

Sexuality Matters

Many years ago, an administrative assistant telephoned me on behalf of the dean of the college where I was teaching. The dean wanted me to meet with a Black female student struggling to adjust to university life. I gladly agreed. One reason I had accepted the job at the historically White university was to be a role model for students of color. Later that day, a Black woman professor called me. The student was enrolled in her department, and the dean had told her he thought I could relate to the student's struggles because I was a lesbian. The woman professor and I were friends, and she was sure that I was heterosexual. She wanted to tell me about the dean's misperception.

I didn't know how to respond. A part of me wanted immediately to correct the misunderstanding. I'm ashamed to admit that I didn't want to be identified as gay. Yet I also didn't want to care what the dean or anyone else thought about my sexual orientation. That was nobody's business. Should I tell the dean he was mistaken? Would denying that I was gay seem homophobic? Why did he even think I was gay? Was it my short hair, or maybe it was because I was single with no children and had never brought a date to campus social events? Could it be how I dressed for work (I usually wore pants)? Or was it because I am a feminist and people often equate feminism with lesbianism?

Maybe someone told him I was gay. But why would he categorize me without direct information from me? Wasn't that somehow unethical? If I were a lesbian and wanted no one to know, his referral would have "outed" me.

The dean's assistant never called back, and I said nothing to the dean. I still wonder if I should have handled the situation differently. What would you have done? Why?

My story implies many issues related to sexuality. A private aspect of one's identity, sexuality, has become more public than it used to be. Not long ago, it would have been unthinkable for an employer to mention an employee's sexual orientation in the way that the dean did. It's still taboo in many places. The student's difficulties reflect the reality of struggling to fit into

heterosexual contexts. Being both Black and lesbian may have compounded her challenges. And, my initial reaction to deny that I was a lesbian stresses the stigma of homosexuality and the privileged status of heterosexuality.

Related to that, my colleague and I had never discussed each other's sexuality. She assumed that I was straight. I assumed the same about her because she was a mother! My assumption shows how we draw conclusions about a person's sexuality. And my second-guessing why the dean thought I was gay illustrates how we read nonverbal cues to infer someone's sexual identity.

Did you notice I referred to different identity labels for what the dean assumed: "lesbian," "gay," and "homosexual?" And that I used "gay" most often? I also used "sexual orientation" and "sexuality" interchangeably. Similar to other social identities we're studying, numerous options exist for describing sexuality or sexual orientation—as do meanings and attitudes toward those options.

In this chapter, we will explore these and other issues. I begin by defining sexuality and explaining why it matters. Next, I summarize historical perspectives on sexuality in the United States and discuss how we obtain information about sexuality. Then I look at communicating sexuality in the workplace. Our journey illuminates sexuality as another significant aspect of social identity that reflects and reinforces dominant ideologies in the United States. We also will see ways that groups and individuals have advocated for social justice.

What Is Sexuality and Why Does It Matter?

Sexuality is a complex, contested, and controversial topic. How would you define sexuality? **Sexuality** is a broad term related to "an individual's sexual interests and behaviors, involving biological, cultural, psychological, social, and spiritual aspects."¹ Sexuality involves social relations, sexual orientation, desire, sexual behavior, procreation, attraction, societal norms, and our feelings and emotions about all of these elements. Sexuality is social and it encompasses reality and fantasy. It includes biological aspects and physiological issues beyond sexual intercourse, such as puberty, menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause.

Traditional categories of sexuality are heterosexual, homosexual (gay and lesbian), and bisexual. However, scholars of sex and sexuality have argued for approaches that avoid strict categories. They recommend acknowledging flexibility and fluidity in how people understand attraction and intimacy. Sexologist Alfred Kinsey and his coresearchers described sexual behavior and interests along a seven-point continuum, from "exclusively heterosexual" to "exclusively homosexual."² The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid expands the Kinsey scale to define sexuality as a combination of people's past, current, and idealized future attractions, behaviors, and interests.³

Perspectives on sexuality have always reflected the beliefs and values in which people live, interact, and build intimate relationships with others.