

Seidman, Steven, Nancy Fischer, & Chet Meeks (Editors).
2006. Introducing the New Sexuality Studies.
23 London: Routledge.

Bisexualities in America

Interview with Paula C. Rodríguez Rust

Paula C. Rodríguez Rust is a sociologist specializing in bisexuality and sexual identity. She has conducted two major research studies, including the International Bisexual Identities, Communities, Ideologies, and Politics study, and published two books, *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics* (1995) and *Bisexuality in the United States* (2000). She lives with her partner of 21 years, Lorna, and their four children in central New Jersey.

How have American popular images of bisexuality changed in the last couple of decades?

There have been many changes in popular images of bisexuality during the past few decades. In a nutshell, during the 1970s bisexuality was "chic." On the heels of the (hetero)sexual revolution and the gay pride movements of the 1960s, the social atmosphere in the United States favored sexual experimentation. Sexual openness and experimentation, including with members of one's own sex, was seen as healthy and liberating; old sexual mores were considered stifling and repressive. Popular news magazines ran stories with titles like "Bisexual Chic: Anyone Goes" (*Newsweek*, May 13, 1974) and "Bisexuality: The Newest Sex-Style" (*Cosmopolitan*, June 1974). Bisexuality was fashionable. College students, "hip" people, Janis Joplin, and David Bowie were doing it. Heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men were doing it.

The advent of HIV/AIDS changed this image. Once gay men became labeled a source of HIV, bisexuals – who were suddenly transformed in the public mind from curious, carefree (male and female) college students to married men with children who lurked around public restrooms – became seen as the conduit through which HIV would pass from the gay community to heterosexuals. The implication was that gay men and bisexual men had done something to deserve HIV, but that heterosexuals were innocent victims. As long as HIV had been largely confined to gay and bisexual men (and a few other socially marginal groups such as Haitians), there was little public concern about the disease, and little funding was allocated toward finding treatments and cures. But when heterosexuals began contracting the disease, gay and bisexual men were blamed for spreading the disease instead of being recognized as the first victims, and funding was suddenly available for HIV research. Popular news magazines warned wives that their husbands might be bisexuals who would bring HIV home to

them and their children. *Redbook* warned readers about the “secret life of bisexual husbands” (1993) and *Cosmopolitan* published “The Risky Business of Bisexual Love” (1989).

Meanwhile, however, the bisexual political movement was gaining in numbers. Having begun decades earlier, during the 1980s the bisexual movement became more visible and outspoken. As the GLB community responded to AIDS with increased visibility and political action, the bisexual movement also gained fervor in response to AIDS-related accusations and characterizations. Several new bisexual organizations, including the Boston Bisexual Women’s Network, formed during the 1980s. These organizations challenged negative characterizations of bisexuals in both mainstream and gay/lesbian publications, and by the 1990s popular magazines had a new take on bisexuality. *Time* rediscovered bisexuality in “Bisexuality: What Is It?” (1992) and *Newsweek* published “Bisexuality emerges as a new sexual identity” (1995). In the 1990s, bisexuality was portrayed as a lifestyle that challenged traditional conceptualizations of sexuality. No longer a fad for heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men who wanted to experiment, bisexuality “became” a sexual orientation, and bisexuals became a social and political group in the public eye. This trend has continued into the new millennium, although the issue of same-sex marriage has eclipsed bisexuality in the public eye. The news media’s memory of bisexuals as a visible readership segment might be fading; the *New York Times* might have chosen a different headline if the story “Straight, Gay, or – Lying? Bisexuality Revisited” (July 5, 2005) had been printed in the 1990s. In the year 2005, however, this headline sparked an organized and comprehensive response from bisexual activists that reflected the sophistication of the contemporary bisexual political movement.

Do you think there is any connection between the increased visibility and tolerance of gays and lesbians and the broader acceptance of bisexuality?

