Who’s Gay, Who’s Straight?: Understanding Sexual Orientation

So what constitutes homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality? The current trend is to emphasize acts in sexual identity (i.e., sexual behaviors). Additionally, the extent to which someone engages in sexual activity, as well as what kinds of sexual activity, influences our attitudes about sexual orientation. But, like sexuality labels, viewing orientation based on acts is not always appropriate. For example, it was common for 19th century American upper-class white women to be involved in intensely emotional and romantic relationships with other women.

In New England, these types of relationships were so popular they were deemed “Boston Marriages”—a committed, domestic, and romantic union between two women. It is generally unclear whether these romantic friendships/ unions ever led to sexual contact. Were they lesbians then? Adolescents often realize they are lesbian or gay without any prior sexual experience. How do they know? Experiences and feelings in the following spheres of sexuality could all encompass sexual orientation:

- Sexual behavior patterns (i.e., sexual physical contact)
- Sexual attraction
- Sexual fantasies
- Affectional patterns—(i.e., who one prefers to be emotionally connected to)
- Self-labeling—(i.e., identifying one’s sexual orientation)

But it’s not just a laundry list! Individuals can be homosexual in one sphere and heterosexual in another, or both at the same time. For example, a man may exhibit both homosexual and heterosexual behavior patterns and self-label as straight. A woman may experience both homosexual and heterosexual attraction, engage only in heterosexual behavior patterns, and self-label as bisexual.

The moral of the story is that sexuality can be fluid and it does not always fit into a straight, bi, or gay box. Labels used to describe sexual orientation are best viewed on a continuum, and individuals’ preferences for sexual orientation labels are self-identified, deeply personal, and can change over time.

Written by: Jennifer Gooch, Center for Research on Women, CROW, University of Memphis

“If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.” – Audre Lorde
Formation of Lesbian and Gay Identities

Understanding sexual identity can be very complex. Labels used to neatly categorize sexuality are not always appropriate for understanding multifaceted human behavior. Sexual fluidity is one example of the complexity of categorizing sexual orientation. For example, some researchers argue that women’s sexuality tends to be more relationship focused and more changeable than men’s sexuality.

Notably, Letitia Anne Peplau is one researcher who has examined influences on women’s sexual fluidity such as the social environment (e.g., a visible and supportive lesbian and gay community), pursuing intimate relationships primarily based on the individual person and not the gender of the person, and political ideologies that may help shape women’s sexual orientation.

Still other researchers have noted the dismissal of sexual fluidity for both women and men in certain situations, such as when one is intoxicated, bored, or just curious. In these situations, same-sex erotic behaviors tend to be considered circumstantial and not worthy of contributing to human sexuality or sexual identity in any significant way.

Among the most widely accepted explanation as to the development of lesbian and gay sexual orientation is the Cass model of sexual identity. Cass presents six stages of development in gay and lesbian identity as it relates to actions, feelings, and thoughts. The model does not speculate on the development of bisexuality or transgendered identity. (The Cass Model is described in full in this Manual in Chapter 6, pages 1 and 2.)

As every person is unique, the Cass model will not and does not explain everyone’s experiences, nor will everyone enter and pass through each stage of development, or in the same order. What the model does provide is a general overview of what can happen and how individuals may feel, think, or act when they realize an identity that deviates from the accepted norm prescribed by society. It is generally presumed that individuals realize their lesbian or gay identity during adolescence, but it is important to note that it can happen at any time in life.

Written by: Jennifer Gooch, Center for Research on Women, CROW, University of Memphis

“As far as I'm concerned, being any gender is a drag.” ---Patti Smith
**Historical Figures**

Sappho (Greek philosopher)
Alexander the Great (Macedonian ruler)
Plato (Greek philosopher)
Julius Caesar (Roman emperor)
Richard the Lion-Hearted (English king)
Caligula (Roman emperor)
Leonardo da Vinci (Italian artist, inventor)
Desiderius Erasmus (Dutch monk/philosopher)
Michelangelo Buonarotti (Italian artist/sculptor)
Joan of Arc (French heroine)
Montezuma II (Aztec)
Francis Bacon (English statesman (author))
Christopher Marlowe (author)
Queen Christina (Swedish queen)
Peter the Great (Russian czar)
Frederick the Great (King of Prussia)
Lord Byron (English poet)
Hans Christian Andersen (Danish author)
Margaret Fuller (American writer, educator)
Herman Melville (American writer)
Collette (French writer)
Walt Whitman (American writer, poet)
Willa Cather (American author)
Oscar Wilde (Irish author)
Gertrude Stein (American author, poet)
Horatio Alger, Jr. (American author, philanthropist)
Amy Lowell (American poet)
Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (Russian composer)
Virginia Woolf (English author)
John Maynard Keynes (English economist)
Bessie Smith (American singer)
Tennessee Williams (American playwright)
Greta Garbo (actor)

(Adapted from: Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Los Angeles)
Who We Are: Historical & Contemporary

