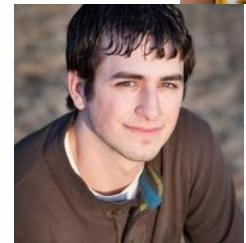


# WHAT'S IN A NAME ?

## THE UTILITY AND INADEQUACY OF GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION LABELS

**LOREN B. BROWN**

Counseling and Psychological Services  
Brigham Young University



# WHO I AM

- Doctoral Student in the Counseling Psychology program at Brigham Young University
- A Practicum Therapist at Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
- Someone interested in the social construction of language and gender



# OVERVIEW

- The evolution of labels
- Current list of labels for sexual orientations and gender identities
- Linguistic and semiologic perspectives on labels
- The utility of labels – how they are helpful
- The inadequacy of labels – how they fall short
- Looking past the label
- Suggestions for clinicians
- Discussion and questions

# WHAT DO WE ALL WANT?

- **To feel...**
  - accepted
  - understood
  - part of a community
- **The freedom to...**
  - define ourselves
  - find love or companionship in the way which feels most natural to us
  - express our views, even when others may disagree with us
- To be free from discrimination, violence, and prejudice based on who we are



# THE **EVOLUTION** OF LABELS

# AN EXAMPLE: FRENCH CUISINE

## Mama's Gooey Chocolate Cake

*Molles au chocolat*



# AN EXAMPLE: FRENCH CUISINE

English Title	French Title
Peach tart	<i>Tarte aux pêches</i>
Casserole-roasted chicken	<i>Poulet en cocotte bonne femme</i>
Tuna steaks	<i>Thon à la provençal</i>
Pork and cabbage	<i>Porc braisé aux choux rouges</i>
Steamed lobster	<i>Homard aux aromates</i>

- Survey administered to 212 students
- Independent samples t-tests found a significant difference with how much an individual was willing to pay for a food.
- With some items a significant difference was found with how delicious an individual would expect the food to taste.

(Bartlett, Hipps, Purdy, & Tycksen, 2010)

# AN EXAMPLE: METROSEXUALS

- Neologism
- Metrosexual = Metropolitan + Heterosexual
- Created by Mark Simpson in 1994
- A label for a new category of men
- Why was it needed?





# ETYMOLOGY OF THE WORD “GAY”

- Late **12<sup>th</sup> century**: surname, *Philippus de Gay*
- Early **14<sup>th</sup> century**: “stately and beautiful; splendid and showily dressed
- Late **14<sup>th</sup> century**: “full of joy; light-hearted; carefree,” also “wanton, lewd, lascivious”
- **1630’s** suggestion of immorality
- **1890’s** tinge of promiscuity – *a gay house* was a brothel
- **1893** – link to homosexuality with *a gay cat*, meaning a young hobo
- At least since **1920**, used by homosexuals among themselves
- **1940’s** appearing in psychological writings as slang