It is tempting to argue, simply because gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are all “sexual minorities,” that public acceptance of one form of non-heterosexuality would tend to lead to acceptance of other forms of non-heterosexuality. I’m not convinced of this, however. The growing acceptance of gay men and lesbians has changed our cultural conception of sexuality from one involving heterosexual men and women only, to one involving heterosexual men/women and gays/lesbians. It’s simply a new social conception of sexuality; there’s nothing inherent in it that would make it any more amenable to further change than any earlier conceptualization of sexuality. After all, “heterosexuality” is itself a relatively new concept; but ask most people on the street, and they will tell you that the nuclear heterosexual family, within which heterosexual men and women are defined as such by their sexual attractions to each other, is the original “tradition.” This is not true. For example, marriage in nineteenth-century English culture was based on social and economic compatibility, not sexual desire. Two people who married each other because of sexual passion were considered fools, because such passion fades and could not be the basis of a lasting marriage. Individuals found their sense of self in their relationships to their families as mothers, fathers, wives, and husbands. The idea of defining oneself in terms of one’s sexual desires toward other people would have seemed grossly self-centered and inappropriate. Men and women married each other and had sex with each other, but the concept of “heterosexuality” as a *sexual orientation* dates back only to the late 1800s (Katz 1995). Furthermore, the “nuclear” family is a preferred family form only in particular cultures and historical periods; for example, many cultures emphasize extended or multigenerational families, not nuclear families, and many cultures consider the entire community or village – not just two parents – responsible for the welfare and upbringing of children. Yet today in the United States we call the nuclear

heterosexual family the “traditional” family form; historically speaking, change is forgotten in the public mind soon after it happens.

Although greater acceptance of lesbians and gay men might not necessarily lead to greater acceptance of bisexuality, we can all – gays, lesbians, bisexuals, the transgendered, and the intersexed – help each other gain acceptance and equal rights by standing together and supporting one another. Sometimes we don’t support one another, and sometimes the in-fighting within a minority is more damaging than the larger struggle with a dominant society. In other words, if lesbians and gay men don’t support the rights of bisexuals, and if lesbians, gay men and bisexuals don’t seek to understand and support transsexuals and intersexed people and vice versa, we all weaken each other in our efforts to build a world in which all forms of gender and sexuality are respected.

This is true for all minorities, not only sexual and gender minorities. As minority members, we can struggle against our own oppression while accepting social prejudices against other groups, or we can use our own experiences of oppression to understand others as well and become part of a larger struggle against injustice. For example, white lesbians and gay men do not necessarily understand racism any better than white heterosexuals, so lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals do not necessarily understand and support each other any more than heterosexuals understand what it’s like to be a sexual minority in this society. But we *could* use our own experiences to understand the experiences of others, and the more we make an effort to understand each other, the more united we will all be – across differences in sexuality, as well as gender, race, ethnicity, ability, age, social class, culture, religion, height, weight, etc.

I believe that it is the responsibility of members of socially privileged groups – for example, heterosexuals, whites, the able-bodied – to understand the privileges they have as members of these groups, and to participate in the struggle to create a society in which everyone is equally respected for who they are. If you are white, how often do you walk into a store and wonder if store security is watching you because of your race? Probably never; not having to worry about what other people think of you because of your skin color is part of your race privilege. *Make* yourself aware of the effect of your whiteness on your life by asking yourself once in a while how you would be experiencing your life if you were African-American or Latino/a. If you are able-bodied, how often do you plan to go somewhere – a store, a theater, a friend’s house – and wonder if you’ll be able to get up the steps into the door? Assuming you will be able to get in is your privilege. If you are heterosexual, do you think about marriage and assume that you will be able to marry the person you love? Same-sex couples can marry in Massachusetts, but not in any other state in the USA, and nor in the eyes of the federal government, which means even married same-sex couples in Massachusetts do not receive the same rights as married heterosexual couples. If you are lesbian or gay, how often do people tell you your sexuality simply doesn’t exist? Bisexuals are often told they don’t exist, and that they should make up their minds whether they are lesbian/gay or heterosexual. It might be uncomfortable for heterosexuals to stand up for LGBTI rights, and it might be uncomfortable for whites to stand up for the rights of people of color – after all, we don’t want to offend someone by using the wrong words because of our own ignorance and, anyhow, it doesn’t seem to affect us in a negative way on a daily basis so it’s easy to put off until we have some spare time – but if the privileged don’t speak out, who is left to do all the talking and fighting? The same people who have already been doing the suffering, the fighting, and the talking.

