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How Do People Understand and Communicate Their Sexuality?: Application of Labels and the Sexuality Spectrum

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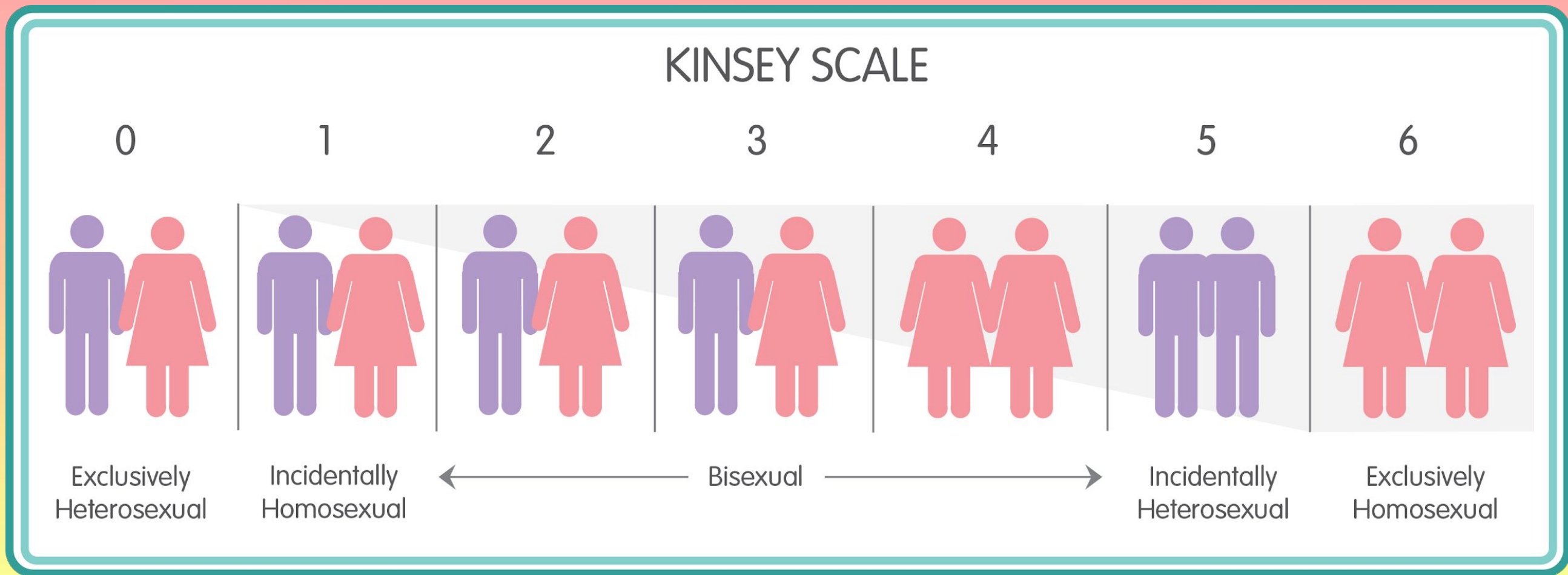
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How Do People Understand and Communicate Their Sexuality?

Application of Labels and the Sexuality Spectrum

McKenna Bunnell, Emelyn Ehrlich, and Gillian van der Have



Interpretation by Emma Wenig

The Kinsey Scale

- Scale first proposed by Alfred Kinsey and his associates (1948) to better illustrate sexual history and experiences
- Divided into seven categories ranging from exclusively heterosexual and exclusively homosexual with different categories in-between
- Intended to illustrate that sexuality does not fit into an exclusively hetero/homosexual continuum but rather has a variety of nuances
- Original intentions of Kinsey et al was to show that humans occupy every gradation between 0 and 6
 - Has been lost in translation over the past 70 years and in how the scale is used in current research; instead, the scale has been used to affirm a “fixed” nature to sexual orientation

Variable	Past	Present	Ideal Future
Sexual Attraction			
Sexual Behavior			
Sexual Fantasies			
Emotional Preference			
Social Preference			
Heterosexual/Homosexual Lifestyle			
Self-Identification			

The Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG)

- Proposed by Fritz Klein (1978) in his book “The Bisexual Option.”
- It looks at seven variables of sexual and romantic attraction as opposed to only sexual history (which is what Kinsey’s model did)
 - Also looks at past, present, and ideal future orientations
- It was developed to further explore the complexities and subtleties of sexual orientation, as well as to illustrate the fluctuations of sexuality
 - Not intended as a diagnostic tool
- Rather than combining the scores in each box to one final score, the numbers (on a 1-7 scale) are looked at as a whole to get a complete picture of the person’s sexuality and sexual journey

