Sexual Orientation

- Sexual Orientation – the classification of individuals according to their preference for emotional-sexual relationships and lifestyles
  - It is a basis of inequality.
  - Homosexual, Heterosexual, Bisexual
- Transgendered – does not refer to SO, but to individuals whose gender identity is different than the one assigned to them at birth
- LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered

There is no definitive study on the number of people who identify as homosexual or bisexual.

1994: Most commonly cited study found that 2.8% of men and 1.4% of women think of themselves as gay or bisexual.

2000: New estimates indicate that about 5% of the population is gay.

Gay rights have progressed substantially in the US and other countries.

- 1996: South Africa banned discrimination based on sexual orientation.
- 2000: Vermont began to allow civil unions between same-sex partners.
- 2004: Massachusetts legalized same-sex marriage.
- But gays and lesbians still continue to experience prejudice and discrimination.

Protection Under Family Law

Equal Opportunities in the Workplace

2009: Uganda proposed an antihomosexuality law that proposed the death penalty for homosexual acts.
Biological Perspective
- Biology, psychology and sociology all contribute to our understanding of sexual orientation.
- Biology
  - Neurohormonal Theory – homosexuality is caused by atypical sex hormone levels in utero
  - Behavioral Genetics – homosexuality is genetic
    - Supported by the results of twin studies.

Psychological Perspective
- Psychology
  - Early studies treated homosexuality as a pathology or mental illness and was included in the DSM until 1973.
  - Work in this area now focuses on examining the impact of a homosexual identity.
  - Also examine causes of attitudes toward homosexuality.
    - Homophobia – an irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuals

Functionalist Perspective
- Functionalist look at how society upholds heterosexuality.
  - Institutionalized Heterosexuality – the ideas, institutions, and relationships that define the heterosexual family as the societal norm
  - Our legal, political, and social structures work in harmony to support these ideas. How?
  - 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) – denies federal recognition of same-sex unions
    - Represents the value of the heterosexual family in our society.
    - Illustrates how society defines all other forms of sexuality and families as problematic.

Conflict Perspective
- Gore Vidal (1988): In order for a ruling class to rule, there must be arbitrary prohibitions. Of all prohibitions, sexual taboo is the most useful because sex involves everyone… we have allowed our governors to divide the population into two teams. One team is good, godly, straight; the other is evil, sick and vicious.
  - Thoughts? How does this represent conflict theory?

Conflict Perspective
- Conflict theorists focus on how conflict in our society is often based on sexual orientation and heterosexuals are given the advantage.
  - Heterosexism – heterosexual is the norm, leads to discrimination against homosexuals
  - Heterosexual Privilege – the set of advantages granted to some people because of their heterosexuality
    - Example: 1,000+ government benefits of being married.
    - Example: The freedom to be affection in public without fear.

Conflict Perspective
- Point out that state and federal policies help institutionalize heterosexism in 3 ways.
  - Through policies that label LGBT individuals as abnormal or deviant.
    - Ex: DOMA
  - Through federal definitions that assume that all families are heterosexual.
    - Ex: US Census Definition of Family – a group of 2 or more related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together
  - Through policies that overlook LGBT poverty and social needs because of stereotypes about affluence among LGBT families.
    - Ex: Overlooked in poverty studies.
Feminist Perspective

- Gay rights – especially gay marriage rights – are bound to the ongoing critique of marriage as an institution.
- Some have argued that gay marriages will positively disrupt the gendered definitions of marriage and the assumption that marriage is a prescribed hierarchy.
- However others are concerned that supporting gay marriage simply means supporting the very institution that perpetuates women’s inequality.

Two Approaches to Marriage

- Radical Approach – reject marriage outright on the basis that it is an oppressive institution
- Liberal Approach – support the choice to marry on the understanding that people can conduct their marriages in nontraditional ways

Interactionist Perspective

- Focus on the implications of homosexuality for identity, status, and labels.
- Homosexuality typically becomes a master status, an identity that determines how others view individuals and how individuals view themselves.
- Also look at how sexual orientation is socially constructed.
- Heterosexuality is a social invention that designates a norm and role... peculiar to the late 19th and 20th centuries (Katz 2003).
- Thus the heterosexual ideal is time bound and culturally specific.

