

## Are **YOU** Curious?

1. Do children of gay and lesbian couples grow up to be well adjusted, or do they have problems?
2. What percentage of Americans are gay, lesbian, or bisexual?
3. What causes people to be gay?
4. Who is more likely to be bisexual—men or women?

Read this chapter to find out.

# CHAPTER 13



## Sexual Orientation: Gay, Straight, or Bi?

### CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

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Minority Group

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#### Sexual Orientation in Multicultural Perspective

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Bisexual Development

Jeffrey and I met when he responded to an online message I posted, seeking gay teenagers willing to discuss their online lives. . . . He made it clear that he could allow no overlap between his online gay life and the life he led in the “real world.” . . . He feared that if word of his sexual orientation were to reach his parents, they might refuse to support him or pay for college. From his peers at school he dreaded violence.\*

\*Egan (2000), p. 113.

One night in June 1969, in response to police harassment, gay men and lesbians rioted in the Stonewall, a gay bar in New York City’s Greenwich Village. This may have been the first open group rebellion of homosexual persons in history. Gay liberation was born.

Most of us want to know more about sexual orientation. The purpose of this chapter is to try to provide a better understanding of people’s sexual orientations, whether homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual, as well as an understanding of homophobia (the fear and hatred of homosexuals).

**Sexual orientation** is defined by whom we are sexually attracted to and also have the potential for loving. Thus a **homosexual** is a person whose sexual orientation is toward members of her or his own gender; a **heterosexual** is a person whose sexual orientation is toward members of the other gender; and a **bisexual** is a person whose sexual orientation is toward both genders. The word homosexual is derived from the Greek root *homo*, meaning “same” (not the Latin word *homo*, meaning “man”). The term homosexual may be applied in a general way to homosexuals of both genders or specifically to male homosexuals. The term **lesbian**, which is used to refer to female homosexuals, can be traced to the great Greek poet Sappho, who lived on the island of Lesbos (hence “lesbian”) around 600 B.C. She is famous for the love poetry that she wrote to other women. Sappho was married, apparently happily, and had one daughter, but her lesbian feelings were the focus of her life.

Several other terms are also used in conjunction with homosexuality. Gay activists prefer the term **gay** to homosexual because the latter emphasizes the sexual aspects of the lifestyle and can be used as a derogatory label, since there are many negative connotations to homosexuality. A heterosexual is then referred to as **straight**. The term gay is generally used for male homosexuals, lesbian for female homosexuals. There are, of course, a number of slang terms for gays and lesbians, such as “queer,” “fairy,” “dyke,” and “faggot” or “fag,” which are derogatory when used by straight persons to belittle homosexuals. The term **queer** has now been taken back

by gay activists and scholars, who use it as a proud term encompassing gays, lesbians, and transgender persons. Queer theory is prominent in lesbian–gay–bisexual (LGB) studies.

In this chapter, we will use the abbreviation LGB for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, because it is awkward to repeat the phrase gays and lesbians, and even that phrase omits bisexuals. *Sexual minority* is another term that encompasses LGBs.

## Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians

Your sexual orientation has implications for the attitudes people have toward you. First, there is the belief that all people are heterosexual, that heterosexuality is the norm. This belief is termed **heteronormativity**. Furthermore, just as there are stereotypes about other minority groups—for example, the stereotype that Asian American men are asexual—so there are stereotypes about homosexuals. These stereotypes and negative attitudes lead to discrimination and hate crimes against gays and lesbians. Here we examine some of the scientific data on these negative attitudes.

### Attitudes

Many Americans disapprove of homosexuality. For example, as Table 13.1 shows, in a well-sampled 2010 survey of adult Americans, 45 percent expressed the opinion that sexual relations between two adults of the same sex are always wrong.

Has the gay liberation movement succeeded in changing the negative attitudes of Americans?

**Sexual orientation:** A person’s erotic and emotional orientation toward members of his or her own gender or members of the other gender.

**Homosexual:** A person whose sexual orientation is toward members of the same gender.

**Heterosexual:** A person whose sexual orientation is toward members of the other gender.

**Bisexual:** A person whose sexual orientation is toward both men and women.

**Lesbian:** A woman whose sexual orientation is toward other women.

**Gay:** Homosexual; especially male homosexuals.

**Straight:** Heterosexual; that is, a person whose sexual orientation is toward members of the opposite gender.

**Queer:** A self-label used by some LGBs, as well as by some heterosexuals who prefer unusual sexual practices.

**Heteronormativity:** The belief that heterosexuality is the norm.

**Table 13.1** Attitudes of Adult Americans toward Homosexuality, 1973 and 2010

Question and Responses	Percentage of Sample	
	1973	2010
1. Are sexual relations between adults of the same sex:		
Always wrong	74	45
Almost always wrong	7	4
Wrong only sometimes	8	8
Not wrong at all	11	42
2. Should an admitted homosexual man be allowed to teach in a college or university?		
Yes	49	85
No	51	15

Source: General Social Survey, 1973, 2010, <http://icpsr.umich.edu/>

The answer seems to be yes, but slowly. Table 13.1 shows that the percentage of people who believe that homosexual behavior is always wrong changed substantially from 1973 to 2010.

Some experts believe that many Americans' attitudes toward homosexuals can best be described as homophobic (Moradi et al., 2006). **Homophobia** may be defined as a strong, irrational fear of homosexuals and, more generally, as fixed negative attitudes and reactions to homosexuals. Some scholars dislike the term homophobia because, although certainly some people's feelings are strong enough to be called a phobia, negative attitudes and prejudice are most common. Therefore, some prefer the term **antigay prejudice** or sexual prejudice (Herek, 2000). Another related term is **heterosexism**, which is the belief that everyone is heterosexual; homosexual people and behaviors are denigrated (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997).

Sometimes the prejudice is subtle. The prevalence of the expression "that's so gay" among high school and college students is hurtful to LGB students who may be listening (go to [www.thinkb4youspeak.com](http://www.thinkb4youspeak.com) for a media campaign against this expression and others).

The most extreme expressions of antigay prejudice occur in *hate crimes* against LGBs (Cogan & Marcus-Newhall, 2002). One horrifying case occurred in

Wyoming (Loffreda, 2000). Matthew Shepard, a University of Wyoming freshman, was found tied to a fence, savagely beaten and comatose, on the outskirts of Laramie. He died five days later. Two men, both 21 and high school dropouts, were charged with the murder. Apparently they had led Shepard to believe that

they, too, were gay and lured him from a bar to ride in their pickup truck. In the truck, they began beating him with a revolver, then got out and tied him to a fence, beat him more, and left him for dead.

Averaged across more than 100 studies of LGBs, the results indicated that 55 percent reported that they had been verbally harassed, 14 percent had been assaulted with a weapon, 41 percent had experienced discrimination, 19 percent had experienced victimization from the police, 28 percent had been verbally harassed by family members, and 45 percent had been sexually harassed because of their sexual orientation (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012). These studies show that hate crimes against and harassment of sexual minority individuals are common—not rare, isolated incidents. Child abuse—whether physical, emotional, or sexual—by family members may have particularly serious consequences for the mental health of sexual minority persons (Balsam et al., 2010).

These incidents exact a psychological toll. One high school student said of the verbal harassment, "It's not just name calling. I don't know how schools can isolate it like that. When are they going to see it as a problem? When we're bloody on the ground in front of them?" (Human Rights Watch, 2001).

What role do the media play in antigay attitudes? In previous decades there were almost no portrayals of gays, so they were invisible in the mass media. Current research, however, now finds more representations of sexual minorities. In one study of television programming, content associated with sexual minorities occurred in 15 percent of programs overall, most of it in movies and sitcoms (Fisher et al., 2007). So, gays are now more visible in the media, but are they portrayed positively or negatively? Some argue that even successful programs such as *Ellen* and *Will and Grace* increase stereotypes because they show the LGB character as lacking a stable relationship, being

**Homophobia:** A strong, irrational fear of homosexuals; negative attitudes and reactions to homosexuals.

**Antigay prejudice:** Negative attitudes and behaviors toward gays and lesbians. Also termed *sexual prejudice*.

**Heterosexism:** The belief that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is the norm; homosexuality is denigrated.



**Figure 13.1** Homosexuality has been found in many cultures and historical eras. Here we see male–male couples at a banquet in Roman art from the 5th century BCE

preoccupied with his or her sexuality, and laughable (Calzo & Ward, 2009). Others argue that programs such as *Glee*, although portraying gays stereotypically, still represent positive portrayals. Research on the actual effects of the media on attitudes is very new and paints a complex picture (Calzo & Ward, 2009). For example, reading popular magazines is associated with more positive attitudes toward LGBs, but reading teen magazines is associated with less positive attitudes, probably because teen magazines tend to be conservative about sexuality.

In 1990, Congress passed the Hate Crimes Statistics Act, in which gays and lesbians were included with ethnic minority persons as having a special status necessitating legal protection from hate-motivated crimes (Morin & Rothblum, 1991). Although this may seem like cold comfort to a person who has already been the victim of such a crime, it is a step in the direction of providing some legal protection.

But we should also recognize the other side of the coin. As we can see from Table 13.1, some Americans are tolerant of or supportive of homosexuals. For example, 85 percent of Americans approve of an overt homosexual teaching in a college or university. Thus Americans are a strange mixture of bigots and supporters on the issue of homosexuality.

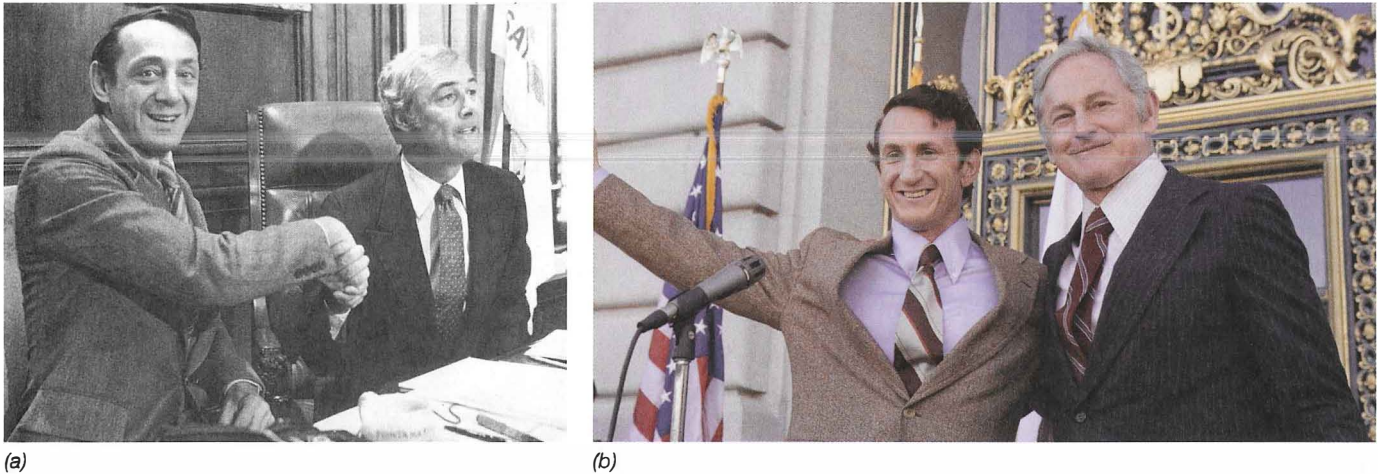
### Gays and Lesbians as a Minority Group

From the foregoing, it is clear that LGB people are the subject of many negative attitudes, just as other minorities are (Meyer, 2003). Like members of other minority groups, they also suffer from job discrimination. Just as Blacks and women have been denied

access to certain jobs, so too have homosexuals. Wage discrimination occurs as well. According to census data, gay men are more educated than straight men, but gay men earn less (Black et al., 2000). Homosexuality has often been grounds for a dishonorable discharge from the armed forces, a fact that became an issue when President Bill Clinton took office in 1993. The result of the controversy was a “Don’t ask, don’t tell” policy in which gays and lesbians could be members of the armed services as long as they kept their sexual orientation to themselves. That policy was not rescinded until 2012, when gay members of the military were allowed to serve without being required to be closeted. Homosexuality has also been grounds for firing a person from federal employment and for denial of a security clearance.<sup>1</sup>

A clever experiment captured discrimination against gays in the workplace (Hebl et al., 2002). Undergraduates who were confederates of the experimenters applied for jobs at local stores in Houston. Half of them wore a baseball cap that said “Gay and Proud” (the experimental group), and the other half wore a cap that said “Texan and Proud” (the control group). A number of measures were collected, including whether the staff person at the store said that a job was available, whether the applicant was given permission to complete a job application, whether they received a callback, and more subtle measures such as the length of the interaction between the applicant

<sup>1</sup>One gay man commented, “Soldiers who are not afraid of guns, bombs, capture, torture or death say they are afraid of homosexuals. Clearly we should not be used as soldiers, we should be used as weapons.”



