

Bisexuality: Dispelling the myths

By Sean Cahill

Popular conceptualizations of sexual orientation often present a strictly either/or perspective on intimate relationships and human sexuality: a person is *either* heterosexual or homosexual; a person is emotionally and sexually attracted to *either* women or men.¹ However, research shows that human sexuality is much more fluid than the simple gay-straight binarism. In fact, many people are neither exclusively heterosexual nor exclusively homosexual.

While we don't know exactly what percentage of the population is bisexual, a recent study indicates that the bisexual population may be as large as the homosexual population, or even larger. A recent analysis of data gathered by the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth,² found the following:

- When asked "Do you think of yourself as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or something else?" 2.3 percent of men age 18-44 answered homosexual, 1.8 percent bisexual, 3.9 percent something else, and 1.8 percent did not respond.³
- When asked the same question, 1.3 percent of women age 18-44 identified as homosexual, 2.8 percent bisexual, 3.8 percent something else, and 1.8 percent did not answer the question.⁴
- When asked about sexual attraction, 5.9 percent of men 18-44 said they were attracted to both males and females: 3.9 percent "mostly female," 1.0 percent "both," and 0.7 percent "mostly male." Another 0.7 percent were "not sure."⁵
- Some 12.9 percent of women 18-44 said they were attracted to both sexes: 10.2 percent "mostly males," 1.9 percent "both," and 0.8 percent "mostly females." Another 0.8 percent were "not sure."⁶

Most bisexuals describe themselves as being emotionally, sexually and/or romantically attracted to both women and men and feel capable of loving and forming relationships with either.⁷ To most bisexuals, the gender of the person they find attractive is substantially less important than who the person is.

¹ Fox, R. (1995). "Bisexual Identities," In D'Augelli, A. & Patterson, C. (1995). (Eds.). *Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identities Over the Lifespan : Psychological Perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

² Mosher, W., Chandra, A., & Jones, J. (2005, September 15). Sexual behavior and selected health measures: Men and women 15-44 years of age, United States, 2002. Advance Data from Vital Health and Statistics. Number 362. Hyattsville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics.
<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/ad/361-370/ad362.htm>. Accessed October 13, 2005.

³ Mosher et al., 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid, Table 14, 32.

⁶ Ibid, Table 15, 33. Language inconsistency in original ("mostly female" but "mostly males").

⁷ Rust, P. (2001). "Two Many and Not Enough: The Meanings of Bisexual Identities." *Journal of Bisexuality*. 31: 58.

www.TheTaskForce.org

Washington, DC

1325 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Suite 600
Washington, DC 20005-4171
Tel 202.393.5177
Fax 202.393.2241

New York, NY

90 William Street
Suite 1201
New York, NY 10038-5047
Tel 212.604.9830
Fax 212.604.9831

Los Angeles, CA

5455 Wilshire Boulevard
Suite 1505
Los Angeles, CA 90036-4204
Tel 323.954.9597
Fax 323.954.9454

Cambridge, MA

1151 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02138-5201
Tel 617.492.6393
Fax 617.492.0175

Miami, FL

3510 Biscayne Boulevard
Suite 206
Miami, FL 33137-3823
Tel 305.571.1924
Fax 305.571.7298

Contrary to common misperceptions, bisexuality is not the equivalent of sexual promiscuity.⁸ Most bisexuals describe themselves as monogamous in their committed relationships.⁹ Bisexual identity speaks more to the existence of attraction to people of either gender, rather than a statement of past or current sexual activity.

Also contrary to common misperceptions, bisexuality is not a transitional phase between heterosexuality and homosexuality. No single pattern exists among bisexuals. Some have experienced both same-sex and opposite-sex relationships though others have only experienced one or the other.¹⁰ Some feel they fit into neither the heterosexual nor homosexual worlds, while others feel identified more predominantly with one or the other.¹¹

Due to the lack of understanding, acceptance, or even acknowledgment of bisexual identity, the family relationship issues facing bisexual people seldom emerge when contemplating policy and legal changes. Some bisexual people are legally married to opposite-sex partners.¹² As a result, they are able to access the privileges afforded to married couples. However, many bisexual people are not married either by choice or because they are in same-sex relationships and live in one of the 49 states in which same-sex couples cannot marry. If they are committed to an opposite-sex partner they may nevertheless find the discriminatory aspects of marriage to run counter to their belief system. Finally, bisexual people often face similar discrimination and obstacles as gays and lesbians with regard to custody, visitation and adoption of children.

Sean Cahill directs the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.

⁸ Ibid, p. 57.

⁹ Ibid, p. 65.

¹⁰ Fox, (1995), p. 73

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Rust, (2001); Fox, (1995).