

Developing a Common Language: Sexuality & Gender Terms

As society evolves and changes, so does language. The terms defined below may have evolving definitions that change over time as we develop an understanding of newly visible and emerging identities. You may hear some of these terms used differently by different people, especially terms that are used in the context of identity labels. Asking people for further information and/or clarification about the way in which they use the terms is encouraged.

★ Terms related to Identity and Social Dynamics

- **Ally**: a person of one social identity group who stands up in support of members of another group; typically a member of a dominant group standing beside member(s) of a group being discriminated against or treated unjustly
- **Closeted or In the Closet**: to hide one's sexual orientation or gender identity
- **Come Out or Coming Out**: short version of the phrase "coming out of the closet," which is a metaphor for acknowledging one's sexual orientation or gender identity to oneself and/or disclosing one's sexual orientation or gender identity to others
- **Discrimination**: the use of societal or institutional power and privilege to act on prejudiced beliefs or attitudes to deny members of a less powerful social group access to societal resources; can include both individual acts of hatred or injustice and institutional denials of privileges normally accorded to other groups. Ongoing discrimination creates a climate of oppression for the affected group.
- **Down Low or On the Down Low (D/L)**: See 'Closeted;' often refers to married men, or men professing to be heterosexual, having sex with other men, but who identify themselves as neither homosexual nor bisexual due to being in the closet. Men on the down-low may engage in regular, secret sexual interactions with other men while continuing sexual and romantic relationships with women. Most commonly used to refer to African-American males, although the practice is not unique to them
- **Identity/Identify as**: How one thinks of oneself. One's internal self, as opposed to what others observe or think about one.
- **Internalized Oppression**: The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.

- **LGBT Ally**: an individual who is accepting and supportive of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, and who works to reflect their support in their personal beliefs, language, and behaviors; allies also take action to combat homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexism, and gender-based discrimination within themselves, others, and in societal institutions.
- **LGBTQI**: A common abbreviation for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersexed community; additional letters sometimes included are another “Q” for questioning, “A” for ally, “SA” for straight ally, “S” for same-gender loving, “TS” for two-spirit, or “S” for supportive
- **Metrosexual**: First used in 1994 by British journalist Mark Simpson, who coined the term to refer to an urban, heterosexual male with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. This term can be perceived as derogatory because it reinforces stereotypes that all gay men are fashion-conscious and materialistic.
- **Oppression**: The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group with access to social power, the result of which benefits one group over the other and is maintained by social beliefs and practices.
- **Outing**: the act of revealing another individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, usually without permission
- **Passing**: Describes a person's ability to present themselves as and be accepted as heterosexual or as their preferred gender/sex or race/ethnic identity
- **Prejudice**: A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members.
- **Queer**: historically a derogatory term used to refer to individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, implying that they are unnatural, unusual, or freakish; some lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender individuals have reclaimed this term as a source of empowerment and pride in being different from the norm; sometimes used as a sexual orientation label as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to be attracted to
- **Reclaimed language**: terms that originated as derogatory or negative terms used to denigrate a group of people that have been adopted by those groups to destigmatize the language and forge new, more positive meanings and connotations for those words (i.e. queer, dyke, faggot). However, the reclaiming of such negative language is not universally accepted among people to whom the terms might apply; some will still find the terms offensive. Generally the use of such terms is usually

offensive to the in-group when used by outsiders, so extreme caution must be taken concerning their use when one is not a member of the group.

- **Stereotype**: A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for their individual differences. Though often negative, can also be complimentary. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative impact, however, simply because they involve broad generalizations that ignore individual realities.
- **Straight-Acting**: usually applied to gay men who readily pass as heterosexual. The term implies that there is a certain way that gay men should act that is significantly different from heterosexual men. Straight-acting gay men are often looked down upon in the LGBTQ community for seemingly accessing heterosexual privilege.

★ Terms related to Sex and Sexuality

- **Bicurious**: A curiosity about having sexual relations with a same gender/sex person.
- **Biphobia**: fear or hatred of bisexual individuals displayed by heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbians.
- **Bisexual**: persons who are capable of feeling attracted to and engaging in relationships with others regardless of biological sex; this attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.
- **Dyke**: predominantly used to refer negatively to lesbians or to stereotype them as masculine; some lesbians have reclaimed the term as a symbol of pride in their strength and independence
- **Faggot/Fag**: predominantly used to refer to gay men in a derogatory fashion, implying weakness and lack of masculinity; derived from the Latin word meaning a “bundle of sticks” which was used to burn witches at the stake; some gay men have reclaimed this term for use within their own community
- **Gay**: used to refer to homosexual men, although some homosexual women use it also; often used as a shorthand reference to all homosexuals
- **Heteronormative**: The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and the practices, on the personal, social, or institutional levels, based on that assumption; i.e. the reinforcement of heterosexuality as the norm and therefore as normal

