

Lisa Diamond - Male Sexuality

More Fluid Than We Thought

By Peter Ould. on May 25th, 2014



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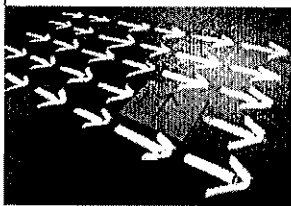
Fascinating research from the University of Utah academic. Karen Booth [has more](#). Is homosexuality unchangeable? Are gays and lesbians exclusively attracted to their own genders? Does a person who experiences same-sex attraction always proceed developmentally to the acceptance of a homosexual orientation or the adoption of an LGB or “queer” identity?

These are the kinds of questions that have intrigued sex researcher Dr. Lisa Diamond, who teaches psychology and gender studies at the University of Utah. A self-identified lesbian and vocal supporter of same-sex marriage, she is considered by many in her field to be one of the nation’s foremost experts on female homosexuality. Her research since the mid-90s has primarily focused on the “fluidity” of women’s sexual behavior, attractions (orientation) and identity labeling; and when she [published her findings](#) in 2009 the shock waves were felt almost immediately throughout the LGBT community.

For example, the online introduction to [one of her interviews](#) on a local radio station put it this way: “The queer community has been obsessed with cultivating the idea that we all have fixed sexual identities. We’ve crafted terrific narratives and political platforms based on the notions that all gays are ‘born that way’. But what if sexuality is more complex? What if biology actually intersects with environment, time, culture and context? Could we possibly be more fluid than we’ve supposed?”

Now, her more recent discoveries about male and adolescent sexuality — described in detail in [this 45 minute video](#) of a lecture she presented at Cornell University — are poised to make a similar impact. Diamond is a very engaging speaker, and I encourage readers to watch the complete video. Otherwise, here are some of the highlights along with my commentary *in italics*. I also noted some of the minute markers in case anyone wants to fact check.

In an overview of her previous research, Diamond acknowledges that early studies of homosexuality focused mainly on the “coming out” models of young men, with the developmental sequence moving from an awareness of same-sex attraction at 9 or 10 years old, to a gradual sexual experimentation with other males, to a recognition and acknowledgement of a homosexual orientation, to an ultimate adoption and announcement of gay self-identity. *This stereotypical model, with its subsequent conflation of attraction, orientation and identity, has become the accepted “conventional wisdom” of much of the culture and Church. Christian psychologist Dr. Mark Yarhouse dubs it “the gay script.”*



Though her findings on women contradicted these patterns in many respects, Diamond still believed they were common for men. But she also acknowledged that it’s been almost impossible to accurately assess male homosexuality because the samples have been small, non-random and self-selected, and the right kinds of questions haven’t been asked.

(6:10) The same problem has plagued almost all sex researchers ever since the hopelessly flawed Kinsey studies in the late 40s and early 50s. And all of the studies are based on memory and self-report that may not be entirely accurate. (For more information on the Kinsey reports, see Chapter One of my book Forgetting How to Blush: United Methodism’s Compromise with the Sexual Revolution.)

So in her most recent research, Diamond has shifted her focus from women to men and adolescents in an attempt to confirm or disprove what she calls the three pillars of sexual fluidity — non-exclusivity; inconsistency between identity, attraction and behavior; and, variability over time. **(8:35)** In doing so, she rigorously examined and plotted the findings of a dozen of the more recent large population studies from 1992-2010, including one in New Zealand that followed a group of young people from their late teens to early thirties.

Regarding the first “pillar” — non-exclusivity — she discovered that the majority of men who had experienced same-sex attraction (SSA) of any kind were PRIMARILY attracted to the opposite sex; those who were exclusively attracted to other men accounted for approximately 2.5 percent of the general population sample. Less than 1 percent of the women were exclusively SSA, and both of these results were consistent across all the studies. **(14:36)**

These statistics are far more accurate than the commonly heard claim that 10 percent of men and women are gay, usually thought of as exclusively so. That figure is based on a faulty interpretation of the Kinsey research, which actually reported that approximately 10 percent of the male population had engaged in homosexual behavior at some time during their life. Even this outcome was inflated well beyond Diamond's findings (5-7 percent) because Kinsey used a disproportionate number of incarcerated "sex offenders" and urban-dwelling homosexuals in his sample.

To assess the inconsistencies among sexual identity, attraction and behavior — the second "pillar" — Diamond did her own sampling of 300+ Salt Lake City residents who were almost equally divided between those who self-identified as homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual. (20:48) The participants were asked questions about sexual attraction, romantic feelings ("falling in love") and actual sexual partners. Stereotypically, one would expect to find neat divisions across the three identities. But this was not the case: for example, 42 percent of lesbian women and 40 percent of gay men reported some attraction to the opposite sex in the previous year, and 31 percent of gay men reported having had romantic feelings for women. (26:26) There was even more of what Diamond calls a "mish mash" between identity, attraction and behavior when the study participants had been 12-17 years old.

One of Diamond's strengths, in my opinion, is that she makes a distinction between identity, attraction and behavior. As mentioned previously, so does Dr. Mark Yarhouse. So does the official teaching of The United Methodist Church.

To track variability over time — the third "pillar" — Diamond analyzed the four stages of the New Zealand "National Attitudinal Study of Adolescent Health," which tracked "gain" or "loss" of SSA among a group of young people at ages 16-17, 18-19, 24-27 and 29-31 years old. (29:00) During their late teens, more boys and girls were losing SSA than gaining, which was reversed by their mid-twenties with more of them gaining, and which was then reversed once more by their early thirties with more of them again losing SSA. This tendency toward fluidity was also evident in the measurements of gain or loss of opposite sex attraction (OSA), especially in their early twenties and early thirties. However, in contrast to the females, male attraction did tend to become more "fixed" over time, though not to the degree that Diamond expected. *It would be interesting to see the results extended as the group continues to age.*

Diamond concludes (37:27) that: 1. fluidity in identity, attraction and behavior is NOT specific to women but a general feature of human sexuality, one which is also confirmed by historical and cross-cultural literature; 2. the various sexual categories currently in use (LGBTQI, etc.) are useful *heuristics* (mental shortcuts, rules of thumb, educated guesses or stereotypes), but though “they have meaning in our culture, ... we have to be careful in presuming that they represent natural phenomena” (38:55); and 3. it is “tricky” to use these categories for advocating rights based on the concept of immutability “now that we know it is not true ... As a community, the queers have to stop saying: ‘Please help us, we were born this way and we can’t change’ as an argument for legal standing.” (43:15)

When one of the leading lesbian academics on the issue of sexual fluidity says this kind of stuff, why are we continuing to buy the line that people are simply born gay?