

Queering Our Vocabulary: Sex, Sexuality, and Gender Terminology

Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT
Communities

247 Tillett Hall (LC) ↔ 848-445-4141
socialjustice.rutgers.edu

All definitions are provided as a general framework. Individuals decided for themselves whether these terms or other terms apply to their identities and may define similar words in different ways.

Ally: A heterosexual or cisgender person who cares about LGBTQ issues and works to challenge sexuality and gender related oppressions.

Biological Sex/Assigned Sex: The physiological and anatomical characteristics of maleness and femaleness with which a person is born or that develop with physical maturity. These markers including internal and external reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, and body shape. Infants are usually assigned to a sex category (usually male or female) at birth on the basis of such characteristics (primarily the appearance of the external genitals) (Bornstein, 1994, 1998). We therefore use assigned sex to refer to the sex designation that appears on birth certificates and other legal documents. See also *intersex*.

Butch: A queer person whose gender presentation includes attributes more commonly associated with masculinity than femininity; an intentional performance of masculinity.

Cisgender: A person whose assigned sex aligns with their gender identity, i.e. a male/man, a female/woman. Someone who is not transgender.

Cross-dressing: A person who enjoys dressing in clothes typically associated with another gender. This may be the extent of the gender-bending behavior, or it may be one step on a path of changing sex or gender. The words transvestite and transvestism have been used in the past to describe this activity or interest.

Femininity/Masculinity: Ideological constructions whose human manifestations (women and men, girls and boys) are recreated in each generation according to the intermeshing requirements of social, cultural, economic, and biological necessities. People rely on cultural

constructions of these to indicate their membership in their sex or gender category.

Femme: A queer person whose gender presentation includes attributes commonly associated with femininity. An intentional performance of femininity.

FtM: Female-to-Male (or Female-toward-Male) transgender person, cross-dresser, or transsexual.

Gender: A social identity usually conflated with biological sex in a binary system that presumes one has either male and masculine characteristics and behavior, or female and feminine characteristics and behavior. In addition to being a major social status experienced by individuals, this is also “a social institution” that helps humans organize their lives.

Gender Expression: (a) Masculinity and femininity are culturally specific definitions, and many people fall “in between” those cultural expectations as we discovered in Module 1. Some other people may have gender expression that is farther to either end (i.e., more masculine than “traditional” masculine, more feminine than “traditional” feminine). Some additional terms that might belong in the middle or on either end of the gender expression axis include *androgynous, tomboy, drag queen, drag king, butch, femme, effeminate, crossdresser* and so on. (b) Most of us have gender expression that changes daily. For some people, our habitual gender expression may go through significant shifts over our lifetimes. (c) Furthermore, we know that it is not just men who are masculine, some women are masculine; it is not just women who are feminine, some men are feminine.

Gender Expression: People’s behaviors that convey something about their gender identity, or that others interpret as meaning something about

their gender identity. How we walk, talk, dress, and the language we use for ourselves (e.g. names and pronouns) are all aspects of gender expression. Socially we quantify gender expression with terms like masculine, feminine, androgynous, butch, femme.

Gender Identity: A person's own understanding of themselves in terms of gendered categories like man and woman, boy and girl, transgender, genderqueer, and many others. How they feel inside or what they believe themselves to be.

Gender Identity Disorder/Gender Dysphoria: A psychiatric/medical diagnosis included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSMIV)* to describe when a person assigned one gender based on their birth sex identifies as a different gender, or does not conform with the gender roles associated with their birth sex. This can manifest in many ways, including varying levels of body dysphoria, and general discomfort living as the assigned sex and/or gender.

Gender Nonconforming: A term to describe someone whose gender identity and gender expression don't align with social prescriptions. A masculine woman, a feminine man.

Genderqueer: Captures a variety of identities and the identity has permeable boundaries; characterized by the desire or tendency to challenge gender roles and presentation, to "play" with gender, and to make the categories of gender irrelevant. It may be but is not always a political identity; changing society's attitudes toward gender is often the goal. This is an identity that must be claimed as one's own; it should not be imposed upon people.

Harry Benjamin Standards of Care: In 1966, Harry Benjamin created the Standards of Care as ethical guidelines for the care and treatment of transsexuals. Benjamin's guiding principles dictated the requirements necessary for a person to be considered transsexual and to qualify for medical transition, as well as the scope of therapies, treatments and surgeries that a transition would include. Although many

therapists and medical providers still rely on the Standards of Care, the guidelines are often adhered to less rigidly than in the past.

Intersex: A group of medical diagnoses describing a person whose anatomy or physiology differs from cultural ideals of male and female, in terms of external genitalia, internal genitalia, and/or hormone production levels. Intersex individuals are typically assigned as "male" or "female" at birth, and often undergo surgery on their genitals in infancy to force a more culturally acceptable gendered appearance. The intersex movement has challenged the ethics of infant genital surgeries that are not medically necessary, pointing out that many intersex people who undergo such surgery in infancy later report feeling a sense of loss of an essential aspect of themselves. About 2–4% of all births are intersex to some degree. This is sometimes not evident until puberty. For more information regarding intersexuality, contact the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), via their Web site www.isna.org.

Medical Model: A clinical view of gender variance, rooted in biological and psychological orientations, with an understanding that transsexuality and transgender identity are medical and mental health conditions, in need of diagnosis, treatment, and cure.

MtF: Male-To-Female (or Male-toward-Female) transgender person, cross-dresser, or transsexual.

Queer: An umbrella identity term taken by people who do not conform to heterosexual and/or gender binary norms; a reclaimed derogatory slur taken as a political term to unite people who are marginalized because of their non-conformity to dominant gender identities and/or heterosexuality.

Passing: Successfully (convincingly) presenting one's preferred gender image. May be intentional or unintentional. Passing is a contentious term in transgender communities, and has different meanings for different people. For example, many trans people do not feel that

they are presenting as anything but themselves, whereas “passing” seems to imply that they are fooling people or hiding something. In addition some trans people do not desire to “pass” as non-trans, but rather to be respected for their identity and expression, even though people know that their gender identity or expression is different from the one typically associated with their sex.

Sexual Orientation: Determines the focus of our sexual/erotic drives, desires, and fantasies, and the inclination or capacity to develop intimate, emotional and sexual relationships with other people. Sexual orientation is usually quantified in terms of gender — both an individual’s own gender and the gender(s) of the people to whom that person is attracted and/or with whom they engage in intimate relationships and/or sexual behavior.

Transgender: An umbrella term that may include transsexuals, cross dressers, drag

queens, drag kings, butch lesbians, and any other people transgressing the socially constructed confines of gender. This is an identity that must be claimed as one’s own; it should not be imposed upon people. Or, a person whose assigned sex and gender identity don’t align with dominant culture’s assumptions. For instance, a person assigned female at birth who identifies as man.

Transphobia: The fear, intolerance, or hatred of atypical gender expression or identity, or of people embodying or expressing an atypical gender identity.

Transsexual: Someone who wants to, intends to, or has begun to pursue some physical change to his/her/hir body, in an effort to align the physical body with one’s gender identity, *and* identifies with this term. This is an identity that must be claimed as one’s own; it should not be imposed upon people.

References

- Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw: On men, women, and the rest of us*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Bornstein, K. (1998). *My gender workbook: How to become a real man, a real woman, the real you, or something else entirely*. New York : Routledge.

Adapted from: © Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, Second Edition, Routledge, 2007