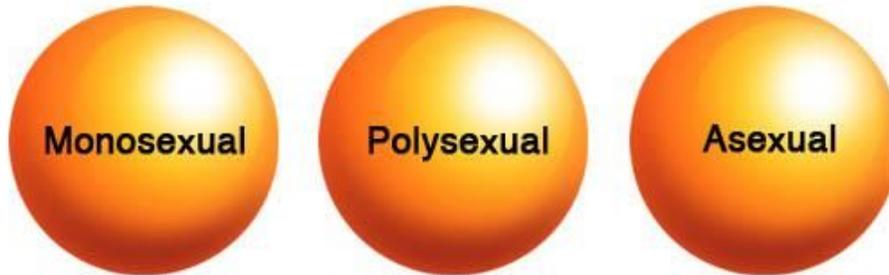
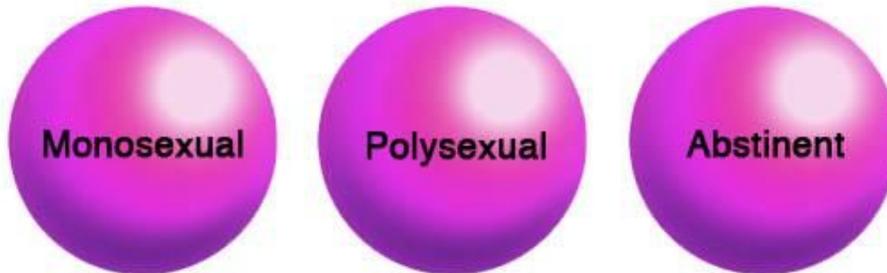


# A Twenty-First-Century Sexual Orientation 101



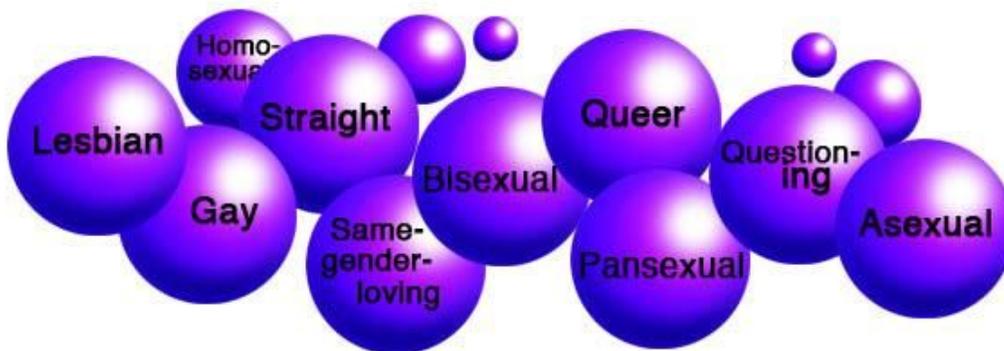
## Attraction

Attraction is about who you are attracted to—who you feel drawn to sexually, who you fantasize about, who sparks your libido. Some people are attracted to one gender only, some are attracted to more than one gender, and some do not experience sexual attraction.



## Behavior

Behavior is about your sexual activity—who you express interest in, who you engage in any variety of sexual acts with. Some people engage with one gender only, some with more than one gender, and some do not engage in sexual behavior.



## Identity

Identity is about how you define yourself—what your own internal understanding of your sexuality is.

## A 21st-Century Sexual Orientation 101

When we say *sexual orientation* in this culture we are lumping together a number of things. The three primary elements that get combined are attraction, behavior, and identity.

The assumption and the expectation is that these things dictate each other: that a man who is attracted to men engages in sexual behavior only with men and identifies as gay; that a woman who is attracted to men engages in sexual behavior only with men and identifies as straight.

But although this might well be how sexual orientation plays out for many people, human diversity is far more complex than we've been led to believe.

### Attraction: "Zing!"

*Attraction* is about who you feel drawn to sexually—who catches your attention, who sparks your libido, who you fantasize about. We can think of the gendered pattern of peoples' attractions as generally falling into one of three camps: monosexual, polysexual, and asexual.

People who have **monosexual** attractions are only attracted to one gender. Someone who has monosexual attractions could be only attracted to men, or only attracted to women, or only attracted to transmasculine genderqueer bois, for example.

People who have **polysexual** attractions are attracted to people of multiple genders. Someone who has polysexual attractions could be attracted to women and men, feminine people of all genders, or men and genderqueer people, for example. Being polysexual doesn't mean you are always attracted to multiple genders simultaneously or to equal degrees.

