

Book Review

***Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*, by Lisa M. Diamond. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009. Paperback, 333 pp. \$17.95.**

Married Women Who Love

***Women, Second Edition*, by Carren**

Strock. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2008. Paperback, 252 pp. \$24.95.

I am deeply skeptical of the concept of “sexual orientation.” I don’t think it can be defined with enough precision to serve either as a descriptive or an explanatory concept. As it has come to be applied in everyday discourse and in academic discussions, it is a blunt instrument that fails to capture the endless nuances and variety of human experience. It seems to have assumptions and expectations built in that are misleading and sometimes totally false. Certainly there are individuals who show consistency in their sexual preferences over long periods of time. Perhaps they have an “orientation” that can be discerned based on that long consistency. But does the consistency of relatively few imply therefore that everyone has a welldefined “orientation”? Is this a universal concept? It is also pertinent to ask: *Who* is insisting that everyone belongs in an orientation category, and what purpose does it serve to for everyone to wear one of these labels? “Orientation” is not just a way of conceptualizing the past. “Orientation” does not simply describe one’s behavior or inclinations up to the present. “Orientation” seems somehow directed toward the future. It tells you what you can expect. It carries predictive connotations about how likely a person is to enter into particular kinds of personal relationships over some indefinite period of time going forward. In practice, it serves as an identifying label that draws boundaries around a person and leaves some gates open and some closed. But, is this a scientific term with a scientific purpose? That is, can it be used to describe generalities in human behavior and psychology beyond a small group of paradigmatic cases? Some constructions of the concept present it as capturing some sort of “underlying” reality that lies dormant in a person for many years only to emerge under favorable circumstances after a long process of evolution and self discovery. Understood this way, it would seem necessary to wait (how long?) until this emergent process plays out and a final culmination is achieved before the concept could be definitively applied. How would we know when we could be

certain of our

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application? For example, what is the sexual orientation of a person like Larry Craig, who self-identifies one way on the floor of the United States Senate, but behaves in a totally contradictory way in a public restroom when he believes he is anonymous?

Lisa Diamond defines sexual orientation as “a consistent, enduring pattern of sexual desire for individuals of the same sex, the other sex, or both sexes, regardless of whether this pattern of desire is manifested in sexual behavior.” (p. 12) Under her formulation, “sexual orientation” becomes a description of internal dispositions extending over a considerable period of time, rather than a record of behavior. Actual behavior becomes irrelevant. She said “regardless.” What counts is how you feel in your private heart. However, in the overwhelming majority of women that she studied, she did not find any such consistent, enduring pattern. What she found was fluctuation and variability. Outward behavior sometimes contradicted the enduring pattern of internal dispositions. In fact, in carrying out her research, her approach was to ask each interviewee to what orientation category she felt she belonged. This made the concept one of self-identification rather than an observable quality that can be objectively verified. So the measure of sexual orientation for her study became the subjective judgment of each interviewee at particular moments, not the observation or conclusion of the researcher based on information gleaned from the interviewees. Many of the participants in her study changed their self-identifications over time. Some of them rejected the labels altogether and defined themselves as “unlabeled.” If science depends on different researchers being able to apply a concept to a given subject or a phenomenon and record the same observations, then how would such a concept measured by such techniques square with conventions of scientific practice? In this case the concept was applied not by the researcher, but by each subject of the study to herself. Each individual interpreted the concept herself and used her own criteria for arriving at a measurement, the label. How could the data of such research ever be verified?

The results of Diamond’s own research forced her to develop a notion of “fluidity” as an adjunct to the concept of orientation, but she did not wish to abandon the idea of orientation altogether.

My understanding of female sexual fluidity includes four elements:

1. Women do, in fact, have a general sexual orientation. Most of them are predominantly attracted to men; some are attracted to both sexes; some are mainly attracted to women. 2. In addition to sexual orientation, women possess a capacity for fluidity. . . Fluidity can trigger same-sex or other-sex attractions. 3. The sexual attractions triggered by fluidity may be temporary or long lasting....The key point is that the attractions triggered by fluidity do not alter a woman's basic orientation, though they might function like an orientation in terms of consistency.

