
DEFINITIONS

The language used to describe sexual and gender diversity can lead to miscommunication, misperceptions, stereotypes and discrimination. This section is intended to define the terms used throughout this Study Guide and serve as a resource for discussion of sexual and gender diversity in faith-based communities.

Many of these terms are often thought of as “binary”—that is, there are only two categories that define them, such as “male-female” or “gay-straight.” When considering sexual and gender diversity, many scientists believe it is more appropriate to consider a range of possibilities. Where applicable, scales are included with the terms.

Sex. The biological characteristics that define human beings as male or female or intersex. **Biological sex** refers to physical characteristics such as external genitals, sex chromosomes, sex hormones and internal reproductive systems. **Natal sex** is the sex assigned at birth, which is typically based on the appearance of the external genitals. In cases where the genitals appear ambiguous, the chromosomes and hormones are then assessed to make the most appropriate sex assignment. Words that describe sex are female, male, and intersex. “Sex” is often, and inaccurately, used as a synonym for sexual intercourse.



Intersexual. An individual who has atypical development of physical sex attributes, including (but not limited to) external genitals that are not easily classified as male or female, incomplete development of internal reproductive organs, variations of the sex chromosomes, overproduction or underproduction of sex-related

hormones, and variant development of the testes or ovaries. Some intersex characteristics are recognized at birth; others do not become apparent until puberty or later. Intersexuals were previously known as hermaphrodites. Some individuals now prefer the term **DSD** (disorders of sexual development) to refer to intersex conditions.

Sexuality. The sexual knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, values and behaviors of individuals. Its dimensions include the anatomy, physiology and biochemistry of the sexual response and reproductive systems; gender identity, sexual orientation, roles and personality; as well as thoughts, attachments, physical and emotional expressions, and relationships.

Sexualities. A sociological term for the many ways human beings engage in physically, emotionally and spiritually intimate behaviors and relationships. The term is typically used to suggest a diversity of sexual and gender identities, rather than a single sexual norm.

Sexual Identity. An individual’s sense of self as a sexual being, including natal sex, gender identity, gender role, sexual orientation and sexual self-concept. Sexual identity may also refer to the language and labels people use to define themselves. **Sexual self-concept** refers to the individual’s assessment of his or her sexual identity. Development of sexual identity is a critical part of adolescence.

Sexual Orientation. An individual’s enduring romantic, emotional or sexual attractions toward other persons. “Heterosexual,” “homosexual” and “bisexual” are examples of specific sexual orientations, although sexual orientation falls along a continuum that ranges from exclusive heterosexuality to exclusive homosexuality.

Many people are attracted in varying degrees to people of the same sex and people of the other sex. It is important to note that:

- Sexual orientation refers to feelings and identity, not necessarily behavior. Individuals do not always express their sexual orientation through their sexual behaviors.
- Sexual orientation is not a choice. It is determined by a complex interaction of biological, genetic and environmental factors (see *Science on Sexual and Gender Diversity* on page 15).

Asexuality. Little or no romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction toward other persons. Asexuals may also be described as **nonsexual**. Asexuality is different from **celibacy**, which is a choice not to engage in sexual behaviors with another person.

Bisexuality. An enduring romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction toward people of all sexes. A person who identifies as bisexual may live in relationships with a partner of the other sex or of the same sex. A bisexual may be more attracted to one sex than another, equally attracted to women and men, or may consider sexual orientation and gender unimportant. The intensity of a bisexual’s attractions toward one sex or another may vary over time.

Heterosexuality. An enduring romantic, emotional and/or sexual attraction toward people of the other sex. The term “straight” is commonly used to refer to heterosexual people.

Homosexuality. An enduring romantic, emotional or sexual attraction toward people of the same sex. The term “gay” can refer to homosexual women or men, while the term “lesbian” refers only to homosexual women.



Gender. An individual’s personal, social and/or legal status as female, male or transgender. Words that describe gender include “feminine,” “masculine” and “transgender.” Gender is a cultural construct that reflects a society’s expectations for feminine and masculine qualities and behaviors.

Gender Identity. An individual’s own sense of self as a woman, man or transgender. Gender identity may or may not conform to an individual’s biological sex.

Gender Expression. The outward expression (behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice and/or body characteristics) of an individual’s gender.

Gender Role. The cultural expectations of female and male behaviors.

Gender Variance. Gender identities, expressions or roles that do not conform to what society typically expects from an individual based on his or her biological sex.



Transgender. An umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the cultural expectations of their biological sex. Transgender people seek to make their gender expression match their gender identity, rather than their biological sex. The term “transgender” does not provide information about a person’s sexual orientation; transgender people can be bisexual, heterosexual, homosexual or asexual.

