

Beyond Gay or Straight: increasing our choices about sexual identity

Written by Amada Udis-Kessler and Cooper Thompson, and published by the Campaign to End Homophobia, 1995

Three friends are sitting in a coffee shop. Gail sees a woman at another table and comments, "Is she hot!" Raymond agrees wholeheartedly, and they laugh together. "Isn't this what it all comes down to?" asks Gail. "We both get turned on by women! That's why I'm a lesbian and you're straight." But Vivian shakes her head in disagreement. "For me, it's much more complicated than that. I have close men friends that I find sexually attractive, but I don't have much desire to make love with them, even though I am very affectionate with them and can even imagine sleeping with a man in the future. After all, I enjoyed being married to James. At this point in my life, I definitely like being sexual with Robyn, but it has to do with who she is, not just that she's a woman. I could identify as a lesbian, but it doesn't give the full picture of who I am. And if I say I'm bisexual, some people think that I'm a fence-sitter or in some sort of phase. I'm definitely not heterosexual. So what am I?"

Sexual identity has been defined for many of us as being either gay or straight and determined by the extent of our physical sexual contact with either women or men. Despite the continuum proposed by Kinsey, and the option for identifying as bisexual, most people still define sexual identity as the choice of having sex with the same or opposite gender. This pamphlet offers a broader conception of sexual identity, one that honors the many different ways that people express their sexuality.

If our society celebrated sexuality in all its variations, we could imagine children and adults expressing their sexuality in many ways, and we could imagine that these feelings, thoughts, and behaviors might change over a lifetime. Actually, young children do explore their sexuality with some degree of freedom. But our society and the sub-cultures in which we live impose standards for sexual conduct that influence how we think and feel about our sexuality, and, especially, how we behave. In the United States, some of the most broadly held standards include the following: being married to the "opposite sex" is the most appropriate expression of an adult sexual relationship; having a relationship with someone of your own gender is somewhere on a continuum from abnormal to immoral; and expressing one's sexuality is synonymous with wanting or having genital contact.

The consequence of these standards is that our sexuality may be limited by, for example:

- Being publicly affectionate or emotionally intimate with only one gender
- Not allowing ourselves to be attracted to both women and men
- Believing that we must always be consistent in whatever sexual identity we claim for ourselves

We are not advocating an end to all standards for sexual expression. There are probably some standards that we can all support, such as mutual consent in sexual contact. We do wish, however, for there to be a wider range of choices, and for individuals to be supported in their choices rather than being boxed in by prevailing norms.

The following three scales measure sexual identity and offer the potential for broadening how we think about our sexuality:

- The Kinsey Scale
- The Storms Sexuality Axis
- The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid

Tools for Measuring Sexual Identity

The Kinsey Scale

In the 1940's and 1950's, after extensive research, Alfred Kinsey and his associates proposed a seven-point scale of sexual behavior to make sense of the data he had collected on homosexuality. Through questionnaires and interviews with over ten thousand people, Kinsey discovered that one-third of the men he surveyed had experienced homosexual encounters to orgasm as adults and that forty-six percent of the men surveyed were neither exclusively homosexual nor exclusively heterosexual. Although the amount of homosexuality reported was much greater than expected, the range of sexual behaviors was at least as surprising and led Kinsey to create a scale that helped him make sense of his data.

I-----I-----I-----I-----I-----I-----I
0 1 2 3 4 5 6

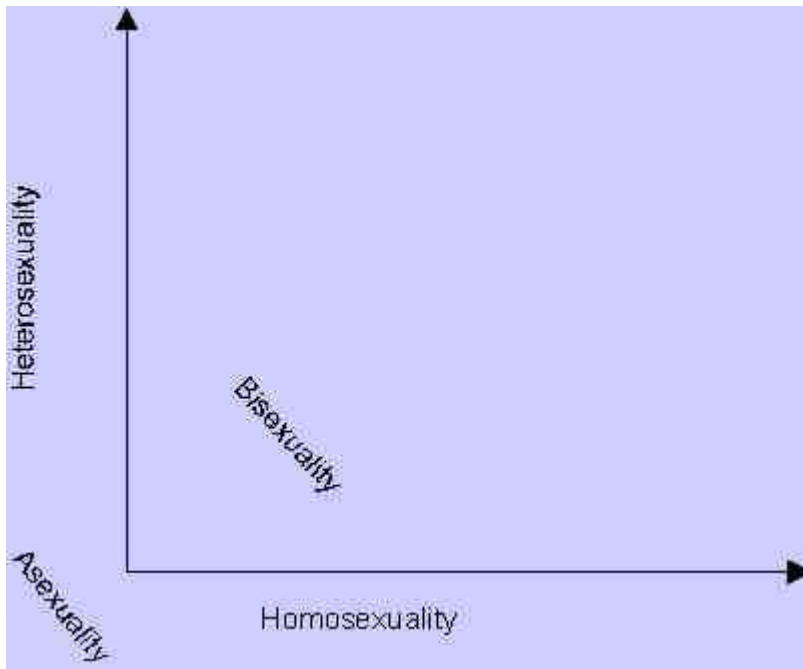
- 0 Exclusively heterosexual
- 1 Predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual
- 2 Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual
- 3 Equally heterosexual and homosexual
- 4 Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual
- 5 Predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual
- 6 Exclusively homosexual

Although Kinsey developed the scale to stress a continuum of sexuality, his study has generally been cited to prove that ten percent of the population is gay. This famous number, although politically useful for establishing the presence of a gay population, is probably inaccurate. Kinsey's continuum was based on counting orgasms, and this measure of sexual identity misrepresents contemporary gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. In addition, it has since become clear that Kinsey's sample (the set of people who provided his data) was not representative of the country as a whole. Nonetheless, the phrase "one in ten" is often accepted as accurate in discussions about the prevalence of lesbian and gay people in American culture.