4. Not all women are equally fluid. (pp. 84–85)

How does this clarify the concept of sexual orientation and its application to any particular human being? Diamond's study illustrates how ambiguous, slippery, amorphous, and changing this concept is when applied to the lives of real women studied over lengthy period of time. It is one thing to ask a bunch of college students how they feel at a particular moment when they are very young and still in school. But to extrapolate conclusions based on their responses about their likely behavior and their personal relationships over the course of their lifetimes is well-nigh impossible. If a woman says she is "gay," or "straight," or "lesbian," or "bisexual," when she is 20 years old, what can we conclude from this about her future relationships? Based on the research described in Lisa Diamond's book, you can't conclude anything: You can't conclude anything about the past; you can't conclude anything about the future; you might be able to conclude something about the present, but even that might be confused and in transition. Sexual orientation is practically meaningless beyond indicating what is going on in the immediate happenstance of a woman's life. But that deflates its directedness and its essential spirit as a forward looking, predictive concept.

The concept is more concrete to those who find themselves consistently attracted to people or activities that are socially disapproved, thus resulting in their becoming socially distinguished by their sexual preference. Curiously, the people most harmed and most limited by the sexual orientation categories are among the ones most invested in their perpetuation as a rigid, unyielding aspect of a person's character. They believe that if they are perceived as not being able to help being what they are, that they were somehow fixed in a specific category from birth and

condemned by nature to stay in it until death, society will thus capitulate to the inevitable and concede them acceptance. Don't count on it. In her final chapter, Diamond presents a discussion of the political underpinnings of these sexual orientation categories and how various groups view the persistence of sexual categories as instrumental to their political agenda. She points out how the concept of sexual orientation reflects cultural anxieties and the need to draw a boundary around exclusive heterosexuality posited as a social norm. It is the intensity of the need to direct sexuality into this one restricted form of expression that makes it necessary to distinguish all of the many deviations and tar them with labels. The greatest scientist of sexuality, Alfred C. Kinsey, totally repudiated categorization of people based on sexual preferences as Diamond points out (p. 254). Sexual orientation is actually a prop to the ideal of exclusive heterosexuality. It enables everyone to distinguish the sheep from the goats so it is clear who you can despise and discriminate against, and comfortingly label yourself as not one of "them." "Most heterosexual women never even think about their sexual identity; the presumption of universal heterosexuality is so strong that they never have to question it" (p. 58). Were minority inclinations and preferences to be socially accepted with the same equanimity as heterosexuality, they would likely not notice their "orientation" either. The idea that everyone has a well-defined sexual orientation helps create the closet. Science has no need for this confused, nebulous concept. By continuing to apply this concept and study people based on sexual orientation categories, science is cooperating in the social disapproval of same sex relationships and lifestyles. It is not appropriate for science to take a position on this issue.

The best part of *Sexual Fluidity* is chapters 3–6 where Diamond presents the results of her own research describing the changes in the lives of the women she studied over a 10-year period. Her major point is that sexual behavior and sexual inclinations in women are not constant and predictable. She has gone to a lot of trouble to follow a fairly substantial group (100 mostly White middle-class women) over a long time period (10 years) and has documented the fluctuations in their sexual relationships and their dispositions. Although she presents these results as if they were new discoveries, Kinsey observed this phenomenon in women in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* over 50 years ago. But as she points out, Kinsey's repudiation of the tendency to categorize people based on sexual preferences was not followed in

subsequent research. So, while the results of her study may not really be new, they may be news to many in the academic audience to which she seems directed. The degree of change she found, the wide variety of experience between different women, the nuances and complexities of their experience, are impressively described and discussed with intelligence and insight.

She is much less impressive discussing the findings and arguments of others. She often uses phrases like "the research shows," "researchers now believe," "the evidence suggests," "animal research demonstrates," "our scientific models of sexuality," "most psychological models." She sometimes uses "we," as in "we now know," "we are only beginning to understand," as if everyone is part of some common affiliation that shares some large body of knowledge and a common outlook. These vague locutions hide a lot. They gloss over the details, methods, and reasoning processes of the studies she is referring to. They paint over differences of interpretation, and disagreements among researchers. There is a glibness and shallowness in her style that grates on me a bit. In her footnotes, she hardly ever provides page numbers; she simply lists the authors' names and the years of the publications, as if the sheer weight of piling up citations will give some authority to her assertions. I think this feature of her style reflects an impatience with sitting in the library poring through books and pondering conceptual ambiguities. She likes to get out there and talk to people and gather information about them, and that is where she clearly excels. But she seems to be in a rush to reach definitive conclusions. She wants to say things with certainty. She can't bear to leave things unexplained. But the results of her own research thoroughly thwart that objective. Her results show that women are highly variable, that they differ greatly from one another, and individual women admit considerable capacity for change and variability over the course of their lives. It is very hard to make any statement stick that starts out: "Women are this way, or that way." Women almost have to be studied as individuals. They don't lend themselves well to sweeping generalizations, which is what scientists tend to want to impose.

