often used to refer to lesbians, gays, bisexuals,
and transgendered individuals as a group.

There is no definitive study on the number of individuals who identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual. The study that is most often cited is one conducted in 1994 by Robert Michael and his colleagues. Based on a random survey of 3,432 U.S. adults age 18 to 59 years, Michael et al. found that 2.8 percent of males and 1.4 percent of females thought of themselves as homosexual or bisexual. About 5 percent of surveyed males and 4 percent of females said they had had sex with someone of the same gender after they turned 18. About 6 percent of males and 4 percent of females reported that they were sexually attracted to someone of the same gender. Based on the U.S. Census 2000 and election voter polls, David Smith and Gary Gates (2001) estimated the gay and lesbian population at 5 percent or more than 10 million men and women.

Gay rights have progressed in the United States and globally. Homosexuality was explicitly defined as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association until 1989. The World Health Organization removed a similar classification from its *International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems* in 1992. In 1996, South Africa became the first country to establish a constitutional ban against discrimination based on sexual orientation. In 2000, Vermont was the first U.S. state to recognize civil unions between same-sex partners; in 2004, Massachusetts was the first state to legalize same-sex marriage. And though national polls indicate increased support of gay and lesbian individuals, as a group they are still not immune to the experience of social problems. Based on their sexual orientation, gay and lesbian individuals continue to experience prejudice and discrimination regarding equal protection under family law and equal opportunities in the workplace.

**Sociological Perspectives on Sexual Orientation and Inequality**

**Functionalist Perspective**

Theorists in this perspective examine how society maintains our social order. Émile Durkheim argued that our social order depended on how well society could control individual behavior. Our most basic human behavior—our sexuality—is controlled by society’s norms and values. Functionalists identify how society upholds heterosexuality and a marital union between a man and a woman as ideal normative behavior. This is also referred to as institutionalized heterosexuality, the set of ideas, institutions, and relationships that define the heterosexual family as the societal norm (Lind 2004).
Our legal, political, and social structures work in harmony to support these ideals (the conflict perspective of this is presented in the next section). The 1996 Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) denies federal recognition of same-sex unions, defining marriage as a legal union only between a man and a woman. This legislation serves as a declaration about how the heterosexual family is valued and how all other family forms are not. Society grants legitimate kinship and familial obligations only through the heterosexual family. Consequently, society defines all other forms of sexuality and families that do not fit this ideal image as problematic. These forms are considered deviant or unnatural because they do not fit society’s ideal.

Nonetheless, during the past decades, the gay rights movement has effectively influenced family rights, employment, and discrimination policies throughout the world. The movement has been successful largely because of its ability to affect institutional (macro) level changes—the focus of the functionalist perspective.

### Conflict and Feminist Perspectives

Gore Vidal (1988) observes,

> 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.

Vidal’s statement addresses the focus of both these perspectives, how conflict in our society is based on sexual orientation, with heterosexuals given the advantage.

Sociologists recognize that heterosexuals are granted a privileged place in our society. **Heterosexism** assumes that heterosexuality is the norm, encouraging discrimination in favor of heterosexuals and against homosexuals. Heterosexual privilege is defined as the set of privileges or advantages granted to some people because of their heterosexuality. For example, married couples receive more than 1,000 government benefits, ranging from the right to sue based on wrongful death of a partner, access to employment-based health benefits, and the ability to make medical decisions on behalf of a partner (Feigenbaum 2007).

From a conflict perspective, Amy Lind (2004) identifies how the DOMA helped institutionalize heterosexism because it blocks future proactive and protective legislation for gays and lesbians. She focuses specifically on heterosexual biases in social welfare policy, identifying its impact in three ways: through policies that explicitly target LGBT individuals as abnormal or deviant, through federal definitions that assume that all families are heterosexual, and through policies that overlook LGBT poverty and social needs because of stereotypes about affluence among LGBT families.

Evidence of the first type of heterosexual bias can be found in federal legislation such as DOMA and policy initiatives such as the healthy marriage promotion and fatherhood programs promoted by President George W. Bush. Current legislation funds abstinence only until marriage education programs in schools. Lind explains that gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents have no access to sexual education that pertains to their sexual experience. In an effort to preserve the traditional heterosexual family, these programs deny LGBT people their rights and needs.

The second type of heterosexual bias concerns how the U.S. Census defines the family and household. Lind refers to the 2003 definitions used by the U.S. Census. Family is defined as “a group of two or more (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption and residing together.” Household “consists of all people who occupy a housing unit” and is distinguished by family versus nonfamily households. Family households are defined as
“a household maintained by a householder who is in a family (as defined above) and includes any unrelated people who may be residing there,” whereas a nonfamily household is “a householder living alone or where the householder shares a home exclusively with people to whom he/she is not related.” Lind argues that these definitions privilege marital unions over domestic partnerships and the status of heterosexual families over other types of families.

Finally, the third type of heterosexual bias is based on stereotypes of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals and families as affluent, despite evidence that LGB families are as economically diverse and stratified as heterosexual families are. Lesbians, gays, and bisexuals remain invisible in poverty studies or policies because they are assumed to be childless, have fewer family responsibilities, and thus higher overall incomes than heterosexual households have. With the exception of HIV/AIDS, LGB individuals are considered as not needing any economic, social, or health-related services.