**Figure 13.2** (a) Harvey Milk (left) and George Moscone (right). Harvey Milk, a gay activist, was an elected member of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, representing a district including many gays. Milk fought for gay rights throughout California and was supported by Mayor George Moscone. On November 17, 1978, Dan White, a former police officer and a supervisor, entered City Hall and shot and killed Milk and Moscone. White confessed within hours. A jury declined to convict White of first-degree murder, instead finding him guilty of voluntary manslaughter, a lesser offense carrying a reduced jail sentence. The gay community, as well as many sympathetic supporters, were shocked and furious. A protest march and the White Night Riot ensued. The entire incident symbolizes the ambivalent progress achieved by gay liberation: A gay liberationist can be elected to an important public office, but he is then murdered. An observance of these events continues in San Francisco every year. (b) The movie *Milk* with Sean Penn and Victor Garber.

and staff. Measures of formal discrimination, such as being allowed to complete an application, showed no differences between the experimental and control groups. However, measures of subtle discrimination did reveal the effects of wearing the Gay and Proud cap. Conversations between the applicant and the staff person were half as long when the applicant wore the gay cap. Those wearing the gay cap also rated their interactions with the staff person as more negative than those wearing the Texan cap, even though they were kept unaware of which cap they were wearing. This study provides tangible evidence about the kind of discrimination that gays and lesbians encounter in the workplace.

Discrimination goes hand in hand with stereotypes. One such stereotype is that gay men are child molesters. As with many stereotypes, this one is false. Research shows that only 2 to 3 percent of those who sexually abuse children are homosexual (Jenny et al., 1994).

In a spirit of reform beginning in the 1980s, a number of states and cities passed laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. For example, in the state of Wisconsin it is illegal to discriminate against gays and lesbians in matters such as employment and housing. These legal issues are discussed further in Chapter 20.

There is, however, an important way in which homosexuals differ from other minorities. In the case

of most other minorities, appearance is a fairly good indicator of minority-group status. It is easy to recognize an African American or a woman, for example, but one cannot tell simply by looking at a person what his or her sexual orientation is. Thus LGBs, unlike other minorities, can hide their status. There are certain advantages to this. It makes it fairly easy to get along in the heterosexual world—to “pass.” However, it has the disadvantage of encouraging the person to live a lie and to deny her or his true identity; not only is this dishonest, but it may also be psychologically stressful (Meyer, 2003). Concealing a stigma—whether it is one's sexual orientation, mental illness, illiteracy, or history of having been raped—exact a psychological toll (Pachankis, 2007).

We shouldn't leave this discussion of discrimination and prejudice against LGBs without asking a crucial question: What can be done to prevent or end this prejudice? Change must occur at the individual, the interpersonal, and the organizational levels (e.g., corporations, educational institutions), as well as society as a whole and its institutions (e.g., the federal government). At the individual level, all of us must examine our own attitudes toward LGBs to see if they are consistent with basic values we hold, such as a commitment to equality and justice. Some people may need to educate themselves or attend workshops to examine their attitudes. These attitudes, though, were formed as we grew up, influenced by our parents, our

peers, and the media. Parents must consider the messages they convey to their children about gays. The adolescent peer group is strongly antigay. What could be done to change it? How can the media change in order not to promote antigay prejudices and stereotypes? At the interpersonal level, people must recognize that LGBs are often a hidden minority. Eric, for example, just told a joke that ridiculed gay men. What he didn't know was that one of his three listeners is gay—just not “out” with him (for obvious reasons). We must examine our interactions with other people, recognizing the extent to which many of us assume that everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. At the institutional level, how can education be changed in order to reduce antigay discrimination? A strong program of sexuality education across the grades, with open discussion of sexual orientation, would be a good start (see *Looking to the Future: Sexuality Education*, at the end of this book). Despite the fact that numerous states have passed laws banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, the U.S. federal government has failed to do so. Such a law would be an important next step.

## Life Experiences of LGBs

In understanding lesbian, gay, and bisexual lifestyles, it is important to recognize that there is a wide variety of experiences. One of the most important aspects of this variability is whether the person is covert (in the closet) or overt (out of the closet) about his or her homosexuality. A **covert homosexual** may be heterosexually married, have children, and be a respected professional in the community, spending only a few hours a month engaging in secret same-gender sexual behavior. An **overt homosexual**, on the other hand, may live almost entirely within an LGB community, particularly if he or she lives in a large city like New York or San Francisco where there is a large gay subculture. There are also various degrees of overtness (being “out”) and covertness. Many lesbians and gays are out with trusted friends but not with casual acquaintances. The lifestyle of gay men differs somewhat from that of lesbians, as a result of the different roles assigned to males and females in our society and the different ways that males and females are reared. In addition, there is more discrimination against gay men than there is against lesbians. For example, it is considered quite natural for two women to share an apartment, but if two men do so, eyebrows are raised.

The lifestyles of LGBs are thus far from uniform. They vary according to whether one is male or female

and overt or covert about the homosexuality and also according to social class, occupation, personality, and a variety of other factors.

## LGB Development

Some experts believe that sexual orientation is determined by age 5 or 6 or even prenatally, whereas others say that it is determined by age 10 or 12. Scientists don't have exact answers to this question and without doubt it depends on the individual, in ways that are discussed in the section that follows.

Some evidence indicates that gender variance in childhood predicts later LGB orientation (Steensma et al., 2012). That is, children who are rated by their parents as having characteristics, at least somewhat, such as “behaves like the opposite sex” and “wishes to be the opposite sex” are more likely, in adulthood, to have same-gender attractions and behaviors. However, this prediction is far from perfect. In one study, the prevalence of homosexuality was 10 to 12 percent in adulthood among those who displayed gender variance in childhood, compared with 1 to 2 percent among those who did not display gender variance in childhood (Steensma et al., 2012). In fact, then, the majority of gender-variant children did not turn out to be gay.

Sexual minority women report their first same-gender romantic attraction on average at age 12 and sexual minority men at age 11, but there is lots of variability around those averages (Katz-Wise, 2012). First questioning of one's sexual orientation occurs on average at age 12 for males and age 15 for females, and self-labeling as LGBQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer) occurs on average at age 16 for men and 17 or 18 for women. As we discussed in Chapter 9, a crucial task of adolescence is identity development, and sexual orientation is one important aspect of development that occurs over the adolescent years. Related to identity development is **coming out**, which involves acknowledging to oneself, and then to others, that one is gay or lesbian. Whether the person experiences acceptance or rejection from family, friends, and others to whom he or she comes out can be critical to self-esteem and mental health.

These developmental processes are complicated by the negative climate for sexual minority youth that exists in middle school, high school, and college. Many LGB youth report harassment by peers, especially in middle school (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). The use of homophobic epithets (name-calling) is common in middle school and high school (Poteat et al., 2011b).

**Covert homosexual:** A homosexual who is “in the closet,” who keeps his or her sexual orientation a secret.

**Overt homosexual:** A homosexual who is “out of the closet,” who is open about his or her sexual orientation.

**Coming out:** The process of acknowledging to oneself, and then to others, that one is gay or lesbian.

Boys engage in this name-calling to each other more than girls do, and the frequency for boys actually increases from seventh grade to twelfth grade. Homophobic epithets are, in reality, a form of bullying and, among boys, they enforce the rules of masculinity (Poteat et al., 2011a). Ironically, those who dish them out are also the most likely to receive them. And today, cyberbullying also occurs, often allowing perpetrators to remain anonymous and facilitating the “outing” of LGB adolescents to hundreds of peers with the click of a key (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). Harassment can lead sexual minority youth to skip school, which creates another set of problems.

Even at the college level, peer harassment can be intense, and this harassment has been linked to suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts (Robinson & Espelage, 2011). One much publicized example is the case of Tyler Clementi, a Rutgers University student, whose roommate used a webcam to view him kissing another man in the privacy of his room. The roommate then urged many others to view another encounter and Clementi discovered what was happening. The next day, Clementi killed himself by jumping off the George Washington Bridge.

Support from adults, especially parents and adults at school, is crucial as sexual minority youth weather these storms (Darwich et al., 2012; Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). Often schools fail to address individual incidents and lack proactive policies to reduce negative climate. A policy brief from the Williams Institute at UCLA, *Safe at School: Addressing the School Environment and LGBT Safety through Policy and Legislation*, outlines steps that schools and state legislatures can take to improve the climate for sexual minority youth (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). For example, schools should provide professional development opportunities on LGB issues for all school staff. Schools can also host gay-straight alliances, safe zones, and wellness programs for sexual minority youth.

To this point, we have discussed sexual identity as something that develops during adolescence and then is fixed. That may be true for many people, but psychologist Lisa Diamond has documented what she calls **sexual fluidity**, which refers to changes over time in sexual attractions, identity, or behavior, which can occur with people in their twenties, thirties, or later (Diamond, 2005, 2008a). Her research involved young women, followed longitudinally. Over a period of eight years, women’s attractions and identity shifted

**Sexual fluidity:** Changes that occur over time in sexual attraction, identity, or behavior.

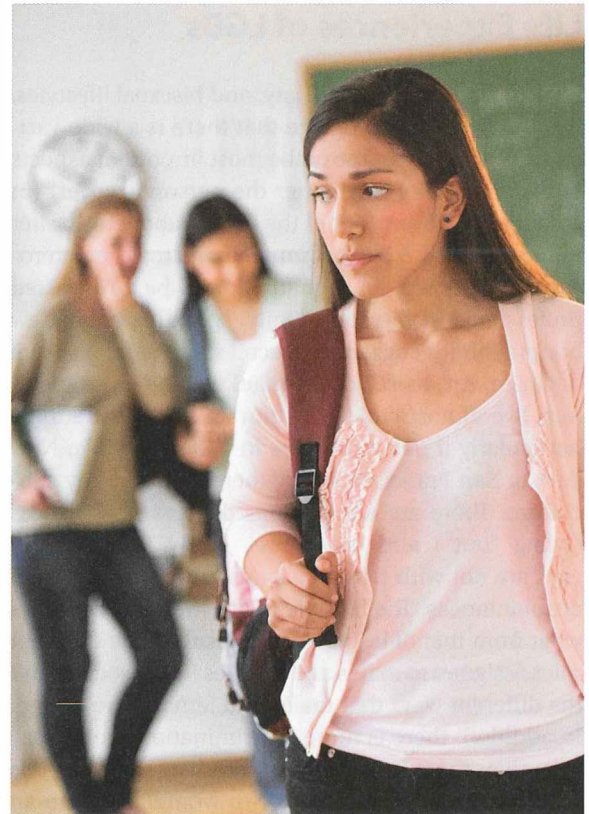
in all directions, for example, from bisexual to lesbian or from lesbian to heterosexual. Similar patterns have been documented

in men as well (Katz-Wise, 2012). Some of these people report that they are attracted to the person, not the gender. As one man said,

I find gender matters, but it’s definitely not the first priority on the list for me. . . . In terms of attraction, I just like beautiful things, and I don’t really classify those in men or women. I find both of them beautiful. (Katz-Wise, 2012, p. 122)

For some people, then, patterns of attraction and behavior can continue to develop and evolve well past adolescence.