Are there differences among men and women with regard to bisexuality?

Research has found average or typical differences between bisexual men and bisexual women. However, any statement that takes the form “bisexual men are like this, whereas

bisexual women are like that" would be an overgeneralization. There are more differences among bisexual men, and among bisexual women, than there are between the genders. The largest differences among bisexuals correspond to the cultural contexts within which bisexuality is found, rather than gender. Many people stereotype bisexuals as people who "need" both male and female partners, or who are very promiscuous and can't be monogamous. This is not true. Bisexuals, like lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals, can be celibate and they can be monogamous. Think about it; a heterosexual woman who chooses to remain celibate is still heterosexual, right? What makes her heterosexual is her sexual attraction to men, or maybe her expectation that some day she will fall in love with someone and that person will be a man. She doesn't need to have sex with a man to be a heterosexual. Bisexuality is the same. Most people who identify themselves as bisexual do so because they are sexually attracted to both men and women, or because they could see themselves in a romantic relationship with either a man or a woman. Bisexuals don't "need" sex with both men and women; they are simply more open to the possibilities than heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men who find only one gender sexually interesting.

There are many forms of bisexuality. Some bisexuals find one monogamous lifetime partner – what makes them different from lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals is that this partner could have been either a man or a woman. There is also serial monogamy, in which an individual has one partner at a time. This is a pattern for many people, including lesbians, gay men, heterosexuals, and bisexuals – the difference is that for bisexuals, over the years their partners might include both men and women. Some people experiment with both men and women when they are young, and then decide as adults that they are really only interested in one gender or the other, so they identify as lesbian, gay, or heterosexual in adulthood although their sexual history is bisexual. Other people grow up believing they are heterosexual and might even marry someone of the other sex, and then later in life discover an interest in people of their own sex, so they divorce and find a same-sex partner. They might identify first as heterosexual and later as lesbian/gay, but their *behavioral history* is bisexual. Some bisexuals live in open committed relationships, meaning that they have one primary long-term or lifetime partner, but agree with that partner that both of them are free to have secondary relationships with other people as well. Polyfidelity is a committed relationship among more than two adults; for example, it could be two men and two women living in sexual fidelity with each other. Just as among heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men, there are bisexuals who have many sexual partners over time, people who have one-night-stands or anonymous sex with many different people, and people who are celibate. Unfortunately, because of social misunderstanding and disapproval of bisexuality, lesbianism, and gayness, some bisexuals are secretive about their same-sex interests. This leads to other patterns of bisexuality: for example, individuals who are heterosexually married but who also have sex with people of their own gender without their spouse's knowledge.

The most interesting differences between bisexual men and women concern not individual-based statistics, but the cultural and social differences in how bisexuality is experienced by men and women. Weinberg, Williams and Pryor (1994) found that both bisexual men and women reported that it is easier to have sex with men, but easier to fall in love with women. This is not surprising; although we have come a long way in terms of gender equality, boys are still expected to strongly desire sexual contact, whereas girls are taught to value emotional relationships and romance. Consequently, both bisexual men and women tend to have more male than female sex partners (e.g. Rosario *et al.* 1996; Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994). This means bisexual men have more homo-sex, whereas bisexual

women have more hetero-sex. The basic difference, however, lies not in bisexual men and women themselves – it does not result from higher Kinsey attraction scores among bisexual men than among bisexual women, for example – but in the world of potential partners in which both bisexual men and women live. Bisexual men and women live in the same world, that is, a world in which male sex partners are more available than female sex partners, but the consequences are different – more heterosexual contact for women, but more homosexual contact for men.

