

Sexual and Gender Minorities

Some Useful Definitions

(Please note that these are working definitions. They may not fit everyone's experiences or understandings of the words. Language often evolves over time.)

GLBTQ: These letters are used as shorthand for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer and allied community. "I" for intersex and "A" for ally are often included in this "alphabet soup."

Gay: The word gay is generally used to describe men who are romantically and sexually attracted to other men. It is sometimes used to refer to the general GLBTQ community.

Lesbian: The word lesbian is generally used to describe women who are romantically and sexually attracted to other women. This term originates with the female poet Sappho who lived in a community comprised predominantly of women on the Isle of Lesbos in ancient Greece.

Bisexual: The term bisexual is generally used to describe people who are romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of more than one sex or gender.

Sex & Gender: It is easy to confuse these two concepts and terms; however, they are different. Sex refers to the biological sex of a person. Gender is socially constructed and refers to societal appearance, mannerisms, and roles.

Trans or Transgender: The words trans or transgender is an umbrella term used to refer to people who transcend the traditional concept of gender. Many feel as though they are neither a man or a woman specifically, and many feel as though their biological sex (male, female, etc.) and their socialized gender (man, woman, etc.) don't match up. Some opt to change/reassign their sex through hormones and/or surgery and some change their outward appearance, or gender expression, through clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, etc. Many people who identify as transgender feel as though they are confined in a binary system (male-female, man-woman) that does not match who they feel themselves to be. If we look at gender as a continuum and not an "either/or" concept, we have a better idea of understanding this issue. Other terms people might use to describe themselves include "gender queer" or "gender other".

Transvestite: More appropriately referred to as "crossdressing," the term transvestite most often refers to males who dress in the clothing of women. The term drag usually refers to dressing in the clothing and styles of another gender for entertainment purposes.

Transsexual: Transsexual is used to describe those individuals who use hormone therapy and/or surgery to alter their sex.

Transphobia: The fear of a transgendered person and the hatred, discrimination, intolerance, and prejudice that this fear brings. Transphobia is manifested as harassment, threatened safety, disgust, ridicule, restrictions on freedom of movement, restrictions on access to resources (housing, employment, services etc), and violence to name a few.

Intersex: The word intersex refers to people who, on a genetic level, do not fit into only "male" or "female". They are individuals whose sex chromosomes are not xx or xy, or who are born with ambiguous genitalia. The term hermaphrodite had been used to describe such individuals but is now considered disrespectful and inaccurate.

Surgery performed in infancy or childhood, without informed consent, leaves some of these individuals feeling incomplete or altered. For more information, please refer to the web site for the [Intersex Society of North America](#).

Questioning: People who are in the process of questioning their sexual orientation are often in need of support and understanding during this stage of their identity. They are seeking information and guidance in their self-discovery.

Ally: An ally is an individual who is supportive of the GLBTQ community. They believe in the dignity and respect of all people, and are willing to stand up in that role.

Homosexual: The word homosexual is a scientific term invented in the 1800's to refer to individuals who are sexually attracted to their own sex/gender. This term is not widely used in the GLBTQ community as it is seen as too clinical.

Heterosexual: The term heterosexual was created around the same time to describe individuals who are sexually attracted to the opposite sex/gender. These words are still widely used, though they tend to perpetuate an "us versus them" mentality and a dichotomous sex/gender system.

Straight: The word straight is a slang word used to refer to the heterosexual members of our community.

Heterosexism and Homophobia: The term heterosexism refers to the assumption that all people are heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior and more desirable than homosexuality. "Homophobia" is defined as "the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals." Both of these are perpetuated by negative stereotypes and are dangerous to individuals and communities.

Sexual Orientation: One's sexual orientation refers to whom he or she is sexually or romantically attracted to. Some people believe that this is a choice (a preference) and others that it is innate (GLBT people are born this way).

Gender Identity: A person's gender identity is the way in which they define and act on their gender. Gender Expression is how they express their gender.

Coming Out of the Closet: The "coming out" process is the process through which GLBTQ people disclose their sexual orientation and gender identity to others. It is a lifelong process. Coming out can be difficult for some because societal and community reactions vary from complete acceptance and support to disapproval, rejection and violence.

Queer: The term queer has a history of being used as a derogatory name for members of the GLBTQ (and Ally) community and those whose sexual orientation is perceived as such. Many people use this word in a positive way to refer to the community; they have reclaimed the term as their own. Not everyone believes this and sensitivity should be used when using or hearing it as there are still many negative connotations with its use.

Sexual Minority: This is an umbrella term used to describe members of the GLBTQ community.

Gender Minority: This is an umbrella term used to describe members of the Trans community.