



# STRAIGHT TO GAY CONVERSION THEORY

Are straight women really three drinks away from gay? **BY TEMMA EHRENFELD**

**I**t happens every now and again: A woman who has always been with men wants to sleep with you. Could this be for real? When Katy Perry sang “I Kissed a Girl,” stealing her title from a 1995 indie hit by Jill Sobule, lots of girls sang along—right next to their boyfriends. Some pretty young things even kiss and pet in straight bars, while straight couples in the swinger scene heat up their sex lives with wife-on-wife action or MFF threesomes. So, how many straight women are actually really interested in other women as lovers—or, to put it another way, what does it mean when people cross the orientation lines? Science

is chipping in with some answers.

The pioneer sex researcher Alfred Kinsey and his team based their theories on evidence from interviews conducted in the late 1940s. When they asked people about their fantasies and their actual behavior, they kept hearing that over a lifetime some people’s sexual histories showed quite a bit of line crossing. To quote the current website of the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, the team found that “sexual behavior, thoughts and feelings toward the same or opposite sex was not always consistent across time.” To sort that out, Kinsey came up with a scale that attempted to measure where people stood on a continuum from gay to straight.

Then came the gay civil rights movement, dominated by gay men and their reports of a powerful biological drive aimed entirely at men. Politics, even rainbow politics, works better in black and white: The movement took the position that people fit into one of three groups—gay, straight or bi—and dismissed any shades of gray. Some dismissed bisexuality, decreeing that anyone who identified as bi was “really” gay or straight.

Over in the scientific camp, the evidence Kinsey had tried to address with his scale wasn’t studied for decades. But recently, the psychologist Robert Epstein, a former editor of *Psychology Today*, has argued that Kinsey was right. Sexual orientation, he says, is a continuum and most people fall somewhere in the middle, which

means they “experience some degree of same-sex attraction at some point in their lives.” Epstein, who has collected online survey responses from more than 17,000 respondents around the world, says that their answers match the Katy Perry phenomenon: Women report more same-sex attraction than men do and more flexibility in expressing their desires.

Cal State Fullerton psychologist Richard Lippa didn’t just ask survey questions: He had men and women who consider themselves heterosexual rate their attraction to pictures of models in swimsuits. He also tracked the time they spent looking at the photos. Separately, he asked other participants to rank the models according to how attractive they were by societal standards. As predicted, the men were keener on the female models and spent more time looking at them. The women, on the other hand, said they were attracted to both male and female models, and they spent more time looking at the most attractive models, whether they were male or female. In another study, Lippa looked at how libido matched up with bisexual activity when he analyzed results from online surveys created by a team of psychologists for the BBC One television series *Secrets of the Sexes*. The results seemed to show that lustier women are more bi. “There may be some degree of latent same-sex attraction in most women,” Lippa says. “In women with high sex drives, this latent attraction can be energized.”

The Kinsey interviews found changes in sexual desires over time—but not a lot of people with a continuous attraction to both genders. It’s possible that just as people’s libidos can change, so can the object of their desires. A woman may get more into women when she’s feeling especially hot. (Or not.)

University of Utah psychologist Lisa Diamond reports that women may feel drawn to women for years then switch to men—or vice versa. And sometimes they come to feel that their response has nothing to do with gender, she reports. As one woman she studied put it, “Deep down, it’s just a matter of who I meet and fall in love with.”

Diamond has been following 100 women who described themselves as lesbian, bisexual or “unlabeled” since 1995, when they were in their 20s, interviewing them every two or three years. At each point, she says, 25 to 32 percent of the group changed their sexual identity, and the switchers were not the same people. The most popular change was to “unlabeled,” which Diamond says supports her fluidity thesis. Nearly 80 percent of the sample had changed their sexual identity at least once by 2009, up from the two-thirds she reported when she published her book, *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women’s Love and Desire*. “Six years after [writing] the book, the data holds up,” she told me.

Things get even more complex when scientists look at the female physiological response. Studies that try to measure response independent of awareness—through eye tracking, brain scans and genital arousal—find that the female “sexual response is nonspecific,” psychologist Meredith Chivers reported in her 2010 review of the research since 2005. Straight women, for example, will respond as much to a picture of a woman masturbating as to a picture of a man, whereas heterosexual men (and lesbians) prefer photos of women. In Chivers’s own research, from the University of Toronto, she and her colleagues found that women of all sexual orientations could be aroused by a range of images, including male-male, male-female, and female-female pornography.

Of course, this doesn’t mean that women will actually sleep with other women. “We don’t know the links between desire and behavior,” she told me. “There are a lot of leaps in between.” Interestingly, women’s statements about their sexual arousal and their measured physiological responses match up less neatly than men’s, and some research suggests a link from the mismatch to sexual dysfunction. To boil that down, women’s sexual responses are complex, and they themselves don’t always know what they like.

So love confuses us, and love changes. The big fear about dating a woman with a bisexual history is that she’ll leave you for a man. It happens. I knew a lesbian who fled her native Mumbai after a painful breakup with a woman who had left her for a man. They had been living together for four years. “The sex was great,” she says. “We were happy. She left me because in India I couldn’t give her what she wanted, a marriage and family.” Another woman I met—call her Dina—told me about the most passionate sex of her life. Her lover, a woman, left her to marry a man. She couldn’t understand it: Wasn’t her lover a lesbian? When they were together, she had expressed no attraction to men.

Diamond has a theory to explain these stories: Attraction, romance and *identity* are separate psychological functions. Dina’s lover was capable of attraction and love for both genders, at different points in her life, but ultimately wanted a heterosexual identity.

Women also choose lesbian identities. A friend I’ve known since we were teens—call her Jessica—had only heterosexual relationships before she decided in her mid-20s to “do the lesbian thing,” she says. When she met a lesbian visiting her rural area for a weekend conference, they decided on the spot to live together. She bought a house and her new lover moved in. They held a large marriage ceremony and built a tight-knit lesbian circle around a weekly spiritual group. But the relationship went awry and she sought out sexual affairs with local men. When, in her 30s, she fell for a man, she was less afraid of losing her companion than her beloved community. Now, at 51, Jessica has a happy and monogamous relationship with a woman, and she pushes aside the occasional male fantasy. “I don’t think I’d find a man who I was that emotionally drawn to,” she says.

I know of another woman—call her Carol—who married in her 20s in order to have children. When her husband asked for a divorce, Carol fell head over heels for the first woman she slept with, a woman who also had a long marriage in her past. Like Jessica, Carol has fantasies about sex with men, yet she’s still blissful about her partner 10 years later. If she were ever alone again, she says she’d probably stay alone. “I can imagine having sex with a man,” she says, “but who wants to live with one?”

These stories fit with the complexity of the emerging biochemical data on love and desire. In this new understanding, romance—the butterflies, the obsession, the euphoria—is linked to the neurotransmitter dopamine. Let’s call that Dopey. Lust is associated with testosterone, or Testy, and then there’s Oxy, or oxytocin, which makes us bond and feel like family. (Blame the U-Haul phenomenon on Oxy.) Dopey, Testy and Oxy can come and go; they can cooperate or fight.

Back to the woman who wants to sleep with you: Yes, even if she’s officially straight, evidence suggests that she could bond with you and even fall in love with you. But it’s your call on whether to give her your heart. ■