The interesting question for me is the degree to which this fluidity in women's sexuality contrasts with that of males: that is, whether male sexuality is inherently more rigid in its preferences, or if it admits the same flexibility as female sexuality. From every indication, going all the way back to Kinsey, male sexuality appears to be less fluid, less flexible, less subject to change over time than female

sexuality. Diamond concurs with this and she argues extensively in chapter 7 that this is due to physiological differences between the sexes having to do with hormones. She introduces a conceptual distinction which she hopes will explain the differences between male and female sexual inclinations and behaviors. "Proceptivity," or lust, is the subjective experience of desire for sexual activity—undifferentiated, not focused on a particular individual, but rather acting as an internal prompt to seek out some form of sexual satisfaction. It is dependent on hormone levels, particularly androgens, and there are well-known differences between men and women in the levels of these hormones and their effect on what is called "libido" or "sex drive." "Receptivity" or "arousability" is the capacity to respond to an opportunistic sexual encounter. This is psychological and is highly dependent on conditioning and experience. These concepts are derived from studies of mammalian sexual behavior and probably have some applicability in understanding some differences between men and women such as differences in levels of sex drive, aggression, number of partners, perhaps even the degree of dependence on fantasy and imagination for sexual arousal, but Diamond tries to stretch them to apply to the *gender of choice* for sexual activity. Proceptive sex, she thinks, is reproduction oriented and therefore other-sex directed. It will be generally stronger and more constant in men. In women it will peak around the time of ovulation. Same-sex proceptive sex, she thinks, is due to some intrinsic alteration in this physiological program, perhaps genetic (p. 210). Women's sexuality, she thinks, is much more characterized by "arousability," which depends on situational factors, rather than this hardwired lust driven sexuality of males. She thinks this explains women's greater fluidity and context dependence in their sexual behavior and desire.

One thing we can conclude for certain is that the relatively greater role of arousability in women's day-to-day desires should create more opportunities for women to experience nonexclusive desires than for men to experience them. And this, of course, is exactly what researchers have found! (p. 215)

This is what has been found in our society in our time. Diamond thinks this is a general truth about the difference between men's and women's sexual makeup. However, it can also be argued that what she has found is that the severe societal persecution of male-male sex over the last 100–150 years has had an impact on limiting the flexibility of men in their desires, imposing a polarity on them that is

not an inherent quality of their biological make up or their psychology, but very much an temporal artifact of culture and conditioning. I didn't think that she showed sufficient appreciation for the degree to which the sexual culture in the United States has changed over the last 150 years, particularly in regard to male-male sex. She did not consider the role of gender identity in the determination of sexual preferences, and I think the result is an overestimation of the effect of hormones on the particular shape and character of male sexual behavior and male subjective experience. Gender identity tends to be less secure in males and the anxieties over masculinity are more intense than women's sense of themselves as female. Because exclusive, puritanical heterosexuality has become such a badge of masculine identity it has created this perception of inflexibility in male sexual preference. But this is not an inevitable feature of male psychology. It is a cultural construct with a history that is traceable. I would suggest that gender identity, a psychological factor which Diamond does not discuss, is the greater influence in the fluidity of women's sexuality and the relatively constant pattern seen in men. It is for this reason that I would offer the conjecture that were the social strictures on male-male sex to be lifted from an early age and the prevailing concept of masculinity become less rigidly bound to exclusive heterosexuality, that male sexuality would show every bit as much flexibility and variability as we now see in the sexuality of females.

