Sexual Orientation

by Vern L. Bullough

The phrase *sexual orientation* is used to describe erotic attraction toward people of the same gender (homosexual), the opposite gender (heterosexual), or both (bisexual). Like any such simplistic categorization, definitions are not easy to make and are problematic.

There is an assumption that the label "heterosexual" is to be reserved for people who have sexual interactions only with members of the other sex, and this implies that those who do not do so are classed as homosexuals, regardless of the number of same-sex sexual relationships they have had and even if the number of opposite sex relationships far outnumber them. When can an individual be labeled bisexual, homosexual, or heterosexual?

The Kinsey Scale

Kinsey's influential 1948 study of American males and his 1953 study of females first pointed out the difficulties of such classification. To overcome it, Kinsey developed a seven point scale with 0 representing individuals who had only heterosexual intercourse and with 6 representing those who had only same-sex activities.

Not so surprisingly, Kinsey and his associates found that 37 per cent of the males and 13 percent of the females in their sample had had at least one homosexual encounter. The scale, however, did not establish numerical ranges for categorizing sexual orientation. Is a man who has had sexual relations with females 70 per cent of the time and with males 30 percent of the time, a homosexual? Is a woman who has sex with males 30 per cent of the time, and 70 per cent with other women, a lesbian? Are they both bisexual? Because of this difficulty, Kinsey used the terms homosexual and heterosexual as adjectives rather than nouns, to refer to activities but not to people.

Experimentation and Fantasies

The issue is further complicated by the fact that many people do considerable experimentation before confining themselves to one sex. Others might originally have partners only of the opposite sex, but as they age they have an increasing number of partners of the same sex, and settle down with a same-sex partner. How should they be labeled?

If this problem does not make the issue complicated enough, other factors also have to be considered, particularly the psychological reactions of individual partners. What kind of fantasies and feelings about same-sex relationships do individuals have even though they have sexual relations only with the opposite sex? Anna Freud, for example, maintained that the crucial determination of homosexuality or heterosexuality was one's thoughts and images when masturbating or becoming sexually aroused. A woman who becomes sexually aroused by same-sex fantasies while having sex with her husband would be classed as homosexual even though she never engaged in homosexual behavior. The opposite case with males would be equally true.

Other factors might also be at work, and this is most noticeable in observations made about other species. Beach, for example, held that homosexual activities among animals was usually an expression of the dominant or submissive role of that particular individual animal *vis-à-vis* another. He cautioned, however, that the existence of homosexual behavior in some animals says little about homosexual relations in humans, that is, that homosexuality is "biologically normal." This might well be the case, but he felt the empirical evidence from animals was irrelevant and neither supported nor denied the deduction.

Cross-Cultural Data

Cross-cultural data has also been utilized to emphasize the existence of same-sex orientation over much of history or culture. Ford and Beach examined 190 cultures for information about sexuality using what was then called the Human Relations Area Files, a collection of reports on a variety of cultures. The information was extracted from reports of observers in earlier periods, many of them missionaries or explorers, while later reports were often made by trained anthropologists.

They reported that homosexual behavior was not found to be a predominant sexual activity among adults in any of the societies, but that in the majority of the 76 groups for which information on homosexuality was available, same-sex relations were considered to be normal and socially acceptable, at least for certain members of the society. In about a third of these societies where homosexuality was reported, it was said to be rare, absent, or carried on only in secrecy. The fact that it was not mentioned in the reports of the majority of societies, however, should not be taken to say it was non-existent, since the observers might well not have been looking for it.

For example, Balinese society was classified by Ford and Beach as among the 36 percent minority where homosexual activity was rare, absent, or carried only in secret. Yet the crossing of sex roles is common among the Balinese, and their religious beliefs place a high valuation on the hermaphroditic figure of Syng Hyan Toengaal, also known as the Solitary or Tjinitja. Tjinitja existed before the division of the sexes and is regarded as both husband and wife. Are the transvestite ceremonies connected with this god a form of homosexuality? Ford and Beach classified the cross-dressing of the Native American *berdache* as homosexuality, but not here. Why not?

Identification and Coming Out

Probably the best solution to determining one's sexual orientation is to ask how he or she identifies himself or herself. Such a question was not possible in most cases until recently since homosexuals and bisexuals were regarded as "sick" and their "illness" was also illegal. It was not until 1974 that members of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) adopted a resolution to the effect that being "homosexual did not imply any impairment in judgment, stability, reliability or general social or vocational capabilities."

