



Nature and Nurture: The Changes in Sexuality Over Time Through Life Experiences

This essay explores the evidence of changes in sexuality that may occur throughout time during the course of many women's lives. The multiple theories proposed in this essay include ideas addressing variation in sexual attitudes and desires as different life experiences present themselves. This essay challenges biology and the concept of nature and nurture in a way that sexuality can be a result of both, not just one or the other. By having an understanding of how sexuality can change, we can begin to acknowledge the women who are struggling with these newfound inclinations and find ways to help them continue on with their lives as desired.

Keywords:

Sexualities; Divorce, Nature and Nurture, LGBTQI Identity in Later Life

Introduction

If you've ever heard some of the commonly talked about statistics of divorce, it can sometimes be disheartening when you think about your own future. Unlike many people, these statistics never scared me. Being a child of divorced parents, to this day I believe it was better for everyone. In 2016, at the age of 16, the day came when my parents sat me

and my sister down to give us the news. I felt a wide range of motions but the most surprising one was acceptance. Growing up in a household with the sound of constant arguing and awareness of your father's alcoholic tendencies, I knew it was only a matter of time. It sounds bad, despite that my parents gave my sister and me anything we could ever want. Most importantly, we were loved and cherished, which is why I knew during that conversation they had tried their hardest.

Over the years, I began wondering if they would be interested in dating again when, on Christmas of 2022, my mother told my sister and me that she had been seeing someone for six months and that her name was Beth.¹ I could tell from her face that my mother was nervous for our reactions, but she then displayed ease when she saw our tears of happiness. Later I asked my mother if she felt like some part of her had always felt attracted towards women as well as men. She told me no. Although, she noted that in her parents' generation, homosexuality was not very well accepted. Growing up, I always had the mindset that you were born with your sexuality. Now my understanding is different. This is the inspiration for my research and why this

topic is so important for me to learn more about. This essay explores sexuality changes occurring later in life, and I argue against the biological aspect of the debate and what, if any, life experiences factor into this change.

Nature and Nurture

The concept of nature and nurture has been an ongoing debate concerning sexuality for as long as people have been coming out. It begs the question of whether sexuality is biological or adaptive based on environmental factors. Fortunately, our current generation has become extremely accepting of members within the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) community. Not only does the LGBTQ community have a lot more support, but they continuously gain allies that fight for their equal rights regardless of identifying as straight or not. Still, no matter how accepting society becomes, coming out continues to be very difficult for people to do. No matter how much happiness it will bring that person, the fear of whether everyone will accept them holds them back. This is especially challenging for people coming out as adults.

¹ Pseudonym

Miller (2019) helps us better understand how sexual desires of older women can convert over time. Many changes other than physical appearance go along with aging. Miller observes:

Research shows that role exits, transitions, and turning points cause people to re-evaluate their romantic and sexual goals, aspirations, and behaviors...women gain more control over their sexuality and experience more sexual pleasure in midlife. Further, aging offers people opportunities for self-reflection, which may help women better understand their sexual desires and what most pleases them (p. 374).

This makes sense why some women come out later in life as their romantic behaviors change with their age. For some, they have pushed aside these previous desires towards the same sex in the past. New opportunities of self-reflection allow these women to welcome the desires. Sexual changes among older women are more fluid than we are led to believe. For example, Ainsworth and Baumeister (2012) affirm,

That is, women display greater erotic plasticity than men. Erotic plasticity can be evidenced by changes in the object of desire... Women are more

likely to adopt new activities and preferences at any point in her adult life (p. 1).

Given that women fluctuate more when it comes to their sexual preferences, it is easy to assume that as they get older the change in gender of their sexual partners is common as well. As previously mentioned, this change for some is not easy as they are in fear of rejection from friends and family as well as an identity shift that is new to them. Rickards and Wuest (2006) explain,

Women in this study described support as emotional and included being accepted, having continued love, knowing that important relationships are maintained, and having lesbian identity acknowledged. The extent to which women turned to family members for support in confronting the taken for granted depended on the quality of their past relationship, particularly with parents and siblings (p. 535).

For middle-aged women coming out in this generation, the chances for lack of support may be greater because of how homosexuality was viewed in their siblings and parents' childhoods and their views on LGBTQ rights in general. This brings me to the factor of how life experiences can affect when women

decide to come out and whether they acknowledge their difference in sexualities before and after.

