

WHY I'D FAIL A PLETHYSMOGRAPH AND WHY I DON'T CARE

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“The fact that I would ‘prefer’ in some abstract sense to be partnered with a man for the rest of my life does not render it completely impossible that I should end up with a woman, though it may indeed be less likely. And what about the converse; might my physiological inclination towards women make it more difficult to settle down with a man? I don’t know; maybe it already has. That might be a reason to change it (which way?), were there any evidence that such a voluntary change is possible; I have studied the relevant psychology enough to say that no such evidence exists.”

Ever heard of a penile plethysmograph? It’s a medical testing device, basically a blood-pressure cuff (sometimes a strip of strain-sensitive metal) that is wrapped around one’s penis; it measures the volume and pressure of the erectile tissue of the *corpus cavernosum*, and thereby detects erection. It’s meant to measure physiological arousal, a task at which it is good but not perfect (most men can suppress our erections voluntarily, making it appear as if we are not as aroused as we are; some of us can also do the opposite); it is often used, however, for the far grander task of determining sexual orientation and predicting future sexual behavior.

I think I would fail a penile plethysmograph. I think any measure of my erectile pressure under particular stimuli would give a pitifully incomplete—and thus, if taken as definitive, profoundly inaccurate—indication of my sexual orientation. I don’t think I would show up as the bisexual I know I am, if (as in the typical experimental profile) you presented me with varying types of porn and measured the blood pressure in my penis as I watched it. I

already know fairly confidently that I would respond most to the heterosexual pornography, including that which displays and glorifies the female while essentially reducing the male to a disembodied penis. I would show a weaker response to lesbian sex and solo females, and a weaker response still to the vast majority of pornography involving gay sex and solo males. (Actually if you used furry pornography, I would probably show a much stronger response to males and a much more equal response to males and females—and frankly I have no idea what accounts for the difference or what it says about my sexuality.) I would show no response or a negative response to fetishism such as urolagnia or sadomasochism, and I would be positively disturbed by eroticized violence or rape.

I know this of course because all of these sorts of material are readily available on the Internet, I am of sufficient age to legally view them in my jurisdiction, and I on occasion avail myself of this opportunity. I therefore know from my own experience how my own body responds to these different stimuli. That’s at least what happens visually; I haven’t systematically analyzed other sensory modalities—I think my tactile and olfactory systems are a good bit more egalitarian than my optical and aural; in embarrassed honesty I must admit I have a lot more experience with the latter than the former—but it’s quite possible that even under these other circumstances I would be on average more physiologically aroused by specifically heterosexual stimuli.

Given this, some might wonder why I call myself “bisexual” at all. If I freely recognize that at least the majority of my visually-induced physiological arousal is triggered by females, why not consider myself straight? There are many reasons—not least that I have no desire to support, even tacitly, the repression and patriarchy of institutionalized heterosexuality—but the most important above all is that *arousal is not orientation*. Many people (nearly all of them straight, but far too many with Ph.D. or M.D. after their name) have often argued in favor of a theory of sexual orientation that makes arousal the primary—or even sole—factor involved in sexual orientation; others have asserted that arousal is orientation for males, but not for females, and so

on—but the fact of the matter is that things are much more complicated than that. What I feel, what I like, what I want, what I need; these things are related to, but not limited by, the intensity of physiological response produced by my body.

According to Fritz Klein, sexual orientation is composed of eight distinct dimensions, which need not be correlated (but often are). Since two are purely self-identification, one is behavioral, and two are social, I would like to focus on the three that I would truly consider to comprise “orientation,” by which I mean one’s personal sense of desire or preference for persons of a particular sex or gender. Though others use different names, I call these three dimensions the “erotic,” which relates to the desire for sexual activity *per se*; the “romantic,” including intimate relationships and long-term partnership; and the “platonic,” which includes friendship and general social association. Of course, these three spheres are not wholly distinct, and we can imagine that there may be some grey areas, but I think they provide a useful tool for understanding.

The problem with science trying to measure the culmination of these three things—my “aggregate sexuality,” as it were—is that most measures available focus almost exclusively on one dimension or another. For instance, a plethysmograph (that penis-measuring device I mentioned earlier) can *at best* only describe my erotic orientation; even at this it isn’t perfect, since I might still be most erotically drawn to something other than what produces the strongest physical response. Still, it’s not a bad measure: Given that I respond most strongly to heterosexual porn, it might be reasonable on this basis to say that I am probably to some degree heteroerotic. But this is only of incidental relevance to my *romantic* orientation, which describes the sort of persons that I would most prefer to enter a relationship with and maintain consistently as a life partner. As it turns out, I must consider myself *homoromantic* to some degree, because I would rather that my life partner be physically male and psychologically somewhat masculine. (Platonic orientation usually doesn’t bother people as much; as it turns out I happen to be fairly biplatonic, with relatively equal distribution between male and female friendship.)