*The current  
list of labels*

**G**

**LGB**

**LGBT**

**LGBTQ**

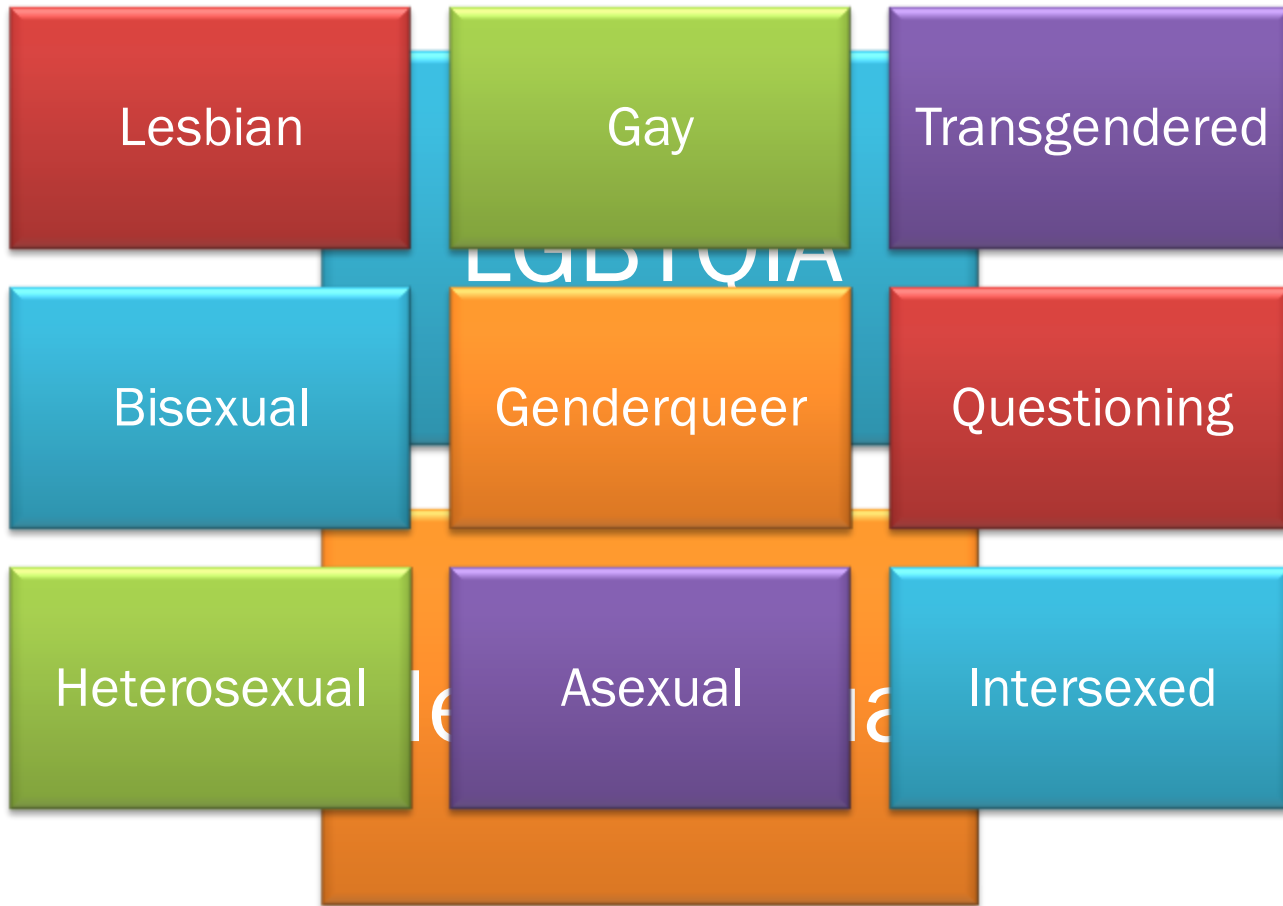
**LGBTQI**

**LGBTQIA\***

**LGBTQIA??**

*\*Lesbian, gay, genderqueer, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, questioning, queer, intersex, ally, agendered, and asexual*

# CURRENT STATE



**WHAT LETTER WOULD YOU GIVE ME?**



She came out to her family as a lesbian and exclusively dated women for 10 years. For the last 2 years, she has been in a committed relationship with a man.

**FEMALE, SAN FRANCISCO**



“I’m sexually attracted to men and emotionally attracted to women. I’m not interested in acting on my homosexual feelings; I don’t feel like I identify with them. I don’t really think of myself as bisexual since I’m not sexually attracted to both men and women.”

**MALE, SALT LAKE CITY**



“I’m somewhere on the trans continuum, in the genderblur, gender-bending section. I use female pronouns and identify as femme, but I’m not necessarily invested in people seeing me as either ‘male’ or ‘female’.”

**MATTILDA**

a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore

# AN IRONIC EXAMPLE: POMOSEXUALS

- “A portmanteau of pomo, short for postmodernism, and sexual, used as a noun—a **person who shuns labels** (e.g., heterosexual and homosexual, which define people by their sexual preferences)—and as an adjective, referring to such a person or to the philosophy of pomosexuality.”

SEGEN'S MEDICAL DICTIONARY



# **DECONSTRUCTING LABELS AND LANGUAGE**

# THE POWER OF LANGUAGE



- “I am interested in language because it wounds or seduces me.”  
(1973) *The Pleasure of the Text*
- “Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that **all speech is a classification**, and that all classifications are oppressive.”

**ROLAND BARTHES**

Inaugural Lecture, Jan. 7, 1977

Collège de France

# SIGNIFIERS AND THE SIGNIFIED

Signifier =

*Butterfly*

*Papillon*

*Mariposa*

*Schmetterling*

Signified =

the object



# LINGUISTICS: THE SIGNIFIED



- “In linguistics, the nature of the signified has given rise to discussions which have centered chiefly on its degree of 'reality'; all agree, however, on emphasizing the fact that **the signified is not 'a thing' but a mental representation of the 'thing'.**”

**ROLAND BARTHES**

(1964) *Elements of Semiology*

# THE **UTILITY** OF LABELS

# THE UTILITY OF LABELS

- Organization
- Efficiency
- Guide/influence the behavior of others
- Can foster community
  - Internet groups and social media
- Legal recognition and protection
- Increase awareness

# THE POWER OF A NAME

- “We must not assume we know the sexuality of other individuals. We must not label the sexual orientation of others. Naming ourselves is one of our few fundamental rights, and it must be honored and protected.”

