

UNDERSTANDING LGBTQ+

UNDERSTANDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Recognising the natural diversity of human attraction

ARTICLE 2 • BY MAGGIE LEAROYD



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"No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us." — Marsha P. Johnson

Introduction

Sexual orientation is one of the most widely discussed aspects of LGBTQ+ identity, yet it is also one of the most misunderstood. Misconceptions, stereotypes and outdated beliefs have often created confusion, leaving many people unsure about what sexual orientation actually means.

Whether you are exploring your own identity, supporting someone else, or simply wanting to understand more, learning about sexual orientation begins with recognising one important fact:

- Human attraction is diverse.

People experience emotional, romantic and sexual attraction in different ways, and there is no single "correct" way to experience these feelings. Sexual orientation is not about fitting into a stereotype or meeting someone else's expectations. It is about understanding who you are naturally drawn to and how you experience relationships.

For many people, recognising their sexual orientation brings clarity and self-understanding. For others, it may be something they continue to explore over time. Every journey is personal, and there is no right or wrong timeline.

What Is Sexual Orientation?

Sexual orientation describes a person's pattern of emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction towards others.

For some people, these forms of attraction align closely.

For others, they may be experienced differently.

Sexual orientation is about who you are attracted to—not how you dress, how you speak, your hobbies or your personality.

It is one part of a person's identity, but it does not define everything about who they are.

Understanding Common Sexual Orientations

Lesbian

A lesbian is a woman who is emotionally, romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women.

Some women identify strongly with this label throughout their lives, while others may explore different ways of describing their identity.

Gay

The word gay usually refers to a man who is attracted to other men, although some women also choose to describe themselves as gay.

For many people, it represents both a sexual orientation and a sense of community and belonging.

Bisexual

Bisexual people experience attraction to more than one gender.

This does not necessarily mean equal attraction to different genders, nor does it mean attraction to everyone.

Every bisexual person's experience is unique.

Pansexual

Pansexual people may experience attraction regardless of another person's gender.

For many, gender is not the determining factor in who they are attracted to.

Asexual

Asexual people experience little or no sexual attraction to others.

Some asexual people experience romantic attraction and choose to have relationships.

Others do not.

Being asexual is a valid sexual orientation and should not be confused with celibacy or a lack of interest in relationships.

Aromantic

Aromantic people experience little or no romantic attraction.

Some aromantic people experience sexual attraction.

Others do not.

Romantic attraction and sexual attraction are separate experiences.

Attraction Exists on a Spectrum

For some people, sexual orientation feels clear from an early age.

For others, it develops gradually.

Some people discover new aspects of themselves later in life.

Human experiences do not always fit neatly into categories.

Some people find labels incredibly helpful.

Others prefer broader terms or no labels at all.

The important thing is that individuals have the freedom to describe themselves in ways that feel authentic.

Common Misconceptions

"Being LGBTQ+ is a choice."

Sexual orientation is not generally understood to be a conscious choice. Major professional health organisations recognise it as a normal variation of human experience.

"It's just a phase."

Some people spend time questioning or exploring their identity, while others know their orientation from an early age. Exploration does not make a person's experiences less real.

"Bisexual people are just confused."

This is a common stereotype.

Bisexuality is a recognised sexual orientation.

People who identify as bisexual are not necessarily undecided or "going through a phase."

"Asexual people simply haven't met the right person."

Asexuality is not something that needs fixing.

It is a valid orientation, and asexual people have a wide range of experiences and relationships.

Respecting Individual Experiences

No two LGBTQ+ people have exactly the same story.

Some people come out during adolescence.

Others later in adulthood.

Some choose to share their identity openly.

Others keep aspects of their identity private for personal, cultural or safety reasons.

None of these choices make someone's identity more or less valid.

Respect means allowing people to define themselves rather than making assumptions based on appearance, behaviour or relationships.

Did You Know?

Research consistently shows that supportive families, schools and workplaces are associated with better mental health and wellbeing for LGBTQ+ people. Feeling accepted for who you are can significantly reduce stress and improve overall quality of life.

Real-Life Example

James remembers spending years wondering why conversations about relationships felt different for him.

While his friends spoke excitedly about dating girls, he found himself quietly relating to someone else entirely.

For a long time, he assumed he would "grow out of it."

He didn't.

When he finally met other gay men at university, he realised he wasn't unusual or alone.

Looking back, he said,

"Nothing about me changed that day. I simply found the words to describe something that had always been there."

For many people, discovering a label is not about becoming someone new.

It is about understanding who they have always been.

Reflection Questions

Take a few moments to reflect:

- What did you learn about sexual orientation from your family, school or community?

Were those messages supportive, neutral or negative?

How might assumptions about another person's orientation affect the way they feel?

What can you do to create conversations that feel more inclusive?

Key Takeaways

Sexual orientation describes emotional, romantic and/or sexual attraction.

It is separate from gender identity.

Human attraction is diverse and exists across a spectrum of experiences.

Labels can help some people understand themselves but are not compulsory.

No two LGBTQ+ people have identical experiences.

Respect begins by listening rather than assuming.

Final Thoughts

Understanding sexual orientation is not about learning a list of definitions.

It is about recognising the diversity of human experience and appreciating that each person's journey is unique.

Some people know who they are attracted to from an early age.

Others take years to understand their feelings.

Some use labels with confidence, while others choose not to use them at all.

Every journey deserves respect.

When we replace assumptions with curiosity and judgement with compassion, we create safer environments where people feel able to be themselves.

As Marsha P. Johnson reminded us,

"No pride for some of us without liberation for all of us."

True inclusion begins with recognising that every person deserves the freedom to understand themselves, to define their own identity and to live without fear of discrimination or prejudice.