

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Straight: What Are We Really Talking About?

Most people -- gay and straight alike -- prefer to believe that you are either gay or straight. Bisexuals are seen as "bi now, gay later." And those who are "heteroflexible" -- heterosexual but enjoying gay sex everyone once in a while -- are almost always seen as latent homosexuals, especially if they are males. The truth is that it is not this simple at all.

To best understand how complicated this is, we need to be able to differentiate four terms that are often confused: sexual orientation, sexual preference, sexual fantasies, and sexual behavior. Contrary to common usage, they aren't always in alignment.

Sexual orientation encompasses one's sexual and romantic identity, in which thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors work together in concert. It's the alignment of affectional, romantic, psychological, spiritual, and sexual feelings and desires for those of the same or opposite sex. Sexual orientation doesn't change over time; it is fixed (although some women experience fluidity in sexual orientation; more on that below). One's sexual behaviors and preferences might change, but like one's temperament, one's orientation remains mostly stable. The term also refers to how someone self-identifies, not how others may categorize him or her. Some people self-identify as straight, while others self-identify as gay or lesbian, bisexual, or questioning. It's important to ask how they self-identify, regardless of whom they have sex with. Sexual preferences refer to sexual acts, positions, and erotic scenarios that someone prefers and finds erotic to have while engaging in sexual activity. The term takes into account what individuals like to do and get into sexually, not necessarily with whom they like to do it. Preferences and erotic interests can change over time, as one becomes more open or closed to certain thoughts and behaviors.

Sexual fantasies are any thoughts that one finds arousing. They can encompass anything -- sexual positions, romantic encounters, body parts, clothing and shoe fetishes, even rape fantasies. Sexual fantasies aren't necessarily acted out. In fact, in many cases, they aren't. Straight men and women sometimes fantasize about having sex with members of the same sex and even watch porn and find it sexually arousing. This is similar to lesbians who enjoy watching gay male porn. Lesbians who enjoy gay male porn movies report that it is not about the men in the porn but about the mutual and externalized sexual desire and power balance that exists between them, which is not usually seen in heterosexual erotica.

Sexual behaviors are any behaviors intended to pleasure oneself and/or one's sexual partner. It doesn't necessarily reflect one's orientation. For example, gay men have sex with women all the time, and it doesn't reflect heterosexuality or bisexuality. Men who are imprisoned engage in sexual behaviors with other men, but they do so out of sexual necessity, not because of erotic interest in other men. They desire the sexual release it achieves, and the sex of the partner is secondary.

Men and women are different when it comes to reasons for having sex with the same sex. For straight men having sex with men, same-sex encounters aren't about romance or sexual attraction and desire but about sexual and physiological arousal -- "getting off" with another

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who's male and accessible. They don't sexually desire or get aroused by looking at other men, only by the sexual act.

Women in heterosexual porn are not engaging in sex for their own pleasure only; they often are doing it for the pleasure of the straight men watching them, and because they are being paid. Straight men in gay porn are the second highest-paid actors next to women, giving them a reason to engage in gay sexual behaviors.

But if they don't actively desire other men, how do they get to the point of having sex with them? These men typically want to bond with and get affection from other men. Their behavior may reflect a desire to experiment, to engage in something that's taboo, or to express inner psychological conflicts involving their sexual feelings and desires that have nothing to do with having a gay or bisexual identity. Young adults are showing us that they can be sexual with the same sex and the opposite sex while not labeling themselves or each other as the older generations do.

Straight men who have sex with men do so for a variety of reasons. Some have been sexually abused and are compulsively reenacting childhood sexual trauma by male perpetrators; some find sexual release with another man more accessible; some have sex with men because it's easier and requires fewer social skills than those required to have sex with women; some are "gay for pay" and get financial rewards; some like the attention they receive from other men; some like anal sex, which they're otherwise too ashamed to talk about or engage in with their female partners.

Straight women are different when it comes to sex with other women. Sometimes they do so because they have been abused by men and have decided to consciously be in relationship with women as a result. Women have more permission to experiment and play with other women than do men. Often, there is a romantic interest as well as a sexual desire for other women. Some women express a sexual fluidity in that they can express their sexual energy to both men and women at different times in their lives and don't necessarily identify as bisexual. Many of those who engage in sex with members of both the opposite sex and the same sex are bisexual. It is important to understand that bisexuals are sexually attracted to both sexes but don't often feel romantic toward both equally, if at all.

If you're confused, then I have done my job in writing this article. There is nothing simple about sex and sexuality. It is a complicated narrative about a person.