In none of the individual cases that she summarizes does she report the childhood origins of their sexuality or their gender identity in any depth. In chapter 2, Diamond makes an astonishing blunder. "Research finds no evidence that child rearing influences sexuality" (p. 32). I nearly threw the book out the window when I read that sentence. She cites a number of authors in support of this ridiculous assertion, including Richard Friedman and Jennifer Downey (2002). But Friedman and Downey believe no such thing. They're psychoanalysts. In fact they say, "The assertion that homosexuality is genetic is so reductionistic that it must be dismissed out of hand as a general principle of psychology" (p. 39). "One clinical consequence of what has now been learned, not only from the study of twins, but from behavioral genetics generally, is that family history should be part of the initial assessment of all patients treated by mental health clinicians, including psychoanalysts and psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapists" (pp. 41–42). The Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith(1981) study also referred to in Diamond, has

methodological and conceptual problems—as well as problems of inference and reasoning—on almost every page, but even taking it at face value, it does not support Diamond's blanket assertion.

Sexual preference involves a host of psychological needs and an array of unique social (or interpersonal) circumstances. (p. 222)

One of the major conclusions of this study is that boys and girls that do not conform to stereotypical notions of what it means to be a male or a female are more likely to become homosexual...As long as parents are unable to accept gender nonconformity in their children, and as long as institutional policies of various kinds reflect unkind preoccupations with stereotypical notions of what males and females are required to be, nonconformists will continue to suffer painful consequences both as they grow up and throughout adulthood. (p.221)

I recommend skipping chapter 2 of Diamond's book. It is a glib, rather careless review of a large body of literature that I frankly think she has not read carefully. She spends a lot of time struggling with this misguided literature that searches for a "gay gene" or physiological explanations for same-sex inclinations. It's like looking for a gene for speaking English instead of Chinese, or playing baseball instead of soccer, or a physiological explanation for why some people like classical music and some people like salsa. Certainly there are genes and physiological factors that enable a person to do and enjoy any of those things. There are genes and physiological structures that enable you to learn a spoken language or respond to music, but whether you learn English or Bantu will depend on where you grow up. So it is for sexuality. Lust is the subjective impulse to seek out sexual activity. This has to do with genes and physiology. It is like hunger or the need for sleep. It is the psychic manifestation of a physiological process. But how lust is directed, pursued, and satisfied is always context and experience dependent. It can't be otherwise.

I think Diamond's preoccupation with this unfortunate line of research has distracted her from looking at her own subjects in more psychological depth and in their cultural and historical context. This is a basic flaw running through the whole book. I wish she had spent more of her time and space spelling out in more detail and more depth the lives of the women she had the privilege of following through the course of their inner development. Her research, which she funded and carried out herself—and I commend her for that—contributes substantially to the demolition of these

sexual orientation categories, and I think that is a good thing. Whether or not the difference we now observe between the fluidity of female sexuality and the relative persistence of male sexual preferences has to do with differences in hormonal balance between the sexes or the weight of conditioning and culture remains to be seen.

Carren Strock's book, *Married Women Who Love Women*, also provides a substantial body of confirming data for the fluidity of women's sexuality in response to circumstances. Strock's vignettes let you see how fluidity manifests itself in the real world of married women who experience same-sex attractions. Although she has not written the book with this objective in mind, I found it complementary to the conceptual issues raised by Diamond, and thus the joint review. Strock is not a theoretician. Her approach is that of a sociologist. Her object is to describe the lives and difficulties of a neglected and unrecognized group of people, namely married women who are dissatisfied with their lives and struggling with attractions to other women. Throughout the book she weaves in her own autobiographical narrative as a take-off point that gives the book an authenticity and an emotive power that it might not have were she to adopt the stance of a disinterested observer. Her objectives also go beyond mere description. She wants to give voice and support to this group of women and the myriad variety of their experiences. I think she succeeds in this. If you are a married woman in this predicament, you will likely find solace and inspiration in this book. You will discover that you are not alone, that many other women have faced similar dilemmas, and have found unique and sometimes surprising solutions. This can be an extremely valuable discovery. Mitigating the feeling of aloneness and isolation can be psychically bolstering and an impetus to action.

I, however, am about as remote from this audience as a person could be. And I am looking at this book through very different eyes. Strock probably never imagined that she would fall into my hands. I don't like misery, and there is a lot of it in Strock's book. I like ideas and understanding. I am interested in this book because I see it bearing on some of the conceptual issues raised by Lisa Diamond in the first part of this review. But the pain and misery gives it an authenticity and an empirical grounding that is less evident in Diamond's book. Strock's feet are firmly planted in the mire of human life. The difference between the two books is reflected in their titles. "Sexual fluidity" is an abstraction. It is conceptual. It requires elucidation and argumentation. "Married women who love women" is

concrete and immediate. It is a series of personal stories.

