



Education Department Resource

The Language of Gender

A Discussion and Vocabulary List for Educators on Gender Identity

By Nicolette Siragusa*

The following resource will provide educators with a set of definitions to help expand their understanding of gender, enabling them to speak effectively and respectfully about gender with peers, parents, and students. Although people have exhibited behaviors outside of traditionally assigned masculine and feminine gender roles throughout recorded history, we are just beginning to explore the idea that gender is not intrinsically tied to a person's biological sex, that gender is not so much natural as it is cultural and historical, and that gender is not fixed at two points, but rather exists along a continuum. This exploration has come about, in part, as a result of critiques begun by the women's movement, and added on to by later movements for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights.

Students are being exposed to more information about gender identity than ever before, as intense widespread cultural discussions ensue, especially through media such as television and the Internet. As a result, students need a trusted adult to whom they can go with questions and concerns; someone who will help them make sense of the diverse and complex messages that they hear in age-appropriate and accurate ways. Young people will benefit from open and honest discussions about gender by learning to accept and appreciate the full spectrum of gender identities embodied by the community members with whom they interact daily. Accurate and affirming information will also help young people to recognize and accept their own gendered identities, whether traditional or non-traditional, resulting in more healthy and holistic personal development. To support this process, educators need to understand their students' identities and provide them with resources and information that affirm them as individuals and as parts of the school community.

One way to begin to make sense of the range of gender identities is to better understand some of the terms and labels associated with gender. When discussing gender identity and expression, it is important to first recognize that sexual orientation is distinct from and independent of gender. Consider the following definitions:

- *Sexual Orientation:* The structure of our romantic, sexual, and/or emotional attractions. Some of the better-known categories include "heterosexual" (or "straight"), "homosexual" (or "gay" or "lesbian"), or "bisexual."
- *Gender Identity:* An individual's innermost sense of self as 'male/masculine' 'female/feminine,' somewhere in between, or somewhere outside of these gender boundaries. Sometimes this "innermost sense" does not correspond with anatomy (e.g. a person born anatomically male, but who identifies as female).

- *Gender Role:* Describes socially determined sets of behaviors (i.e. 'masculine' or 'feminine') assigned to people based on their biological sex (i.e. male or female). People who are born biologically female, for example, may be expected to like the Power Puff Girls but not baseball; people who are born biologically male may be expected to like baseball but not the Power Puff Girls.

Many people develop a gender identity that socially aligns with their biological sex; many do not. But our biological 'maleness' or 'femaleness' does not naturally determine whom we are attracted to, and our sexual attractions do not naturally indicate whether we are male or female—whether in terms of biology or gender. To illustrate, consider the following individuals who each represent a different combination of biological sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity. 'Pat,' born biologically female, identifies as a man, and is attracted to other men. 'Chris,' also born biologically female, identifies as a woman, and is attracted to other women. 'Alex,' born biologically female as well, identifies as a woman, and is attracted to men.

Each of the above fictitious people may be labeled in a variety of ways, including gay, lesbian, heterosexual, male, female, etc. Labels influence how we define ourselves, and describe ourselves to others. They can help us to understand our similarities and differences, thereby enhancing our appreciation of others and helping us to form cohesive group identities.

We may feel constrained, however, by the pressure to fulfill the expectations of labels that often neglect the richness of our personal experiences. Misconceptions about a variety of groups may lead outsiders to label people erroneously, whether out of malice or simply by accident. Such stereotyping may lead some people to internalize negative feelings about themselves or trigger conflict or hostility amongst members of different groups.

The following definitions are therefore offered with a note of caution. Though it is hoped that they will expand and enrich the dialogue around gender at your school, they should not be considered a fixed or definitive lexicon of terms. Since gender is a social construction, the terms we use to describe it are ever-changing and can never reflect the complex identities of all members of the LGBT and other communities. There will always be healthy disagreement about the use and definition of certain terms, so that what any given label means to one person may be different from what it means to another. We must take care, then, to not impose these labels on others, but to always allow people to identify themselves how and when they wish, and to always respect those who choose not to label themselves at all.

Definitions:

Androgyne/Androgynous/Androgyny: From the Latin roots for male (andro) and female (gyne). An androgynous person may identify and appear as both male and female, or as neither male nor female, or as in between male and female. This person also may or may not exhibit the behaviors of the two traditional genders, thus making it difficult for others to place them into a specific gender category.

Cross-dresser: One who dresses, either in public or private, in clothing that society assigns to the opposite sex. Cross-dressing is not an indication of one's sexual orientation or gender identity. The formerly used term, 'transvestite,' is now considered offensive by some.

Drag King: A female who emulates a man in appearance and manner, generally for the purposes of entertainment, and not necessarily because the person identifies as a man.

Drag Queen: A male who emulates a women in appearance and manner, generally for the purposes of entertainment, and not necessarily because the person identifies as a woman. Considered to be a derogatory term by some.

Female to Male (FTM): A person born biologically female, who identifies or feels male, and who takes on the sex, gender, or both of a male through surgery, mannerisms, dress, behavior, etc.

Feminine: Term used to describe the socially constructed and culturally specific gender behaviors assigned to biological females.

Gender/Gender Role: The set of socially defined and culturally specific behavioral and appearance expectations assigned to females ('femininity') and males ('masculinity') on the basis of biological sex, including but not limited to dress, hairstyle, professional roles, family roles, hobbies and interests. Also called 'sex role.'

