
A Classroom Activity Exploring the Complexity of Sexual Orientation

Laura Madson
New Mexico State University

Sexual orientation subsumes sexual attractions, sexual behavior, psychological and emotional attachments, self-identification, and affiliations with a particular community. These elements are often overlooked in the use of terms such as lesbian or heterosexual. In this activity, students categorized the sexual orientation of 10 fictional people, some of whom presented inconsistencies between different aspects of their sexuality. By illustrating the difficulty in defining rigid and consistent categories of sexual orientation, the activity stimulates animated discussion and receives positive feedback from students. I use this activity in teaching the Psychology of

Women, Sexual Behavior, and the Psychology of Sexual Orientation, although instructors could use it in other courses as well.

With the growing emphasis on diversity, topics related to sexual orientation are becoming more prevalent in psychology courses. When discussing *homosexuality*, *bisexuality*, or *heterosexuality*, instructors can have difficulty getting students to think critically about what these terms mean. In particular, students' a priori understanding of sexual orientation tends to be limited to who you have sex with, failing to consider psycho-

logical–emotional attachment, identification with a community, erotic attractions, or changes in identity across the life span (see Klein, 1993; Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985). Scholarly definitions can be of little help because there is little agreement among them (Shively, Jones, & De Cecco, 1983/1984). For example, *lesbian* can refer to nonsexual emotional intimacy and attachment between women (see Golden, 1987) or being woman-identified (Rich, 1980). It can also refer to sexual attraction and sexual relations between women (Ferguson, 1981) or emphasize the political elements of lesbianism (Radicalesbians, 1969).

Instructors could address this variability by comparing and contrasting several different definitions (e.g., Lips, 1997, 1999; Paludi, 1998; Unger & Crawford, 1996), but this approach may not get students actively involved in the material and may lead students to have a negative impression of research on sexual orientation (e.g., “they can’t even decide what the terms mean; why should I believe anything they say?”). More important, providing definitions allows students to take for granted that these categories are inherently meaningful when, in fact, some scholars have argued that these terms should be abandoned (Paul, 1985; see also De Cecco & Shively, 1983/1984).

I designed this activity as a vivid means for students in my courses (i.e., Psychology of Women, Sexual Behavior, and Psychology of Sexual Orientation) to consider what sexual orientation terms may or may not mean. The activity described in this article requires students to apply various criteria to categorize the sexual orientation of 10 fictional people. In the process, students realize how difficult it is to define rigid and consistent categories of sexual orientation.

The Activity

Materials

Students receive short descriptions of 10 fictional individuals and indicate whether they think each person is heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or gay based on their understanding of these terms (see the Appendix for a complete listing of the instructions and descriptions). Based on Klein’s (1993) model of sexuality, each description includes some combination of the following: the person’s sexual attractions, current relationship status, relationship history, past and present sexual behavior, self-identification, psychological attachments, and community preferences. I arrange the descriptions such that those that contain inconsistencies are introduced gradually, with the most difficult inconsistencies appearing toward the end of the activity. This order illustrates the inadequacy of students’ conceptualization of sexual orientation because, although their ideas are usually sufficient for categorizing the first targets, the latter targets defy clear categorization according to students’ naive criteria.

Procedure

Students complete the activity individually, indicating their categorization of each person and making short notes as

to the reasoning behind their categorization. This step requires 5 to 10 min of class time. Students then discuss their categorizations, first in groups of three to four, then in a full-class discussion. I explicitly tell students that they do not need to come to a consensus (within their small groups or in the full-class discussion) regarding the categorizations. The focus of this discussion is the various criteria that could be used to categorize a person’s sexual orientation. I usually allow 10 to 15 min for the small-group discussion and 10 to 20 min for the full-class discussion, depending on available class time.