Today, American culture has a much wider variety of possible self-labels, so that people don’t have to fit themselves into just one of two boxes, heterosexual or homosexual. People can be bisexual, queer, questioning, or unlabeled. In one well-sampled national survey, 86 percent of women and 92 percent of men said that their sexual attractions were only to members of the opposite sex, but 10 percent of women and 4 percent of men said that their sexual attractions were “mostly” opposite sex (Chandra et al., 2011). They don’t fit neatly into the heterosexual box, nor into the homosexual box.



**Figure 13.3** Peer harassment, such as spreading rumors, can be part of school climate for LGB youth.



**Figure 13.4** LGB community: Sandy Sachs and Dr. Robin Gans, cofounders of Girl Bar, a lesbian social club, with upscale nightclubs in several cities. They have also launched GirlBarMatch.com, a dating service for LGB women.

### Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Communities

A loose network of lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities extends around the world. One woman said,

I have seen lesbian communities all over the world (e.g., South Africa, Brazil, and Israel) where the lesbians of that nation have more in common with me (i.e., they play the same lesbian records, have read the same books, wear the same lesbian jewelry) than the heterosexual women of that nation have in common with heterosexual women in the U.S. (Rothblum, 2007)

These links have been cemented in the last decade by increases in international travel, globalization, and the international reach of the Internet (Puar, 2001).

Gay and lesbian communities began flourishing in the United States after World War II (D'Augelli & Garnets, 1995). Ironically, in the gender-segregated military, gay men were able to find each other and lesbians find each other in a way that had previously not been possible. Activist groups slowly formed in the 1950s and 1960s, energized particularly by the Stonewall rebellion discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s cemented together the gay community as it had never been before. Support networks and activist groups formed rapidly in response to the epidemic.

Today many LGB communities exist in neighborhoods in large cities, with bookstores, restaurants, theaters, and social organizations that are an integral

part of the community. The lesbian community in particular has been involved in creating a lesbian culture, expressed in music and literature and celebrated at festivals and women's sporting events (Dolance, 2005).

Symbols and rituals are important in defining the LGB community, just as they are with other cultural groups. The pink triangle, which the Nazis used to label gay men, has been adopted as a symbol of pride. The Greek letter lambda is another. Lesbian and gay pride marches held in June each year commemorate the Stonewall uprising. The use of slang is another sign of solidarity among LGBs.

Gay bars are one aspect of the LGB social life. Drinking, perhaps dancing, socializing, and the possibility of finding a sexual partner or a lover are the important elements. Some gay bars look just like any other bar from the outside, whereas others may have names—for example, *The Open Closet*—that indicate to the alert who the clientele are. Bars are typically gender segregated—that is, they are either for gay men or for lesbians—although a few are mixed. There are far more bars for gay men than for lesbian women. Typically, the atmosphere is different in the two, the male bars being more for finding sexual partners and the female bars more for talking and socializing. Lest the reader be shocked at the none-too-subtle nature of pickup bars, it is well to remember that there are many bars—singles' bars—that serve precisely the same purpose for heterosexuals.

The **gay baths** are another aspect of some gay men's social and sexual lives. The baths are clubs with many rooms in them, generally including a swimming pool or whirlpool, as well as rooms for dancing, watching television, and socializing; most areas are dimly lit. Once a man has found a sexual partner, they go to one of a number of small rooms furnished with beds, where they can engage in sexual activity. The baths feature casual, impersonal sex, since a partner can be found and the act completed without the two even exchanging names, much less making any emotional commitment to each other.

The majority of bathhouses were closed in the 1980s because public health officials feared that they encouraged risky sexual practices and the spread of HIV. Bathhouses were resurrected in the 1990s, however, and have created a controversy within the gay community. Some see the baths as an aspect of gay culture that spreads HIV and will continue to do so, killing thousands; they believe the baths must be closed and the destructive practices they encourage should stop (Rotello, 1997; Signorile, 1997). Others celebrate the liberated sexuality fostered by the baths and see it as an essential part of gay men's lifestyle.

Today, of course, a major way for gays to meet each other is through the Internet. Cyberspace is also a place where gays can find community when, geographically, they do not live in a place that has a gay community (Brown et al., 2005). Gay-related Web sites provide chat rooms and other means for gays to form online relationships and perhaps find partners for casual sex or a long-term relationship (Brown et al., 2005; Ross et al., 2007).

Certainly in the last four decades the gay liberation movement has had a tremendous impact on the gay lifestyle and community. In particular, it has encouraged LGBs to be more overt and to feel less guilty about their behavior. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force<sup>2</sup> is the central clearinghouse for activist groups; it can provide information on local organizations.

There are many places for LGBs to socialize besides bars, including the Metropolitan Community Church (a network of gay and lesbian churches), gay athletic organizations, and gay political organizations.

**Gay baths:** Clubs where gay men can socialize; features include a swimming pool or whirlpool and access to casual sex.

Among their other accomplishments, members of the gay liberation movement have founded numerous gay newspapers, magazines, and Internet

sites. These have many of the same features as other media: forums for political opinions, human-interest stories, and fashion news. Probably the best-known LGB magazine is *The Advocate*, [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com). There are also several publications that list all the gay bars, community centers, and baths by city in the United States, which is handy for the traveler or for those newly arrived on the LGB scene. In 2006, *The Advocate* issued *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students*, which lists the 20 most gay-friendly campuses.

## Gay and Lesbian Relationships

Contrary to stereotypes, a substantial number of lesbians and gay men form long-term, cohabiting relationships. One such relationship is described in First Person on page 336. Across numerous surveys, between 8 and 21 percent of lesbian couples had been together for 10 or more years, as had between 18 and 28 percent of the gay male couples (Kurdek, 2005). A dramatic testimony to the commitment of many gays and lesbians to long-term relationships occurred in 2004 when gay marriage was legal, briefly, in San Francisco, and became legal in Massachusetts. City halls were flooded with same-gender couples seeking marriage licenses (Belluck, 2004). By 2010, according to the census, there were 132,000 same-gender married couple households and 515,000 same-gender unmarried partner households in the United States.

Gay and lesbian couples—like heterosexual couples—must struggle to find a balance that suits both persons. Three aspects of the relationship typically have to be negotiated and can be sources of conflict: money, housework, and sex (Solomon et al., 2005).

In one study, gay couples, lesbian couples, and heterosexual couples were brought to the laboratory and told to discuss a problem (Julien et al., 2003). Each couple's interactions were videotaped and later coded for both positive and negative behaviors by each partner. The results showed no differences between lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples on any of the interaction measures.

What is striking about all the research on gay and lesbian relationships is how similar they are—in their satisfactions, loves, joys, and conflicts—to heterosexual relationships (Holmberg & Blair, 2009; Patterson, 2000).

## Lesbian and Gay Families

Increasingly, gay couples and lesbian couples are creating families that include children (Bowe, 2006). This is a controversial concept to some

<sup>2</sup>The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, 1325 Massachusetts Ave. NW, Washington, DC 20005 (202) 393-5177. See the inside covers of this book for a list of other organizations dealing with various aspects of sexuality.

# Milestones in Sex Research

## The Ethics of Sex Research: The Tearoom Trade



**S**ociologist Laud Humphreys's study entitled *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places* (1970) is a classic in the field of sex research. In light of concerns on the part of both scientists and the general public about ethical standards in research, however, his methods of data collection are questionable from a contemporary perspective. Important issues are raised about the difficulty of doing good sex research within ethical bounds.

As the title of the book implies, the term *tearoom trade* refers to impersonal sexual acts in places like public restrooms. Typically, a man enters the restroom and conveys to another man who is already there an interest in having sex. He may do this by making tapping sounds while in one of the stalls, for example. The men generally perform the sexual act in a stall and may not even exchange a word. The activity is typically fellatio, which can be done rapidly and with a minimum of encumbrance.

In the tearoom situation, a third person generally serves as a lookout who watches for police or other intruders while the other two engage in sex. To obtain his data, Humphreys became a lookout. Not only did he observe the behaviors involved in the tearoom trade, but he also wrote down the license-plate numbers of the participants. He traced the numbers through state records and thus was able to get the addresses of the persons involved. He then went to the homes of the people and administered a questionnaire (which included questions on sexual behavior) to them under the pretense of conducting a general survey.

The research provided some important findings, particularly that a large proportion of the men who engaged in the tearoom trade were respectable, heterosexually married men, and many were leaders in their community. This finding provoked quite a controversy over the book; the notion that "heterosexual" men could engage in homosexual behavior was shocking to many. Indeed, many gays find the tearoom trade to be shocking.

In his report of the research, Humphreys maintained the complete anonymity of the participants. However, his work still entails numerous ethical problems. There was no informed consent procedure (this study was carried out before scientific societies and universities instituted such standards). Participants were deceived—a problem made worse by the fact that they were never debriefed and told the true purpose of the research. But these considerations in turn raise the question, Could Humphreys have obtained good data within the bounds of research ethics? The clearly negative aspects of the study have to be weighed against the benefits that knowing more about this form of sexual behavior offers to society.

Tearoom sex gained publicity again in 2007 when Senator Larry Craig (R, Idaho) was arrested in the Minneapolis airport for behavior in a restroom that seemed to solicit sex. Today, because so many gay men are out of the closet, tearooms are used mainly by older or closeted men.

*Source:* Humphreys (1970).

heterosexual people in the United States, who view a lesbian family or gay family as a damaging setting for children to grow up in. The courts have often assumed that lesbians and gay men are unfit parents, and the same-gender sexual orientation of a parent has been grounds for the other, heterosexual parent to gain custody of children following a divorce (Patterson, 2009). What does the research

say about these families and the effects on children in them?

It is important to recognize that these families are diverse along dimensions of race, social class, and gender. In some, the children were born to one of the partners in a previous heterosexual relationship. In others, the children were adopted or, in the case of lesbian couples, born by means of artificial



## First Person

### A Gay Couple: Lee and Bob

**L**ee and Bob have been living together as a couple for 10 years. Lee is 30 and Bob is 53; they live in a small town in northern Wisconsin.

Lee feels that he never had a real home while growing up. His father worked in construction, and they moved frequently, living in motel rooms. His parents divorced when he was in kindergarten. His mother remarried soon, but the man turned out to be a wife batterer, so they divorced when Lee was in the fifth grade. His mother, now single, turned to drugs and partying. Home life had no structure and was chaotic, although Lee feels that she loved him. Then his mom was “saved” and joined a repressive, fundamentalist church. She married again, to someone with like beliefs, and is still married to that man.

Lee knew that he liked boys more than girls by the first grade, but he also knew that he shouldn’t talk about it. He didn’t completely self-label as gay until his first semester in college. At that time he had his first affair, with his boss at Burger King. The affair was tempestuous, and he was heartbroken when it ended badly. His mother sensed that something was up. When he told her that he was gay, she insisted that he go to a psychiatrist to be cured. He agreed to try not to be gay and did try, but of course it didn’t work. He and his mother had one more fight about it, and she kicked him out of the house. After two years they reconciled somewhat but not completely, and his stepfather is still rejecting.

Bob, in contrast, had an unremarkable childhood. His parents are still married after 54 years, and he speaks to them every day, although he has never told them that he is gay and they have never asked. Raised

as a Catholic in northern Wisconsin, he is nonpracticing today.

Bob began to find boys to be more attractive than girls in high school, but in the 1950s and 1960s no label of “gay” was available. He first acted on his impulses in college and had dated five or six people before meeting Lee.

They met, improbably, in northern Wisconsin when the first gay bar opened in one small town. They dated briefly and quickly settled down as a couple. They have an agreement to be monogamous, which Bob has never breached and Lee has breached only once.

When asked what they liked best about their relationship, Bob said it was the stability of knowing that there’s someone to share life with. The relationship seems to him like an investment built up over time. Lee likes being in a relationship because he loves Bob and knows Bob loves him in return. Lee also appreciates the depth of the relationship, which seems to him to be a major accomplishment. They worry a bit about their age gap. Bob is beginning to think about retirement, whereas Lee is getting ready to launch his career and anticipates a major move in the next few years. They also regret their emotional distance from their families.

