LGBTQ+ Terminology & Concepts

Introduction

This document is a curated list of important terminology and concepts when interacting with, talking about, and supporting LGBTQ+ communities. Please use it as a guide for deepening your knowledge and familiarity with these communities, and keep in mind the following:

1. There are many more terms and concepts than is practical to list in this document. We are happy to direct you to additional resources if you would like more information.

2. Some LGBTQ+ folks may define certain terms and concepts differently than what is listed in this document. Further, some terms and concepts may shift in meaning over time, have different meanings across other identity intersections, or fall out of favor. Think of these definitions and descriptions as introductions rather than a fixed rulebook.

3. Use LGBTQ+ identities as adjectives, not nouns. For example, describe a group of gay men as “gay men” and not “gays.” Similarly, you should not describe transgender folks as “transgenders.” The only exception is lesbian, which can be used as either an adjective or a noun.

4. This list does not currently reflect the breadth and depth of terminology used among LGBTQ+ communities with other minoritized identities, especially those who identify as QTPOC (queer/trans people of color) or disabled. We welcome feedback on how we can continue to improve in this regard.

5. Despite our best efforts, sometimes we make mistakes. Please let us know immediately of any errors, and we will do our best to swiftly make corrections.

6. You are welcome to borrow and modify this list for your own purposes. As we have done at the end of this document, we ask you acknowledge, in some way, from where your work originated.

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Terminology & Concepts

Ally
Typically any non-LGBTQ+ person who supports and stands up for the rights and dignity of LGBTQ+ people, though LGBTQ+ people can also be allies, such as a lesbian who is an ally to transgender folks.

Androgynous
(1) A gender expression that has elements of both masculinity and femininity. (2) Occasionally used in place of “intersex” to describe a person whose sex chromosomes, external genitalia, and/or internal reproductive systems are not considered “standard” for either male or female.

Biological sex
A medical term that refers to our anatomy as “male,” “female,” or “intersex.” It consists of our sex/reproductive organs (internal and external), chromosomes, and hormones.

- **Assigned female at birth (AFAB):** (1) A phrase describing a person who was deemed to be the female sex at birth via the subjective viewing and labeling of the body’s characteristics; (2) a phrase representing the wide spectrum of identities and bodies that were labeled as female when born. Also referred to as assigned gender at birth (AGAB), female assigned at birth (FAAB), and designated female at birth (DFAB).

- **Assigned male at birth (AMAB):** (1) A phrase describing a person who was deemed to be the male sex at birth via the subjective viewing and labeling of the body’s characteristics; (2) a phrase representing the wide spectrum of identities and bodies that were labeled as male when born. Also referred to as assigned gender at birth (AGAB), male assigned at birth (MAAB), and designated male at birth (DMAB).

- **Intersex:** A condition in which a person is born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia, and/or internal reproductive systems that are not considered “standard” for either male or female.

Biphobia
Aversion toward bisexuality and bisexual people as a social group or as individuals. People of any sexual orientation—gay, heterosexual, queer, etc.—can experience such feelings of aversion.

Cisgender
A common phrase among younger LGBTQ+ folks. It is short for “cisgender, heterosexual.”

Cissexism
Assumptions that all people identify with the gender they were categorized as at birth, based on their genitals. Assuming all people are cisgender results in cisgender people being seen as “normal” and “natural”, while transgender people are seen as the opposite—“abnormal” and “unnatural.”

Closeted
Refers to an individual who is not open to themselves or others about their (queer) sexuality or gender identity. This may be by choice and/or for other reasons such as fear for one’s safety, peer or family rejection or disapproval and/or loss of housing, job, etc. Also known as being “in the closet.” When someone chooses to break this silence they “come out” of the closet.
Coming out
The process of acknowledging one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity to other people. For most LGBTQ+ people, this is a life-long and ongoing process. It is important to note here that coming out is neither a requirement nor owed to anyone.