Sexual Fluidity

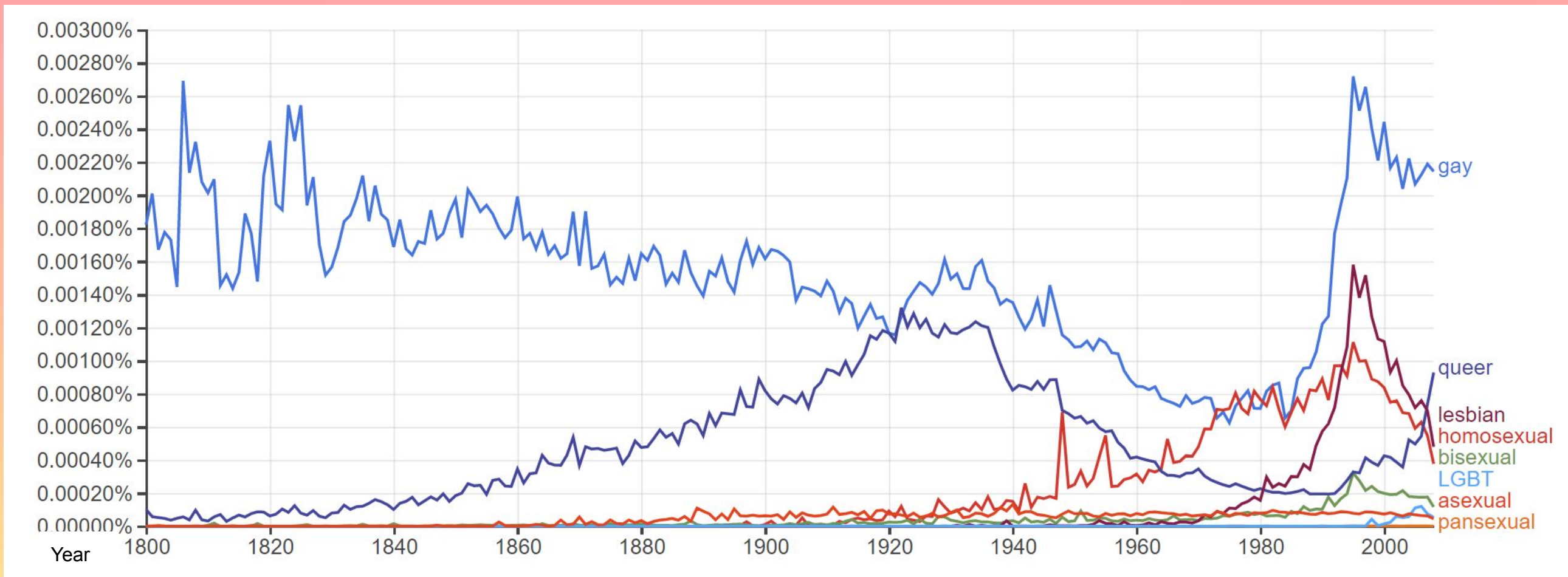
- Sexuality is fluid and changeable in terms of attraction to and desire for relations with the same sex, the opposite sex, and/or both sexes
- Sexuality is fluid when considering shifts across relationships, significant others, and social circles
- Participants in several studies adopted different identities over time as well as used multiple concurrent identities
- There is no popular consensus on what experiences define the differences between different labels
- Bisexuality is often viewed as a malleable orientation, and well suited to changing situations
- Queer can be used as a consistent label that still acknowledges the fluidity, not-fixed nature of sexuality

Constraining Labels

- Sexual identity labels possess a utilitarian function
 - They operate as a tool of communication rather than a description
- Measures of sexual orientation (i.e. Kinsey Scale, KSOG, etc.) do not always match with individuals’ self-identification labels
- Many decline to label their sexuality because they find existing identities and the process of categorizing itself to be “limiting and restrictive”
- Label adoption is often not straightforward
 - It is often complex, ongoing, and dependent upon access to appropriate vocabulary

Influence of Masculinity

- Stereotypical gender roles are often associated with heterosexuality while atypical gender roles are often associated with homosexuality
- Heterosexual men often affirm their sexuality by avoiding feminine traits/behavior and by displaying negative attitudes towards homosexuality
- Ideas of how a straight man versus how a gay man should act/present himself are restricting
- Females are more than twice as likely as males to report a fluid sexuality
- According to Queer Theory, destroying rigid ideas of femininity and masculinity is necessary for gay liberation
 - Depicting gender roles as being natural preserves heterosexual privilege; gay liberation challenges this notion



Frequency of Western Sexuality Vocabulary

- **GAY** → originally used as a synonym for happy (1800 - 1900); decreases as the use of queer increases (1920); increases during the AIDS epidemic (1980 - 1995); creation of additional labels leads to drop in adoption of gay (1995 - 2010)
- **QUEER** → originally used as a synonym for odd (1800 - 1900); gains connotation as a slur for gay (1900 - 1940); use spikes with the reclamation of queer by the LGBTQ+ community (1990 - 2010)
- **LESBIAN** → spikes during the AIDS epidemic (1980 - 1995); creation of additional labels leads to drop in adoption of lesbian (1995 - 2010)
- **HOMOSEXUAL** → spikes around the publication of Kinsey et al (1945 - 1950); continues to climb with the Gay Liberation Movement (1970 - 1980); creation of additional labels leads to drop in adoption of homosexual (1995 - 2010)
- **BISEXUAL** → slightly jumps with the publication of Kinsey et al (1945); slightly jumps with the publication of Klein (1975 - 1980); increases with the advent of the internet (1995 - 2010)
- **LGBT** → spikes with the advent of the internet (1995 - 2010)
- **ASEXUAL** → steady usage because of the term “asexual reproduction” (1800 - 2010)
- **PANSEXUAL** → no popular usage (1800 - 2010)

To further interact with the graph, scan the QR code below



Conclusions

- Originally we thought we would find that labels constrain the fluidity of sexuality; contrary to this, we found that labels are constraining because sexuality is fluid
- Traditional views of gender and masculinity also constrain people’s ability to explore their sexual orientation for fear of stigmatization
- Labels are helpful in the process of determining sexual orientation and in communicating
- However, labels are restraining and do not do justice to the complicated and fluid nature of people’s sexuality

[References](#)