

Sexual Identity

KIMBERLY ALLEN

North Carolina State University, USA

An essential component of human development is identity development: making sense of one's goals, beliefs, values, and life roles. Included in identity development is sexual identity. Sexual identity can be defined as a label that helps signify to others who a person is as a sexual being and includes the perceptions, goals, beliefs, and values one has in regard to his/her sexual self. Sexual development and sexual identity are both a part of human development, but unlike other developmental concepts, sexual identity requires an understanding of the complex factors that shape human sexual behavior. Like all human development, sexual identity is not stagnant; it evolves over the course of the life cycle. Developing a sense of sexual orientation is an important aspect of adolescence and emerging adulthood, but it also continues into adulthood.

Sexual identity is a complex concept that encompasses a variety of factors and connotations. Many think of sexual orientation as the mainstay of sexual identity and, for a great number of people, there is congruence between their sexual identity and sexual orientation. However, this is not true for all. For some, sexual identity does not coincide with their sexual orientation. For others, sexual identity is a loaded term that can have social and political consequences, making it difficult to balance sexual identity and sexual orientation.

There is still debate about what theoretical basis or empirical means constitutes a definition or overall understanding for sexual identity. In the professional helping

field, sexual identity often means something different depending on the lens through which the concept is viewed. For example, mental health professionals might consider sexual identity as something different from a medical professional's definition. It is not just the lens that creates differing connotations, but the constructs do so too. In the past the literature on sexual identity was more about the sexual activities in which a person engaged. However, sexual activities are only a small part of sexual identity. Constructs such as romantic thoughts, fantasies, desires, and affiliations help present a more rich description of sexual identity.

What is clear and agreed on in the field is that sexual identity is a multidimensional construct that involves many factors such as gender identity, sexual orientation or erotic identity, sexual attraction, sexual behaviors, fantasies, desires, and sociosexual identity (Savin-Williams 2006). Sexual identity development is beginning to come into its own in terms of research and empirical study; the field is becoming inclusive and multidimensional about the concepts of sexual identity. Contemporary scholars now view sexual identity as including both cognitive and emotional understandings about sexuality, and those understandings are essential as the field is young and has been underinvestigated.

Despite a lack of consensus for a universal definition of sexual identity terms, the Pan American Health Organization and the World Health Organization have helped to define the terms of sexual identity, sexual orientation, and sexual activity. Sexual identity is defined as "the internal framework, constructed over time, that allows an individual to organize a self-concept based on his/her sex, gender, and sexual orientation, and to perform socially in regard to

his/her perceived sexual capabilities” (PAHO and WHO 2000, 7). Sexual orientation is defined as “the organization of an individual’s eroticism and/or emotional attachment with reference to the sex and gender of the partner involved in sexual activity” (p. 7). In other words, sexual orientation is the degree to which a person is attracted to a person of the same or different gender. Sexual activity is defined by the “behavior that seeks eroticism and is synonymous to sexual behavior” and does not include gender.

Sexual identity has most often been classified into four terminological categories: (1) heterosexual: attracted to opposite sex; (2) homosexual: attracted to same sex; (3) bisexual: attracted to two or more sexes; and (4) unsure (Ridner, Topp, and Frost 2007). More specific terminology for homosexual orientation include the terms “lesbian, gay, and bisexual” (LGB). A lesbian is a female-identified person attracted to another female-identified person; a gay person is a male-identified person attracted to another male-identified person; and a bisexual is a person attracted to both males and females. Heterosexuals are called straight and are attracted to the opposite sex.

Although LGB terms are common and individuals readily report identification with these terms in quantitative surveys, people are less likely to use these terms in open-ended or qualitative inquiry. Subgroups of sexual identity labels are becoming more common, and youth are describing their sexual identity in flexible terms such as “questioning,” “queer,” and “other.” “Questioning” refers to a person who is exploring his/her sexual orientation, while “queer” is an umbrella term often used by LGBTQ persons to describe the LGBTQ community. Utilization of labels that are open and nonrestrictive tend to resonate with the complexity of sexual orientation and sexual identity.