But wait—how can I be heteroerotic, on the one hand, and homoromantic, on the other? Does it mean that I couldn’t possibly have a relationship with a woman, or that in a relationship with a man I couldn’t possibly enjoy sex? No, it doesn’t. *Tendencies are not absolutes*, an idea we’d all do well to internalize. Gay men can love women, and straight men can love men. It’s unfortunate that most people don’t understand this, and indeed may well be shocked by the idea; but that doesn’t change the truth. The fact that I would “prefer” in some abstract sense to be partnered with a man for the rest of my life does not render it completely impossible that I should end up with a woman, though it may indeed be less likely. And what about the converse; might my physiological inclination towards women make it more difficult to settle down with a man? I don’t know; maybe it already has. That might be a reason to change it (which way?), were there any evidence that such a voluntary change is possible; I have studied the relevant psychology enough to say that no such evidence exists. I think on some level my erotic response is more based on sex (anatomy, biology, that sort of thing), and my romantic response is more based on gender (identity, social identity, personality)—so perhaps a transman would be a good fit for me? If so, why does that not seem especially appealing right now?

And to complicate matters further, there remains a question of whether sexual orientation is constant throughout one’s life—or even from day to day. I honestly don’t know; the answer might actually depend what you mean by the words “sexual orientation.” My own intuition is that there is some underlying core orientation that stays largely constant, but that the specifics can be significantly modulated by moods and experiences day to day and year to year. Was I gayer this morning than last Thursday, or did it just feel that way? What if I was gayer for visual stimuli and straighter for smells? I can’t say for sure, and I really don’t know how one would even go about finding out—or if it really matters anyway.

I belie all of this complexity when I label myself “bisexual;” this I do mostly for my own convenience. Rather than pulling out a brochure for the Klein continuum and delivering an hour-long lecture explaining my own

multidimensional sexuality, it's easier for me to simply use a pre-existing label and present an image of someone who doesn't particularly care about the sex or gender of my partner. I can always explain the specifics later if it happens to come up. In the same way, I'm sure it's easier for a mostly homoerotic and heteroromantic young man who is presently just looking for sex to say that he is "gay" so it's clear what sort of person he's interested in right now. If such a man grows up and marries a woman, has that man sold out? Is he closeted? Maybe not; maybe the only thing that has changed is the particular face of his identity that is most salient in his life. Or maybe these things really can change at a deeper level, but the ways they change remain mysterious to us.

In any case, it's nowhere near as simple as we make it out to be. *Nor should we expect it to be!* Part of the problem is that we are bothering to taxonomize our sexuality in the first place. There are no psychologists charting out the percentage of people who prefer broccoli to asparagus, no pastors decrying the sinfulness of enjoying chocolate rather than vanilla. I have little doubt that these preferences are equally complicated as sexual orientation (broccoli goes better with stir-fry, but what about barbecued in tin-foil? Normally I like chocolate, but the other day, vanilla really hit the spot), but we simply don't bother to categorize people that way. We don't even do the same thing in other kinds of sexual preference: there isn't a word for someone who prefers blondes to brunettes, and there aren't political organizations dedicated to destroying or upholding the rights of foot-fetishists. For some reason, we see sexual orientation differently; grand institutions have been built around defining vaginal sex between one male and one female as the only acceptable sort of sexual behavior and all other sorts of sex as not merely distinct, but so much so that one is good, holy, even obligatory and the other is evil, degenerate, even unforgivable. Even if we grant them roughly equal ethical status (as most LGBT people and allies probably would), we still tend to see some profound distinction between these two kinds of sex, and by analogy between the sorts of people who choose to engage in them. Speaking as a biological scientist, this is not a

completely arbitrary distinction to make—obviously, male-female vaginal sex is the only kind of sex that ever produces children, and there are epidemiological differences as well—but it distorts and oversimplifies the issue immensely, elevating real but minor differences to absolute categories.

Ultimately, I think this is why it is so difficult to pin down a simple, accurate, measurable concept of sexual orientation: sexual orientation is not a concept we discovered, it is a concept we invented. It is imposed upon the world, not found within it; and except as a very broad generalization it does not accurately reflect the true state of human affairs. Maybe it is a convenient notion for certain circumstances (in a gay bar, I can expect to find men who are interested in men, at least in that particular context, at that particular moment in their lives); but we must be willing to abandon our convenient notions when they become oppressive.

So yes, I call myself "bisexual." It's easier, quicker this way; there is a little pink-purple-blue flag I can wear (that at least most LGBT people seem to recognize, though straights are typically befuddled); I have something to say when someone asks whether I like men or women. I have an identity label I can use when I speak on coming-out panels. And yes, I do all this even though my sexuality is vastly more complicated than the label makes it sound, so much so that indeed I'd probably fail a plethysmograph.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Julius is 20 years old, finishing out his second year (with junior status) of Brain, Behavior, and Cognitive Science in the Residential College and Honors Program at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Patrick is an Ann Arbor native, born and raised; his parents still live in town, but he refuses to commute. He writes for Beyond Masculinity wearing the label of "bisexual" (fairly accurate, yet incomplete, as his essay will describe), which he also wears on coming-out panels for the Speaker's Bureau of the University of Michigan Spectrum Center. He knows four languages (English, Latin, Arabic, and some Japanese), has written a book on special relativity, and is currently working on an invention that provides cardiovascular exercise and reduces carbon dioxide emissions at the same time.