Today Lee is working on his Ph.D. in clinical psychology, hoping to become a therapist. Bob is a commercial pilot for a major airline.

*Source:* Based on an interview conducted by Janet Hyde.

insemination. Some have even said that a “lesbian baby boom” is under way. Some are single-parent families, with, for example, a lesbian mother rearing her children from a previous heterosexual marriage.

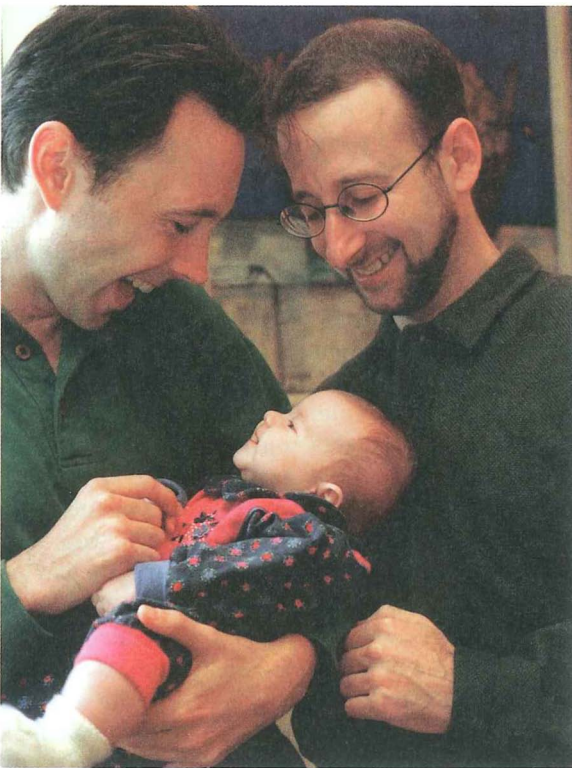
Three concerns have been raised about how the children fare in these families. First, will they show disturbances in gender identity or sexual identity?

Will they become gay or lesbian? Second, will they be less healthy psychologically than children who grow up with two heterosexual parents? Third, will they have difficulties in relationships with their peers, perhaps being stigmatized or teased because of their unusual family situation?

Research on children growing up in lesbian or gay families, compared with those growing up in



(a)



(b)

**Figure 13.5** Gay and lesbian political issues: (a) The custody issue—lesbian mothers want the right to keep their children after a divorce; (b) the right to adoption—a gay couple with their adopted child.

heterosexual families, dismisses these fears. For example, an overwhelming number of children growing up in lesbian or gay households have a heterosexual orientation (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Gartrell et al., 2011).

The adjustment and mental health of children in lesbian and gay families are no different from those

of children in heterosexual families (Farr et al., 2010; Gartrell et al., 2005; Patterson, 2006).

As for the third concern, about peer relationships, research indicates that children in lesbian or gay families fare about as well in terms of social skills and popularity as children in heterosexual families (Patterson, 2009).

In conclusion, although concerns have been raised about children growing up in lesbian and gay families, research consistently shows no difference between these children and those in heterosexual families (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Patterson, 2006). Children need at least one loving, supportive parent, and that can be found in many family constellations.

Recognizing these positive outcomes, in 2002 the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement supporting adoptions by gay parents (Perrin et al., 2002).

## How Many People Are Gay, Straight, or Bi?

Most people believe that homosexuality is rare. What percentages of people in the United States are gay and lesbian? As it turns out, the answer to this question is complex. Basically, it depends on how one defines a homosexual and a heterosexual. First, though, several concepts need to be clarified. A distinction has already been made between sex (sexual behavior) and gender (being male or female) and between gender identity (the psychological sense of maleness or femaleness) and sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual). To this, the concept of **sexual identity** should be added; it refers to one's self-label or self-identification as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, queer, or perhaps something else.

There may be contradictions between people's sexual identity and their actual choice of sexual partners (their behavior) (Pathela et al., 2006; Weinberg et al., 2001). For example, a woman might identify herself as a lesbian yet occasionally sleep with men. Her behavior is bisexual, but her identity is lesbian. More common are persons who think of themselves as heterosexuals but who engage in both heterosexual and homosexual sex. A good example of this is the tearoom trade discussed earlier—the successful, heterosexually married men who occasionally stop off at a public restroom to have another man

**Do children of lesbian couples grow up to be well adjusted, or do they have problems?**

**What percentage of Americans are gay, lesbian, or bisexual?**

**Sexual identity:** One's self-identity as homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, or something else.

**Table 13.2** The National Survey of Family Growth Statistics on Same-Gender Behavior, Identity, and Attraction, 2008

	Percentage	
	Men	Women
<i>Behavior</i>		
Ever had sexual contact with same-gender partner	5.2*	12.5
<i>Sexual Identity</i>		
Homosexual	1.7	1.1
Bisexual	1.1	3.5
Something else**	0.2	0.6
<i>Sexual Attraction</i>		
Only or mostly to same gender	1.9	1.4
Equally to both	0.5	2.8
“Mostly” to opposite gender	3.7	11.9

\*Different questions were used for males and females, and the male question was narrower, so this percentage is an underestimate.  
 \*\*The “something else” category may include people identifying as queer, questioning, and so on.  
 Source: Chandra et al., (2011).

perform fellatio on them. Once again, the behavior is bisexual, in contradiction to the heterosexual identity.

One source of information we have on the statistical question is Kinsey’s research (see Chapter 3 for an evaluation of the Kinsey data). Kinsey found that about 37 percent of all males had had at least one homosexual experience to orgasm in adulthood. This is a large percentage. Indeed, it was this statistic, combined with some of the findings on premarital sex, that led to the furor over the Kinsey report. The comparable figure for females was 13 percent. However, experts agree that, because of problems with sampling, Kinsey’s statistics on homosexuality were almost certainly inflated (Pomeroy, 1972).

Today several well-sampled surveys of the U.S. population have given us improved estimates. One of those is the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Data from that study are shown in Table 13.2 (Chandra et al., 2011). The statistics are complex because much depends on how *homosexual* is defined. Does the definition require someone to have had exclusively same-gender sexual experiences, or just some same-gender experiences, or perhaps just to have experienced sexual attraction to members of his or her own gender without ever acting on it? We will return to this point. What we can say here is that, according to the National Survey of Family Growth, about 5 percent of men and 12 percent of women have had at least one same-gender sexual experience in adulthood, and about 4 percent of both men and women experience sexual attraction to members of their own gender. Roughly 2 percent of men and 1 percent of women have a homosexual identity.

These percentages are considerably smaller than Kinsey’s. What accounts for the difference? The National Survey of Family Growth is better sampled; it is generally agreed that Kinsey’s unsystematic sampling methods led to overestimates of the incidence of homosexuality. But the NSFG may not be perfectly accurate, either. We can expect under-reporting on any kind of sensitive topic like homosexuality, and the NSFG asked nonequivalent questions on behavior to males and females, making gender comparisons inaccurate.

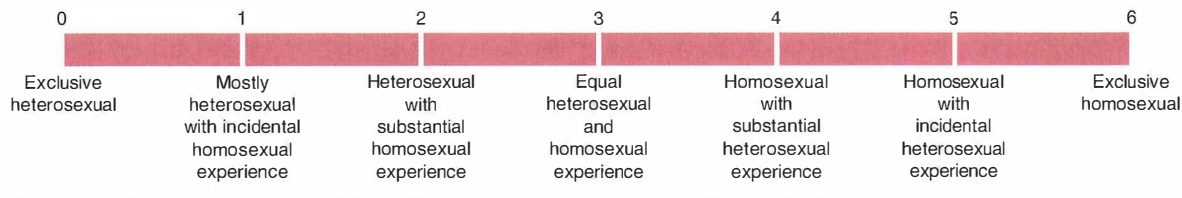
After reading these statistics, though, you may still be left wondering how many people are gay. As Kinsey soon realized in trying to answer this question, it depends on how you count. A prevalent notion is that like the difference between black and white, homosexual and heterosexual are two quite separate and distinct categories. This is what might be called a typological conceptualization (see Figure 13.6). Kinsey made an important scientific breakthrough when he decided to conceptualize homosexuality and heterosexuality not as two separate categories but as variations on a continuum (Figure 13.6, section 2). The black and white extremes of heterosexuality and homosexuality have a lot of shades of gray in between: people who have had both some heterosexual and some homosexual experience, in various mixtures. To accommodate all this variety, Kinsey constructed a scale running from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual), with the midpoint of 3 indicating equal amounts of heterosexual and homosexual experience.

The answer to the original question—How many people are homosexual and how many are

## 1. The typology



## 2. Kinsey's continuum



**Figure 13.6** Two ways of conceptualizing homosexuality and heterosexuality.

heterosexual?—is complex. Probably about 90 percent of men and 90 percent of women are exclusively heterosexual. About 10 percent of men and women have had at least one same-gender sexual experience in adulthood. About 2 percent of men and 1 percent of women have a homosexual identity. These figures are based on the NSFG, but adjusted somewhat to allow for concealment by some respondents.

## Sexual Orientation and Mental Health

Some Americans believe that homosexuality is a kind of mental illness. Is this really true? Do psychologists and psychiatrists agree that LGBs are poorly adjusted or deviant?

### Sin and the Medical Model

The belief that homosexuality is a form of mental illness is actually something of an improvement over previous beliefs about homosexuality. Before the 20th century, the dominant belief in Europe and the United States was that homosexuality was a sin or a heresy. During the Inquisition, people who were accused of being heretics were also frequently accused of being homosexuals and were burned at the stake. Indeed, in those times, all mental illness was regarded as a sin. In the 20th century, this view was replaced by the **medical model**, in which mental disturbance, and homosexuality in particular, is viewed as a sickness or illness (Bullough & Bullough, 1997).<sup>3</sup>

Psychiatrist Thomas Szasz and others are critical of the medical model. In his writing on “the myth of

mental illness,” Szasz argues that the medical model is obsolete and that we need to develop a more humane and realistic way of dealing with mental disorders and variations from the norm. He has argued the case particularly for homosexuality (Szasz, 1965). LGB activists have joined in, saying that they do not like being called “sick” and that this is just another form of persecution of gays and lesbians.

### Research Evidence

What do the scientific data say? Once again, the answers provided by the data are complex and depend on the assumptions of the particular investigator and on the research design used. Basically, four kinds of research designs have been used, representing progressive sophistication and changing assumptions about the nature of homosexuality.

### Clinical Studies

The first, and earliest, approach was clinical; homosexuals who were in psychotherapy were studied by the investigator (usually the therapist). He or she looked for disturbances in their current adjustment or in past experiences or home life. The data were then reported in the form of a case history of a single individual or a report of common factors that seemed to emerge in studying a group of homosexuals (e.g., Freud, 1920; reviewed by Rosen, 1974). These clinical studies provided evidence that homosexuals were poorly adjusted and neurotic. But the reasoning behind this research was circular. Homosexuals were assumed to be mentally ill, and then evidence was found supporting this view.

### Studies with Control Groups

The second group of studies made significant improvements over the previous ones by introducing control or comparison groups.

**Medical model:** A theoretical model in psychology and psychiatry in which mental problems are thought of as sickness or mental illness; the problems in turn are often thought to be due to biological factors.

<sup>3</sup>As one gay comedian quipped, “If homosexuality is an illness, hey, I’m going to call in queer to work tomorrow.”

The question under investigation was rephrased. Rather than Do homosexuals have psychological disturbances? (after all, most of us have some problems), it became Do homosexuals have more psychological disturbances than heterosexuals? The research design involved comparing a group of homosexuals in therapy with a group of randomly chosen heterosexuals not in therapy. These studies tended to agree with the earlier ones in finding more problems of adjustment among the homosexual group than among the heterosexual group (Rosen, 1974).

