Helpful Terms for Understanding LGBTQ+ Identities

STRUCTURES OF POWER

Homophobia—encompasses a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homo-, bi-, or pan-sexualities and toward people who identify as or are perceived as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, etc.

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.

Heterosexism—a system of attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favor of heterosexuality and relationships. It can include the presumption that all people are heterosexual or that heterosexual attractions and relationships are normal and superior. It may structure individual attitudes as well as the ways that LGB+ people are represented and societal institutions are structured.

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 societal institutions are structured. (see definition of cisgender below)

SEXUAL IDENTITY

Gay—a person who is attracted to people of the same gender. Some may use it only when referring to a man who is attracted to other men, while others use it to refer broadly to those with same-gender attractions.

Lesbian—a woman who is attracted to other women.

Bisexual—a person who is attracted to both men and women.

Pansexual—a person who is attracted towards people of many or all gender identities, including those who identify as transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, men, women, etc.

Asexual—a person with a lack of sexual attraction for others and a lack of interest in participating in sexual activity.

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

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.

ROMANTIC IDENTITY

Romantic Identities—indicate the sex or gender of those for whom one is most likely to have romantic feelings. People’s romantic identities may be connected to or different from their sexual identities. For example, a person may identify as pansexual but have romantic feelings only toward women.
Aromantic—a lack of romantic attraction toward others.

Biromantic—romantic attraction toward both men and women.

Panromantic—romantic attraction toward people of many or all gender identities, including those who identify as transgender, genderqueer, non-binary, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, women, men, etc.

Heterromantic—romantic attraction toward women if one identifies as a man or toward men if one identifies as a woman.

Homoromantic—romantic attraction toward others of the same gender.

Androromantic / Gynoromantic—romantic attraction toward males / females.

Demiromantic—romantic attraction to people only after an emotional (though not necessarily romantic) connection is formed.

GENDER IDENTITY

Transgender—an umbrella term used to describe a person whose gender assigned at birth does not match their personal gender identity. 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 change their external gender characteristics.

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.

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.

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 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.

2 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.

3 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.

Created by Cynthia L. Konrad at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Whitewater, WI, in March 2015. Last updated February 2016.