- **Heterosexism**: system of oppression, based in homophobia, of persons who display non-heterosexual behaviors or identities
- **Heterosexual Privilege**: actual or promised societal benefits accorded to individuals who identify as heterosexual
- **Homophobia**: an intense, irrational fear of homosexuals and homosexuality, and the hatred, disgust, and prejudice fostered by that fear; commonly used to describe any belief or behavior which indicates fear, disapproval, or hatred of homosexuals or homosexuality.
- **Homosexual**: A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex; generally disliked by lesbian, gay, bisexual persons because of it is perceived as having a medical connotation and/or because it reduces identity to a sexual dimension only
- **Lesbian**: used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, physically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people.; derived from the name of the Greek Island of Lesbos, where the poet Sappho ran a school for women in 400 B.C.
- **Lesbian Baiting**: the practice of relying on the social stigma attached to homosexuality to imply that a woman is a lesbian in order to create a negative impression or discredit someone and to invoke fear or disapproval in others; often used to target women involved in all-female activities (such as sports), women who are perceived to be intruding into traditionally male spheres, women who have achieved positions of power and influence, or women who do not have a male partner
- **Pansexual**: A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender expressions.
- **Polyamory**: Refers to having honest, usually non-possessive, relationships with multiple partners and can include: open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves multiple romantic relationships with sexual contact restricted to those), and subrelationships (which denote distinguishing between a 'primary' relationship or relationships and various "secondary" relationships).
- **Same Gender Loving**: sometimes used by members of the African-American/Black community to express a non-heterosexual sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols associated with the dominant white/Euro-centric culture. The term emerged in the early 1990's with the intention of offering Black women who love women and Black men who love men a voice, a way of identifying and being that resonated with the uniqueness of Black culture in life. (Sometimes abbreviated as 'SGL'.)

- **Sex**: refers to one's biological/physical sex, usually determined at birth simply by the appearance of external genitalia, but actually also encompasses chromosomes, hormones, and internal reproductive organs; usually subdivided into 'male' and 'female', which does not recognize the existence of intersexed bodies.
- **Sexuality**: the complex range of components which make us sexual beings; includes emotional, physical, and sexual aspects, as well as self-identification (including sexual orientation and gender), behavioral preferences and practices, fantasies, and feelings of affection and emotional affinity.
- **Sexual Behavior**: an individual's sexual activities or actions (what a person does), which may or may not be congruent with an individual's sexual identity (how they identify their sexual orientation); sexual identity (who we are) is distinct from sexual behavior (what we do)
- **Sexual Identity**: 1) alternative term for sexual orientation, used to describe an individual's identity as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual; or 2) a person's identity as male, female, in-between, beyond, or neither
- **Sexual Orientation**: the direction of an individual's emotional, physical, and/or sexual attraction to others, which may be toward people of the same gender/sex, another gender/sex, or multiple genders/sexes; research has shown that sexual orientation exists on a continuum, rather than as a set of distinct categories.
- **Straight**: used to refer to people whose sexual orientation is heterosexual

★ Terms related to Gender Identity and Expression

- **Androgyne/Androgynous**: Person appearing and/or identifying as neither male nor female, presenting a gender that is either mixed or neutral.
- **Berdache**: A generic term used to refer to a third gender person (woman-living man), most often referring to Native Americans. The term 'berdache' is generally rejected as inappropriate and offensive by Native Peoples because it is a term that was assigned by European settlers to differently gendered Native Peoples. Appropriate terms vary by tribe and include: 'one-spirit', 'two-spirit', and 'wintke.'
- **Bigendered/Dual Gendered**: A person whose gender identity is a combination of male/man and female/woman.
- **Boi**: a deliberately altered spelling of "boy" often used to refer to a female-born or female-bodied person who generally does not identify as, or only partially identifies as feminine, female, a girl or a woman; the term also has several alternative uses