Full-Class Discussion

In the full-class discussion, students discuss the categorizations of each of the 10 targets, noting by a show of hands how many students placed each target into the four categories (i.e., heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian, or gay). Although there is considerable consensus regarding the categorization of the first few targets, inconsistencies appear as the discussion progresses. At the beginning of the activity, students primarily base their categorizations on a target person’s sexual behavior, relationships, or self-identification (e.g., most students decide that Target 1 is gay, Target 3 is bisexual, and Target 5 is heterosexual). Agreement regarding categorization is lowest when the target’s sexual behavior is inconsistent with his or her relationship history, self-identification, or attractions (e.g., Targets 4 and 9). For example, discussion about Target 7 is particularly lively because her self-identification and political activities are consistent with a lesbian categorization, but her relationship history is inconsistent with this categorization (i.e., she is happily married to a man). Students make a number of assumptions in an attempt to reconcile this inconsistency, including speculating that her marriage is loveless or a relationship of convenience, her self-identification is motivated by peer pressure or fear of rejection, or she is simply unjustified in identifying herself as a lesbian. In general, some students resolve the inconsistencies presented by the latter targets by staunchly clinging to current sexual behavior as their primary criterion. Other students employ some sort of mental heuristic that dictates past or present sexual behavior as the primary criterion for some targets (e.g., Target 4 or 9) but discounts this factor for other targets (e.g., Target 7 or 8).

Integration with Other Class Material

I use this activity to introduce the concept of sexual orientation and what it does (or does not) mean. Students participate in the activity having had little or no prior discussion of issues related to sexual orientation. This timing tends to maximize the impact of the activity. Subsequent classes focus on historical and cross-cultural perspectives on sexual orientation. The discussion of historical and cultural perspectives on orientation reinforces the message that current Western ideas of sexual orientation may not be the best way of conceptualizing the relation between sexual behavior and self-identity. Historical and cultural information also stimulate discussion of the social implications of any particular construction of sexual orientation and the labeling of individuals (e.g., as bisexual or homosexual) that may result.

Instructors could opt to reverse this order, conducting the activity after introducing the idea of historical and cultural variation in conceptualizations of sexual orientation. One advantage of conducting the activity as an introduction to the topic is that the activity propels students to question their conceptualizations of sexual orientation, creating a foundation on which to add information about historical and cultural variations. A potential disadvantage of conducting the activity after covering this material is that students may interpret these alternative constructions as simply “wrong” because they have not yet begun to question their own beliefs

Evaluation

Forty-six students enrolled in my Sexual Behavior class at New Mexico State University during Spring and Summer 1999 participated in the activity. At the end of the discussion, students evaluated the activity using seven close-ended items and three open-ended items. Table 1 lists the items, response scales, and descriptive statistics for the close-ended items. In general, students responded positively to the activity. They reported that they enjoyed the exercise, that they learned about issues related to sexual orientation, and that I should use the exercise again. Students recommended that instructors who teach other courses that cover sexual orientation should use the exercise.

Students also responded to three open-ended items that asked them to describe what it was like to participate in the exercise and to describe the best and worst part of participating in the exercise. Many students noted that the activity was a fun opportunity to think about sexual orientation in a different way. Although students’ self-reports indicated the activity made them think more deeply about sexual orientation, I did not access critical thinking directly. Unexpectedly, several students commented that the best part of the exercise was the opportunity to hear other students’ opinions and beliefs. Ironically, other students cited this openness as the worst part of the exercise because they were uncomfortable with the conflict between students’ beliefs.

Because sexual orientation is a complex and controversial topic, disagreements do arise during the discussion. However, I have yet to encounter overtly homophobic or hostile responses from students. Although the discussion can be-

come heated, students have remained civil and respectful of others’ opinions.

When disagreements do arise, I diffuse them by highlighting inconsistencies or contradictions in students’ logic. For example, one issue that invariably arises is that sexual behavior should be the sole criterion of sexual orientation. I respond by proposing that virgins therefore do not have a sexual orientation. Similarly, students often agree that sexual experimentation should not be factored into one’s orientation. I press students to consider how much experimentation must occur before one “switches” categories. For example, I playfully question whether 6.5 acts of sexual activity with a same-sex partner mean a person is now gay. A sense of humor is helpful in confronting these inconsistencies: Laughter helps diffuse any tension and seems to make students more willing to speak. Because students quickly discover that there are no right answers to these issues, they are generally unwilling to denigrate other students’ beliefs.

