

# Homosexuality

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September 30, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Homosexuality*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=30587>

## Homosexuality

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, Gender Studies, Human Rights, Public Health

### 1. Core Definition

Homosexuality is fundamentally defined as the enduring pattern of romantic, emotional, and/or sexual attraction to persons of the same sex. This attraction can manifest in various ways, encompassing feelings, desires, and behaviors. It is a fundamental aspect of an individual's sexual orientation, which is generally understood to be a stable and inherent characteristic rather than a choice. The concept distinguishes itself from heterosexuality, which involves attraction to the opposite sex, and bisexuality, which involves attraction to both sexes, as well as asexuality, characterized by a lack of sexual attraction.

Common colloquial terms used to describe individuals experiencing homosexual attraction include "gay," which can be applied to both males and females, and "lesbian," specifically referring to homosexual females. While these terms are widely adopted in everyday language and by the LGBTQ+ community itself, the formal academic and clinical term remains **homosexuality**. It encompasses both an internal psychological state, often described as a "mindset" or intrinsic orientation, and a potential "lifestyle" or mode of relationship and social interaction, which varies significantly across individuals and cultures.

Understanding homosexuality requires differentiating it from gender identity. While both are critical components of an individual's self-concept, they are distinct. Gender identity refers to one's internal sense of being male, female, both, neither, or somewhere else along the gender spectrum. Sexual orientation, conversely, describes to whom one is attracted, irrespective of one's own gender identity. A transgender person, for example, can be homosexual, just as a cisgender person can be.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Context

The term "homosexuality" itself is relatively modern, coined in 1869 by Hungarian physician Karoly Maria Benkert in a pamphlet published anonymously. It combines the Greek prefix "homo-" (meaning "same") with the Latin root "sex." Prior to this coinage, same-sex desires and behaviors were described using various terms, often laden with moral or religious condemnation, such as "sodomy" or "unnatural acts." The emergence of the term marked a shift towards a more clinical, albeit often pathologizing, understanding of same-sex attraction.

Historically, attitudes toward same-sex relationships and behaviors have varied enormously across cultures and epochs. In many ancient civilizations, such as those of Greece and Rome, same-sex

relations were integrated into social structures, albeit often with specific roles, power dynamics, and contexts. For instance, pederasty in ancient Greece involved adult men forming relationships with adolescent boys, often seen as a form of mentorship and education. In some indigenous cultures, gender-variant individuals and same-sex relationships held spiritual or honored positions. However, with the rise of Abrahamic religions, particularly Christianity and Islam, strictures against certain sexual acts, including same-sex relations, became codified and often enforced with severe penalties, shaping centuries of legal and social disapproval in many parts of the world.

The 19th and early 20th centuries saw the medicalization of homosexuality, particularly in Western societies. It was increasingly viewed not merely as a sin or crime but as a psychiatric illness or a "sexual inversion." This framework led to various attempts at "cures," including conversion therapies, which are now widely discredited and considered unethical. This period also saw the rise of sexology as a field, with figures like Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Magnus Hirschfeld attempting to classify and understand human sexuality, even while operating within prevailing societal prejudices.

### 3. Evolution of Understanding and Terminology

The mid-20th century marked a pivotal period in the understanding of homosexuality, particularly in the United States and Western Europe. Research by Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s and 50s, which introduced the Kinsey scale of sexual orientation, challenged the rigid binary of heterosexual/homosexual, suggesting that sexuality exists along a continuum. This groundbreaking work helped to normalize the idea of diverse sexual experiences. However, homosexuality remained classified as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) of the American Psychiatric Association until 1973, a classification that was deeply damaging to individuals and perpetuated societal stigma.

The removal of homosexuality from the DSM was a direct result of advocacy by gay rights activists and increasing recognition within the scientific and medical communities that same-sex attraction was not inherently pathological. This declassification was a monumental step, transitioning the understanding of homosexuality from a disease to a natural variation of human sexuality. Subsequently, major professional organizations, including the American Psychological Association and the World Health Organization (which removed it from its International Classification of Diseases in 1990), affirmed that homosexuality is not a mental illness and that efforts to change an individual's sexual orientation are ineffective and potentially harmful.

Concurrently, the terminology around sexual orientation has evolved. While "homosexual" remains a valid clinical term, "gay" and "lesbian" have become preferred by many within the community, fostering a sense of identity and community. The broader umbrella term LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and others) emerged to represent the diverse

spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, emphasizing solidarity and shared experiences of marginalization and advocacy. This shift reflects a move from pathologizing labels to affirming identifiers.

#### 4. Forms of Expression and Identity

Homosexuality, as a sexual orientation, manifests in incredibly diverse ways in terms of personal identity and public expression. For many, acknowledging and integrating their homosexual attraction into their self-concept is a deeply personal journey, often referred to as "coming out." This process can involve recognizing one's own feelings, sharing them with trusted individuals, and eventually living openly as a gay or lesbian person. The "mindset" aspect of homosexuality refers to this internal experience of attraction and self-identification, which can exist irrespective of whether an individual acts on their attractions or expresses them publicly.

