Helpful Terms for Understanding Sex and Gender Identities

STRUCTURES OF POWER

Transphobia—encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward transgender identities or toward people who identify as or are perceived as being transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, etc.

Cissexism—a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favor of cisgender identities. It can include the presumption that all people are cisgender and conform to normative gender roles or that cisgender identities are normal and superior. It may structure individual attitudes as well as the ways that transgender people are represented and the ways that societal institutions are structured. (see definition of cisgender below)

PHYSICAL SEX

Intersex—an umbrella term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with anatomy, chromosomes, hormones, or a combination thereof that do not fit the typical definitions of female or male.

GENDER IDENTITY

Gender Identity—one’s internal sense of having a gender or being a gendered person. A person’s gender is not dependent on their physical body, and it may or may not match with the gender they were assigned at birth according to societal norms.

Transgender—an umbrella term used to describe a person whose gender assigned at birth does not match their personal gender identity according to societal norms. People who identify as transgender may or may not live as the gender with which they identify and may or may not use surgery or hormones to physically alter external gender characteristics. Transgender is correctly used as an adjective, not a noun or a verb, thus "transgender people" is appropriate but "transgenders,” “a transgender,” or “transgendered” are often viewed as disrespectful.

Personal Gender Pronoun—the pronoun that a person uses for themself. For example: If Xena’s personal pronouns are she, her, and hers, you could say “Xena ate her food because she was hungry.” Some pronouns, such as he/him/his or she/her/hers, indicate gender, while others, such as they/them/their or ze/zim/zir are considered gender neutral or gender inclusive pronouns. Many different gender inclusive pronouns exist.

FTM or Transgender Man—female to male transgender person or someone assigned female at birth who identifies as a man.

MTF or Transgender Woman—male to female transgender person or someone assigned male at birth who identifies as a woman.

Genderqueer, Gender Nonconforming, Nonbinary—a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or some combination of the genders of man and woman. These terms carry different meanings and nuances for the individuals who identify with them.

Gender Fluid—a person for whom gender identity is not fixed, but rather shifts throughout that person’s life.

Two-Spirit—A contemporary umbrella term that refers to gender and/or sexually diverse historical and current North American Indigenous people. Some Two-Spirit people say that they have both a male and female spirit, while others describe their identity as nonbinary. Some Two-Spirit people also identify with an LGBTQ+ identity, while others do not identify with Western labels of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Many Indigenous cultures have a tradition of diverse gender identities and specific words to describe them.
Cross-dresser—a term for people who dress in clothing traditionally or stereotypically worn by another gender, but who generally have no intent to live full-time as that gender. For example, a man who enjoys dressing in “women’s clothes” but identifies as a man might consider himself a cross-dresser. The older term "transvestite" is considered derogatory by many.

Cisgender—a person whose gender assigned at birth matches with their personal gender identity according to societal norms. For example, a person assigned male at birth who identifies as a man is considered cisgender.

Transition—the complex process of moving from one gender to another, personally, socially, professionally, and/or physically.

Gender Confirmation Surgery—Surgical procedures that alter one’s body to better reflect a person’s gender identity. This may include different procedures, including those sometimes also referred to as "top surgery" (breast augmentation or removal) or "bottom surgery" (altering genitals). Contrary to popular belief, there is not one surgery; in fact there are many different surgeries. These surgeries are medically necessary for some people, however not all people want, need, or can have surgery as part of their transition. The terms "sex change surgery" or “sex reassignment surgery” are considered derogatory terms by many.

Passing—being seen or read as the gender one is presenting externally, rather than being identified as transgender or as the gender one was assigned at birth

Clocked/Spooked/Read/Made—being recognized as transgender or the gender one was assigned at birth rather than the gender one is presenting externally. Being recognized or outed in public carries a threat of danger for transgender people, especially transgender people of color, who are oftentimes victims of harassment and violence. Terms for this concept vary regionally.

Dysphoria—a variety of negative feelings that are related or connected to someone’s gender or sex. Transgender people who experience dysphoria (not all do) may be profoundly uncomfortable with certain aspects of their bodies, particularly sex characteristics. They may also have a strong aversive reaction — perhaps sadness, or anger, or disgust — upon being called by the (inappropriate) pronouns or name associated with the gender they were assigned at birth.

CROSS-CATEGORY TERMS

Queer—a slang term for an LGBTQ+ person. Also, a set of theories or a political stance that emphasizes opposition to structures of normal, especially in relation to sex, gender identity, and sexuality. The term has been politically reclaimed as positive by some, while remaining offensive and hurtful to others.

Questioning—a person who is exploring their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and questioning whether they may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, etc.

Ally—a person who does not identify as LGBTQ+ but acts in support of LGBTQ+ people and their interests. People within LGBTQ+ communities can be allies to others with different identities.

1 Identities that fall under the umbrella of transgender identities include but are not limited to transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, etc.

2 They/them/their is considered an acceptable singular pronoun as it is more inclusive of those with nonbinary gender identities. Many other singular gender neutral pronouns exist and are used regularly, as well.

3 No single acronym will capture the diversity of identities related to sexual orientation, gender identity, their intersections, and their intersections with other identities such as race/ethnicity or economic class. In addition to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, additional terms include but are not limited to queer, genderqueer, pansexual, two-spirit, same gender loving, fluid, intersex, asexual, etc.