Discussion

This activity enables students to grapple with a number of issues that are generally neglected in undergraduate discussions of sexual orientation. These issues include whether a person’s psychological–emotional attachments can be a defining factor in sexual orientation (e.g., Target 9); the role of brief experimentation in determining sexual orientation (e.g., Target 8); how inconsistencies between erotic attractions, self-identification, and sexual behavior should be resolved (e.g., Targets 4 and 7); and whether sexual orientation can change across the life span (e.g., Targets 6 and 10). The activity propels students to consider what sexual orientation is (or is not), and what, if any, is the most meaningful way of conceptualizing differences between people.

Instructors could modify the exercise for use in other psychology courses that discuss continuous dimensions that students treat as categorical. For example, students in abnormal psychology courses could grapple with the distinction between “normal” and “abnormal” behavior by using target behaviors that vary in terms of their level of deviance, dysfunction, and resulting distress. Similarly, students in psychology of gender courses could use this activity to consider where to draw the line between sexual harassment and unobjectionable flirtation. I have used this activity in

Table 1. Closed-Ended Evaluation Items, Response Scales, and Mean Responses

Item	Response scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
How much did you learn about issues related to sexual orientation as a result of this exercise?	1 (<i>very little</i>) to 7 (<i>a great deal</i>)	5.72	1.29
In terms of understanding issues related to sexual orientation, how enjoyable was this exercise?	1 (<i>very enjoyable</i>) to 7 (<i>not at all enjoyable</i>)	2.59	1.75
The instructor should use the exercise on sexual orientation again in future semesters.	1 (<i>strongly agree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly disagree</i>)	2.28	1.76
How useful was this exercise in prompting you to think about issues related to sexual orientation?	1 (<i>not at all useful</i>) to 7 (<i>very useful</i>)	6.00	1.46
I learned more about issues related to sexual orientation today than if I had not participated in the exercise.	1 (<i>strongly agree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly disagree</i>)	2.87	1.94
Today’s exercise on sexual orientation was a waste of my time.	1 (<i>strongly agree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly disagree</i>)	6.35	1.34
Instructors who teach other, related courses should use this exercise when they discuss issues related to sexual orientation.	1 (<i>strongly agree</i>) to 7 (<i>strongly disagree</i>)	2.26	1.60

teaching Sexual Behavior, Psychology of Women, and Psychology of Sexual Orientation, all of which are junior–senior courses. Instructors could use the activity in lower-division courses, although students may be less open to the ideas generated by the activity in these settings. Also, relatively small classes ($N = 30$ or less) facilitate the best discussion of the activity.

For students, the primary result of this activity appears to be a new appreciation for what terms like heterosexual and lesbian do (or do not) mean. Although some students may be frustrated that there are not definitive answers to these issues, students leave class with a richer understanding of the complexity of sexual orientation.

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For each of the following people, identify whether the person is heterosexual (H), gay (G), lesbian (L), or bisexual (B), based on the information provided. For each person, briefly make note of your reasons for your decision.

1. A man who has self-identified as gay since his teens, who has had two brief sexual relationships with women, and who has been involved with his current (male) partner for 3 years.
2. A woman who has had a number of intimate sexual relationships with women and expresses little interest in pursuing relationships with men.
3. A man who has had several intimate sexual relationships with both women and men, though he generally prefers the company of men.
4. A man who is strongly attracted to both men and women although all of his sexual relationships have been with women.
5. A woman who has self-identified as heterosexual throughout her life and finds herself strongly attracted to a new female co-worker.
6. A man whose male partner died of AIDS 10 years ago and is currently married to a bisexual woman.
7. A woman who self-identified as a lesbian, is active in the women's movement and gay rights groups, and is happily married to a man.
8. A woman who had a brief sexual relationship with her college roommate 20 years ago but since then has had several intimate relationships with men.
9. A woman who psychologically, emotionally, and socially prefers the company of women over men but whose sexual experiences have been exclusively with men.
10. A recently divorced woman who had been married to a man for 19 years and is now living with her female partner.

Notes

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2. Send correspondence to Laura Madson, Department of Psychology, Box 30001/ Dept. 3452, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, NM 88003; e-mail: lmadson@nmsu.edu.

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