People who are **asexual** do not experience sexual attraction. Someone who is asexual could experience sexual arousal that is not associated with a potential partner, or could experience romantic attraction and have a desire to form long-term partnerships without sexual activity, for example. (Visit the [Asexuality Visibility & Education Network](#) to learn more.)

Attractions often vary and fluctuate throughout our lives. Some people go through periods of experiencing polysexual attraction and other periods where their attractions are monosexual. Some people go through temporary periods of not experiencing sexual attraction. Attraction is not a static thing. Your attractions are real and legitimate regardless of whether you act on them and regardless of how you self-identify. Attraction exists independently of the actions you take on them and the meaning you make of them.

## **Behavior: “So... do you want a cup of coffee?”**

*Behavior* is about your sexual activity—who you express interest in, who you flirt with or ask out, who you make out with or engage in sexual acts with. The gendered pattern of peoples’ behavior also shows up in three general ways: monosexual, polysexual, and abstinent.

People whose sexual behavior is **monosexual** only engage in sexual behavior with one gender. Such a person might have polysexual attractions, but choose to only engage in sexual behavior with one gender.

People who are **polysexual** in terms of behavior have engaged in sexual behavior with people of multiple genders. Not necessarily simultaneously and not necessarily during the same period of time. Polysexual is not the same thing as polyamory—being polyamorous means you have the capacity for multiple intimate relationships at one time, being polysexual means you have engaged in sexual behavior with people of multiple genders, perhaps over the course of your entire life.

People who are **abstinent** do not engage in sexual behavior. Someone might abstain from sexual behavior for a limited time or as a lifelong choice.

Behavior is a choice. No matter what our attractions are, we choose which attractions to act on and which to ignore. Mainstream media, caregivers, teachers, religious authorities, and many other influences in our lives pressure us in a thousand ways, both big and small, to make certain choices in terms of sexual behavior. The challenge is to make choices that bring more joy and connection and pleasure into the world for all those involved—to make choices that broaden our world instead of narrowing it. Your sexual behavior should never be about proving something to anyone.

## **Identity: “Hello, my name is...”**

*Identity* is about your own internal understanding of yourself. It’s how you make meaning out of your attractions and your behavior and how you define yourself.

There are as many different understandings of self as there are selves in this world. Language and labels can help us describe our internal self and how it relates to others’, but there is no singular definition for any one identity term—each person’s relationship to each word is unique. And humanity is constantly finding new words and new definitions of existing words to better share our unique experiences.

Some people use only a single term to describe their identity in terms of sexual orientation; others use multiple terms. For example, some people describe themselves as both asexual and lesbian—they might

see themselves as asexual in terms of sexual attraction but lesbian in terms of non-sexual partnership desires. Other people add adjectives and additional descriptors, like “mostly straight.”

Furthermore, identity can shift or change over time. For many people, the language they use to describe their sense of self shifts over time; for others, their very sense of self when it comes to sexual orientation can change dramatically.

### **Attraction + Behavior + Identity: the playground**

We are taught that it's a 1 to 1 to 1 relationship: that attraction, behavior, and identity are all interdependent. We are taught, for example, that a woman who is attracted to women will identify as lesbian and will engage in sexual behavior only with women. This 1 to 1 to 1 model reflects many people's experiences, but for many others it just doesn't work that way. Attraction, behavior, and identity are far more complex than we've been taught.

There is also no measuring stick or litmus test for what defines a person's “real” sexual orientation except that person's own understanding of self. Being attracted to people of multiple genders does not mean a person isn't gay, engaging in sexual behavior with only one gender does not mean a person can't identify as queer, being in a monogamous relationship for decades does not negate a person's self-identity as bisexual, not having engaged in sexual behavior yet in life does not mean a person doesn't have a solid sense of their sexual orientation identity.

Maybe your head is spinning; maybe you're cruising right along; but wherever you are on the journey, if you're seeking to truly expand your understanding of the world and the amazing diversity it contains, here are some steps:

1. Understand that attraction, behavior, and identity are separate variables that may inform each other but don't dictate each other.
2. Affirm that each person is the ultimate authority and expert on their own identity, and that other people's truths might differ from yours.
3. Stay open-minded and respectfully curious about each person you meet: never assume you know the whole package of a person's attractions, behaviors, or identity just because you've been given a single piece of the puzzle.
4. Get into real relationship with people whose sexual orientations and experiences differ from yours. Educating yourself is good, but you'll never gain a broader worldview or true understanding without relationship.