**Definition: sexual orientation** from *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*

A term used to identify a person's sexual attraction toward persons of a particular gender. Those sexually attracted to the opposite sex are said to display a *heterosexual* orientation, those attracted to the same sex, a *homosexual* orientation and to both, *bisexual*. This term is the most encompassing of several near synonyms currently in use such as *sexual preference* and *sexual identity* although, as noted under these terms, there are nuances of use and reference.

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**Summary Article: Sexual Orientation**  
*Encyclopedia of Social Problems*

Sexual orientation is the expression of sexuality enveloped by one’s self-identification, including romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction. Sexual orientation can be problematic for those not conforming to mainstream societal norms.

*Heterosexuals* are people who are sexually and romantically attracted to people of the opposite sex. Because heterosexuals are the dominant group in society, those whose sexual orientation differ are sometimes overlooked, under-represented, or misunderstood. People who are attracted to their same sex are known as gay and lesbian. The term *gay* refers mostly to men who are sexually and romantically attracted to other men, and the term *lesbian* refers to women who are sexually and romantically attracted to other women. Sometimes the term *gay* serves as an umbrella word for all people whose sexual attraction includes attraction to people of their same sex. Historically, the word *homosexual* described people who had same-sex attraction. Because of its pathological history and the clinical implication of the word, many people have stopped using *homosexual* to explain a person’s sexual orientation.

*Bi*sexual people are people whose romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction is to both sexes. Many misconceptions exist about the bisexual orientation among the gay and lesbian population as well as the heterosexual population. Bisexuals are sometimes unfairly labeled as people who cannot “make up their minds” or as people who have sex with multiple partners simultaneously. Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals all face possible stereotyping because their sexual orientation differs from the dominant culture. Additionally, people who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual (or perceived to be) often face prejudice and discrimination based on those stereotypes and society’s misrepresentation of this group as “undesirable, deviant, and unnatural.”

Sexual orientation also includes a person’s sexual behavior, but the two are not always congruous. For example, some black and Latino men who have sex with men do not identify as gay, homosexual, or bisexual. Instead they are considered to be on the “down low.” Many of these men are married with children and lead lives that most would consider heterosexual. It is important to note that sexual behavior does not define one’s sexual orientation but is only one aspect of identity.

*Asexual* people are people who do not experience sexual attraction. Experts continue to debate whether or not asexuality is a sexual disorder or orientation. Most asexuals have the capability to be aroused, but the arousal is not in response to sexual attraction. In fact, asexuals find sexual behavior unappealing.
Sexual preference, a term that some believe to be congruent with sexual orientation, is favored by those who believe that individuals choose their sexuality. The “nature versus nurture” debate raises the question as to whether or not one is born gay. To say that a person chooses to be gay implies that she or he can change her or his mind and be “fixed” by therapy. Numerous programs in the United States operate on the premise that they can “make” a gay person heterosexual with the help of religion, normative gender role play, and psychotherapy.

See also
- Bisexuality
- Homosexuality
- Queer Theory
- Sexuality
- Transgender and Transsexuality

Further Readings

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