Another interesting difference existed in the bisexual political movement during the 1980s. In many political movements, as in many other domains of social life, men tend to be more visible and in more leadership roles than women. However, because more gay/bisexual men than lesbian/bisexual women contracted HIV infection during the 1980s – a period of growth for the bisexual political movement – many of the most visible bisexual leaders during this time were women. Many of the men who might have been involved in the bisexual movement were sick, deceased, caring for sick loved friends and partners, or occupied with fighting for HIV funding. Many of the women, on the other hand, had had political experience because they were involved in other social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the counterculture and feminist movements, so they came to the bisexual movement well-prepared to make a difference.

Is there any evidence that more young men and women today are experimenting with bisexuality or identifying as bisexual? How would you explain this?

I believe that young people today are more likely to identify as bisexual than in previous generations, and that they are doing so at younger ages. Previous generations grew up in time periods when being lesbian or gay, not to mention bisexual, was either not talked about or more severely condemned. You were assumed to be heterosexual, and that was it. Today, although bisexuality does not receive much public attention, lesbian and gay issues are talked about in the national media. Television shows contain gay characters, and newscasters report on the progress of same-sex marriage rights. The experiences of Ellen DeGeneres are a chronicle of the way in which lesbians and gay men have been portrayed in the public media over the past couple decades. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, young people in urban areas began to have access to social services for sexual minority youth, but people in suburban and rural areas and youth in certain parts of the country still had nowhere to go to receive positive information about being gay or lesbian, let alone bisexual. Many young people who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual did not find any positive information or like-minded peers until college – and many did not find it even then.

During the past fifteen or so years, however, the explosion in the internet and in youth access to the internet has led to a whole new world. Individuals who belong to many different minorities – racial minorities, sexual minorities, political minorities – can find each other today in a way never possible before. People who live in small towns can now find others who are like them through the internet. Young people who are wondering about their sexuality can find other young people who are wondering or who have come out on the internet. Information and support is available to anyone with an online hookup and a little privacy. Today, it is hard to imagine the person who has not at least heard of lesbianism, gayness, and bisexuality.

It is still difficult for most young people to come out. However, with all the information and support available today, it is undoubtedly easier for young people who do feel attracted to members of their own sex to recognize these feelings and develop a positive lesbian, gay,

or bisexual identity. Young people are also very creative when it comes to sexual identity. It's more OK than ever before to simply be "Questioning" or to make up your own identity. So, I think bisexual identity is becoming more common, and young people are coming out at younger ages, but also that young people are feeling freer to simply explore their sexualities without worrying so much about putting labels on it.

How possible is it today, in America, to practice bisexuality and not identify as bisexual?

Quite possible. Most individuals who describe themselves as attracted to both men and women, or who have had sexual contact with both men and women, do not identify as bisexual (e.g. Laumann *et al.* 1994). First of all, many people still subscribe to the belief that "you are either lesbian/gay or heterosexual," or they define bisexuality in terms of having *equal* feelings or experiences with men and women, so they identify as lesbian/gay or heterosexual based on the preponderance or importance of their experiences with same-sex as against other-sex partners. They are not in denial or lying about their sexuality; they are simply defining sexual orientation in terms of *preference* for one gender or the other and describing themselves honestly within that paradigm. Other individuals discredit either their same-sex or their other-sex experiences by saying they were "experimental," or "just a phase," and therefore not relevant to their "true" sexual identity. Whether these experiences were *really* "experimental" or not is a question of perspective, not a question of fact, and so, therefore, is the question of whether such people are *really* lesbian/gay/heterosexual, or really bisexual. "Sexual orientation" is a culturally constructed concept with different meanings to different people, in different ethnic contexts, and in different historical time periods.