Transsexual. A term for persons who believe that their natal sex is incompatible with their gender identity. Biological females who live as men are called female-to-male (FTM) transsexuals, transsexual men or transmen. Biological males who live as

women are called male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals, transsexual women or transwomen. Transsexuals often pursue medical procedures such as hormone treatments or gender confirmation surgery (also known as sex-reassignment surgery) to make their physical attributes conform more closely to their gender identity. Transsexuals who pursue sex-reassignment surgery may refer to themselves as pre-operative (“pre-op”) or post-operative (“post-op”) transsexuals. Others dislike this terminology and prefer to say they are in transition.

Cross Dresser or Transvestite. An individual who regularly dresses in attire associated with the other gender, either for sexual excitement or emotional release, or in some cases, for performance art. Cross dressers can be any sexual orientation, but are primarily heterosexual men. Transvestites differ from transsexuals in that they do not want to alter their bodies. In the U.S., the older term “transvestite” is considered by many cross dressers to be offensive, but the usage and connotation vary by culture.

Coming out. Short for “coming out of the closet,” the term refers to the period when LGBT persons acknowledge and embrace their sexual orientation or gender identity and begin to share this information with others. Coming out is not a one-time event, but an extended process of self-identifying to family, friends, colleagues, clergy and other significant people in an individual’s life.

LGBT/GLBT. A collective acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Lengthier versions include “LGBTQ” to include people who identify as “queer,” and “LGBTQQIA,” to include “queer, questioning, intersex and asexual.” The “a” may also be used to refer to “allies,” heterosexuals who support justice for LGBT persons.

Heterosexism. Similar to racism or sexism, this term refers to the privileging of heterosexuality over other sexual orientations, or to the assumption or assertion of heterosexuality as the preferred cultural norm.

Homophobia. Fear, dislike, hatred or prejudice toward homosexuality and homosexual persons.

Queer. Once a negative term for a lesbian or gay man, “queer” has recently been reclaimed by some gay people as a self-affirming reference for anyone of a non-heterosexual orientation or gender identity. It is best not to use this word to refer to specific individuals without their consent.

Questioning. Some individuals do not identify with any of the current terms that define sexual orientation or gender identity; others are struggling to understand their own sexual orientation and/or gender identity. They may choose to refer to themselves as “questioning,” “third gender,” “gender queer,” or they may choose no term at all.

What’s the Right Word?

As public understanding of sexual and gender diversity evolves, so does the language. Terminology once used commonly may now be considered outdated, inaccurate, or even offensive. For example, many individuals prefer to identify themselves as lesbian or gay, rather than homosexual. References to “admitted,” “avowed” or “practicing” homosexuals are offensive, because these adjectives suggest that a homosexual orientation is shameful or chosen, or that a lesbian or gay identity is entirely sexual or erotic in nature.

This following list can be helpful in choosing language that is respectful and inclusive of all persons.

| OUTMODED | CURRENT |
|---|---|
| Admitted, avowed or practicing homosexual | Openly lesbian, openly gay |
| Hermaphrodite | Intersexual, intersex person |
| Homosexual | Lesbian woman, gay man |
| Lifestyle, sexual preference | Sexual orientation |
| Sex change | Sex reassignment, transitioning |
| Transvestite | Cross dresser |
| Gay marriage | Marriage, same-sex marriage (contrasted with other-sex marriage) |

Questions for Group Discussion / Individual Reflection

1. Am I familiar with these terms? Which terms are new to me? Which terms or concepts do I need more information about?
2. When did I first hear the words homosexual, lesbian, gay? When did I first hear the words transgender, transsexual, cross dresser?
3. What messages did I learn about sexual and gender diversity from my parents? My faith community? The media?
4. Why do words matter? How can the words used to describe sexual and gender diversity support the dignity and worth of all persons? How can they hurt people?
5. Are we comfortable using these words? How might we be more inclusive in language around these topics in our faith community?

For More Information

Answers to Your Questions About Individuals with Intersex Conditions. American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, 2006).

<http://www.apa.org/topics/intersx.html>.

Answers to Your Questions About Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality. American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, 2007).

<http://www.apa.org/topics/orientation.html>.

Answers to Your Questions About Transgender Individuals and Gender Identity. American Psychological Association (Washington, DC, 2006).

<http://www.apa.org/topics/transgender.html>.

Defining Sexual Health: Report of a Technical Consultation on Sexual Health, 28–31 January 2002, Geneva. World Health Organization, 2006.

<http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/sexualhealth/index.html>.

Fact Sheet: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth Issues. SIECUS (Sexuality Information & Education Council of the United States), April/May 2001.

http://www.thebody.com/siecus/report/youth_issues.html.

GLAAD Media Reference Guide, 7th ed. Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

<http://www.glaad.org/media/guide/index.php>.

Making the Connection: Sexuality and Reproductive Health. SIECUS (Sexuality Information & Education Council of the United States).

<http://www.siecus.org/pubs/cnct/cnct0000.html>.