Coming Out

- Can be very scary for many gay people.
- And there can be real consequences such as verbal abuse and physical attacks.
- As a result, many people hide their sexual orientation using concealment strategies.
- Inhibiting behaviors and interests associated with homosexuality.
- Limiting exposure to the opposite sex.
- Avoiding exposure to information about homosexuality.
- Assuming antigay positions.
- Establishing heterosexual relationships.
- Avoiding feelings through substance abuse.
Sexual Orientation and Inequality

US Legislation on Homosexuality
- Gay people and their families are subject to social inequalities through practices of discrimination and prejudice, many of which are institutionalized in formal law.
- Sodomy Laws – criminalize oral and anal sex between two adults
  - Applied more stringently to same-sex couples.
  - Texas has a law prohibiting "deviate sexual intercourse" between people of the same sex.
  - But this law was ruled problematic by the Supreme Court.
- 2009: Congress passed legislation to protect gay individuals under hate-crime laws after the brutal murders of 2 gay men.

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Rights and Recognition of Same-Sex Couples
- DOMA permits states to ban recognition of same-sex marriages and 41 states do.
- As a result, gay families are...
  - Denied federal benefits.
  - Denied common legal protection such as:
    - Adoption
    - Custody
    - Guardianship
    - Social Security
    - Inheritance

- 2002: Mychal Judge Act – allows federal death benefits to be paid to the same-sex partners of firefighters and police officers who die in the line of duty
- 2006: Federal Personal Protection Act – an individual’s retirement plan can be transferred to a domestic partner or other non-spouse beneficiary
- 2010: DHHS drafted rules requiring hospitals that receive federal funds to grant all patients the right to determine who can visit and help make medical decisions

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Map of Countries Where Same-Sex Marriage Is Legal Nationwide, as of July 2010

- The Netherlands
- Canada
- South Africa
- Norway
- Sweden
- Argentina
- Ireland
- Portugal
- Belgium
- Denmark
- Finland
- Spain
- Netherlands
- Slovenia
- South Africa
- Argentina
- Portugal
- Ireland
- Spain
- Finland
- Denmark
- Belgium

Note: Countries that offer marriage on a national level to same-sex couples, but stop short of marriage include the following: Brazil, Chile, France, Hungary, Italy, New Zealand, and South Africa.
Employment

- The need to "manage a disreputable sexual identity in the workplace" has been called the most persistent problem facing gay people today.
- As many as 46% of gay people have experienced discrimination based on sexual orientation.
- Studies also show that gay workers earn less than straight workers.
- The Federal Title VII protects against discrimination based on sex, but not based on sexual orientation.
- But 21 states and many cities provide protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation.
- Many companies also have antidiscrimination policies.

Responding to Sexual Orientation Inequalities

Family Legislation

- 2003: Massachusetts Supreme Court rules that same-sex and opposite-sex couples must be given equal civil rights.
  - Gave gay couples the right to:
    - Obtain a civil marriage license.
    - Make health and financial decisions for each other.
    - File joint state tax returns.
    - Receive other protections under state law.
- 2009: MA became the first state to sue the government over DOMA.
- 2010: 4 other states and D.C. have legalized gay marriage.

Military Service

- 1993: President Clinton suspended the policy that did not allow gays into the military on the grounds that homosexuality was incompatible with military service.
  - But the new policy included the Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) provision, which has been criticized since its adoption.
- 2011: Obama ended DADT and gays can now openly serve in the military.
Conclusion

Summary
- Definition of SO.
- Ways SO serves as a basis of inequality.
- Number of gay people.
- Biological Perspective
- Psychological Perspective
- Sociological Perspective
  - Functionalist
  - Conflict
  - Feminist
  - Interactionist
- Laws on Homosexuality
- Trends in Gay Rights