Once again, though, it became apparent that there were problems with this research design. It compared a group of people in therapy with a group of people not in therapy and found, not surprisingly, that the people in therapy had more problems. It was also circular in assuming that homosexuals were abnormal (in therapy) and that heterosexuals were normal (not in therapy) and then finding exactly that.

### Nonpatient Research

A major breakthrough came with the third group of studies, which involved nonpatient research. In these studies, a group of homosexuals not in therapy (nonpatients) were compared with a group of heterosexuals not in therapy. The nonpatient homosexuals were generally recruited through LGB organizations, advertisements, or word of mouth. Such nonpatient research generally has found no differences between the groups (Ross et al., 1988; Rothblum, 1994). That is, gays and lesbians seem to be as well adjusted as heterosexuals.

This position has received official professional recognition by the American Psychiatric Association. Prior to 1973, the APA had listed homosexuality as a disorder under Section V, "Personality Disorders and Certain Other Nonpsychotic Mental Disorders," in its authoritative *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. In 1973, the APA voted to remove homosexuality from that listing so that it was no longer considered a psychiatric disorder.

### Population Studies

Most recently, a new set of studies has emerged using even better designs that, for example, obtain a random sample of the general population and then compare the homosexuals and heterosexuals in the sample on indexes of mental health (Cochran et al., 2003; Meyer, 2003; Robert et al., 2010; Wichstrøm & Hegna, 2003). These studies find somewhat higher rates of depression and anxiety among gays and lesbians compared with heterosexuals. And suicide attempts and PTSD

are more common among LGBs than among heterosexuals (King et al., 2008; Mustanski et al., 2010; Roberts et al., 2010).

**Conversion or reparative therapy:** Anyone of a number of treatments designed to turn LGBs into heterosexuals.

However, scientists vigorously debate the meaning of the statistics. One controversy concerns how big or meaningful the differences are. For example, in one study 9.1 percent of LGB adolescents had made a suicide attempt, compared with 3.6 percent for heterosexual adolescents (Wichstrøm & Hegna, 2003). We could focus on the fact that LGB youth were nearly three times as likely to attempt suicide. Alternatively, we could say that it's a gap of less than 6 percentage points and 90.9 percent of the LGBs had not attempted suicide (Savin-Williams, 2001; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Should we view the glass as half full or half empty?

Beyond that, scientists agree that higher rates of depression and suicide among LGBs do not mean that homosexuality per se indicates mental illness. Instead, the higher rates reflect the following: (1) the exposure of LGBs to maltreatment and violence (Dunbar, 2006; Roberts et al., 2010); (2) the lack of support or downright rejection by family and friends that some LGBs experience (Ryan et al., 2009; Ueno, 2005); and (3) the stress of concealing their true identity (Meyer, 2003).

## Can Sexual Orientation Be Changed by Therapy?

**Conversion therapy or reparative therapy**—treatments designed to change LGBs into heterosexuals—have been around for more than 100 years (Haldeman, 1994; Shidlo et al., 2002). The latest versions come not from trained psychologists but from far-right religious groups. Many earlier techniques were downright inhumane. They included crude behavior therapy that involved giving gay men electrical shocks while they viewed slides of nude men, as well as surgeries ranging from castration to brain surgery. All these treatments rested on the assumption that homosexuality was an illness that could and should be cured.

Investigations of reparative therapies today reveal the pressures from family and the personal agonies that people experience as they are forced, or perhaps choose, to change their orientation. One man, who is now a psychologist, wrote in his diary,

I am going to meet with the counselor tomorrow. I don't really know what to think. I feel that I need help but I also feel that I'm trying to do away with a part of myself. I know I should look at it as sinful and ugly, like a wart that needs to be burned off. Is it possible that those emotions are what allow me to be a sensitive caring male? Is it possible that God has allowed this in my life to build certain characteristics? Is it really ugly and sinful that I want to hold and be held by a man and that I want to have a relationship with a man that includes sex? It sure sounds ugly

on paper. I don't like admitting these things. I really don't. What is it that causes me to think and feel this way? Is it Satanic? Am I possessed? (Ford, 2001, p. 77)

The consequences of reparative therapy can be ugly, because they do not actually change people's sexual orientation but they do make them feel awfully guilty about it. In fact, some psychotherapists have developed a specialty in helping gay and bisexual men recover from conversion therapies (Haldeman, 2001).

Given the evidence discussed earlier in this section supporting the argument that LGBTs are not mentally ill, reparative therapies make no sense. Ethical issues are raised as well: Should a person be changed from gay to straight against his or her will? By 2000 the scandals associated with conversion therapies had become so great that the American Psychiatric Association issued an official position statement opposing them (American Psychiatric Association, 2000b).

In sum, it is probably about as easy to change a homosexual person into a happy heterosexual as it is to change a heterosexual person into a happy homosexual—that is, not very.

## Why Do People Become Homosexual or Heterosexual?

A fascinating psychological question is, Why do people become homosexual or heterosexual? Several theoretical answers to this question, as well as the relevant evidence, are discussed in this section. You will notice that the older theorists and researchers considered it their task to explain homosexuality, reflecting a heteronormative approach. More recent investigators, realizing that heterosexuality needs to be explained as well, are more likely to consider it their task to explain sexual orientation.

### Biological Theories

A number of scientists have proposed that homosexuality is caused by biological factors. The likeliest candidates for these biological causes are genetic factors, prenatal factors, differences in brain structure, and an endocrine imbalance.

#### Genetic Factors

One study recruited gay and bisexual men who had a twin brother or an adopted brother (Bailey & Pillard, 1991). Among the 56 gay men who had an identical twin brother, 52 percent of the cotwins were themselves gay (in the terminology of geneticists, this is a 52 percent concordance rate). Among the 54 gay men

who had a nonidentical twin brother, 22 percent of the cotwins were themselves gay. Of the adoptive brothers of gay men, 11 percent were gay. The same research team later repeated the study with lesbians (Bailey et al., 1993). Among the 71 lesbians who had an identical twin, 48 percent of the cotwins were also lesbian. Among the 37 lesbians who had a nonidentical twin sister, 16 percent of the cotwins were lesbian. Of the adoptive sisters of lesbians, 6 percent were lesbian. The statistics for women were therefore quite similar to those for men. Later studies using improved methods have found similar results (Kendler et al., 2000b; Kirk et al., 2000).

The fact that the rate of concordance is substantially higher for identical twins than for nonidentical twins argues in favor of a genetic contribution to sexual orientation. If genetic factors absolutely determined sexual orientation, however, the concordance rate would be 100 percent for the identical twin pairs, and the rates are far from that. The implication is that factors other than genetics also play a role in influencing sexual orientation.

One research group believes that they have discovered a gene, located on the X chromosome, for homosexuality; this research is highly controversial (Hamer et al., 1993; Marshall, 1995). One study has replicated the finding but others have not (Bailey & Pillard, 1995; Rice et al., 1999).

A milestone came in 2005 with the first full genome scan for sexual orientation in men, using modern genotyping methods (Mustanski et al., 2005). The sample consisted of 456 individuals from 146 different families, all of which had two or more gay brothers. The sample included many heterosexual siblings and parents from those families, as well as the gay siblings. This design is ideal for spotting regions of DNA that are the same for two gay brothers but that differ from the heterosexual siblings or parents. The findings indicated possible influence by three genes, found on chromosomes 7, 8, and 10. It seems likely that multiple genes contribute to sexual orientation. This research is still in its infancy but should yield important findings in the next decade.

#### Prenatal Factors

Another possible biological cause is that homosexuality develops as a result of factors during the prenatal period. As we saw in Chapter 5, exposure to atypical hormones during fetal development can lead a genetic female to have male genitals, or a genetic male to have female genitals. It has been suggested that a similar process might account for homosexuality (and also for transsexualism—see Chapter 12).

According to one theory, homosexuality is caused by a variation in prenatal development. According to



What causes people to be gay?

this theory, there is a critical time in fetal development during which the hypothalamus differentiates and sexual orientation is determined (Ellis & Cole-Harding, 2001). Any of several biological variations during this period will produce homosexuality.

One line of research that supports this theory has found evidence that severe stress to a mother during pregnancy tends to produce homosexual offspring. For example, exposing pregnant female rats to stress produces male offspring that assume the female mating posture, although their ejaculatory behavior is typical for males (Ward et al., 2002). The stress to the mother reduces the amount of testosterone in the fetus, which is thought to produce homosexual rats. Research with humans designed to test the prenatal stress hypothesis reports mixed results. Some studies find effects like those in the rat studies and others do not (Bailey et al., 1991; Ellis & Cole-Harding, 2001).

Another research group has studied the birth order of gay men. Their research shows that consistently, across many samples, compared with heterosexual men, gay men are more likely to have a late birth order and to have more older brothers but not more older sisters (Blanchard, 1997; Bogaert, 2003). This is termed the *fraternal birth order effect*. The researchers find no birth order or sibling effects for lesbians compared with heterosexual women. They believe that they have uncovered a prenatal effect, hypothesizing that with each successive pregnancy with a male fetus, the mother forms more antibodies against an antigen (H-Y antigen) produced by a gene on the Y chromosome (Blanchard, 2001). Because H-Y antigen is known to influence prenatal sexual differentiation, the hypothesis is that the mother's antibodies to this antigen may affect sexual differentiation in the developing fetal brain. These researchers estimate that between 15 and 30 percent of gay men had their sexual orientation created in this manner (Blanchard & Bogaert, 2004; Cantor et al., 2002).

Other researchers have documented an odd, but potentially important, pattern concerning the 2D:4D finger-length ratio. This refers to the ratio of the length of the index finger (2D) to the length of the ring finger (4D). In general, men have lower 2D:4D ratios than women; that is, men's index fingers are relatively shorter than their ring fingers, compared with women's. Lesbians have a smaller 2D:4D ratio than heterosexual women; there are no differences between gay men and heterosexual men (Grimbos et al., 2010). It is thought that the 2D:4D ratio is an indicator of prenatal androgen exposure, so these results suggest possible prenatal effects on women's sexual orientation. Other researchers have found that gays are more likely to be left-handed than are straights; gay men are about 40 percent more likely than straight men to

be left-handed, and lesbians are nearly twice as likely as heterosexual women to be left-handed (Lalumière et al., 2000). Both patterns suggest some kind of prenatal hormone effect on the developing brain.

These theories of prenatal influence are intriguing, but none right now have enough scientific evidence behind them to be completely accepted (Gooren, 2006).

### Brain Factors

Another line of theorizing argues that there are anatomical differences between the brains of gays and straights that produce the differences in sexual orientation. A number of studies have pursued this possibility, all looking at somewhat different regions of the brain (Swaab, 2005). A highly publicized study by neuroscientist Simon LeVay (1991) is an example. LeVay found significant differences between gay men and straight men in certain cells in the anterior portion of the hypothalamus. Anatomically, the hypothalamic cells of the gay men were more similar to those of women than to those of straight men, according to LeVay. However, the study had a number of flaws: (1) The sample size was very small: only 19 gay men, 16 straight men, and 6 straight women were included. This small sample size was necessitated by the fact that it was the pre-MRI days and the brains had to be dissected in order to examine the hypothalamus, so that the brains of living persons could not be studied. (2) All of the gay men in the sample, but only 6 of the straight men and 1 of the straight women, had died of AIDS. The groups are not comparable, then. Perhaps the brain differences were caused by the neurological effects of AIDS. (3) Lesbian women were omitted from the study, making them invisible in the research—as they often have been in psychological and biological research. (4) The gay men were known to have been gay based on records at the time of death; the others, however, were just presumed to be heterosexual—if there was no record of sexual orientation, the assumption was that the person had been heterosexual, scarcely a sophisticated method of measurement. (5) The brains were all from adults, so it is impossible to know whether the different hypothalamic cells caused the sexual orientations, or the different experiences of gay men affected the hypothalamus.

