



Image from: [Gay rights rally. Tina and Melissa Lesley-Fox of... in Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society](#)

Summary Article: **LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER**

From *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*

The phrase *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender* (LGBT) refers to members of a community of people marginalized by sexuality and gender. The acronym LGBT itself owes its existence to decades of identity politics and organizing. Ethnoracial minorities who are LGBT face specific issues where sexuality, gender, and their experience as people of color intertwine, and LGBT categories are infused with racial readings not often discussed. This entry consists of two sections; the first discusses the historical relationship between these categories, and the second addresses specific aspects that relate to ethnoracial groups, LGBT identity, and community organizing.

Historical Overview

In general, social scientists, service providers, and even lawmakers are beginning to make a distinction between gay, lesbian, and bisexual as a type of *sexual orientation* (along with heterosexual and, as some people would argue, asexual) and transgender and transsexual as specifically referring to one's own sense of *gender identity* (or a rupture from the basic categories of male and female imposed on all social beings at birth as man and woman and based primarily on genitalia). In mainstream U.S. society, however, conflation among sex, gender, and sexuality continue to be made in reading lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual people as members of the same group.

The language of much community organizing during the past 15 years or so has employed the terms *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender* (or *transgendered*) and only sometimes names *transsexuality* explicitly. Transgender as a category often refers to an action against gender-binary impositions, and *transsexual* is much more specific to a move from one gender construct to another. In addition, the use of *transexual*—with one s—was coined by Riki Anne Wilchins to denote a different relationship to a transgender person's experience; the term *transsexual*—with double ss—is historically tied to the psychiatric, medicalized, and surgically based experience that tended to define and regulate transsexuality.

Although of some utility, the application of broad community labels such as *gay and lesbian; gay, lesbian, and bisexual; or gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender/transsexual* is problematic because these categories of identity did not come together without continual experiences of social discrimination and bias, sometimes including violence, for instance, the constant sexism faced by many lesbian and bisexual women in the Castro neighborhood of San Francisco when it was becoming a primarily gay male neighborhood during the 1970s and the frequent invisibility of bisexual and transgender people even though current social movement leaders and organizations often name or list “bisexual” and “transgender” as part of their titles. The use of the acronym LGBT is much more recent in identity politics and community organizing. Organizing among same-sex male- and same-sex female-bodied individuals, which only emerged with some political significance during the 1950s, took place separately as organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society erupted. Organizing for “gay” rights was first gay, then gay and lesbian, and co-ed organizing began during the 1970s with the former National Gay Task Force becoming the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Bisexuality is seldom mentioned, although in much theorizing, as well as in organizing since perhaps the 1980s, bisexuality is attached to “gay and lesbian,” often to counter accusations of atypical gender presentation by gays and lesbians—attempting to produce gender-normative men and women with nonhegemonic sexualities. Transsexuality was mentioned in relationship to the psychiatric and medical establishments and only began to be linked explicitly to lesbian, gay, and bisexual nomenclatures later on. Transgender is a 1990s term, as argued by writers such as David Valentine. From this brief historical outline of “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgender/transsexual” as newly emerged identity markers, it should be clear that decades of struggles to this level of organizing and inclusiveness did not just come about “naturally.” Many activists and scholars alike, however, use the acronym LGBT without much consideration to where sex/gender/desire intersect with these identities.

Racial Aspects of LGBT Identity and Organizing

Racial/ethnic minorities and immigrants in U.S. society who are LGBT experience not only those challenges that White LGBT people experience but also the legal, institutional, and social barriers to people of color and immigrants. For instance, during recent decades requests for political asylum on the basis of a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity have become increasingly common in applications to stay in the United States. There are structural differences to understanding LGBT communities of color; in the United States, a certain hegemonic way of being LGBT is often imposed without a racial reading of whiteness noticeably imposing it. Whiteness fuses with gayness in ways that have unfortunate results for people of color. For instance, the relationship of Black and Latino sexuality in contemporary portrayals has solidified notions of how communities of color are homophobic; how men of color are often “closeted” and cannot identify as gay, remaining (as commonly stated) on the “down low”; and how machismo is perceived to be an element that affects only Latino culture. Similarly, whereas Black and Latino men are hypersexualized, Asian men tend to be desexualized or effeminized. These structural readings make it much more feasible to read whiteness as an ideal basis for gayness (although this is rarely noticed) and to read communities of color as more homophobic. And because communities of color are highly affected by issues such as HIV/AIDS, a simple justification is made to link and establish homophobia as the basis for such high incidence.

LGBT people of color have historically been involved in community organizing and activism on various fronts. Writers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Cherríe Moraga, and Gloria Anzaldúa have discussed the relationship of being women of color and managing their own sexuality as such. Many community organizing centers in the United States, for example, organizations such as the Austin Latina/o Lesbian and Gay Organization in Texas and the Audre Lorde Project in New York City, use the experience of being both LGBT and people of color as an active platform to mobilize. In sum, both racial status and sexual status are active components of their organizing and activism. (Note, however, that in many instances the placement of LGBT people of color’s racial status as secondary by mainstream LGBT people tends to be accompanied by that general group’s sense of tolerance toward racial minorities in the LGBT communities; interracial dating is often understood to be proof of such lack of bias toward LGBT people of color.)



Gay rights rally. Tina and Melissa Lesley-Fox of Portland, Oregon, holding their 13-month-old daughter Amelia at a rally for gay rights at the Oregon State Capitol in Salem on March 7, 2007. The rally was being held to support the Oregon Equality Act, a statewide nondiscrimination bill that would prohibit discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation on the basis of sexual orientation, and the Oregon Family Fairness Act, a relationship recognition civil unions bill that would extend to same-sex couples benefits, protections, and responsibilities similar to those afforded to opposite-sex couples through marriage.

Source: Getty Images.

Gender and sexuality are also complex categories through which LGBT people understand their experiences. Although no reductionist approach should be used to juxtapose Whites' and people of color's experiences with these categories, it is important to mention how terms such as *two-spirited*, *same-gender loving*, *family*, and *de ambiente* (Spanish for "from the crowd") are used by various communities of color to identify their behavior, attraction, or belonging to an LGBT community (or to a community at large but with some specific recognition). Lesbians and lesbians of color are particularly affected by the erasure of gender and gendered experiences within studies of LGBT communities because much funding, attention, and literature respond to male-identified individuals who are members of LGBT communities—more so when speaking of African American or Latino men. Lesbians also experience a set of erasures when their sexuality is highlighted; commonalities between them and heterosexual and bisexual women concerning harassment, experiencing sexism and developing tools to respond to it, and histories of abuse and trauma tend not to be foregrounded.

In sum, LGBT communities comprise a variety of experiences. LGBT identities are often framed through the lens of whiteness even when seldom noticed. LGBT people of color experience additional barriers toward social acceptance in society. And although LGBT is used as a coalitional term, it does not mean that all communities are represented equally—or treated equally—within such coalition movements.

See also

Civil Rights Movement; Discrimination; Immigrant Communities; Immigration, U.S.; Machismo; People of Color; Privilege; Sexuality

Further Readings

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