Definition of sex? [1]

Alice,

How would you define sex?

? Budding Webster

Answer

Dear Budding Webster,

Kanoodling. Nookie. Doing it. What does this all mean? And who hasn't paused to ponder this one? Sex can mean many different things to many different people. There is not one universal definition of sex, but a variety of perspectives.

To clarify, this question could be asked about Sex: The Verb or Sex: The Noun. In noun form, sex is one component of gender. Specifically, "sex" is the term often used to describe the physical or genetic markers of gender. Biologically speaking, it is a myth that there are only two sexes, male and female. All physical sex characteristics ? from genitals, to hormones, to chromosomes ? fall on a spectrum.

Still, many others seeking the elusive definition of "sex" are after Sex: The Verb. The Birds and the Bees. Getting it on. Sex has a history of being defined somewhat narrowly, centering around 1) traditional cultural and religious norms, 2) heterosexual practices, and 3) experiences of males. Many people may initially learn to define sex strictly as vaginal/penile intercourse, perhaps as an answer to the famed "where do babies come from?" question. Some definitions even imply that male orgasm is what defines having had sex. There are also those who define sex as existing solely for the purpose of procreation.

Not everyone can spot their sexual experiences in these definitions, so why not alter the definitions to reflect people's lived experiences? Thanks to decades of anti-sexual violence activism, many people have started incorporating the concept of consent into their definitions of sex. Consent means that all parties engaging in any given sexual activity (think kissing, foreplay, hand holding, etc.) have given some form of enthusiastic and un-coerced "yes." Consent, however, is a necessary component for all sexual activities, which brings us back to our original question: What specifically is s-e-x?

An inclusive definition would be able to describe lots of different activities performed by people with a diversity of gender identities and sexual orientations, with any number of partners.
Under this definition, any act involving contact with the vulva, clitoris, vagina, anus, penis, or testicles between one or more consenting people for the purpose of sexual pleasure could constitute Doing the Deed. Genital-to-genital, mouth-to-genital, mouth-to-anal, hand-to-genital, anal-to-genital, toy to genital? you get the idea. Yes, this definition could encompass phone sex, masturbation, and genital contact through clothes. In this definition, consent matters and intent matters (pelvic exams do not equal sex, for example). Notice that penetration does not define sex, nor does a possibility of pregnancy, nor does orgasm. And there is no sex hierarchy where some practices are considered more "real" than others.

What to take away from all this ruminating? There are lots of ways to have sex and the most necessary characteristic of sex is the presence of consent. Understanding what sex means to you is a process of self-discovery, of figuring out what types of sex are fun and meaningful for you.

What turns you on and what gets you off? This gives you your magical key to understanding the definition of sex. So the real question becomes, dear Budding Webster, what does sex mean to you?

Alice!

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