Such a conclusion was based on research dating from at least the beginning of the twentieth century that had challenged the illness conclusion. But change in psychiatric opinion was slow and did not take place in isolation. Activists in the gay and lesbian community had organized themselves and agitated for change since 1950, and they had confronted the APA and demonstrated for a change to be made in its policies.

Challenges were also made to the legal system that regarded homosexual acts as a crime because it was an "unnatural act." Groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and the American Law Institute began agitating for change in the 1950s and early 1960s, as did a growing number in the gay community, an agitation that culminated in the 2003 decision of the U. S. Supreme court declaring sodomy laws unconstitutional.

Increasingly, lesbians and gay men themselves organized and developed communities and institutions. As the medical, legal, and social barriers fell, increasing numbers of gay men and lesbians came out of the

closet, proclaiming their sexual orientation.

Acquiring a gay identity is an extremely important but not always easy process, even though most gay men and lesbians indicate that they felt that somehow they were "different in childhood and adolescence" from others. Only gradually in their teens did they begin to identify themselves as homosexual.

Identification probably comes more easily if individuals are able to identify with other gay men or lesbian women. As they do so they have to decide whether to come out of the closet, to acknowledge their gay identity to others. For many this decision is a complex and somewhat difficult problem; for others it is not. In any case, once gay men and lesbians express their identity, they tend to be culturally defined by society as a class. Definitions, whether by self or others, influence how one is viewed and accepted by others. However, as society adjusts to changing attitudes, this expression of identity is less limiting than it was ten or twenty years ago.

Characteristics of Homosexuals as a Mixed Collectivity of Individuals

Gay men and lesbians, either as individuals or in groups, are a very mixed collectivity of individuals, with a wide ranging variety of behaviors, although most seem to be gender atypical in some traits. Gay men in general describe themselves as less masculine in a range of traits than do straight men, and lesbians in general describe themselves as less feminine than do straight women.

Both sexes also seem more willing to disregard gender norms in their choice of occupations. Lesbians are more interested than heterosexual women in visual stimuli, and less concerned than straight women in their partner's social status. Gay men are less prone than straight men to sexual jealousy, and are also somewhat less focused on their partner's youth as a criterion for attraction. The differences between gay and straight people are generally more marked for men than for women.

Theories to Explain Sexual Orientation

These similarities and others have resulted in diverse theories to explain sexual orientation. Most theories fall into one of two categories: psycho-social dynamic or biological, sometimes simplified as elements in the nurture vs. nature debate.

Psychodynamic theories attempt to explain development of a person's sexual orientation in terms of internal mental processes, and the interaction of these with reward and punishment. Examples of these include Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Ira Reiss's socialization theory. The latter holds that the greater the rigidity of gender role in male-dominant societies, the higher the likelihood of male homosexual behavior. This is so, Reiss argued, because the rigidity of the gender role could lead a male child who did not conform to find conformity with other nonconformists, that is, male homosexuals.

In the last decade, increasing numbers have turned to biological theories, explaining sexual orientation in terms of biological phenomena such as brain circuitry, hormones, genes, and evolution. The brain, for example, is said to be influenced by prenatal hormones. Fetuses whose brains are exposed to high levels of androgens during prenatal development will be sexually attracted to women in adult life, while those exposed to low levels will be attracted to men. Brain researchers have looked at biological markers, such as the human hypothalamus, to test such conditioning.

Others have looked at bodily difference such as fingerprints or finger length to determine the influence of prenatal hormones. Other physiological and anatomical features have also been examined, but all of the theories proposed so far have limitations, some more serious than others. Since homosexuality is thought by many to run in families, there has also been an effort to look at genetic influence, and while some researchers have found what they think is documentation of this, there generally has been a failure to replicate the findings.

The author of this article has argued that so far there are too many variables involved to come up with any definitive answers. Probably biological, psychological, and social dynamics are all involved, and there are too many variables to reach any final conclusions. As far as classifying any individual, sexual orientation seems best left up to the individual to define for himself or herself.

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About the Author

Vern L. Bullough, a SUNY Distinguished Professor Emeritus, also founded the Center for Sex Research at California State University, Northridge. He was the author, co-author, or editor of more than 50 books, about half of which deal with sex and gender issues. A past president of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality, he earned numerous awards for his writing and research, including the Kinsey award. He wrote more than 150 refereed articles, and hundreds of others. During his career, he lectured in most of the 50 states, and in more than 25 foreign countries.