(Pope & Reynolds, 1991, p. 210)



# THE COMPLEXITY OF LABELING



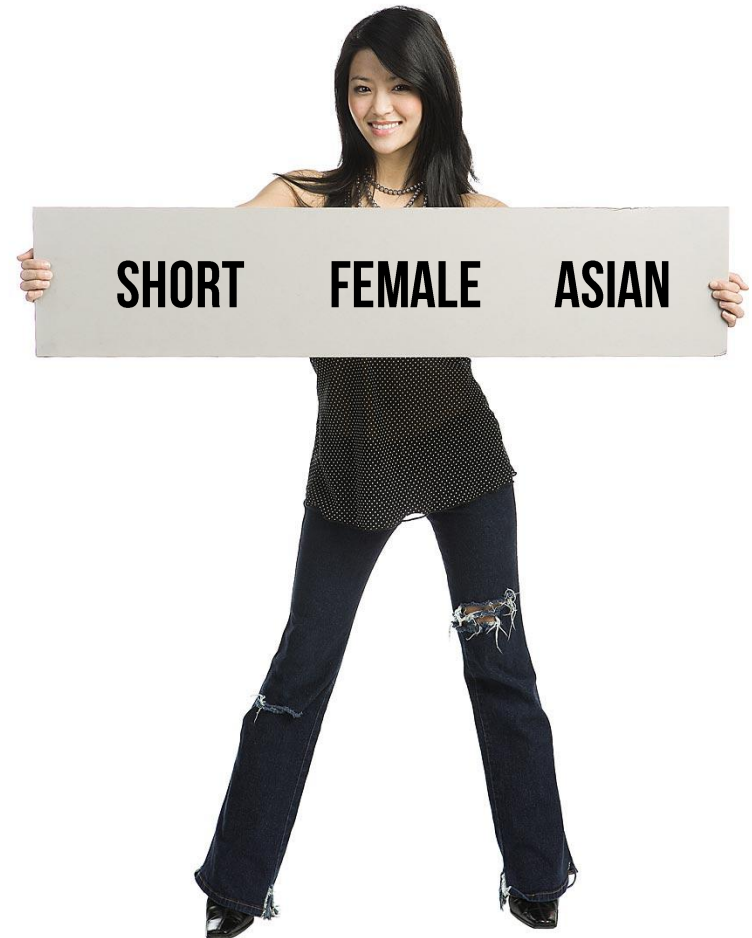
- “We are confronted daily with innumerable varieties of flowers and plants, and **we do not attempt to label them all roses for fear of complexity.** We do not assume that the existence of one flower limits and minimizes the flourishing of another. **The human mind is capable of embracing a multitude of truths.** It is our fear that prevents us from venturing into this unknown place of acceptance and inclusion.”

(Pope & Reynolds, 1991, p. 208)

# THE **INADEQUACY** OF LABELS

# THE INADEQUACY OF LABELS

- Create subdivisions
- Reductionistic
- Exclusion/Inclusion
- Sense of permanency
- Contribute to the formation of stereotypes



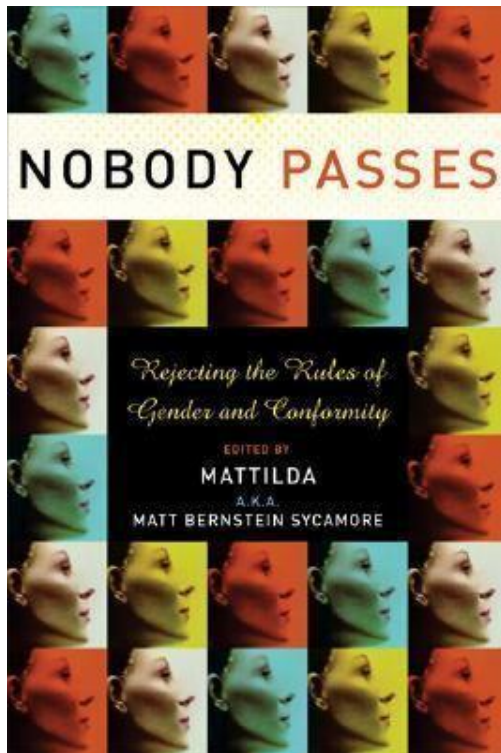
# STEREOTYPES

- “Many cultural images provide powerful messages that prescribe strict traditional gender roles for all men and women. There are numerous **cultural stereotypes** that reinforce the myths that heterosexuals adhere to traditional gender roles and that **people who cross these lines must be gay, lesbian, or bisexual.**”