**Historical Figures: continued**

T. E. Lawrence (English soldier, author)
Margaret Mead (anthropologist, writer, educator)
   Julius III (Catholic pope)
   Langston Hughes (writer, poet)
   Emily Dickinson (writer, poet)
   James Baldwin (American author)
   Susan B. Anthony (American suffragette)
   Baynard Rustin (American civil Rights leader)
   Noel Coward (English author, composer)
   Rosa Bonheur (French artist)
   Michael Foucault (French philosopher)

**Contemporary Figures**

Martina Navritolova (tennis player)
   John Waters (director)
   k.d. lang (musician)
   Dick Sargent (actor)
   Becky Bertha (writer)
Glen Maxey (Texas State Representative)
   Morrissey (singer)
   Portia de Rossi (actor)
   Samuel Delaney (writer)
   George Michael (musician)
   Holly Near (singer)
   Del Martin (writer)
   Angelina Jolie (actor)
   Freddie Mercury (musician)
   Amelie Mauresmo (tennis player)
   Robert Rauschenberg (artist)
   Kate Moennig (actor)
   Michael Stipe (musician)
   Heather Mattarazzo (actor)
   Rosie Jones (golfer)
   Bob Paris (body builder)

*Adapted from: Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Los Angeles*
Contemporary Figures: continued

Sara Gilbert (actor)
Christopher Rice (writer)
Melissa Etheridge (musician)
Joe Norton (writer)
Ellen DeGeneres (comedian)
Elton John (musician)
Joan Guetschow (Olympian)
Jerry Studds (US congressperson)
Rosie O’Donnell (comedian)
Harvey Fierstein (actor/playwright)
Cindy Olavarri (Olympian)
David Sedaris (writer)
Fanny Flagg (writer/actor)
Boy George (musician)
Sandra Bernhardt (comedian)
Perry Farrell (musician)
Linda Morales (activist)
RuPaul (drag queen)
Ian McKellan (actor)
Barney Frank (US Congressperson)
Ani diFranco (musician)
Divine (drag queen)
Annie Leibowitz (artist/photographer)
Rachel Maddow (television personality)
Billy Joe Armstrong (musician)
Dan Choi (Military activist)
Neil Patrick Harris (actor)
Sheryl Swoops (professional athlete)
Taye Diggs (actor)
Keith Boykin (activist)
Adam Lalmber (musician)
Richky Martin (musician)
Matthew Mitcham (Olympic diver)

(Adapted from: Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, Los Angeles)
QUESTIONS WE CAN ASK OURSELVES TO IDENTIFY OUR OWN HOMOPHOBIA

Phobias in general are unrealistic or irrational fears, and homophobia is an unrealistic fear or generalized negative attitude toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals. Homophobia may be experienced and expressed by lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals as well as by heterosexuals. The following questions can assist you in identifying areas of personal homophobia you may want to address.

Circle answer

Y or N 1. Do you look at a lesbian or a gay man and automatically think of her/his sexuality rather than seeing her/him as a complex person?
Y or N 2. Do you stop yourself from doing or saying certain things because someone might think you’re gay, lesbian, or bisexual? If yes, what kind of things?
Y or N 3. Do you ever intentionally do or say things so that people will think you are heterosexual?
Y or N 4. Do you assume you can spot a gay or lesbian person?
Y or N 5. Do you feel repulsed by public displays of affection between lesbians and gay men but accept the same displays of affection between heterosexuals?
Y or N 6. Do you use the terms “lesbian” or “gay” as accusatory?
Y or N 7. Do you think that a lesbian (if you are a female) or a gay man (if you are a male) is making sexual advances if she/he touches you?
Y or N 8. Do you ever believe that gays or lesbians can influence others to become homosexual? Do you think someone could influence you to change your sexual orientation or your gender identity?
Y or N 9. Have you ever laughed at a “queer” joke?
Y or N 10. Do you hesitate to confront a homophobic remark for fear of being identified with lesbians and gays?
Y or N 11. Do you assume everyone you meet is heterosexual?
Y or N 12. Do you feel that a lesbian is just a woman who couldn’t find a man or that a lesbian is a woman who wants to be a man, or conversely, that a gay man is just a man who couldn’t find a woman or that a gay man is a man who wants to be a woman?
Y or N 13. If you were a parent, how would you (or do you) feel about having a lesbian daughter, gay son, or a bisexual, transgender, or intersexed child?
Y or N 14. How do you think you would feel if you discovered that one of your parents or parent figures, or a brother or sister, were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersexed?
Y or N 15. Do you neglect to inquire about a woman’s female significant other or a man’s male significant other although you regularly ask “How is your husband/wife?” when you greet a heterosexual friend?
Y or N 16. Do you fail to be supportive when your gay friend is sad about a quarrel or breakup?
17. Would you go to a physician whom you knew or believed to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersexed if that person were of a different gender from you? If that person were of the same gender as you? If not, why not?

18. If someone you care about were to say to you, “I think I’m gay,” would you suggest that the person see a therapist or “get help”?

19. Do you worry about the effect a lesbian or gay volunteer/co-worker will have on your work or your clients?

20. Are there any jobs, positions, or professions that you think lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, or intersexed people should be barred from holding or entering? If yes, why?