Life Experiences

Elements like childhood, family views, past relationships, divorce, and children are all instances which can influence the decision to come out or not. Cultural and societal views have a big impact on determining whether the risk is worth the reward. Countries such as Iraq, India, or Pakistan are male-dominated cultures in which women aren't necessarily given the option to be openly gay and live with the acceptance from others. Moghasemi et al. (2018) write,

Although the majority of middle-aged women considered sexual activity important in their life, in many cultures, sexuality for older women is less welcomed...in Iran with a male-dominant context, with priority of male sexual fulfillment, women limit sexuality to childbearing years and consider menopause as the time to say goodbye to the sex and feminine world (p. 47).

Although my study is not particularly on Iranian women, their culture's limitations is a good representation of how society's views can influence women's feelings toward sex in general.

Many middle-aged women have internalized and carried the views that were embedded in them since childhood. For the majority growing up, there wasn't the option to express their sexuality as it was not accepted. Nowadays, coming out for middle-aged women is becoming more common as their sexuality is more likely to be embraced. Especially after a huge life change like divorce, more women are then able to express and experiment with their sexual desires. Recently Morrissey's (2018) study showed, "... the quality of the marriage impacted the experience of the divorce, and this was especially true with sexual expression. Less sexual pleasure in the marriage often meant that after the divorce, sexual learning was experienced as thrilling" (pg. 7). As it can be expected, having one sexual partner over an extended period can require more changes and trying new things. For most couples, when there is talk of the lengthy process of divorce, sex is off the table as they are adapting to becoming separate. In some instances, after the divorce is final, women may be looking for change and sexual expression, which isn't always with the same sex. Having the additional factor of children from the past marriage can make that exploration more difficult.

Morris et al. (2002) conducted a study on lesbian/bisexual mothers and observed,

Thus, mothers who had children before coming out were significantly older when they first questioned being LGB, when they had their first sexual experience with another woman, when they first thought of themselves as LGB, and when they first told someone that they were LGB (p. 4).

The coming out process can be harder for women due to the thought of making their children confused or upset. These factors and more have shown to affect sexuality change and the process of women coming out later in life, which brings me back to the topic of nature and nurture. Life experiences and aging can cause changes in sexuality, not always making it biological.

Science and Society

Sexual identity is both sociocultural and biological. To argue that it is one or the other misses the point. The LGBTQ population is diverse and contains people with all different backgrounds and experiences. A large population of people who grew up in many different types of environments, families, and/or education systems fall within the LGBTQ community. There is not one single factor that every single one of those people have in common, also

revealing that sexual orientation can be biological and cultural. There have been multiple studies trying to answer the scientific mystery to the question of whether sexuality is biological or not, including one done by a professor who identifies as gay himself.

Jenny Cornuelle (2010) documents,

Pillard is quick to point out that much about how sexual orientation is determined remains a mystery. 'It's really hard to come up with any definite statement about the situation,' he says. 'I think some sort of genetic influence seems very likely, but beyond that, what really can we say? And the answer is: not a lot' (p. 5).

Pillard's study regarding twins was to determine whether sexuality is genetic. His hypothesis stated that if one is gay, it is more likely the other twin is too. Although his study does not have the twins raised in separate environments, it is understood that genetics regardless of separation does not have an influence on the outcome of sexualities.

When we think biologically about how the body uses the things we pick up through our senses to create our characteristics and personality traits, it's quite fascinating. Cues and behaviors that are picked up through childhood are eventually used in puberty, creating the

subconscious mechanisms that form sexual orientation. Salu (2011) writes,

The brain has auditory centers that process sound, and sex-control centers that control sexual activities. Certain auditory circuitries are innately tuned to distinguish between the voices of men and women. The specific innate connections between those circuitries and the sex-control centers determine the sexual orientation of the person at puberty (p. 2).

The explanation of how the brain works in regard to how we learn to speak, behave, and understand what's going on around us is something that was very interesting for me to read. This article gives a good understanding on what happens within innate auditory circuits and how that can be a factor into determining one's sexuality. The curiosity of how a person is determined to become straight or gay is something that scientists will always seek answers to. Jannini (2015) explores more of the genetic determination of sexuality and concludes,

The existing literature on human sexuality provides evidence that many sexuality-related behaviors previously considered to be the result of cultural influences (such as mating strategies, attractiveness and sex appeal,

propensity to fidelity or infidelity, and sexual orientation) or dysfunctions (such as premature ejaculation or female sexual dysfunction) seem to have a genetic component (p. 8).