(Obear, 1991, p. 41)



# PASS/FAIL POLITICS



- Mattilda, a.k.a. Matt Bernstein Sycamore, writes in her introduction to *Nobody Passes* (2006), “In a pass/fail situation, standards for acceptance may vary, but somebody always gets trampled.” (p. 9)



# AN EXAMPLE: BISEXUALS



- “At the core of biphobia is the ultimate marginalizing question, ‘Does bisexuality really exist?’ In the end, bisexual people often feel that they are balancing between two worlds and accepted by neither.”

(Pope & Reynolds, 1991, p. 207)

# THE CONTINUING DIVISION OF LABELS

- This rejection of traditional labels and push for new terminology leads to “a type of super-consumer custom-made identity that leaves you with very little upon which to build a movement.”

(Dacumos, 2006, p. 36)



# FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN



- “While it would be lovely to have three or eight or 400 genders, the man on the street will tell you that there are only two...I’d love if we lived in a world where people who don’t fit into ‘man’ and ‘woman’ very tidily weren’t **considered weird, scary and duplicitous.**”

**HELEN BOYD**

**LOOKING PAST THE LABEL**

# LOOKING PAST THE LABEL

- Common humanity
- Recognizing our own limitations
  - Bias, knowledge, attitudes
- Avoiding assumptions
- Finding ways to connect
- Be more tolerant about mislabeling

# WHO I ACTUALLY AM



- I've stopped caring about what others think I am...**I've just realized that who someone else thinks I am has little to do with who I actually am, and that I have almost no control over what a person might see when they see me.** Sometimes they don't have the language or the labels or the imagination to be accurate...Long before Betty, I figured out that I would be called things I didn't think of myself as. Mistaken for a boy at nine, called butch at seven, a lesbian at twelve, homeboy at seventeen. **I knew myself as** a daughter and a sister and a friend and an aunt.

(Boyd, 2006, p. 241)

# INTIMACY VS. SEXUALITY



- “In this culture, we are taught that it is all right to be close and intimate with only some people, at certain times, and in particular ways. Such rules limit our intimacy and connection with other human beings. **Somehow to be intimate is confused with being sexual...We are all born with the potential for 100% intimacy with all people in our lives,** yet because of certain cultural rules, we limit ourselves to being close to only a handful of people who meet our specific qualifications.”

(Pope and Reynolds, 1991, p. 208)

# BE COMFORTABLE WITH YOUR DECISION

- “Have a good understanding of sexual orientation and be aware of and comfortable with your own. If you are a person who chooses not to identify with a particular sexual orientation, be comfortable with that decision, but **recognize that others, particularly lesbian and gay persons, may see your stance as a cop out.**”

(Washington & Evans, 1991, p. 200)



# COMMON HUMANITY

- Carol Lynn Pearson (2007) argues, “Can we be ‘kind’ to others when we see them as a different ‘kind’? We can be polite to our homosexual brothers and sisters, but **we are not being ‘kind’ unless we acknowledge them as ‘kin,’ not as ‘the other,’ but as our very own kind.**” (p. 22)



# SEEING THE WHOLE PERSON

- “We must be willing and able to expand our world view and **move beyond the either/or thinking that permeates our culture.** It is not a matter of being gay or nongay.



What is primary is that all people be allowed and encouraged **to discover and embrace all of who they are.”**

(Pope & Reynolds, 1991, p. 208)

# SUGGESTIONS FOR CLINICIANS

- Allow your client to define themselves
- Don't assume the mental concept is the same just because you're using the same word (i.e. the signifier)
- Seek out resources to gain insight into culture and experience
  - Caution about stereotype reinforcement
- Be aware of the strengths and limitations of labels in clinical work and as therapeutic interventions

**“AN ENEMY IS SOMEONE  
WHOSE STORY YOU DO NOT  
KNOW.”** **-JEWISH SAYING**