Personally, I feel that any way an individual wishes to define their sexuality should be respected by others. For example, if a woman has had both male and female partners but chooses to define herself as a lesbian because she does not believe in bisexuality and her feelings for women are stronger, then that's fine with me. As a scientist, however, I take a different point of view. I do not feel that it is appropriate for scientists to conduct research using methods that do not recognize the existence of bisexuality. Imagine a natural rainbow: this rainbow is continuous; it is not divided into separate colors. Different cultures divide the rainbow into different numbers of colors; as few as three or as many as one hundred. Modern Western culture divides the rainbow into six or seven basic colors, each of which is in fact a "category" which covers a range of light wavelengths. Three of these categories are red, orange, and yellow. Ask me if the color "orange" exists. Well, it's a matter of perspective. Certainly, the wavelength of light that we call orange exists, but we could have divided the rainbow differently. We could have made a single division between red and yellow, and called everything on one side "red" and everything on the other side "yellow." Then, what we now call orange would, depending on whether it's more reddish or more yellowish, be called either red or yellow. Then, orange would not exist. But how useful would that be? As culturally constructed as it is, the name "orange" is useful, and it would seem odd to eliminate it by defining the concept out of existence. The same argument applies to bisexuality. There are people who clearly identify as bisexual, feel attracted to both sexes, and have sex with both men and women; why on earth would we not want a concept we can use to describe these people, and why on earth would anyone want to tell them they are not bisexual? Culturally, the reasons many people feel compelled to protect the "gay/straight" mindset in which bisexuality does not exist are understandable – they are the self-protective reasons that many people prefer to pretend that things they fear or don't

understand don't exist – but it's not a very realistic, respectful, or open-minded way to live in the world.

Finally, is there any evidence regarding patterns of bisexuality among different ethnic or racial groups? If not, what is your impression as a scholar of bisexuality?

I will answer this question primarily in terms of culture, rather than race or ethnicity. Sexual patterns and meanings correlate with culture, not with biological characteristics such as skin tone or eye shape. Obviously, traditional cultures arose among particular racial groups, and the concept of “ethnicity” combines elements of both race and culture, but given mass world migration and acculturation it makes more sense to talk about cultural differences in sexual patterns than about racial or ethnic differences. The very idea of having a sexual identity, and of basing this sexual identity on one's personal sexual feelings or behaviors, is particular to contemporary “Western” or “Anglo” culture. So, the concept of a “bisexual identity,” not to mention a “bisexual lifestyle,” is culturally specific. Bisexual behavior, on the other hand, is found among people in many cultures. This behavior, therefore, carries very different meanings and takes very different patterns in different cultures. There has been more research on these differences among men than among women.

Considerable ethnographic research has been conducted on Latino constructions of sexuality, often in comparison to Anglo constructions of sexuality (e.g. Carballo-Diéguez and Dolezal 1994; Matteson 1997; Almaguer 1993). For the purpose of illustration here, I will describe the differences between Latino and Anglo sexual constructions in very broad strokes. In contemporary Anglo culture, sexual identity is based on one's own sexual desires or attractions and experiences with either males or females. The heterosexuality of a Latino, on the other hand, is more strongly based on his family relationships – his status as husband and father and his commitment to those roles. The fact that he might also have had sex with men, possibly before his marriage when heterosexual opportunities were restricted by the emphasis on chastity among Latina women, does not detract from his heterosexuality as long as he takes the insertive role during sex and displays appropriate *machismo*. “Gay men” are defined not in terms of the fact that they have sex with men, but in terms of the *pasivo* or receptive role they take during that sex and in terms of their gender presentation. In Latino culture, therefore, what an Anglo would call “bisexual behavior” is a cultural phenomenon that takes place among *heterosexual* men. In contrast, in Anglo culture, a married man who has sex with men on the side would probably be considered a “closeted gay man,” not a heterosexual. There is some evidence of racial and ethnic differences in rates of bisexual behavior and identification resulting from cultural differences in the construction of sexuality. This evidence, and the underlying cultural differences, are reviewed in depth in Chapter 22 of *Bisexuality in the United States* (Rodríguez Rust 2000).