Even though the Kinsey scale was conceptualized as a continuum, it is essentially a bipolar scale that presents homosexuality and heterosexuality as exclusive of each other: one is either homosexual or heterosexual. There is little clarity as to what is measured by the middle section. Kinsey surely intended to show degrees of bisexuality, but falling between the two extremes could mean that one is both homosexual and heterosexual or that one is neither. (Someone with little sex drive and few social desires for anyone might show up at “3” on the Kinsey scale, but so would someone with strong sexual desires for both men and women. Today we would consider the former person to be asexual and the latter bisexual.) Even if Kinsey had been clear that bisexuality is different from homosexuality or heterosexuality, it is not surprising that the scale has been interpreted in either/or terms, given the tendency in Western culture to think dichotomously.

The Storms Sexuality Axis

Michael Storms, a psychologist at the University of Kansas, had been studying sexuality and erotic fantasies, and his research seemed to point to some of these conceptual problems with the Kinsey scale. He found that bisexuals engaged in as much heterosexual fantasizing as heterosexuals and as much homosexual fantasizing as their lesbian and gay counterparts. He ascertained from this that bisexuality seemed to somehow incorporate total heterosexuality and total homosexuality in a way not indicated by the Kinsey scale (in which bisexuality is between the two “extremes”, rather than encompassing them). Storms also wanted to distinguish between bisexuality and asexuality. In 1980, he proposed a new sexuality scale using an x-y axis.



<http://www.endhomophobia.org/BeyondGay.htm>

The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid

In 1980, psychiatrist Fritz Klein developed the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) “in an attempt to better demarcate and understand the complexities of human sexual attitudes, emotions, and behaviors.” Klein thought that Kinsey’s original scale was useful to a degree, but he was concerned that the different factors that make up sexual identity—such as attraction, fantasies, behavior, and the like—be taken into account and that the variance of these factors over time be duly acknowledged.

	Past	Present (past year)	Ideal Future Goal
Sexual attraction			
Sexual behavior			
Sexual fantasies			
Emotional preference			
Social preference			
Self-identification			
Lifestyle			

The KSOG includes seven dimensions:

- Sexual attraction: Who turns you on? Who do you find attractive as a real or potential partner?
- Sexual behavior: Who are your sexual contacts or partners?
- Sexual fantasies: Whom do you enjoy fantasizing about in erotic daydreams?
- Emotional preferences: With whom do you prefer to establish strong emotional bonds?
- Social preference: Which sex do you prefer to spend your leisure time with, and with which sex do you feel most comfortable?
- Self-identification: How do you think of yourself?
- Lifestyle preference: What is the sexual identity of the people with whom you socialize?

The KSOG also includes three time scales:

- Past: Your life up to 12 months ago
- Present: the most recent 12 months
- Future: what do you think you would eventually look like?

For the first five aspects of sexual identity, the following scale is used:

- 0 – other sex only
- 1 – other sex mostly
- 2 – other sex somewhat more
- 3 – both sexes equally
- 4 – same sex somewhat more
- 5 – same sex mostly
- 6 – same sex only

For the last two aspects of sexual identity, the Kinsey scale is used, where 0 is exclusively heterosexual and 6 is exclusively homosexual.

Although the instructions for the KSOG ask the user to average her or his responses on each of the 21 separate items to arrive at a single “Kinsey” number, this scale clearly opens the door to a broad definition of what it means to be gay or straight. In fact, using the Klein grid encourages us to abandon easy definitions of our sexual identity and, instead, to think of our sexual identity as being multifaceted.

A Vision: Celebrating Our Sexualities

We look forward to a society in which we celebrate the presence of many sexual identities. Especially from people who consider themselves progressive, we ask for an affirmation of the various ways that people choose to identify themselves as sexual beings, regardless of political or social necessity. We want to celebrate sexuality in the face of oppression, instead of reacting to oppression by limiting our options.

Imagine, then, the same three friends discussing their sexual identity in a climate that celebrates diverse sexualities:

Three friends are sitting in a coffee shop. Gail sees a woman at another table and comments, “Is she hot!” Raymond agrees wholeheartedly, having temporarily shifted his gaze from the attractive man he was watching across the room, and then asks, “Do you think that guy’s good looking?” Vivian, surprised, says to him, “I thought you were straight, Raymond.” “Well,” he says, “I am. I don’t get turned on by men, but there are a lot of men that I find attractive.” Gail adds, “I like men, too, but I usually don’t find them attractive, not in the way that I find women attractive—there’s a sexual charge when I look at women. It didn’t used to be that way, but it sure is now! I am a lesbian through and through.” Vivian listens and then comments, “Isn’t our sexuality interesting? I’m definitely bisexual, but that particular label doesn’t mean much to me—certainly not in the way that being an African-American woman is important to me. I’ve gone through lots of changes when it comes to my sexual relationships, and I know one thing for sure: I like being lovers with Robyn.”

Acknowledgements

Portions of the text written by Amanda Udis-Kessler originally appeared in an appendix to *Closer to Home: Bisexuality and Feminism* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1992); thanks to Seal Press for their permission to use this material. Thanks also to Alfred Kinsey, Michael Storms, and Fritz Klein for their work to understand sexual identity; to Althea Smith for her thinking about a more inclusive approach to sexual identity and her encouragement to develop this pamphlet; to Alan Hamilton and Bobbi Keppel for their understanding of the Klein scale; and to all the people who have thought about, talked about, and written about sexual identity.