

Strange Bedfellows

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How did you realise you were gay? Was there a sudden realisation, or a slow burning coming to terms with your sexuality? Did you just know from an early age that you were attracted to boys or did you have a girlfriend and then realise that something wasn't right? I've said it before; sexuality is complex, however, how is it we discover our sexuality? I have spoken with many gay men that I know and each "coming out" story varies, some are full of dramatic family meals and angry relations, whilst others seem to have had no trouble at all telling their nearest and dearest they are gay.

So, if there is so much variation in the gay community when it comes to discovering one's sexuality, is there a way of categorising the process, or indeed the characteristics of homosexuality? This is of course a large debate, and one that would not fit easily here, however, I believe that there is one universal element to the journey of assuming your sexual identity and that is of course; sex. Yes, sex is everywhere; from selling fragrances or lifestyles and in music and cinema, sex is all around us in our daily lives. For gay youth though sex starts off as being somewhat daunting and then develops into liberation and eventually just becomes part of our lives. We are all aware of the relative dangers and necessary precautions that need to be made when it comes to having sex, however, what is interesting is how open are we when it comes to the other side, the emotional element of sex? I'm not advocating the idea that sex is always going to be meaningful and exceptional, and am able to realise that some of the best sex can be with a person you may never see again. As always the only thing to remember is to be sensible and most importantly to be yourself; this means being open with your sexual partners and never feeling like you have to lie in order to impress others. To develop this argument by simply seeing sex as a developmental necessity is wrong, I want to focus on the part that sex plays in defining who you are as an individual with a sexual identity. Being gay means that you are engaging in sexual activity with another man, however, what of the gay men who have also slept with, or who would consider sleeping with a woman? Is it easy to call this man bisexual? Is a gay man who "can" sleep with a woman truly gay and how do we define his sexuality, (assuming, for arguments sake we need to define it at all)? Being a gay man myself, I struggle here to delve into the psyche of a bisexual. However, knowing bisexuals I respect them for the potential confusion they live with on a daily basis. Yes, being gay means you are part of a minority, however to be bisexual involves having to repeatedly define yourself and develop your attitudes towards attraction. There are so many levels to bisexuality, as by its very nature to be bisexual involves complete choice over both sexes. There are always going to be preferences and a man who only sleeps with men throughout his teens could quite easily settle with a family later in life. Moving the debate on bisexuality to one side, let's examine our scenario of the gay man who has or would sleep with a woman. What is his motivation? Is there simply a curiosity involved, or is there a need to test his sexuality? Perhaps both are equally true, and certainly both are important. At the centre of the debate is of course sex. To define yourself as gay involves making a life changing decision, and perhaps reassurance is needed before this decision can be made. In this case, by sleeping with a woman and realising you are in fact gay is probably a positive and as long as there is no hurt caused to the girl, fairly harmless. Consider a gay man who has come out to his friends and lives his life openly. If he were to actively seek a girl to sleep with, how do we classify him sexually? In this instance there is no experiment needed to discover his sexuality, therefore is he simply trying the best of both worlds? I have spoken to gay men who have described sex with a girl as fantastic, despite being unable to be as active as perhaps a straight man may be they seemed to have enjoyed the experience. This surely complicates the matter of defining sexuality. Obviously a big factor here is youth, and to be young means you are able to live life to the extremes of pleasure and therefore experimentation is easily justified with age. However, what of gay couples who decide to start a family and happily sleep with a woman to procreate? If to be gay means there is a sole attraction to men, surely this would be impossible. This does come back to the emotional engagement that sex brings with it. Although I am sure that we could all easily go through the "mechanics" of sex with a woman. For gay men there is likely to be little engagement on an emotional scale, surely? However, if the sex is fantastic, then what does this mean? Should it be seen as wrong to be gay and to have slept with a woman? Perhaps there is an issue of frequency; if a gay man is sleeping with women regularly then he is more likely to be coming to terms with bisexuality. There is perhaps a further motivation and this is best categorised under the term of the "straight acting gay man". Perhaps you have experienced certain social environment, like school for example, where to be openly gay is tough from time to time. Therefore as a means of fitting in it becomes necessary to be a chameleon and adapt to your surroundings. Perhaps this seeming ability to be attracted to girls is a defence mechanism employed to ease the pressures of not being accepted. By complying with heterosexual ideals and behaviours a gay man can ease the visibility he has as part of the gay minority? I am inclined to follow this logic and certainly believe that as a gay youth, when to be gay can be hard, fitting in is the biggest challenge. Ultimately, to be gay means to have an interest in seeking a partner of the same sex. Therefore, in every aspect of the relationship you are going to be interested solely in another man. When it comes to sex, it is of course possible to have sex with a girl, but most gay men perhaps have no real desire to see what the experience will be like. Of course we can all see a person, regardless of gender, as attractive, but for most this is where it stops. Sexuality is complex; there is always a difficulty in classifying universally what it is to be a gay, lesbian, bisexual or heterosexual individual. There are many facets and discoveries to be made and observed and therefore to simply define yourself with a specific label is hard and probably undesirable. Ultimately you are your own person with your own ideas and attitudes along with curiosities and awareness. As long as both people involved respect each other and are relaxed with each other, nobody should stand up and label you before you have labelled yourself.