21. Do you change your seat in a meeting because a lesbian sat in the chair next to yours?

22. Do you ask your lesbian or gay colleagues to speak about lesbian or gay issues, but not about other issues about which they may be knowledgeable?

23. Have you ever been to a gay or lesbian bar, social club, party, or march? If not, why not?

24. Do you focus exclusively on someone’s sexual orientation and not on other issues of concern?

25. Do you feel that gays and lesbians are too outspoken about gay civil rights?

26. Are you outspoken about gay rights, but make sure everyone knows you are straight?

27. Are you afraid to ask questions about lesbian or gay issues when you don’t know the answers?

28. Do you feel that discussions about homophobia are not necessary since you are “okay” on these issues?

29. Can you think of three positive aspects of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersexed lifestyle? Can you think of three negative aspects of a heterosexual lifestyle?


We are all diminished when any one of us is demeaned. By challenging homophobia, people are not only fighting oppression for specific groups of people, but are striving for a society that accepts and celebrates the differences in all of us.
HOMOPHOBIA:

What is Homophobia?

Homophobia takes many different forms. Sometimes it takes the form of physical acts of hate, violence, verbal assault or blatant discrimination, such as firing an employee, evicting someone from their housing, or denying them access to public accommodations based solely on their sexual orientation or their perceived/assumed sexual orientation. There are many other kinds of homophobia and heterosexism that happen every day.

We often overlook these more subtle actions and exclusions because they seem so insignificant by comparison, but they are not insignificant. It is important for allies of the GLBTIQ community to recognize homophobic assumptions and behaviors in ourselves so that we may take steps toward changing those attitudes and behaviors.

(Rhodes College Safe Zone Manual)

Definitions of Homophobia:

**Homophobia** is the fear, hatred, disgust, mistreatment, or intolerance of same-sex intimacy, relationships, “atypical” gender behavior or appearance, and/or people who identify as or are perceived as GLBTIQ.

**Heterosexism** is the belief in the inherent superiority of heterosexuality and, thereby, its right to dominance. Carries with it the assumption that everyone one encounters is heterosexual. Homophobia is responsible for the many ways in which people are oppressed on the basis of sexual orientation. Sometimes homophobia is intentional, where there is a clear intent to hurt lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Homophobia can also be unintentional or inadvertent, where there is no desire to hurt anyone, but where people are unaware of the consequences of their actions.

**Personal homophobia** is prejudice. It is the personal belief that lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are sinful, immoral, sick, and inferior to heterosexuals, or incomplete women and men. Prejudice towards any group is learned behavior; people have to be taught to be prejudiced. Personal homophobia is sometimes experienced as the fear of being perceived as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This fear can lead to trying to “prove” one’s heterosexuality. Anyone, regardless of their sexual orientation, can experience personal homophobia. When this happens with lesbians, gay, and bisexual people, it is sometimes called “internalized homophobia.”

**Interpersonal homophobia** is the fear, dislike or hatred of people believed to be lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This hatred or dislike may be expressed by name-calling, verbal and physical harassment, and individual acts of discrimination or by the rejection of friends, co-workers, and/or family members.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are regularly attacked for no other reason than their assailants’ homophobia. Most people act out their fears of lesbians and gay men in non-violent, more commonplace ways. Relatives often shun their lesbian and gay family members; co-workers are distant and cold to lesbian and gay employees; or people simply never ask about acquaintances’ lives.
**Institutional homophobia** refers to the many ways in which government, business, religious institutions, and other institutions and organizations discriminate against people on the basis of sexual orientation. These organizations and institutions set policies, allocate resources, and maintain both written and unwritten standards for the behavior of their members in ways that discriminate.

For example, many religious organizations have stated policies against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people holding office; many schools fail or refuse to allocate funds and staff for lesbian, gay, and bisexual support groups; and many businesses have norms for social events which prevent lesbian, gay, and bisexual employees from bringing their same sex partners while heterosexual employees are allowed to bring their opposite sex partners.

**Cultural homophobia** refers to social standards and norms that dictate that being heterosexual is better or more moral than being lesbian or gay, and that everyone is heterosexual, or should be. While these standards are not written down as such, they are spelled out each day in the television shows and print advertisements where virtually every character is heterosexual and every sexual relationship involves a female and a male; or in the assumption made by most adults in social situations that all “normal” children will eventually be attracted to and marry a person of the opposite sex.

Often, heterosexuals don’t even realize that these standards exist, while lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are acutely aware of these standards. The feeling that results for lesbian, gay and bisexual people is one of being an outsider in the society.

*(Adapted from the University of Alabama Safe Zone Manual)*

**Beyond Homophobia: Examples of Heterosexism—Something to Ponder**

- Someone’s life partner being denied access to the patient in ICU because they are “friends” and not family
- Some GLBTIQ find that living in rural areas generally means being isolated and “closeted”
- When GLBTIQ people find their posters for support meetings or dances defaced or removed, GLBTIQ feel discounted and physically threatened and their sense of well-being and safety is thereby damaged
- GLBTIQ young people often drop out of school because of homophobia and heterosexism
- Those who remain in school often find themselves more vulnerable to mental health difficulties and suicide attempts