- **Butch**: A person who identifies themselves as masculine or having what are conventionally considered masculine traits, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally.
- **Cross Dresser (CD)**: an individual who (regardless of motivation) wears clothes, makeup, etc. which are traditionally considered (within a particular culture) to be appropriate for another sex
- **Drag**: Clothes conventionally considered appropriate to a sex different than one's biological sex; the performance of one or multiple genders theatrically.
- **Drag King**: generally refers to women who cross dress, often for theatrical effect, such as using dramatic clothes and mannerisms to create a persona for public appreciation
- **Drag Queen**: generally refers to gay men who cross dress, often for theatrical effect, such as using dramatic clothes and mannerisms to create a persona for public appreciation
- **Femme**: Feminine identified person of any gender/sex, or a person having what are conventionally considered feminine traits, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally.
- **FTM / F2M**: Abbreviation for female-to-male transgender or transsexual person.
- **Gender**: characteristics that are culturally associated with maleness or femaleness
- **Gender Binary**: The idea that there are only two genders – male/female or man/woman and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or
- **Gender Cues**: traits used to attempt to tell the gender/sex of another person. Examples include hairstyle, gait, vocal inflection, body shape, facial hair, etc. Cues vary by culture.
- **Gender Diverse**: A person who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society (e.g. transgender, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc.). Preferred by some to 'gender variant' because it does not imply a standard of normativity.
- **Gender Expression**: how an individual chooses to express one's gender identity through external characteristics and behaviors
- **Gender Identity**: an individual's internal self-perception as masculine, feminine or other-gendered; gender identity is distinct from sexual orientation (which refers to whom an individual is attracted)

- **Gender-neutral pronouns:** New terms proposed to serve as gender-neutral, third-person, singular, personal pronouns in English (e.g. ze or xe, hir); used by people who feel that there are problems with gender-specific pronouns because they imply sex and/or gender.
- **Gender Normative:** the practice of conforming, by nature or by choice, to the traditional/conventional gender-based expectations of society. (also referred to as 'Genderstraight'.)
- **Gender Role:** arbitrary rules, assigned by a given culture, that define what clothing, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, relationships, etc. are considered appropriate and inappropriate for members of each sex
- **Gender Variant:** refers to the act of varying from conventional societal "masculine" and "feminine" gender roles; often used as an alternative term for transgender
- **Genderfuck:** The idea of playing with 'gender cues' to purposely confuse "standard" or stereotypical gender expressions, usually through clothing.
- **Genderqueer:** A gender variant person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. Often includes a political agenda to challenge gender stereotypes and the gender binary system.
- **Intersex:** a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that varies from the expected patterns for male and female types; includes people with chromosomal sex other than XX (female) or XY (male), or people whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and/or genitals fall outside the conventional male and female sexes; more modern term used to replace "hermaphrodite"
- **MTF / M2F:** Abbreviation for male-to-female transgender or transsexual person.
- **Pangendered:** A person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions.
- **Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS):** used by to refer to a group of surgical options that alter a person's physical sex. In most states, one or multiple surgeries are required to achieve legal recognition of gender variance.
- **Stealth:** refers to the act of choosing to be secretive in the public sphere about one's gender history, either after transitioning or while successfully passing. (Also referred to as 'going stealth' or 'living in stealth mode'.)
- **Trans:** An abbreviation sometimes used to refer to a gender variant person. This use allows a person to state a gender variant identity without having to disclose

hormonal or surgical status/intentions. This term is sometimes used to refer to the gender variant community as a whole.

- **Transgender (TG/Trans):** 1) A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity., and 2) an umbrella term which refers to people who transgress, transcend or challenge societal gender norms in various ways; the term is inclusive of many subcategories, such as gay and heterosexual crossdressers, transsexuals, transgenderists, bigendered or pangendered individuals, androgynes, etc.
- **Transgenderist:** used by some to refer to persons who live full-time as a gender other than their biological sex, but who choose not to have sex reassignment surgery or hormone therapy
- **Transman:** An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male-transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as-females.
- **Transphobia:** a reaction of fear or hatred toward those whose gender identity or expression, or perceived gender, does not match their perceived sex, and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity
- **Transsexual:** persons whose core gender identity, their self-perception as male or female, is different than their biological sex as assigned at birth; these individuals may choose to change their sex, through hormone therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery, to match their gender identity
- **Transvestite:** refers to persons who cross dress for pleasure in the appearance and sensation; the pleasure may not be directly erotic; it may be empowering, rebellious, relaxing, stress-relieving, or something else; this term has acquired a connotation of fetishism or perversion
- **Transwoman:** An identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female transsexuals to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as males.
- **Two-Spirited:** One of many terms used to refer to transgendered Native Americans. Native persons who have attributes of both genders, have distinct gender and social roles in their tribes, and are often involved with mystical rituals (shamans). Their dress is usually mixture of male and female articles and they are seen as a separate or third gender. The term 'two-spirit' is usually considered to specific to the Zuni tribe, although it is often used to refer to any Native American who is perceived as non-heterosexual. Similar identity labels vary by tribe and include 'one-spirit' and 'wintke'. Transgender traditions, as well as acceptable terms, vary widely among tribes.

Portions of this terminology sheet came from the LGBT Resource Center at University of California at Riverside and www.trans-academics.org