It is difficult to know how much confidence to place in LeVay's findings. Other scientists who looked for this effect found no differences in this region of the hypothalamus as a function of the person's sexual orientation (Byne et al., 2000; Swaab, 2005). Yet animal researchers believe that they have identified a similar region in the hypothalamus of the rat, and it does seem to be involved in sexual behavior (Swaab, 2005). Currently, then, there are no well-documented

anatomical brain differences between gays and straights (Gooren, 2006).

Using modern functional brain scanning methods, researchers exposed gay men, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women to human pheromones and recorded their brain responses (Savic et al., 2005). One of the pheromones, AND, is a “male” pheromone and is found in male sweat. The other, EST, is a “female” pheromone and is found in female urine. Gay men and heterosexual women showed activation of a region of the hypothalamus (the medial preoptic area, MPOA, of the anterior hypothalamus) in response to AND, whereas heterosexual men did not show the brain response to AND. As a control, the participants were also exposed to common odors such as lavender oil; these odors did not activate the hypothalamus. In a second experiment, the researchers repeated the study with lesbian women, and found that EST stimulated their hypothalamus, as it does with heterosexual men (Berglund et al., 2006). What do these studies mean? They definitely don’t mean that gay men have female brains and lesbians have male brains. What they do show is that both heterosexual men and lesbians are turned on (in their brains) by women’s pheromones, and that gay men and heterosexual women are turned on by male pheromones.

### Hormonal Imbalance

Investigating the possibility that an endocrine imbalance is the cause of homosexuality, researchers have tried to determine whether the testosterone (“male” hormone) levels of male homosexuals differ from those of male heterosexuals. These studies have not found any hormonal differences between the two groups (Gooren, 2006).

Despite these results, in past decades some clinicians attempted to cure male homosexuality by administering testosterone therapy (Glass & Johnson, 1944). This therapy fails; indeed, it seems to result in even more homosexual behavior than usual. This is not an unexpected result, since, as we saw in Chapter 8, androgen levels seem to be related to sexual responsiveness. A clinician friend of ours replied to an undergraduate male who was seeking testosterone therapy for his homosexual behavior, “It won’t make you heterosexual; it will only make you horny.”

In conclusion, of the biological theories, the genetic theory has the best supporting evidence, but much more research is needed.

### Learning Theory

Behaviorists emphasize the importance of learning in the development of sexual orientation. They note the prevalence of bisexual behavior both in other species

and in young humans, and they argue that rewards and punishments shape the individual’s behavior into predominant homosexuality or predominant heterosexuality. The assumption, then, is that humans have a relatively amorphous, undifferentiated pool of sex drive, which, depending on circumstances (rewards and punishments), may be channeled in any of several directions. In short, people are born sexual, not heterosexual or homosexual. Only through learning does one of these behaviors become more likely than the other. For example, a person who has early heterosexual experiences that are very unpleasant might develop toward homosexuality. Heterosexuality has essentially been punished and therefore becomes less likely. This might occur, for instance, in the case of a girl who is raped at an early age; her first experience with heterosexual sex was extremely unpleasant, so she avoids it and turns to homosexuality. Parents who become upset about their teenagers’ heterosexual activities might do well to remember this notion; punishing a young person for engaging in heterosexual behavior may not eliminate the behavior but rather rechannel it in a homosexual direction.

Another possibility, according to a learning-theory approach, is that if early sexual experiences are homosexual and pleasant, the person may become homosexual. Homosexual behavior has essentially been rewarded and therefore becomes more likely.

The learning-theory approach treats homosexuality as a normal form of behavior and recognizes that heterosexuality is not necessarily inborn but must also, like homosexuality, be learned.

The evidence on learning theory’s explanation of sexual orientation is mixed. A comprehensive study of the influences on sexual orientation in humans disconfirmed some essential arguments. The idea that homosexuality results from early unpleasant heterosexual experiences was not supported by the data. Lesbian women, for example, were no more likely to have been raped than heterosexual women (Bell et al., 1981). Yet research using an animal model does point to the importance of early learning. Zebra finches are small birds that are monogamous, mate for life, and are almost invariably heterosexual. If the fathers are removed from the cages, though, so that the young birds grow up without adult males or male-female pairs, in adulthood these birds pair with either males or females (Adkins-Regan, 2002). That is, their behavior, which is bisexual, is a result of early experience.

In contrast to the bird research, research with humans indicates that the great majority of children who grow up with a homosexual parent are heterosexual (Allen & Burrell, 2002; Gartrell et al., 2011; Patterson, 2006). In this sense, then, homosexuality is not “learned” from one’s parents.

## Interactionist Theory

### Bem: The Exotic Becomes Erotic

Psychologist Daryl Bem (1996) proposed a theory of the development of sexual orientation that encompasses the interaction of biological factors and experiences with the environment. Bem's theory is diagrammed in Figure 13.7.

The theory begins with biological influences, relying on the evidence discussed earlier about biological contributions to sexual orientation (part A in Figure 13.7). However, Bem does not believe that genes and other biological factors directly and magically determine a person's sexual orientation. Rather, he theorizes that biological factors exert their influence on sexual orientation through their influence on temperament in childhood (part A to part B). Psychologists have found abundant evidence that two aspects of temperament have some biological basis: aggression and activity level. Moreover, these two aspects of temperament show reliable gender differences. According to Bem, most children show levels of aggression and activity that are typical of their gender; boys are generally more aggressive and more active than girls. These tendencies lead

children to engage in gender-conforming activities (B to C). Most boys play active, aggressive sports, and most girls prefer quieter play activities. These play patterns also lead children to associate almost exclusively with members of their own gender. The boy playing tackle football is playing in a group that consists either entirely or almost entirely of boys. This chain of events will eventually lead to a heterosexual orientation in adulthood.

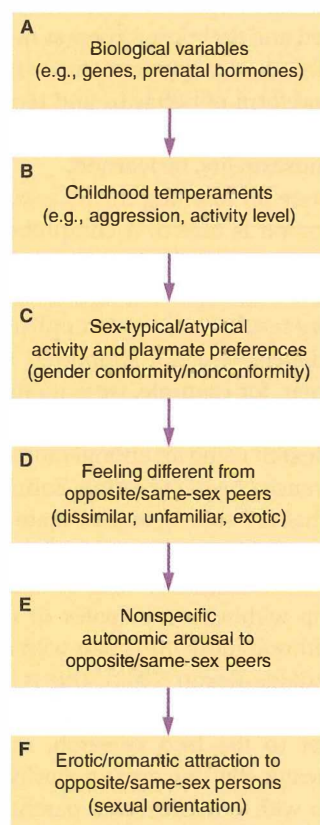
A minority of children, however, have temperamental characteristics that are not typical of their gender: Some boys are not particularly active or aggressive and some girls are. These children are then gender-nonconforming in their play patterns. The boys prefer quieter, less active play and have more girls as friends, and the gender-nonconforming girls prefer aggressive sports and have more boys as friends.

These experiences with childhood play and playmates create a feeling in children that certain other children are different from them and therefore are exotic (parts C to D). For the boy who spends most of his time playing active, aggressive sports with other boys, girls are different, mysterious, and exotic. For the gender-nonconforming girl who plays active sports with boys, most girls, too, seem different and exotic to her.

The presence of an exotic other causes a person to feel generalized arousal, whether in childhood, adolescence, or adulthood (parts D to E). Those of you who are heterosexual certainly remember many instances in your past when you felt ill at ease and nervous in the presence of a member of the other gender.

In the final link of the model, this generalized arousal is transformed into erotic/romantic attraction. Essentially, the exotic becomes erotic. This transformation may be a result of processes described in Berscheid and Walster's (1974) two-component theory of attraction, discussed in Chapter 11. Generalized arousal can easily be transformed into sexual arousal and attraction if the conditions are right. For heterosexual persons, the exotic people are members of the other gender, with whom they had less contact in childhood and who have become eroticized. For gays and lesbians, the exotic people are members of their own gender, from whom they felt different in childhood and who have become eroticized.

One body of evidence that is consistent with Bem's theory indicates that gay men and lesbians are, on average, more likely than heterosexuals to have had a childhood history of gender nonconformity. In one intriguing study, researchers recruited gay men, lesbians, heterosexual men, and heterosexual women (Rieger et al., 2008). They asked the participants for



**Figure 13.7** Daryl Bem's theory of the development of sexual orientation: The exotic becomes erotic.

home movies or videos taken of them when they were children. The videos were then coded by trained raters who were unaware of the adult sexual orientation of the child shown in the video. For each video, they rated the child's behavior on a scale from 1 (more masculine) to 7 (more feminine). The results showed that, as early as age 4, the "prehomosexual" children differed significantly from the "preheterosexual" children. The prehomosexual children were more gender nonconforming—that is, the boys were, on average, more feminine in their behavior than the preheterosexual boys, and the prehomosexual girls were more masculine, on average, than the preheterosexual girls. It is fascinating that the gender nonconformity can be detected at such an early age, and the study provides support for Bem's theory, although it is also consistent with the biological theories.

At the same time, Bem's theory and evidence have been criticized (Peplau et al., 1998; for Bem's response, see Bem, 1998). Two criticisms have been raised: (1) evidence not discussed by Bem contradicts some central propositions of the theory; and (2) the theory reflects male experience and neglects female experience. Regarding the evidence, Bem noted that, in one major study, lesbians (70 percent) were significantly more likely than were heterosexual women (51 percent) to recall feeling somewhat or very different from other girls their age (Bell et al., 1981). The difference is significant, but perhaps more important is the finding that a majority of heterosexual women felt different from other girls. Other girls seemed different or exotic to them. Why didn't they become lesbian, then?

## Sociological Theory

Sociologists emphasize the effects of labeling in explaining homosexuality. The label "homosexual" has a big impact in our society. If you are heterosexual, suppose that someone said to you, "I think you are homosexual." How would you react? Your immediate reaction might be negative: anger, anxiety, and embarrassment. The label "homosexual" has derogatory connotations and may even be used as an insult, reflecting our society's predominantly negative attitudes toward homosexuality.

But the label "homosexual" may also act as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Suppose that a young boy—possibly because he is gender nonconforming or poor in sports, or for no reason at all—is called a homosexual. He reacts strongly and becomes more and more anxious and worried about his problem. He becomes painfully aware of the slightest homosexual tendency in himself. Finally he convinces himself that he is homosexual. He begins engaging in homosexual behavior and associates with

a gay group. In short, a homosexual has been created through labeling.

Recall that in Chapter 2 we discussed Reiss's sociological theory of human sexuality. In his theorizing he addressed the issue of sexual orientation, focusing particularly on gay men. Recognizing the need to explain cross-cultural differences in sexual patterns, he contends that it is male-dominant societies with a great rigidity of gender roles that produce the highest incidence of homosexuality. In such societies there is a rigid male role that must be learned and conformed to, but young boys have little opportunity to learn it from adult men precisely because the gender roles are rigid, so that women take care of children and men have little contact with them. It is therefore difficult to learn the heterosexual component of the male role. In addition, because the male role is rigid, there will be a certain number of males who dislike it and reject its heterosexual component. Cross-cultural studies support his observations (Reiss, 1986). Societies that have a great maternal involvement with infants and low paternal involvement with infants and that have rigid gender roles are precisely those that have the highest incidence of same-gender sexual behavior in males.

This pattern describes the negative pathway to homosexuality. Reiss argues that there is also a positive pathway. It exists in less gender-rigid societies with more permissiveness about sexuality. In such societies, individuals feel freer to experiment with same-gender behavior and may find it satisfying. Examples are provided by several American Indian tribes in which three gender roles have been recognized (see Chapter 12).

## The Bottom Line

We have examined a number of theories of sexual orientation and the evidence supporting or refuting them. What is the bottom line? Which theory is correct? The answer is, We don't know yet. We do not know what causes sexual orientation. Several theories have strong evidence supporting them, but no one theory accounts for all cases. We believe that a good lesson can be learned from this somewhat frustrating conclusion.