Cross-dresser
Someone who wears clothes associated with another gender part of the time. This term has replaced transvestite, which is now considered outdated and pejorative.

Drag
The act of dressing in gendered clothing and adopting gendered behaviors as part of a performance, most often clothing and behaviors typically not already associated with one’s gender identity. Drag queens perform femininity theatrically, and drag kings perform masculinity theatrically. Drag may be performed as a political comment on gender, as parody, or simply as entertainment. Drag performance does not indicate one’s sexual orientation or gender identity.

Family
Colloquial term used by LGBTQ+ people to identify other LGBTQ+ community members. For example, an LGBTQ+ person saying, “that person is family” often means the person they are referring to is LGBTQ+, as well. This is different than chosen family, which often refers to people (LGBTQ+ or otherwise) with whom an LGBTQ+ person is very close, and is separate from the use of the word queer, which is used as an umbrella term to refer to more broadly to LGBTQ+ people.

FTM or F2M
Abbreviation for a female-to-male transgender person. Sometimes also referred to as transman or transmasculine.

Gender
A socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender characteristics can change over time and are different between cultures. See gender identity and gender expression for more on gender.

Gender affirming surgery
Surgical procedures that alter or change physical characteristics of the body in order to better express a person’s inner gender identity. May include removal of the breasts, augmentation of the chest, or alteration or reconstruction of genitals. Also called gender confirming surgery or sex reassignment surgery (SRS).
- **Bottom surgery**: A phrase used in transgender communities to mean a variety of kinds of gender-validating surgeries that can be done on the reproductive organs and/or genitals.
- **Top surgery**: This term refers to surgery for the construction of a “male-type” chest or breast augmentation for a “female-type” chest.

Gender binary
The idea that there are only two genders—woman and man—and that a person must strictly identify as the one assigned to them at birth.
**Gender expression**
The way in which a person expresses their gender identity, which can be through clothing, behavior, posture, mannerisms, speech patterns, activities, and more.

**Gender identity**
The sense of “being” woman, man, genderqueer, agender, etc. For some people, gender identity is in accord with physical anatomy. For transgender people, gender identity may differ from physical anatomy, expected social roles, or their assigned sex/gender at birth. It is important to note that gender identity, biological sex, and sexual orientation are separate and you cannot assume how someone identifies in one category based on how they identify in another category.

- **Agender:** A person who is internally ungendered, does not have a felt sense of gender identity, and/or does not identify with the existing spectrum of gender identities.
- **Bigender:** Typically, a person whose gender identity is a combination of man and woman.
- **Cisgender:** A gender identity where an individual’s experience of their own gender matches the sex and gender they were assigned at birth. Also referred to as cis.
- **Gender fluid:** A person whose gender identification and presentation shifts, whether within or outside of societal, gender-based expectations.
- **Gender non-conforming:** A gender expression or identity that is outside or beyond a specific culture or society’s gender expectations; or, a term used to refer to individuals or communities who may not identify as transgender, but who do not conform to traditional gender norms. May be used in tandem with other identities. Also referred to as GNC.
- **Genderqueer:** A person whose gender identity is neither man nor woman, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. This identity is usually in reaction to the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes, and the gender binary system. Some genderqueer people identify under the transgender umbrella while others do not.
- **Nonbinary:** An umbrella term for all genders outside the binary gender identities of woman and man. Also referred to as NB or enby.
- **Pangender:** A person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions.
- **Transgender:** This term has many definitions. It is sometimes shortened as trans and frequently used as an umbrella term to refer to all people who do not identify with their assigned sex or gender at birth. It is important to acknowledge that while some people may fit under this definition of transgender, they may not identify as such. Also referred to as trans or trans*.
- **Transsexual:** A person whose gender identity is different from their biological sex, who may undergo medical treatments to change their biological sex, often times to align it with their gender identity, or they may live their lives as another sex. This term is outdated and infrequently used. Use transgender instead.

