

## **“Gay, Straight, or Lying” Revisited**

### **Part 1**

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One of my guilty pleasures is reading various men’s magazines. Not the centerfold kind, but the kind packed with useful articles about manly things, like how to get those “Six-Pack Abs!,” “Build Wealth Fast!,” and “Your Ultimate Cardio Plan!,” not to mention plenty of pictures of handsome men and pretty women. Little bite-sized stories are typical in these magazines, and I’ve noticed that many begin with the phrase, “Researchers have found...” or “Scientists say...” often without ever telling us who these researchers and scientists are, their methodology, or even where the study was published. Before I try downing olive oil to reduce my risk of colon cancer (if not my waist line), I’d like to know if the study results have been reproduced, if it was a double-blind study, and if the researcher was reputable. It’s not that I don’t believe in scientific inquiry, I do. I think that’s how we can most reliably find out about our world. But I know that at times science also has let us down.

Take for example the relationship between cranial capacity and intelligence. In the mid to late 1800s, several scientists measured the cranial capacity of various races of humans. What they reported was that ‘Caucasoids’ had the largest brains, ‘Mongoloids’ next, and ‘Negroids’ the smallest, thus “proving” that white Europeans were the most intelligent. This was a very popular idea at the time for two reasons: it fit in with the new theories of Darwin, and it gave license to racists. Never mind there is no proof that brain size has much if anything to do with intelligence. In fact, it seems unlikely since this would mean whales are the most intelligent creatures on earth (or, if one prefers to look at percent of body weight, then it’s birds). Never mind that men, who

are on average larger than women, would then be more intelligent (wait, a sec, they probably liked that aspect, too). Despite all that, physical anthropologists happily stuffed skull cavities with seeds to measure the space the brain took up and proved...and what did they prove? Exactly what they wanted to prove.

Even accepting the premise that brain size and intelligence are related, the studies were deeply flawed. How? In this case, it appears a scientist consciously or unconsciously packed the seeds a little tighter in some skulls than in others. Another way would be to have a non-representative sample, as in this case where American Indian skulls were more likely to be those of women, and thus smaller.

This is what comes to mind for me when I read the study by Michael Bailey with Gerulf Rieger and Meredith L. Chivers of Northwestern University, "Sexual Arousal Patterns of Bisexual Men," (2005 American Psychological Society). Here, it is popularly believed, Bailey proved there are no bisexual men.

As a bisexual man (having identified as bisexual for thirty-one years and a man for all of my forty eight years), let's just say the study caught my attention.

But it all started with a *New York Times* headline: "Straight, Gay or Lying? Bisexuality Revisited." The July 5, 2005 story by Benedict Carey said, "...a new study casts doubt on whether true bisexuality exists, at least in men." The Times article touched off a firestorm of controversy, from those whose long held beliefs were supported, to those arguing the importance of academic freedom, to those who were angered, appalled, offended, saddened, you name it.

What's the real story? Could the study be right? Is Bailey trying to prove something with skulls and seeds? And, for that matter, did the *New York Times* get the headline right?

The study in a nut shell: Bailey set 33 bisexual, 30 heterosexual, and 38 homosexual men in a room and showed them sexual films. Their arousal was measured through self-assessment and through measurement of circumference changes of their penis. The result? While the self-assessment found the predicted “bisexual pattern,” the penis measurements did not. “...We found no indication of a distinctly bisexual pattern of genital sexual arousal among bisexual men.”

Simple enough. What’s wrong with that?

First, of the 101 men recruited for the study, about a third had no “actual” genital arousal, as defined as measurable increases in penile circumference. Bailey elected to simply ignore that and focus on those with measurable responses. That brings up two questions in my mind: if increases in penile girth are the measure of sexuality, shouldn’t the Times headline have read, “New Study Reveals 1/3 Of Men Are Asexual”? And less cheeky but more important, are 22 bisexual men a large enough study sample?

Next, the study subjects’ sexual orientation was determined by their ranking themselves on a Kinsey Sexual Attraction Scale, with zero being heterosexual and six homosexual. Bailey decided that everyone ranked greater than one and less than five was bisexual. One must ask: does that really make these men bisexual? What did these men call themselves?

