

GENDER AND SEXUALITY: BASIC TERMINOLOGY

Heterosexual: Persons who are physically and emotionally attracted to persons of the opposite sex.

Homosexual: Persons who are physically and emotionally attracted to persons of the same sex.

Straight: Colloquial term for heterosexual persons

Gay: Colloquial term specifically for homosexual men; also sometimes used as a synonym for “homosexual”

Lesbian: Colloquial term specifically for homosexual women

Bisexual: Persons who are physically and emotionally attracted to persons of both sexes. Note that this does not imply promiscuity.

Bi-curious/Questioning: These terms refer to persons who are exploring their sexuality for various reasons. Bi-curious tends to have a connotation of sexual experimentation. Questioning tends to have a connotation of identity seeking.

Metrosexual: Straight man who is a snappy dresser and is thus sometimes assumed to be gay.

Queer: 1) An inclusive, non-gendered term used to refer to all LGBT (etc.) persons
2) A socio-political term used to denote those who live outside of traditional gender and sexual norms. In this context, the term “queer” is used as an attempt to reclaim derogatory language and redefine it in protest against heteronormative culture.

*note: in either definition, the term “queer” may also include self-identified straight allies of the LGBT community

Celibacy: A state of being chronically unengaged in sexual activity—culturally, this can be difficult to define as any given person’s understanding of what constitutes “sexual activity” can be vastly different.

Homophobia: An unreasoning fear of or contempt for homosexuals or homosexual activity

Heterosexism: Beliefs or behaviors that set a higher value on heterosexuality than homosexuality and often discriminate against homosexual persons.

Heteronormativity: A cultural state in which all things heterosexual are considered “normal” and all things homosexual are considered “deviant”

Heterosexual Assumption: Cultural assumption that all people are straight until proven gay.

Sex: In this context, sex is the biological description of male and female. It may include genetic, chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical components.

Gender: Gender is understood to be the set of cultural expectations surrounding biological sex.

Gender Identity: One's gender identity is one's innate sense of which gender and sex one belongs to.

Transgender: This is an umbrella term for persons who don't fit traditional gender norms and dichotomies. It may include transsexuals, cross-dressers, intersex persons, etc.

Transsexual: This term normally refers to someone who undergoes surgical sex-change procedures, which may or may not alter genitalia. This term seems to be less common than the broader "transgender."

Intersex: Intersex persons are persons with biological characteristics that don't fit the traditional dichotomy of male/female. For instance, someone with Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome is chromosomally XY. However, their androgen (like testosterone) receptors don't work, which means their bodies never develop as male. They tend to live their lives as women, often only finding out about their condition when undergoing fertility treatments. Persons born with ambiguous or dual genitalia can also identify as intersex. Intersex is the more politically correct term for the old medical term "hermaphrodite."

Gender Queer: Much like the term "queer" above, this term is normally used by persons who intentionally choose to live outside of the traditional male/female societal designations.

The Closet: A state where by LGBT persons engage in denial of and/or compartmentalization of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For most, but not all LGBT persons, this state of inauthenticity causes severe stress and can lead to depression or neurosis. However, in many cases the need to hide and "pass" as straight exists for reasons of emotional or bodily safety.

Coming Out (of the Closet): Coming Out was originally a right of passage for LGBT persons that spoofed the tradition of the Debutante Ball, where young women were welcomed into high society. Coming Out was often a party whereby gay men were introduced to gay society. More recently, the metaphor has shifted to reflect an acknowledgement, to self or others, of one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Individuals may be closeted, partially out, or completely out. In this context, the coming out process never ends as every new acquaintance, colleague, or friend necessitates a decision about whether or not such personal information can be shared.