**Hermaphrodite**
An outdated medical term previously used to refer someone who was born with both male and female biological characteristics. It is not used today as it is considered to be medically stigmatizing, and also misleading as it means a person who is 100% male and female, a biological impossibility for humans. Use androgynous or intersex instead.

**Heterosexism**
A system of societal-level ideologies and patterns of institutionalized prejudice against and discrimination of non-heterosexual people. It is sometimes also thought of as ideologies that assume the world is and ought to be heterosexual—that heterosexuality is both normal and compulsory.
**Homophobia**
A range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people who are identified or perceived as being a member of the LGBTQ+ community. It can be expressed as antipathy, violence, prejudice, or hatred, may be based on irrational fear, and is sometimes related to religious beliefs.

**Hormone therapy**
Administration of hormones to affect the development of one’s secondary sex characteristics. Sometimes referred to as hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

**Latinx**
This term has become a gender-inclusive way of referring to people of Latin American descent. Pronounced *la-TEEN*-ex.

**LGBTQ+**
This is an initialism referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities. Different groups will write the initialism differently (LGBT, LGBTQIA, LGBTQQIA, etc.). The Pride Center uses a “+” at the end to acknowledge and include the many other identities that exist.

**MTF or M2F**
Abbreviation for a male-to-female transgender person. Sometimes also referred to as transwoman or transfeminine.

**MSM**
This abbreviation refers broadly to men who have sex with men, thus accommodating a variety of sexual identities as well as those who do not self-identify as gay.

**Questioning**
For some, the process of exploring and discovering one’s own sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

**Passing**
(1) A term for trans people being accepted as, or able to “pass for,” a member of their self-identified gender/sex identity (regardless of birth sex) without being identified as trans. (2) An LGBTQ+ individual who is believed to be or perceived as straight.
- Passing is a controversial term because it often places the power/authority in the observer rather than giving agency to the individual.
- While some people want to “pass” or, more accurately, be accepted for the identity they feel most aligns with who they are, “passing” is not always a positive experience.
- Some individuals experience a sense of erasure or a feeling of being invisible to their own community when they are perceived to be part of the dominant group.
- Not every trans person or LGBTQ+ person wants to “pass.”

**Polyamory**
The practice of having multiple open, honest, loving relationships. Polyamory emphasizes consciously choosing how many partners one wishes to be involved with rather than accepting social norms that dictate loving only one person at a time. It is defined by informed consent of all the participants. People who identify as participating in polyamorous relationships might refer to themselves as “poly.”
**Romantic orientation**

Describes an individual’s pattern of romantic attraction based on a person’s gender(s) regardless of one’s sexual orientation. For individuals who experience sexual attraction, their sexual orientation and romantic orientation are often in alignment (i.e., they experience sexual attraction toward individuals of the same gender(s) as the individuals they are interested in forming romantic relationships with). This is not true for everyone, though.

- **Aromantic**: A person who experiences little or no romantic attraction to others and/or a lack of interest in forming romantic relationships.
- **Demiromantic**: A person who only experiences romantic attraction after developing an emotional connection beforehand. Demiromantic people do not experience primary romantic attraction, but they are capable of secondary romantic attraction.
- **Grayromantic**: A person whose romantic orientation is somewhere between aromantic and romantic. For example, a grayromantic person may experience romantic attraction but not very often—but when so, it is usually strong attraction. Or, they may experience romantic attraction, but not desire romantic relationships.
- **Heteroromantic**: A person attracted to the “opposite” sex or gender in a romantic way.
- **Homoromantic**: A person attracted to the same sex or gender in a romantic way.
- **Panromantic**: A person who is romantically attracted to others but is not limited by others’ sex or gender. Panromantic folks will tend to feel their partner’s sex and/or gender does little to define their relationship.

**Sexual orientation**

The type of sexual, romantic, and/or physical attraction someone feels toward others. Often labeled based on the gender identity/expression of the person and who they are attracted to. Common labels are lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, queer, etc.