Sexual identity and sexual orientation are not mutually exclusive. A great number of people report experiencing both same-sex and other-sex attractions, fantasies, and behaviors. In other words, it is common for someone to have sexual fantasies about both sexes, regardless of sexual orientation. Perhaps in relationship to nonexclusive and sometimes changing sexual identity, youth have begun to adopt less traditional labels, such as “pansexual,” to make sense of their complex sexuality identities. A person who is pansexual has no limitations in sexual choice or attraction with regard to gender, biological sex, or gender identity.

Although research on sexual identity is growing, there is a deficit of information about sexual identity development and sexual minority populations. Research constraints include a variation of definitions and differences in survey methods, as well as a general concern among sexual minorities about how the information might be used. Although an increasing number of surveys are including questions about sexual orientation and identity, it is still difficult to have an accurate picture of sexual identity demographics. Based on several data, it is estimated that 3.5 percent of US adults identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, with another 0.3 percent identifying as transgender (Gates 2011), but there is still relatively little information about changing demographics among youth who adopt less traditional labels.

There is also a debate about whether or not sexual orientation is lifelong or changeable. Many straight people remain straight and many gay people remain gay. Although not common, shifts in sexual orientation do occur. Of those individuals who experience shifts, women are more likely than men, and sexual minorities are more likely than heterosexuals, to shift. Moreover, shifts are most often made by people who see themselves

somewhere in the middle of a sexual orientation continuum. This means that it is more likely for someone who has had bisexual feelings to switch orientation than someone whose attraction is only oriented toward one gender.

Sexual identity is a natural component of human growth and development and a core component of personality. Just as a positive approach to human sexuality is essential to maintain sexual health, a positive approach to sexual identity is needed to maintain mental and physical health. Youth and emerging adults who find the process of sexuality identity exploration exhilarating tend to have positive outcomes, whereas those who find the process anxiety-ridden have negative outcomes. As such, it is important to approach sexual identity as a positive, natural process of identity development. How to help youth do that is still unknown; more research is needed for a complete understanding of sexual identity formation, including the changing demographics of youth and emerging adults and their process of exploring sexual identity.

SEE ALSO: Gender Identity; Gender and Sexuality; Intersexed Individuals; Sexuality; Sexual Orientation

REFERENCES

- Gates, Gary. 2011. "How Many People Are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender?" Accessed September 4, 2013. <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>.
- PAHO (Pan American Health Organization) and WHO (World Health Organization). 2000. *Promotion of Sexual Health: Recommendations for Action*. Proceedings of a Regional Consultation convened by PAHO and WHO in collaboration with WAS (World Association for Sexology), Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala, May 19–22. Accessed April 23, 2015. <http://www1.paho.org/English/AD/FCH/AI/PromotionSexualHealth.pdf>.
- Ridner, Lee, Robert Topp, and Karen L. Frost 2007. "Methodological Issues in Identifying Sexuality for Research." *American Journal of Men's Health*, 1: 87–90. DOI:10.1177/1557988306294609.
- Savin-Williams, Ritch C. 2006. "Who's Gay? Does It Matter?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 15: 40–44. DOI:10.1111/j.0963–7214.2006.00403.x.
- FURTHER READING**
- APA (American Psychological Association). 2011. "Definition of Terms: Sex, Gender, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation." Accessed September 1, 2013. <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>.
- Erikson, Erik. 1968. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Morgan, Elizabeth M. 2012. "Contemporary Issues in Sexual Orientation and Identity Development in Emerging Adulthood." *Emerging Adulthood*, 1: 52–66. DOI:10.1177/2167696812469187.
- Ott, Miles Q., Heather L. Corliss, David Wypij, Magaret Rosario, and Bryn Austin. 2011. "Stability and Change in Self-reported Sexual Orientation Identity in Young People: Application of Mobility Metrics." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40: 519–32. DOI:10.1007/s10508–010–9691–3.
- Savin-Williams, Ritch C., Kara Joyner, and Gerulf Rieger. 2012. "Prevalence and Stability of Self-reported Sexual Orientation Identity during Young Adulthood." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 41: 103–10. DOI:10.1007/s10508–012–9913-y.
- Vranganlove, Zhana, and Ritch C. Savin-Williams. 2010. "Correlates of Same-Sex Sexuality in Heterosexually Identified Young Adults." *Journal of Sex Research*, 47: 92–102. DOI:10.1080/00224490902954307.