From a feminist perspective, the question about gay marriage rights is bound to the ongoing critique of marriage as an institution (Bevacqua 2004). Scholars have argued that lesbian and gay marriages will positively disrupt the gendered definitions of marriage and the assumption that marriage is a prescribed hierarchy (Hunter 1995). However, just as feminists have criticized traditional marriage as an oppressive and dominating institution against women, feminists have also supported sexual freedom. Supporting gay marriages would mean that feminists would be supporting the very institution that perpetuates women’s inequality.

Ann Ferguson (2007) explains that there are two main sides of the feminist argument: radical feminists who reject marriage outright on the basis of marriage as an oppressive institution versus liberal reform feminists who support the choice to marry on the understanding that men and women (or same-sex couples) can conduct their marriages in nontraditional ways. She supports the liberal reform side, arguing, “We should not simply reject marriage and hope it withers away, but instead should attempt to reform it as a better way to achieve these feminist goals [equality, freedom, and care]” (p. 52). On the topic of gay marriage, however, she concludes that some gay persons should not marry, not because it is a risky institution for women, but because the right to form one’s family should not be tied to a one’s marital status. “We should defend gay marriage as the formal right to access a basic citizen right” (p. 54).

**What Does It Mean to Me?**

Though same-sex couples would not have the same legal protection under civil unions or domestic partnerships as they would under marital law, these unions continue to be promoted by politicians and social leaders as viable alternatives to marriage. What do you think? Should civil unions or domestic partnerships be advocated as acceptable alternatives to marriage for same-sex couples? Why or why not?

**Interactionist Perspective**

In our society, no one gets “outed” for being straight. There is little controversy in identifying someone as heterosexual. Socially, culturally, and legally, the heterosexual lifestyle is promoted and praised. Although homosexuality has existed in most societies, it has usually been attached to a negative label—abnormal, sinful, or inappropriate. A socially determined prejudice, homophobia, is an irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuals (Lehne 1995). Homophobia is particularly directed at gay men.
Interactionists examine how sexual orientation is constructed within a social context. We tend to think of heterosexuality as unchanging and universal; however, Jonathan Katz explains how the term is a social invention that “designates a word and concept, a norm and role, an individual and group identity, a behavior and a feeling, and a peculiar sexual-political institution particular to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (2003:145). Though heterosexuality existed before it was actually named in the early nineteenth century, “The titling and envisioning of heterosexuality did play an important role in consolidating the construction of the heterosexual’s social existence” (p. 145). He argues that acknowledging heterosexuality as social invention—time bound and culturally specific—challenges the power of the heterosexual ideal.

Interactionists also examine the process of how individuals identify themselves as homosexual, what scholars describe as part of the development of a gay identity. Coming out (being gay and disclosing it to others) has come to symbolize the pursuit of individual rights and self-identification (Chou 2001). Coming out implies not just the disclosure of a gay identity, but also the individual’s positive attitude toward and commitment to that identity (Dubé 2000). The disclosure of a gay identity merges a private sexual identity with a public social identity (Cass 1979). To come out successfully, a gay individual needs social and institutional support, in the form of support from family and friends, legal protection from discrimination and violence, cultural acceptance, financial equality, and access to health services (D’Augelli 1998).

The process of coming out to family members is particularly stressful for LGB youth. Fear of parental reactions has been identified as a major reason that LGB youth do not come out to their families (D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington 1998). Following disclosure, youth report verbal abuse and even physical attacks by family members. Youth who lived with their families and disclosed their sexual orientation were victimized by their families more often than were youth who had not disclosed (D’Augelli et al. 1998).

To avoid negative response from others, young lesbians and gay men hide their sexual orientation from family and friends (Rivers and Carragher 2003). Gay and lesbian youth may use one or more of the following concealment strategies: inhibiting behaviors and interests associated with homosexuality, limiting exposure to the opposite sex, avoiding exposure to information about homosexuality, assuming anti-gay positions, establishing heterosexual relationships, and avoiding homoerotic feelings through substance abuse (Radowsky and Siegel 1997). Research is inconclusive about how effective such concealment strategies are in reducing anxiety among lesbian and gay youth.

A summary of sociological theories regarding sexual orientation and inequality is presented in Table 5.1.

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**What Does It Mean to Me?**

After the release of her last Harry Potter novel, author J. K. Rowling announced that Hogwarts’ Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was gay. At a 2007 public event, Rowling described how as a young wizard Dumbledore was smitten with Grindewald, a childhood friend who turned into an evil wizard and was the predecessor to the infamous evil Lord Voldemort. This storyline was never included in any of the books in the Harry Potter series. Her statement was greeted with gasps, then cheers from the audience. Rowling responded, “If I’d known it would make you so happy, I would have announced it years ago.” Why is her disclosure about Dumbledore’s sexual orientation newsworthy? If she had made the announcement earlier, including it in one of her novels, would this have changed fans’ response to the series or to the character?