

Common LGBTQ “Definitions” and Terms

“Definition’ is perhaps too strong a word; if our gender is ambiguous, then so is the rest of our existence. These definitions are approximately correct, but they are soft around the edges.” –Diane Wilson

Ally: In its verb form, ally means to unite or to form a connection between. In the LGBTQ community, allies are all those wonderful folks who have attempted to educate themselves about gender and sexuality issues, who work to reduce homophobia and transphobia in themselves, their families and communities, and who try their best to support LGBTQ people in the political, social and cultural arenas.

Intersectionality - the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

The LGBTQ+ Community - An umbrella term used to refer to people who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and all those whose identity transcends the bounds of culturally prescribed norms for gender and/or sexuality.

Queer – a self-identifying term which can be controversial because it has been used historically as a derogatory term to identify LGBTQ people. It has been widely reclaimed by people in the LGBTQ community to represent individuals whose gender and/or sexuality do not conform with dichotomous gender and sexuality categories.

Questioning: a term used to describe someone who is questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Sex: refers to the cluster of biological, chromosomal and anatomical features, including genitalia, hormone levels, genes, or secondary sex characteristics, as they are present in the human body. Some terms used to refer to sex are:

- Assigned Sex or Gender: the sex/gender one is assigned at birth, generally by a medical professional, based on a cursory examination of external genitalia.
- Intersex: A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not correlate with typical definitions of female or male. Not everyone who has one of these conditions identifies as intersex.

Sexual Orientation: the culturally defined set of meanings through which people describe their sexual attractions, typically based on how another’s sex or gender relates to one’s own. Sexual orientation is not static and can shift over time. Some terms referring to sexual orientation include:

- Asexual: a self-identifying term used to describe a person who experiences a lack of sexual attraction. Also referred to as “ace” for short.
- Asexual Spectrum: the term used to describe the range of identities of people who experience little or no sexual attraction. The asexual (or ace) spectrum encompasses people who identify as asexual and gray asexual.
- Bisexual: the attraction to both men and women, whether on an emotional, physical, and/or sexual level.
- Demisexual: the self-identifying term within the asexual spectrum used to describe a person who only feels sexual attraction after developing a strong emotional bond with someone.
- Gay: a term used in some settings to describe a male-identified person who is attracted to men. It is a self-identifying term that describes feelings and emotions, not behavior (not all men who engage in sexual acts with other men identify as “gay,” and not all men who identify as “gay” engage in sexual acts with other men).
- Gray-Asexual: a self-identifying term within the asexual spectrum used to describe someone who rarely experiences sexual attraction. Gray-asexual people fall in between asexuality and non-asexuality. In some cases, they experience sexual attraction only rarely. In others, they’re unsure if they’ve experienced it or don’t feel that they quite fit the definition of asexual in some way.
- Lesbian: a term used to describe a female-identified person who is attracted to women. Again, like “gay,” “lesbian” is a self-identifying term that describes feelings and emotions, not behavior.
- Pansexual: the attraction to people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions.
- Same-Gender Loving: A self-identifying term, often used by communities of color, referring to people who are attracted to other people of the same gender.

Gender: A set of social, psychological, and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations that classify an individual as masculine or feminine. Some terms referring to gender include:

- Agender: a self-identifying term meaning “without gender.” People who identify as agender may describe themselves as having no gender identity at all, a neutral gender, or a gender which is not definable.
- Cisgender: A person whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth.
- Genderflux: a self-identifying term describing a person whose experience of a gender identity varies in intensity over time.
- Gender Identity: refers to an individual’s sense of self as a man, woman, transgender, other gender category, or no gender category. Gender identity may change over time and may not conform with dichotomous gender categories or (necessarily) with one’s sexual identity or gender expression.
- Gender Expression: refers to the way an individual demonstrates their gender (often based on traditional gender roles) through appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions. Gender expression may change over time and from day-to-day and may or may not conform to an individual’s gender identity.
- Genderqueer: A self-identifying term which refers to individuals or groups who queer or problematize the hegemonic notions of sex, gender and desire in a given society. Genderqueer people possess identities which fall outside of the widely accepted sexual binary.
- Latinx: A self-identifying term which is a gender-neutral way of referring to people of Latin American descent.
- Non-binary: A self-identifying term used to describe a person who feels they do not fit within the traditional male/female binaries of gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation.
- Non-Binary Pronouns: Any of the multiple sets of pronouns which create gendered space beyond the conventional he, him and his and she, her and hers. The singular “they” is a commonly used non-binary pronoun. Other examples include ze, hir and hirs; ey, em and eirs; ze, zir and zirs. These gender pronouns are sometimes referred to as gender neutral pronouns, but many within the community prefer the term non-binary or third gender as they do not consider themselves to have neutral genders.
- Transgender: a self-identifying term that describes a person whose gender identity is different than what is expected based on assigned sex. There are transgender people from every race, class, sexual orientation and ability. Trans is often preferable to transgender for some in this community because it does not minimize the experiential specificities of one group within a broad community.
 - FTM: FTM is an acronym which stands for Female to Male. This term reflects the direction of a gender transition. This includes a broad range of experiences, from those who identify as men or male to those who identify as transsexual, transmen, female men, new men or FTM. Some individuals prefer the term MTM (male-to-male) to underscore the fact that though they were biologically female, they never had a female gender identity.
 - MTF: MTF is an acronym which stands for Male to Female. This term reflects the direction of gender transition. This includes a broad range of experiences, from those who identify as women or female to those who identify as transsexual, transwomen, male women, new women or as MTF as their gender identity. Some individuals prefer the term FTF (female-to-female) to underscore the fact that though they were biologically male, they never had a masculine gender identity.
 - Sex/Gender Confirmation Surgery: Gender confirmation surgery is the term given to an operation and procedure which physically transforms the genitals using plastic surgery. Note that it is never appropriate to ask someone whether or not they have had surgical interventions and that, while some trans-identified people choose to have medical or surgical interventions, these interventions in no way legitimize someone’s trans identity.
 - Transition: The period of time in which a person lives into the gender role which is in accordance with their internal gender identity. This can, but does not always, include alterations to one’s body through the use of hormones or surgery.

Terms and definitions were constructed with the help of:

- Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community, Laura Erickson-Schroth, ed, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- The creative energy of More Light Presbyterians and Side by Side staff and volunteers