In some ethnic and racial minority communities in the United States, homosexuality and bisexuality are characterized as influences of white culture and a sign of the rejection of one's own ethnic culture in favor of acculturation – or selling out – to a more powerful white culture (e.g., Tremble, Schneider, and Appathurai 1989; Chan 1989; Icard 1986). An individual who is coming out as bisexual, lesbian, or gay amid these attitudes risks being told that they are rejecting their ethnic, racial, or cultural identity by adopting a bisexual or gay identity. They might even be told that they are rejecting their family and their racial or ethnic community. The irony is that in many of these traditional cultures, homosexuality was not condemned as much as it was in earlier northern European cultures. For example, the Chinese term “passion of the cut sleeve” refers to the tender story of Han emperor Ai-di,

who cut off his sleeve rather than wake his male lover who was sleeping on it (Hinsch 1990). In China following the Cultural Revolution, homosexuality was portrayed as a capitalist perversion brought in from the West, and today Chinese-American youth in the USA might be told they are rejecting their Chinese heritage by identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In contrast, European-American youth with light-colored skins do not have to struggle with conflict between their ethnic and their sexual identities and lifestyles. For white lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, not having to “choose” between or struggle to “integrate” their sexual and their racial/ethnic identities is another aspect of racial privilege.

Concluding thoughts?

In recent history, each generation confronts new social problems, and each generation builds on the solutions of previous generations. Although there will always be struggles between people who wish to retain traditional values and those who value change, it seems that over time we have been moving toward greater acceptance of diversity. Different types of people are no longer isolated from each other. We have more opportunities to get to know each other, to understand each other, and to celebrate – not just tolerate – these differences. There is no contradiction between pride in one’s own way of life, form of love, or cultural heritage, and understanding and appreciation of other ways of life, loves, or heritages. We are enriched by our differences, and we are all responsible for ending discrimination and social prejudice so that we can create a world in which we can all participate fully and enrich each other by our difference.

References

- Almaguer, Tomás. 1993. “Chicano men: A cartography of homosexual identity and behavior”, in Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (eds), *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge.
- Carballo-Diéguez, Alex and Curtis Dolezal. 1994. “Contrasting types of Puerto Rican men who have sex with men (MSM)”, *Journal of Psychology and Human Sexuality* 6,4: 41–67.
- Chan, Connie. 1989. “Issues of identity development among Asian-American lesbians and gay men”, *Journal of Counseling and Development* 68,1: 16–21.
- Hinsch, Bret. 1990. *Passions of the Cut Sleeve: The Male Homosexual Tradition in China*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Icard, Larry. 1986. “Black gay men and conflicting social identities: Sexual orientation versus racial identity”, *Journal of Social Work and Human Sexuality* 4, 1/2: 83–92.
- Katz, Jonathan Ned. 1995. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*, New York: Dutton.
- Laumann, Edward O., John H. Gagnon, Robert T. Michael, and Stuart Michaels. 1994. *The Social Organization of Sexuality: Sexual Practices in the United States*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Matteson, David R. 1997. “Bisexual and homosexual behavior and HIV risk among Chinese-, Filipino-, and Korean-American men”, *Journal of Sex Research* 34, 1: 93–104.
- Rodríguez Rust, Paula C. 2000. *Bisexuality in the United States: A Social Science Reader*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rosario, Margaret, Heino F. L. Meyer-Bahlburg, Joyce Hunter, Theresa M. Exner, Marya Gwadz, and Arden M. Keller. 1996. “The psychosexual development of urban lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths”, *Journal of Sex Research* 33, 2: 113–26.
- Rust, Paula C. 1995. *Bisexuality and the Challenge to Lesbian Politics: Sex, Loyalty, and Revolution*, New York: New York University Press.