This can somewhat relate to how the brain works to subconsciously group these characteristics into ones that are attractive to the individual or not. Although the inner workings of the brain is a biological aspect, the people in which we come in contact with, the voices we hear, and the physical characteristics we see are all environmental. It is with this information and more that we recognize nature and nurture work in a corresponding relationship rather than a separate one.

Future Awareness

When I look back on my research, I feel validated by the potential and meaning I felt it would bring. The foundation of changing anything about our society or the way we view things is the knowledge and education we are given. As I have mentioned before, I can relate personally to this topic which is why I feel so passionately about bringing this information into light. My mother hasn't changed who she is or how much love she has for me after this realization, if anything I can see how all of those

amazing characteristics about her were heightened. It's incredible to see how not being ashamed and feeling as though you can be your true self across diverse and changing sexualities can do to a person, especially someone you so deeply care about. Since I believe there are other similar situations out there like mine between mother and daughter, I feel as though it's important to recognize how strong that bond really is. Davies (2008) says,

The stories told about change and adjustment but, most importantly, loyalty. Each daughter felt committed to honoring her mother's sexual orientation and all that comes with that. Every daughter spoke respectfully about her mother's role in her life, then and now (p. 2).

No matter how strong that relationship is, there is always doubt and fear when it comes to coming out to the persons you are afraid of losing most.

Reassuring them with loyalty is how they know that there was nothing to be worried about at all. Davies also states, "For women who were mothers,

children had the potential to be their greatest source of support... Teenage and adult children, however, were developmentally better able to appreciate the significance of the transition their mothers were making" (p. 3). Giving the acceptance and support they deserve when the time comes is what will give them the security they need to finally live life the way they want.

Understanding how times have changed as opposed to when they grew up can create a sense of appreciation for how difficult it must be to share that part of their new selves. Since society has begun to change for the better when it comes to accepting different sexualities, we are able to better express how common it is to come out later in life.

My hope with my analysis throughout this essay is to bring awareness to the fact that people still are not allowing themselves to love who they want. That is an issue that desperately needs to change. The aspects about this society that continue to be heteronormative are the lingering effects of the past; let's make them disappear in the future.

References

- AINSWORTH, S. E., & BAUMEISTER, R.F. (2012). Changes in sexuality: How sexuality changes across time, across relationships, and across sociocultural contexts. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 9(1), 32.
- CORNUELLE, K. (2010, November 16). [Nature vs. nurture: The biology of sexuality](https://www.bu.edu/articles/2010/nature-vs-nurture-the-biology-of-sexuality). *BU Today*. <https://www.bu.edu/articles/2010/nature-vs-nurture-the-biology-of-sexuality>
- DAVIES, K. (2008). Adult daughters whose mothers come out later in life: What is the psychosocial impact? *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 12 (2-3), 255-263.
- JANNINI, E. (2015). Genetics of human sexual behavior: Where we are, where we are going. *Sexual Medicine Reviews*, 3(2), 65-77.
- MILLER, L. R. (2019). The perils and pleasures of aging: How women's sexualities change across the life course. *Sociological Quarterly*, 60(3), 371-396.
- MOGHASEMI, S., OZGOLI, G., FAZLOLLAH, A. & SIMBAR, M. (2018). Sexual experience of Iranian women in their middle life: A qualitative approach. *International Journal of Community Based Nursing and Midwifery*, 6(1), 47-55.
- MORRIS, J. F., BALSAM, K. F. & ROTHBLUM, E. D. (2002). Lesbian and bisexual mothers and nonmothers: Demographics and the coming-out process. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 16(2), 144-156.
- MORRISSEY, K. S. (2018). Sex after divorce: Older adult women's reflections. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 61(6), 659-674.
- RICKARDS, T. & WUEST, J. (2006). The process of losing and regaining credibility when coming-out at midlife. *Healthcare for Women International*, 27(6), 530-547.
- SALU, Y. (2011). The roots of sexual arousal and sexual orientation. *Medical Hypotheses*, 7(6), 384-387.