Although Strock is less philosophically ambitious than Diamond, I ended up liking her book better. Strock writes with great sensitivity and compassion and an appreciation for the complexities and ambivalences of human relations. She also shows an appreciation for the cultural change over the last century that has made same-sex relations nonplussed and socially disapproved (pp. 224–225)—an appreciation that Diamond does not seem to share. Diamond is less interested in the emotional complexities of her subjects' lives; she does not present the individual women she studied in great detail, where Strock is very much focused on the *situations* that have many aspects and many possible sequels.

Depending on the confidence levels, the temperament, environment, family, and friends of those people involved, each scenario would be different. For example ...do the children know or not? Does one know and the other(s) not know? Are the children angry or supportive? Is one child supportive and the other angry? Is one angry with the father for putting up with the mother? Are the children angry with each other because they are supportive of opposite parents? Is the husband one who buries his head in the sand and refuses to see? Is he in denial? Is he supporting, caring, loving? And what about the lover? Is she married or single? With her husband or living separately? Is one woman able to communicate with her husband and the other not? Is she jealous of her lover's children? Does she get along with her lover's husband? Does she resent him and any time his wife spends at home? Each shuffle of these possibilities would result in a completely different story. (p. 152)

I think this is a large part of the reason Strock does not get distracted by genetics and physiology. She looks at her subjects in their real-life situations. Her many vignettes complement and support Diamond's arguments for the fluidity and variability of female sexuality and the ability of women to adapt their sexuality to the needs and opportunities offered by circumstances. They also make it easy to see that the role of genes in these complex phenomena can only be operating in the deep background, setting parameters and creating possibilities, but not in determining specific behavior. There is very little theorizing in Strock's book. *Married Women Who Love Women* is basically a compilation of fairly brief vignettes with some commentary on each. I wish they had been a little more filled out and drawn in a little more psychological depth, but

I guess space is limited and she wanted to show a wide variety of women's experience. She has set this up with each vignette focused on a particular individual, whether a woman, or a husband, or the children. For the most part, she doesn't connect the women with the husbands or with the children. Each vignette is presented as a separate case having no connection to any of the others, that is, they are not interrelated as a rule. The result is the *marriages* are never treated as subjects, only the individuals dealing with their marriages. The different family voices are never shown joined together and interacting, so you never get a sense of what is going on in the marriage. You hear only one perspective. Perhaps she studied these people the only way she could. But these are married women who are experiencing attractions to same sex partners in the context of their marriages. I would like to have seen the marriages presented with both husbands and wives and even the children's views of the same elephant. It would have made the marriages more dynamic and made it possible to understand them a little more clearly. Reading her examples one feels the weight of culture and circumstance not only on outward behavior and public acknowledgement, but even on the subjective experience of the women. The biggest problem faced by the women in Strock's study was the negative reaction to their same-sex involvements from the social milieu in which they lived. The cultural assumption of monogamous exclusive heterosexuality in marriage and the bigotry against same-sex relationships created most of the turmoil in these women's lives. The inadequacy of monogamous, exclusive, heterosexual marriage as a norm for human life is probably the primary lesson of Strock's book, but this is not today's topic. What interests me here is the utter failure of sexual orientation categories to describe the lives and inner development of these women. Strock's cases show *evolution* in the sexual and emotional lives of women. They show contradiction between outward behavior and private feeling. They show every imaginable mixture of feeling and behavior depending on the particulars of the relationships. And everything is subject to change. Simplistic, unchanging orientation categories do not describe these women or their lives. She devotes chapter 11 to the topic of labeling, and her treatment of it mirrors Diamond's finding that women's self-labeling frequently changes over time and many women reject the labels altogether. The labels tend to create barriers, distortion, and confusion that do not correspond to the women's experience or their inner dispositions. The reports from the women in her study

further indicate that it is those who are most limited and most polarized in their outlook on human relations that are the ones most interested in imposing these artificial boundaries upon everyone. Although very different in approach and in style these two books offer compelling documentation of the flexibility and variability of sexual preference in women and for the ineffectiveness of the concept of sexual orientation, to describe their inner experience.

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