
SOME COMMONLY ACCEPTED DEFINITIONS IN THE USA LGBTQ COMMUNITY

“Language is a tailor’s shop where nothing fits.” - Rumi

Definitions - and self definition - can be an important feature of the LGBTQ community. For new allies, these definitions will get you started. To learn more, I suggest reading from a wide range of work put out by LGBTQ people. Browse your local library and surf the web. Expect to find definitions contested and debated - and constantly evolving.

Gay: A person attracted to people of the same gender. Gay can refer to men or women, but is generally used for men.

Lesbian: A woman who is attracted to other women.

Bisexual: A person who is attracted to people regardless of gender (a person does not have to have a relationship to be bisexual nor does bisexuality indicate having a relationship with more than one person).

Gender norms: The sum total of expectations that define gender in a culture. The spoken and unspoken rules and practices that define how a person should behave as a “man” or a “woman” or a member of a different gender category (alternative gender categories are found in cultures around the world). Gender norms define appropriate ways for people of different genders to relate to each other. A person who violates a gender norm will receive some sort of negative feedback from the culture.

Gender identity vs. gender expression: “Gender identity” refers to a person’s internal, deeply felt sense of being either male or female, or something other or in between. Because gender identity is internal and personally defined, it is not visible to others. In contrast, a person’s “gender expression” is external and socially perceived. Gender expression refers to all the external ways gender is acted out, such as dress, mannerisms, speech patterns and social interactions. (Source: Transgender Equality)

Cisgender: a person whose gender identity and gender expression fall within the gender norms of a culture.

Transgender: In its broadest sense, *transgender* encompasses anyone whose identity or behavior falls outside of stereotypical gender norms. In contemporary usage, transgender has become an “umbrella” term that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including but not limited to: pre-operative, post-operative, and non-operative transsexual people; male and female cross-dressers (sometimes referred to as “transvestites,” “drag queens” (or “drag kings”)); intersexed individuals; and men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance or characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical. That includes people who do not self-identify as transgender, but who are perceived as such by others and thus are subject to the same social oppressions and physical violence as those who actually identify with any of these categories. Other current synonyms for transgender include “gender variant,” “gender different,” and “gender non-conforming.” “Trans” is a common abbreviation. (Source: Transgender Equality)

Intersex: Intersex is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn’t seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male.

Queer: An umbrella term for gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans people. Formally insulting, but now re-claimed by some of the LGBTQ community.

Heterosexism: Heterosexism is oppression created through the enforcement of gender norms and roles. Heterosexism restricts the behavior of all people and privileges heterosexual, cisgender men and subordinates and denigrates cisgender women and all LGBTQ people. It hurts everyone.

Closeted/In the Closet: Hiding one's sexual orientation or gender identity.

Coming Out: The process by which lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and trans people recognize, acknowledge, accept and typically appreciate their sexuality and/or gender identity. Coming out is a process of disclosure that typically continues over a person's entire life (as we're always meeting new people.)

Good Manners in the LGBTQ community:

Here are a few guidelines designed to help you from sticking your foot too far into your mouth when interacting with LGBTQ people. ;-) This is just a beginning.

1. Assume you're always interacting with queer people. LGBTQ people are probably in the room even if you're unaware of their presence.
2. Use the gender pronouns the person in question uses to describe themselves. It's a good idea to ask a person which pronouns are appropriate. Be considerate in how you do so. Respect the right of a person to identify their gender and sexuality however they choose.
3. Respect the privacy of LGBTQ people. Allow LGBTQ people to choose when, how and to whom they disclose information about their sexuality and gender. Revealing this information without permission is called "outing" someone and is not only inconsiderate but can endanger a LGBTQ person.
4. Take responsibility to educate yourself. It's okay to ask questions, especially when you've developed a relationship with a queer person, but take time to learn on your own. Consider the sort of questions you might want to ask and how appropriate they are to the relationship you have with the person in question. (Classic blunder: if you wouldn't ask someone about their love life or medical history normally, don't ask them just because they are queer.)

Resources on the Bible and Queer folks:

(None of these resources are perfect, but no one work will be the summation of queer thinking. Read widely)

Peterson Toscano - Quaker Theatrical Performance Activist. I especially recommend "Now I know My Gay B, Cs" and "Transfigurations: Transgressing Gender in the Bible." Peterson is a wonderful, compassionate educator and activist (www.petersontoscano.com).

Homosexuality and Christian Faith: Questions of Conscience for the Churches by Walter Wink. Exegesis and discussion on homosexuality and the bible

Stranger At the Gates, by Mel White. Mel White is/was a huge player in the evangelical movement, but came to accept his sexual orientation. This is his memoir.

Inclusive Orthodoxy (www.thurthsetsfree.net) - A Christian queer organization. I especially recommend the bible study on homosexuality. It's online, it's free and it's a good beginning. It also includes some helpful additional resources.

Compiled by CPTer Joy Ellison, 2009.