It has generally been assumed that gays form not only a distinct category (which, we have already seen, is not very accurate) but also a homogeneous category, that is, that all gays are fairly similar. Not so. Probably there are many different kinds or "types" of LGBs. If this is the case, then one would not expect a single cause of homosexuality but rather many causes, each corresponding to its type. The next step in research, then, should be to identify the various

types of LGBs—not to mention the various types of heterosexuals—and the different pathways of development that lead to each.

## Differences between Gay Men and Lesbians

Although gay men and lesbians are commonly lumped together in one category and called homosexuals, evidence from a number of sources indicates that there are some important differences between the two groups that go beyond one group being male and the other female (Lippa, 2007).

Who is more likely to be bisexual—men or women?

Women are more likely to be bisexual, and less likely to be exclusively homosexual, than men are. In the NSFG data set, 2.8 percent of women and 0.5 percent of men indicated that they were sexually attracted to both women and men (Chandra et al., 2011).

In related research, among both heterosexuals and homosexuals, women show more flexibility or change over time in their sexual orientation (Kinnish et al., 2005). As noted earlier in the chapter, this is what Diamond (2008a) calls *sexual fluidity*. In laboratory research, men are specific in their sexual arousal, whereas women tend not to be (Chivers et al., 2004). That is, heterosexual men tend to be aroused, physiologically, by female stimuli and not male stimuli, and gay men show the reverse pattern. Women, however, whether lesbian or heterosexual, show arousal to both male and female stimuli.

Some of the theories discussed earlier in this chapter seem to work for gay men or for lesbians but not for both. For example, the fraternal birth order effect has been found repeatedly; compared with heterosexual men, gays are more likely to have a late birth order and an excess of older brothers. Lesbians, however, are no more or less likely to have a late birth order compared with heterosexual women (Bogaert, 2003).

We will almost certainly need somewhat different theories to explain the development of sexual orientation in women and in men (Hyde & Jaffee, 2000).

## Sexual Orientation in Multicultural Perspective

Just as different cultures around the world hold different views of same-gender sexual behavior (see *A Sexually Diverse World*), so do various U.S. ethnic minority groups have different cultural definitions for same-gender behaviors.

It is generally thought that there is less tolerance for homosexuality in the African American community. In one study whites had the lowest levels of antigay attitudes and Blacks had the highest levels, with Latinos and Asian Americans falling in between (Haslam & Levy, 2006). Ethnic minority LGBs have a double minority status and may experience racism within the gay community and antigay prejudice within their ethnic group (Ibañez et al., 2009).

The process of sexual identity development and coming out may differ across U.S. ethnic groups. In a study of African American, Latina, and white lesbians, the African Americans and Latinas began wondering if they were lesbian at younger ages (around age 14) than the whites (around age 17) (Parks et al., 2004). The African American lesbians were considerably less likely to be “out” with nonfamily than the Latinas and whites, perhaps because of the stronger antigay attitudes among African Americans noted earlier.

We should not overemphasize ethnic differences, though. In one large study of Asian Americans and Latinos, 88 percent of Asian Americans considered themselves heterosexual, 2 percent LGB, 4 percent something else (and the rest didn’t answer) (Chae & Ayala, 2010). The comparable numbers for Latinos were 93, 1, and 1 percent, respectively. This same pattern has been found in numerous studies of mainly white samples (see Chapter 11).

It is also true that Black and Latino men are more likely than white men to engage extensively in homosexual behavior while still considering themselves to be heterosexual (Muñoz-Laboy, 2008). A sizable number—we don’t know the statistics exactly—of African American and Latino men are heterosexually married and present themselves to the world as heterosexual, yet engage in secret sex with other men, a practice called “down low” (Muñoz-Laboy, 2008).

An interesting example of these different cultural definitions comes from a study of Mexican and Mexican American men and their same-gender sexual behavior (Magaña & Carrier, 1991). In Mexico, there is a dichotomizing of same-gender sexual behaviors that parallels traditional gender roles. Anal intercourse, because it most resembles penis-in-vagina intercourse, is the preferred behavior, and fellatio is practiced relatively little. A man adopts the role either of receptive partner or inserting partner and does this exclusively. Those who take the receptive role are considered unmanly, feminine, and homosexual. Those who take the inserting role are considered masculine, are not labeled homosexual, and are not stigmatized. This approach differs substantially from that in Anglo culture, where men commonly switch roles, and both are considered gay.

# A Sexually Diverse World

## Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia



**M**elanesia is an area of the southwest Pacific that includes the islands of New Guinea and Fiji as well as many others. Anthropologists' research on homosexual behavior in those cultures provides great insight into the ways in which sexual behaviors are the products of the scripts of a culture. This research is rooted in sociological and anthropological theory (see Chapter 2). As such, the analysis focuses on the norms of the society and the symbolic meaning that is attached to sexual behaviors.

Among Melanesians, homosexual behavior has a very different symbolic meaning from the one it has in Western culture. There it is viewed as natural, normal, and indeed necessary. The Melanesian culture actually prescribes the behavior, in contrast to Western cultures, in which it is forbidden or proscribed.

Sociologists and anthropologists believe that most cultures are organized around the dimensions of social class, race, gender, and age. Among Melanesians, age organizes the homosexual behavior. It is not to occur among two men of the same age. Instead, it occurs between an adolescent and a preadolescent, or between an adult man and a pubertal boy. The older partner is always the inserter for the acts of anal intercourse, the younger partner the insertee.

Ritualized homosexual behavior serves several social purposes in these cultures. It is viewed as a means by which a boy at puberty is incorporated into the adult society of men. It is also thought to encourage a boy's growth, so that it helps to "finish off" his growth in puberty. In these societies, semen is viewed

as a scarce and valuable commodity. Therefore the homosexual behaviors are viewed as helpful and honorable, a means of passing on strength to younger men and boys. One anthropologist observed,

Semen is also necessary for young boys to attain full growth to manhood. . . . They need a boost, as it were. When a boy is eleven or twelve years old, he is engaged for several months in homosexual intercourse with a healthy older man chosen by his father. (This is always an in-law or unrelated person, since the same notions of incestuous relations apply to little boys as to marriageable women.) Men point to the rapid growth of adolescent youths, the appearance of peach fuzz beards, and so on, as the favorable results of this child-rearing practice. (Schieffelin, 1976, p. 124)

In all cases, these men are expected later to marry and father children. This points up the contrast between sexual identity and sexual behavior. The sexual behaviors are ones that we would surely term homosexual, yet these cultures are so structured that the boys and men who engage in homosexual behaviors do not form a homosexual identity.

Ritualized homosexual behaviors are declining as these cultures are colonized by Westerners. It is fortunate that anthropologists were able to make their observations over the last several decades to document these interesting and meaningful practices before they disappear.

*Source:* Herdt (1984).

Such different definitions of homosexuality are not limited to Mexican and Mexican American culture. One researcher described the scene in Egypt:

In Egypt, because there was so little sense of homosexuality as an identity, what position you took in bed defined all. Between men, the only sex that counted was anal sex. . . . In the minds of most Egyptians, "gay," if it meant anything at all, signified taking the receptive position in anal sex. On the other hand, a person who took the insertive role—and that seemed

to include virtually all Egyptian men, to judge by what my acquaintances told me—was not considered gay. . . . Many of the insults in the Arabic language concern being penetrated anally by another man. (Miller, 1992, p. 76)

As for lesbians, Latinas experience conflicts in the complexities of ethnicity and sexual orientation (Espin, 1987; Gonzalez & Espin, 1996). Although in Latin cultures emotional and physical closeness among women is considered acceptable and



**Figure 13.8** Ethnicity and sexual orientation. Among Latinas, warmth and physical closeness are very acceptable, but there are strong taboos against female–female sexual relationships.

desirable, attitudes toward lesbianism are even more restrictive than in Anglo culture. *Familismo*, the special emphasis on family—defined as mother, father, children, and grandparents—in Latin cultures makes the lesbian even more of an outsider. As a result, Latina lesbians often become part of an Anglo lesbian community while remaining in the closet with their family and among Latinos, creating difficult choices among identities. One Cuban woman responded to a questionnaire, “I identify myself as a lesbian more intensely than as a Cuban/Latin. But it is a very painful question because I feel that I am both, and I don’t want to have to choose” (Espin, 1987, p. 47).

Two features of Asian American culture shape attitudes toward homosexuality and its expression: (1) a strong distinction between what may be expressed publicly and what should be kept private; and (2) a stronger value placed on loyalty to one’s family and on the performance of family roles than on the expression of one’s own desires (Chan, 1995; Cochran et al., 2007). Sexuality must be expressed only privately, not publicly. And having an identity,

much less a sexual identity or a gay lifestyle, apart from one’s family is almost incomprehensible to traditional Asian Americans. As a result, a relatively small proportion of Asian American LGBs seem to be “out” compared with non-Asians. Asian American LGBs who are out tend to be more acculturated, that is, influenced by American culture. They echo the sentiments of the Latina lesbian just mentioned, saying that they would prefer not to have to choose between their ethnic identity and their sexual identity but that when forced to make the choice they are more closely tied to the LGB part of their identities.

In sum, when we consider sexual orientation from a multicultural perspective, two main points emerge: (1) The very definition of homosexuality is set by culture. In the United States, we would say that a man who is the inserting partner in anal intercourse with another man is engaging in homosexual behavior, but other cultures (such as Mexico and Egypt) would not agree. (2) Some ethnic groups are even more disapproving of homosexuality than are U.S. whites. In those cases, LGBs feel conflicts between their sexual identity and loyalty to their ethnic group.

## Bisexuality

A bisexual is a person whose sexual orientation is toward both women and men, that is, toward members of the same gender as well as the other gender. A slang term is “ac-dc” (alternating current–direct current).

Bisexuality is not rare; in fact, it is more common than exclusive homosexuality (if a bisexual is defined as a person who has had at least one sexual experience with a male and at least one with a female). About 1.1 percent of men and 3.5 percent of women claim a bisexual identity (Chandra et al., 2011), although there is probably some underreporting.

The proponents of bisexuality argue that it has some strong advantages. It allows more variety in one’s sexual and human relationships than does either exclusive heterosexuality or exclusive homosexuality. The bisexual does not rule out any possibilities and is open to the widest variety of experiences and partners.

On the other hand, bisexuals may be viewed with suspicion or downright hostility by the gay community (Rust, 2002). Radical lesbians refer to bisexual women as “fence-sitters,” saying that they betray the lesbian cause because they can act straight or lesbian whenever convenient. The term LUGs (lesbians until graduation) is used for women who live a lesbian lifestyle when it is easy in college and then shift to convenient heterosexuality afterward. Some gays even argue that there is no such thing as a true bisexual (Rust, 2002). Heterosexuals, too, can be quite biased against bisexuals, especially men (Yost & Thomas, 2012).

Bisexuals tend to be stereotyped as nonmonogamous (Yost & Thomas, 2012). Some of those who have a bisexual identity also believe that they have to have regular sexual relations with both women and men (Weinberg et al., 1994). If you have been monogamously heterosexually married for the past five years, how can you think of yourself as bisexual? Monogamy is therefore an issue for bisexuals.

Some bisexuals are heterosexually married men who also have sex with men. One researcher recruited a sample of men who fit this description (Malcolm, 2008). In the sample, 65 percent were still married and 35 percent had divorced. Although all the men, behaviorally, were bisexual, 5 percent had a heterosexual identity, 38 percent had a bisexual identity, and 57 percent had a homosexual identity.

## Bisexual Development

Some have argued that bisexuality is a developmental stage on the way to discovering that one is truly gay or lesbian. Is that view accurate, or are there some people who are lifelong bisexuals? Earlier in the chapter we described one longitudinal study over 10 years that

followed women who initially said they were lesbian, bisexual, or “unlabeled” in their sexual orientation (Diamond, 2008b). At the start of the study, the women ranged in age between 18 and 25. Fully 22 percent of the women maintained their bisexual or unlabeled identity over the 10 years, indicating that it is not just a transitional phase. Many other women changed in their identity over time, often in response to relationship experiences. For example, among women who began the study identifying as lesbian and then switched to bisexual/unlabeled, two-thirds had sexual contact with a man during the two years before the identity change.