Gender Dysphoria: Unhappiness or discomfort with the gender role assigned by family and society to one's biological sex. This may or may not coincide with sexual dysphoria.

Gender Expression: Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, and emphasizing, de-emphasizing, or changing their bodies' characteristics. Gender expression is not necessarily an indication of sexual orientation.

Gender Identity: An individual's innermost sense of self as 'male/masculine,' 'female/feminine,' somewhere in between, or somewhere outside of these gender boundaries. Most people develop a gender identity that socially aligns with their biological sex, but many do not.

Gender Neutral: Anything that is considered by society to be appropriate for all genders.

Intersex: At least one in 2,000 children are born with some degree of ambiguity regarding their primary and/or secondary sex characteristics. In these cases, medical personnel cannot easily label the child 'boy' or 'girl.' Most of these children receive cosmetic surgery so that the child's genitalia conform to societal and familial expectations of 'normalcy,' even though such surgeries are not medically necessary and can damage the child's reproductive organs. The number of children born with some degree of intersexuality is difficult to estimate. Though intersex people are opposed to the word 'hermaphrodite' because it is misleading and stigmatizing, it continues to be widely used in the medical profession.

Male to Female (MTF): A person born biologically male, who identifies as or feels female, and who takes on the sex, gender, or both of a female through surgery, mannerisms, dress, behavior, etc.

Masculine: Term used to describe the socially constructed and culturally specific gender behaviors assigned to biological males.

Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM): Term used to describe men who engage in same-sex sexual behavior but choose not to label themselves as "gay."

To Pass/Passing: Successfully assuming a gender role different than the one assigned to a person based on biological sex when interacting with society.

Queer: A controversial term that some LGBT people still consider derogatory; others, most often academics, political progressives and young people, have embraced the term because of its gender neutrality and implication of social non-conformity.

Same Gender Loving (SGL): A term created by African Americans and used by some people of color who view the labels “gay “ and “lesbian” as representative of an LGBT community historically dominated by white people.

Sex/Physical Sex: A classification based on reproductive biology. It is commonly assumed that there are two sexes; since a person’s sex is identified in four main ways (identified below), it is more accurate to think of physical sex as a continuum with most individuals concentrated near the ends.

Genetic Sex: The 23rd chromosome pair coded XX* for female (F) or XY* for male (M).

*There are many other chromosomal organizations, including, but not limited to, XXY, XY, XO. Often times the extra, or missing, sex chromosomes go unnoticed.

Gonads: Glands that produce gametes, usually ovaries (F) or testes (M).

Primary Sex Characteristics – Those physical characteristics present at birth that are used to determine the biological sex of an infant, including, but not limited to, the penis and scrotum (M), and the vagina, clitoris, and labia (F).

Secondary Sex Characteristics: Those physical characteristics not present at birth that develop during puberty as a result of gonadal and adrenal hormones, including facial hair (M) and breasts (F).

Sexual Dysphoria: Unhappiness or discomfort with one’s biological sex. This may or may not coincide with gender dysphoria.

Sexual Reassignment Surgery: A surgical procedure that modifies one’s primary and/or secondary sex characteristics through surgery. This process was formerly called a ‘sex change operation,’ a phrase now considered offensive.

Transgender: Originally coined to describe non-operative transsexuals, this term now refers to people who do not identify with the gender roles assigned to them by society based on their biological sex. Transgender is also used as an umbrella term for all those who choose not to conform to society’s often stereotypical notions of gender expression, including transsexuals, cross-dressers, two-spirit people, and drag queens and kings.

Transition: The period when one is changing from living as one sex or gender to a different conception of sex or gender. Transitioning is a complicated, multi-step process that may include surgically and/or hormonally altering one’s body.

Transsexual: Individuals who do not identify with their birth-assigned sex, and sometimes alter their bodies to reconcile their gender identity and their physical body and/or biological sex.

Non-operative: People who do not intend to change their primary sex characteristics, either because of a lack of desire to, or the inability to. They may or may not alter their secondary sex characteristics through the use of hormones.

Pre-operative: People who have begun the procedure to reassign their primary sex characteristics, but have not yet had the surgery. This covers both those people who have just begun the procedure, and those who are very close to the actual surgery.

Post-operative: People who have had the actual genital surgery done. These people may identify as a man, a woman, an FTM transsexual, an MTF transsexual, etc.

Two-Spirit: The definition of a Two-Spirit person varies across the Native American cultures in which they appear. In general, Two-Spirit people are born one sex, and end up fulfilling the roles assigned to both sexes, in addition to roles reserved for Two-Spirit people. They are considered part male and part female (or wholly male and wholly female), often revered as natural peacemakers as well as healers and shamans. The term 'Berdache,' coined by European explorers to describe people whose gender they did not understand, was replaced by 'Two-Spirit,' a term Two-Spirit people use to refer to themselves.

Definitions compiled and revised from the following sources:

ACLU

<http://www.aclu.org>

Angel's Dictionary

<http://www.chaparraltree.com/raq/angels.shtml>

Gender Talk

<http://www.gendertalk.com/tgism/tgism.shtml>

Gender Web's TGLB Glossary

<http://www.genderweb.org/general/tlbgglos.phtml>

Intersex Society of North America

<http://www.isna.org>

Native America

<http://www.androphile.org/preview/Culture/NativeAmerica/amerindian.htm>

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