The "lifestyle" aspect refers to the ways in which individuals live out their homosexual orientation, which can include engaging in same-sex relationships, forming partnerships, marrying, and participating in gay and lesbian social and cultural communities. Just like heterosexual relationships, homosexual relationships are diverse, encompassing monogamous and non-monogamous arrangements, long-term partnerships, and casual encounters. These relationships contribute to the fabric of society, often mirroring the complexities, joys, and challenges found in all human connections.

Beyond individual relationships, homosexuality contributes to distinct cultural formations. Gay and lesbian communities have historically created their own spaces, social networks, artistic expressions, and political movements. These communities provide support, foster a sense of belonging, and offer platforms for shared experiences and advocacy. The expression of homosexual identity can also influence an individual's fashion, interests, professional choices, and overall worldview, shaping a rich tapestry of human diversity.

#### 5. Societal Perceptions and Acceptance

While increasingly prominent and recognized in many societies, homosexuality is still far from being universally accepted. The journey towards widespread societal acceptance has been arduous and remains ongoing in numerous parts of the world. In societies where traditional religious or cultural norms prevail, homosexuality may still be condemned as immoral, unnatural, or illegal. This lack of acceptance often stems from deeply ingrained prejudices, fear of the unknown, and misinterpretations of religious texts or traditions, leading to significant social and legal disparities.

Despite advancements in human rights and legal protections in many Western nations, significant intolerance persists globally. This intolerance manifests in various forms, from subtle discrimination

in employment or housing to overt violence, hate crimes, and state-sanctioned persecution. Individuals who acknowledge their homosexual attraction or openly adopt a gay/lesbian lifestyle may face profound difficulties with family and friends, leading to estrangement, rejection, and emotional distress. The pressure to conform to heterosexual norms can force individuals to conceal their true identities, leading to psychological harm and hindering authentic self-expression.

However, there is a clear global trend towards greater acceptance in many regions. Public opinion polls in various countries show a gradual increase in support for same-sex marriage and LGBT rights. This shift is often attributed to increased visibility of gay and lesbian individuals in media, personal contact with LGBTQ+ people, and sustained advocacy efforts. Legal reforms, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and anti-discrimination laws, have played a crucial role in legitimizing homosexual relationships and identities, fostering environments where gay and lesbian individuals can live with greater dignity and security.

## 6. Impact on Individuals and Communities

The societal context in which homosexuality is experienced profoundly impacts individuals' mental and physical well-being. In environments of intolerance and discrimination, gay and lesbian individuals are at higher risk for mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. The stress of living with stigma, the fear of rejection, and experiences of bullying or violence contribute to significant psychological distress. Access to supportive communities, affirming families, and inclusive social structures are critical protective factors that can mitigate these negative impacts.

Conversely, in accepting and affirming environments, gay and lesbian individuals tend to thrive. When individuals feel safe to express their authentic selves, they can form stronger social bonds, experience greater self-esteem, and lead more fulfilling lives. The development of vibrant LGBTQ+ communities has been vital in providing spaces of belonging, mutual support, and cultural celebration. These communities offer resources, advocacy, and a sense of collective identity that counteracts the isolation and marginalization often experienced in broader society.

The impact of homosexuality extends beyond individual well-being to broader societal structures. The recognition and integration of gay and lesbian individuals into society challenge traditional notions of family, gender roles, and sexuality, contributing to a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of human diversity. The fight for LGBT rights has also intersected with other social justice movements, highlighting common struggles against discrimination and advocating for universal human dignity. This intersectionality underscores how the experiences of gay and lesbian people contribute to wider conversations about equality and social change.

## 7. Global Debates, Criticisms, and Human Rights

Globally, debates surrounding homosexuality often center on religious doctrines, cultural traditions, and interpretations of human rights. Many religious conservative viewpoints maintain that homosexual acts are morally wrong, often citing specific religious texts. These perspectives frequently inform political opposition to LGBT rights and contribute to social stigma. Counterarguments from progressive religious scholars and theologians contend that religious texts can be interpreted in affirming ways or that compassion and human dignity should supersede literal interpretations.

The legal status of homosexuality varies dramatically worldwide. While many Western countries have legalized same-sex marriage and enacted comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, more than 60 countries still criminalize same-sex sexual activity, with some imposing severe penalties, including the death penalty in a few nations. These laws represent significant human rights violations, contravening principles of equality, non-discrimination, and privacy as enshrined in international human rights instruments. Organizations like the United Nations have increasingly called for the decriminalization of homosexuality and the protection of LGBT rights globally.

Criticisms of homosexuality from a societal standpoint often involve concerns about the erosion of traditional family structures or demographic impacts, though these claims are generally unsupported by research. These criticisms often mask underlying homophobia and discomfort with non-normative expressions of sexuality. Debates also persist regarding the origins of sexual orientation, with scientific consensus generally pointing towards a complex interplay of genetic, hormonal, and environmental factors, rather than a single cause or a matter of conscious choice. The ongoing global struggle for the recognition and protection of the rights of homosexual individuals highlights fundamental questions about human diversity, social justice, and the evolving nature of human rights in the 21st century.

### Further Reading

[Homosexuality - Wikipedia](#)

[LGBT - Wikipedia](#)

[Sexual Orientation - Wikipedia](#)

[Sexual Orientation & Homosexuality - American Psychological Association](#)

[Homosexuality and health - World Health Organization](#)