Another study followed men and women in New Zealand from age 21 to 26 (Dickson et al., 2003). Women were more likely to change their pattern of attraction than men were, but some men also changed in their attractions. Especially for women, attractions seemed to change in all possible directions.

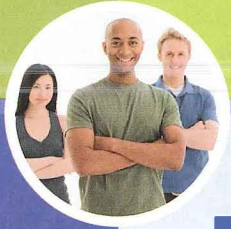
The timing and flexibility of these sequences argue for the importance of late-occurring experiences in the shaping of one’s sexual behavior and identity. As already discussed in this chapter, most of the theory and research rest on the assumption that homosexuality is determined by conditions in childhood, or by prenatal or genetic factors. Yet some people have their first heterosexual and then their first homosexual experience in their twenties. It is difficult to believe that these behaviors were determined by some event that occurred before birth.

**Deprivation homosexuality**, or situational homosexuality, is also a good example of the influence of late-occurring experience. A heterosexual man may engage in homosexual behavior while in prison but return to heterosexuality after his release (Kunzel, 2008). Once again, it seems likelier that such a man’s homosexual behavior was determined by his circumstances (being in prison) rather than by some problem with prenatal hormone exposure.

Unlike gender identity, which seems to be fixed in the preschool years, sexual identity continues to evolve in adulthood for some people (Diamond, 2003). This contradicts some scientists’ assertion that sexual orientation is determined before adolescence (Bell et al., 1981). We think that the point at which sexual orientation is determined is still an open question. For some it may be determined by genetic factors or experiences early in life, but for others it may be determined in adulthood or continue to be fluid.

Second, a question is raised as to whether heterosexuality is really the “natural” state. The pattern in some theories has been to try to discover the pathological conditions that cause homosexuality (e.g., having a father who is an inadequate role model or a bad dose of prenatal hormones)—all

**Deprivation homosexuality:** Homosexual activity that occurs in certain situations, such as prisons, when people are deprived of their regular heterosexual activity.



## First Person

### Sexual Fluidity and Questioning

**T**his case is taken from a series of interviews conducted by psychologist Lisa Diamond, author of *Sexual Fluidity* (2008).

At the first interview, Eleanor described herself as “questioning.” She has an outgoing, vivacious demeanor, with a broad, engaging smile and a self-deprecating sense of humor.

Eleanor flatly refused to characterize her same-sex attractions on a 0–100 percent scale. She threw up her hands and exclaimed, “I can’t make any sense of that at all! There are too many variables involved when I’m attracted to someone, so there’s no way for me to divide it up that way.” Eleanor was 20 years old and had first begun to question her sexuality about a year earlier, when her boyfriend told her that he was bisexual. She had been aware of sporadic same-sex attractions since the age of 13, and, in her words, “they scared the hell out of me.” Yet the attractions had always confused her. Most of her “gut level” urges were in response to men, but she found women more aesthetically and emotionally desirable. As she put it,

I prefer to make out with men, but the idea of having sex with a man utterly repulses me. I would, however, like to marry a woman, and that’s who I want to make a long-term commitment to. . . . When people ask me if I’m straight and I say yes, I know I’m being dishonest, and I can’t tolerate that dishonesty. But if somebody asked me if I was a lesbian, I’d also feel dishonest saying yes. I guess I might be bisexual. I’m annoyed by the uncertainty. I know I’m not straight, it’s just a matter of defining my not-straightness. . . .

By the second interview Eleanor had settled on the compromise of a bisexual identification, despite the fact that her feelings for women remained relatively ambiguous. She was eager for more certainty about her sexuality.

on the basis of the assumption that heterosexuality is the natural state and that homosexuality must be explained as a deviation from it. As discussed earlier, this approach has failed; there appear to be multiple causes of homosexuality, just as there may be multiple causes of heterosexuality. The important alternative to consider is that bisexuality is the natural state, a point acknowledged by the learning theorists and

I still go through this whole explanation when I tell people I’m bisexual, because the truth is that my attraction to women isn’t really all that sexual. It’s more aesthetic. Women are just so much better looking than men. I guess I find women magnetic. That’s not quite the same as a sexual attraction. . . . I thought that things would resolve themselves. I expected that over time I’d either feel clear sexual attractions and I’d identify as bisexual or I wouldn’t feel them at all and I’d identify as heterosexual. But now I realize that won’t happen—I still feel the same and I’ve accepted that.

At the third interview, at age 25, Eleanor had finally reconciled with the fact that her emotional and aesthetic appreciation for women did not really qualify as sexual attraction. Yet contrary to the notion that this might just be a rationalization for not identifying as lesbian or bisexual, Eleanor actually expressed great disappointment that she was not gay.

I’ve kind of straightened out! I still call myself bisexual but I’m on the edge of heterosexual, which I’m not pleased about. . . . I never really wanted to be heterosexual but I don’t have much choice in the matter. . . . I think sexuality definitely changes, because it’s not that I’m just more aware of the straight parts of me, I’ve actually *become* more straight, but I don’t have any idea what causes those changes.

Eleanor reported the same basic perspective at the 8-year and 10-year follow-up interviews, when she characterized herself as “reluctantly heterosexual.” At the time of the 10-year interview, she described her emotional attraction as 70 percent to women, but her physical attraction as only 5 percent to women.

Source: Diamond (2008), pp. 155–158.

sociological theorists (Weinberg et al., 1994). This chapter closes, then, with some questions. Psychologically, the real question should concern not the conditions that lead to homosexuality but rather the causes of exclusive homosexuality and exclusive heterosexuality. Why do we eliminate some people as potential sex partners simply on the basis of their gender? Why isn’t everyone bisexual?

## Critical **THINK**ing Skill

### Interpreting research findings

Earlier in this chapter, we saw that the rate of suicide attempts is higher among sexual minority youth (9.1 percent) than it is among heterosexual youth (3.6 percent). That is the statistical research result, but how should it be interpreted? What does it mean?

In interpreting research results, it is important to consider two questions: (1) Is the difference big enough to care about? and (2) What factor(s) could cause such an effect?

First, then, is the difference big enough to be important? For example, sometimes we hear a proclamation in the news that the unemployment rate is up, followed by the specifics that it is up from 7.8 percent in January to 7.9 percent in February. True, 7.9 is greater than 7.8, but the difference is tiny and not important. In the case of sexual minority youth, is the difference in suicide attempts big enough to be important? If you have had a statistics course, you will know that one way to evaluate a difference between two groups involves testing whether the difference is statistically significant. Therefore, statistical tests of significance are one way to decide whether a difference is big enough to be important. Another way to think about how big the difference is, especially when the data are given in terms of percentages, is to evaluate the percentages directly. Is it disturbing that the suicide attempt rate is more than twice as high among gay youth as straight youth? Or is a rate under 10 percent for gay youth still low and not cause for concern? We might add to that an evaluation of the cost of the behavior. True, a suicide attempt rate of 9.1 percent represents just a small minority, but some suicide attempts foreshadow actual suicides and the death of a person, so a rate of 9.1 percent might be unacceptably high. Perhaps even the 3.6 percent rate for straight youth is unacceptably high. Statistical tests of significance cannot answer these questions, which rest much more on personal values.

Assuming that our answer to the first question is yes, there is a big enough difference between sexual minority and straight youth to be important, then we can ask what factor or factors cause the difference? Don't stop with generating just one cause, but think of several, and then ask, might more than one of them be important? It is not always necessary to choose between one cause and another. Think of some possible causes before continuing to the next paragraph.

Some possible causes, not all of them supported by research, include the following: Perhaps there are genetic factors that cause homosexuality, and those same genetic factors also cause depression and suicide attempts. Another possible interpretation might be that homosexuality is a mental illness and therefore more suicide attempts occur among LGB youth. A third possible interpretation involves thinking about what might cause suicide attempts in general, not just among LGB youth. A leading cause is serious stress, so a possible cause of the difference is that sexual minority youth experience more stress—such as bullying—than straight youth do, and that accounts for the higher rate of suicide attempts.

Notice that the way that we interpret the research findings in this case could lead to very different conclusions and implications. One person might conclude that the research provides confirmation that homosexuality is a mental illness. Another person might conclude from the same findings that sexual minority youth face intolerable levels of stress and that we should institute social programs in schools and families to reduce the stress. For a person who wanted to pursue this question more, the important next step would be to consider what other research evidence would be needed to decide among these conclusions and then find out what the research says.

## SUMMARY

*Sexual orientation* refers to a person's erotic and emotional orientation toward members of his or her own gender or members of the other gender.

### Attitudes toward Gays and Lesbians

About half of Americans believe that homosexuality is wrong. This belief is the basis for much antigay

prejudice. In some cases this prejudice is so strong that it results in hate crimes and harassment directed at gays and lesbians.

### Life Experiences of LGBs

Coming out involves acknowledging to oneself, and then to others, that one is gay or lesbian. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities can be found around the world. These communities are defined by a common culture and social life and by rituals such as pride marches. In surveys, the majority of gay men and lesbians report being in a steady romantic relationship. Although concerns have been voiced about the sexual orientation and psychological well-being of children who grow up in lesbian and gay families, these concerns are unfounded, according to the available studies.

### How Many People Are Gay, Straight, or Bi?

Well-sampled surveys indicate (when corrected for some underreporting) that about 2 percent of men and 1 percent of women have a homosexual identity and that roughly 10 percent of men and 10 percent of women have had at least one same-gender sexual experience. Kinsey devised a scale ranging from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual) to measure this diversity of experience. A person's sexual identity may be discordant with his or her actual behavior.

### Sexual Orientation and Mental Health

Well-conducted research indicates that homosexuality per se is not a sign of poor adjustment. Research does show somewhat elevated rates of depression and suicide attempts among LGBs, which is mainly due to exposure to prejudice and maltreatment and the failure of family and friends to support the person. Although some groups claim success in reparative therapy to change the sexual orientation of LGBs, there is no scientific evidence that one's sexual orientation can be

changed by any known methods, and many indications that these therapies are psychologically harmful.

### Why Do People Become Homosexual or Heterosexual?

Biological explanations include genetic factors, hormone imbalance, prenatal factors, and brain factors. The genetic explanation has some support from the data. Learning theorists stress that the sex drive is undifferentiated at birth and is channeled, through experience, into heterosexuality or homosexuality. Bem's interactionist theory proposes that homosexuality results from the influence of biological factors on temperament, which in turn influences whether a child plays with boys or with girls; the less familiar (exotic) gender becomes associated with sexual arousal. Sociologists emphasize the importance of roles and labeling in understanding homosexuality. Available data do not point to any single factor as a cause of homosexuality but instead suggest that there may be many types of homosexuality with corresponding different causes.

### Differences between Gay Men and Lesbians

Gay men and lesbians differ in some ways. Women are more likely to be bisexual, and some theories that are effective in explaining men's sexual orientation are not supported for women.

### Sexual Orientation in Multicultural Perspective

Different ethnic groups in the United States, as well as different cultures around the world, hold diverse views of same-gender sexual behaviors.

### Bisexuality

Bisexuals are attracted to both women and men. Bisexuality may be more "natural" than either exclusive heterosexuality or exclusive homosexuality.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Diamond, Lisa M. (2008). *Sexual fluidity: Understanding women's love and desire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Diamond, a noted sex researcher, argues against the principle of lifelong, consistent sexual orientation in women.

LeVay, Simon (2011). *Gay, straight, and the reason why*. New York: Oxford University Press. LeVay, a neuroscientist, explores the causes of sexual orientation.

Savin-Williams, Ritch C. (2005). *The new gay teenager*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Savin-Williams, a leading researcher on sexual orientation, argues that today's teenagers are not caught up in the rigid ideas of previous generations and instead think more flexibly about sexuality. The result—gay teenagers who are thriving!

Windmeyer, Shane L. (2006). *The Advocate college guide for LGBT students*. New York: Alyson Books. This book represents a new kind of college rating guide—one that rates college campuses on the kind of environment they provide for LGB students.