Let’s look at the results of the study according to their self-assessed Kinsey ranking. Bailey doesn’t break it down for us, being more interested in putting the men in the three categories, but he does provide a graph with the data. The first thing one may notice is that there appear to be two men who were equally aroused by the male and female films. Interestingly, neither were in Bailey’s bisexual range: one was a Kinsey one and thus ranked as heterosexual, and the other a six, and put in the homosexual group. Also interesting, two of the twenty-five homosexual men were more stimulated by the films featuring women. Neither of these two

outcomes was discussed in the article. In fact, considering three of the “homosexual” men were also attracted to women, perhaps the Times headline should have read: “12% of Gay Men are Bisexual.”

Looking at the group that Bailey calls “bisexual,” there appears there were men spread across the scale, from a Kinsey 1.5 to 4.5. What were the results? In fact, the lower the number, the more they leaned toward being measurably aroused by the sexual films featuring two women, and the higher the number the more they leaned toward films featuring two men. One would think that to be the expected outcome. So why the headlines then? If the researcher was looking for a linear relationship between Kinsey ranking and arousal, three’s equally attracted to men and women, fours a bit more to men, etc., that’s not what they found. Instead, they are scattered around, with the middle ranges, 2.5 on up, leaning more toward the male films than the female. In total, three quarters of these “bisexual” men were more aroused by men, while the rest were more aroused by women.

Interestingly, the self-assessment of arousal showed the expected bisexual pattern, meaning what the men felt differed from what the penis meter detected. Perhaps instead of deciding that “bisexual” men weren’t self-aware enough to know how they feel, the researchers need to re-examine assumptions about expected sexual response to stimuli.

New Times headline: “Sexual Attraction More Complex than Expected, Research Shows.”

Another question that begs asking is the nature of the movies. The study used an 11 minute non-sexual film, followed by four two-minute sexual films. Two of the sexual films showed two men in sexual situations, and the other two showed two women. On what evidence do they base the assumption that men who are attracted to women must enjoy woman-on-woman

porn? For example, what if men generally enjoy porn more if it includes a man to identify with? Plus, is four minutes each really enough material to draw a conclusion? What if the women in the films weren't especially attractive to those 22 men? Bailey's assessment of attractive may well be different than mine, and with such a small sample, that may be important.

Something interesting that is discussed in the study but not included as part of the results, is that to some degree most of the men in the study were aroused by *all* of the sexual content. According to Bailey, "This suggests that most men may possess a certain capacity for bisexual arousal, although the magnitude of this arousal is quite modest." Maybe the headline should read, "All Men Are to Some Degree Bisexual, Study Finds."

For me the bottom line is that sexual attraction cannot be reliably measured in penile blood flow. Consider how complex attraction is. It's well known from the work of Fritz Klein that sexual orientation is informed by things like romantic attraction, sexual behavior, fantasy, community affiliation, *and* visual attraction, not all of which may be measured by a device on a subject's willy.

But what did Bailey really claim to have proved? At first, Bailey is cautious about his conclusions: "Male bisexuality appears primarily to represent a style of interpreting or reporting sexual arousal rather than a distinct pattern of genital sexual arousal." And "our results suggest that male bisexuality is not simply the sum of, or the intermediate between, heterosexual and homosexual orientation." But then he goes a step too far: "Indeed, with respect to sexual arousal and attraction, it remains to be shown that male bisexuality exists." While perhaps literally true in the world of these 22 men in lab rooms with penile girth-measuring devices, it's certainly not true in the lives of millions of men who are bisexual. Finally, Bailey told the *New York Times*, "I am saying that in men there's no hint that true bisexual arousal exists, and that for men arousal is

orientation.” “...*for men arousal is orientation*”? According to whom? What proof is offered of this?

In “Sexual Arousal Patterns of Bisexual Men,” the only conclusion I can draw is that Bailey and company ignored data that didn’t fit their desired result, drew the wrong conclusions from the results they got, and then exaggerated those conclusions. In other words, Bailey stuffed a few more seeds into the skull, consciously or unconsciously, to make sure the results are as expected.

With science, part of the equation is for all of us to be a skeptical consumer. We can’t look to the *New York Times* to always get it right, any more than we can be satisfied with “researchers say...”

Left unasked is why does this study get so much mileage. Why did it warrant “Gay, Straight, or Lying?” We know why. Just like in the 1800’s where there were plenty of people looking for support for their prejudices and happy to find some, there are plenty of people around now looking for proof people like me don’t exist. The study not only reinforced the researcher’s pre-existing beliefs, but also gave people who hate bisexuals plenty of ammunition.

*We’ll explore this more in part two, when we look at the media and the effects the study and stories about it have had, and find out that controversy isn’t new for Michael Bailey.*