

Sexuality includes a spectrum of various identities which can describe a person's sexual attraction, behavior and personal identification. However, sexuality is extremely fluid and one's sexual orientation, sexual behavior and sexual identity are not always aligned. Additionally, sexuality is not necessarily based upon a person's biological sex, but is often determined more so by their gender identity. When trying to understand the complexity of sexuality, it is important to also understand the ways sexuality is regulated in United States culture through social interactions, (un)availability of legal protections and other forces.

What is sexuality?

Sexuality can be understood as a spectrum of identities that relate to a person's sexual orientation, sexual behavior and sexual identity. Sexual orientation refers to the sex/gender of the person/people someone is attracted to. Sexual behavior refers to the relationships of a sexual nature in which a person engages. These relationships can include any number of sexual acts with others, but can also include celibacy, asexuality, and self-pleasure (masturbation). Sexual identity is self-determined and refers to the way a person describes their sexuality, sexual orientation and sexual behavior. Sexual identity typically refers to the way you tell others about your sexuality.

What does it mean to be heterosexual/straight?

People who identify as *heterosexual/straight* are often attracted to a person/people of, what is considered to be, the opposite sex. For example, if someone self-identifies as a heterosexual male, it typically means that based on his identity as a man, he is attracted to females and/or people who identify as women. Similarly, a person who identifies as a heterosexual female is typically attracted to males and/or people who identify as men. However, simply because someone identifies as “straight” does not necessarily mean they are not attracted to, and/or have sexual relations with people of their same sex/gender.

What does LBGTQPIA stand for?

LBGTQPIA is an acronym which symbolizes many different sexual identities (Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Pansexual, Intersex, Asexual). *Lesbian* refers to women identified women/females who are attracted to other women/females. *Bisexual* refers to people who are attracted to people of both sexes/genders (sometimes their attraction also includes people who are transgender). *Gay* typically refers to men/males who are interested in other men/males, but is also used as an umbrella term to refer to LBGTQPIA identities. *Transgender* does not refer to a person's sexuality, but rather their gender identity and expression (for more information about Transgender identities—see the “Gender & Sex” Fast Fact sheet). People who identify as transgender can have any type of sexual identity/orientation/behavior. *Queer* is a term with many meanings—see definition below. *Pansexual* refers to people who are attracted to others of all/any sexes and/or gender identities and expressions. *Intersex* also does not refer to a person's sexuality, but is used to describe people who are born with a variation in their sex characteristics that may result in ambiguous features. *Asexuality* typically describes people who have no or little interest in sexual activity; however, people who are asexual can/do have romantic relationships with others.

How do I know if I am gay or heterosexual?

This is a complicated question. A person's sexuality takes into account an assortment of various components, including a person's attraction to others, sexual desires, intimate behaviors, cultural and religious implications and, most of all, personal feelings. Typically, people start developing and, at some level, understanding their sexuality during childhood. U.S. cultural norms have created heterosexuality as the "default" sexuality experienced in society. However, heterosexuality is actually determined by an individual's self-identification.

What is queer? Isn't it a derogatory term?

Queer was often used as a derogatory term in the mid-to-late 1900s. However, younger generations of LBGTQPIA people have reclaimed the term, often as a political statement, and applied it to their self-expression. Queer is a term that can refer to a person's sexuality and often describes a sexuality that rejects the idea that there are only two genders and two sexes. Additionally, queer can refer to someone's gender, particularly "non-normative" expressions of gender, such as gender queer, trans*, gender nonconforming, etc. (For more information about gender, see the "Gender & Sex" Fast Fact sheet).

What are homophobia, biphobia and transphobia?

All of these terms represent the feelings and negative attitudes toward others which can result in prejudice, contempt, hatred, irrational fear, discrimination and/or violence. *Homophobia* refers to negative attitudes felt toward people who identify or are perceived to be lesbian or gay. *Biphobia* represents negative attitudes toward people who identify as or are perceived to be bisexual. *Transphobia* means negative attitudes toward people who identify as or are perceived to be transgender or have a non-normative gender identity/expression.

What is heterosexism?

Heterosexism is any thought, attitude, belief, action or institutional practice that values heterosexuality above LBGTQPIA identities. Heterosexism is often based upon the presumption that people are heterosexual and that opposite-sex attraction and relationships are "normal" and that all other expressions of sexuality are not normal. These types of beliefs, attitudes and actions can result in prejudice and discrimination.

Where can I find more information about these topics?

MSU Women's Resource Center

<http://wrc.msu.edu>

517-353-1635

332 Union Building

Equality Michigan

Works to achieve equality for all people in Michigan regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

<http://www.equalitymi.org>

MSU LBGT Resource Center

<http://lbgtrc.msu.edu/>

517-353-9520

302 Student Services Building