- **Asexual**: A person who generally does not feel sexual attraction or desire to any group of people. Asexuality is not the same as celibacy. Also referred to as ace.
- **Bisexual**: A person who is attracted to people of their own sex or gender as well as another sex or gender, but not necessarily simultaneously or equally. This has historically been defined as a person who is attracted to both genders (woman/man) or both sexes (female/male), but since there are more than two sexes (see intersex) and more than two genders (see gender identity and transgender), this definition is inaccurate. Also referred to as bi.
- **Demisexual**: An individual who does not experience primary sexual attraction but may experience secondary sexual attraction after a close emotional connection has already formed. Also referred to as demi.
- **Gay**: A person who is attracted primarily to members of the same sex, often used when referring to men who are attracted to men. Although it can be used for any gender, “lesbian” is sometimes the preferred term for women who are attracted to women.
- **Graysexual**: An individual who feels as though their sexuality falls somewhere on the spectrum of sexuality between asexuality and sexuality. Also referred to as gray-a.
- **Heteroflexible**: A form of a sexual orientation or situational sexual behavior characterized by minimal homosexual activity in an otherwise primarily heterosexual orientation that is considered to distinguish it from bisexuality. It has also been characterized as “mostly straight.”
- **Heterosexual**: A person who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to a sex other than their own. Commonly thought of as “attraction to the opposite sex,” however, since there are more than two sexes (see intersex), this definition is inaccurate. Also referred to as straight or het.
• **Homoflexible:** A form of a sexual orientation or situational sexual behavior characterized by minimal heterosexual activity in an otherwise primarily homosexual orientation that is considered to distinguish it from bisexuality. It has also been characterized as “mostly gay.”
• **Homosexual:** An outdated term that refers to a person who is sexually, emotionally, and/or romantically attracted to the same sex or gender. Historically, it was a term used to pathologize gay and lesbian communities. Use the term *gay* instead.
• **Lesbian:** A woman who is primarily attracted to other women. Typically attributed to cis women.
• **Pansexual:** A person who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction for members of all gender identities/expressions. Also referred to as *pan*.
• **Queer:** (1) An umbrella term to refer to LGBTQ+ people. (2) A political statement reclaiming the once derogatory term, as well as a sexual orientation, which advocates breaking binary thinking and seeing both sexual orientation and gender identity as potentially fluid. (3) A simple label to explain a complex set of sexual behaviors and desires e.g., a person who is attracted to multiple genders may identify as queer. (4) Many older LGBTQ+ people feel the word has been hatefully used against them for too long and are reluctant to embrace it.

**Stealth**

Describes the process of a trans person interacting with others without disclosing their trans identity or status; or, purposefully not disclosing trans identity or status in order to aid in identity empowerment, promote privacy, or to increase personal safety.

**Transition(ing)**

This term is primarily used to refer to the process a trans person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

**Transphobia**

The fear or hatred of transgender people or gender non-conforming behavior. Like biphobia, transphobia can also exist among LGBTQ+ people as well as among heterosexual people.

**Two-spirit**

An umbrella term traditionally used by Native American/First Nations/indigenous peoples to recognize individuals who possess qualities or fulfill roles of multiple genders.
Sources Referenced

Definitions and language found in this document have been borrowed or modified from the web pages listed below. Please notify us if one or more links have become inactive since the last update.

- “Definition of Terms” via UC Berkeley’s Centers for Educational Justice & Community Engagement: [http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definition_of_terms#agender](http://geneq.berkeley.edu/lgbt_resources_definition_of_terms#agender)
- “Asexuality, Attraction, and Romantic Orientation” via UNC Chapel Hill’s LGBT Center: [https://lgbtq.unc.edu/asexuality-attraction-and-romantic-orientation](https://lgbtq.unc.edu/asexuality-attraction-and-romantic-orientation)
- “Core Vocabulary” via The Safe Zone Project: [http://www.TheSafeZoneProject.com](http://www.TheSafeZoneProject.com)