

LGBTQ+ Vocabulary List

How to use this Document

This was made to help define terms used during the [Santa Cruz County Queer History Webinar Series](#). Thank you to everyone involved during the development of the new exhibit Queer Santa Cruz.

A note about Vocabulary and Terminology:

This list is meant to help us learn the terms and vocabulary used to represent queer or LGBTQ history. This is not an all-inclusive or exhaustive list of terminology and reflects only the current understanding and usage of words at the time of publishing. Language is constantly changing as new terms are adopted or fall out of usage. These definitions may not resonate with all members of the LGBTQ community but represent generally-accepted or academic and/or medical definitions. When speaking about the queer community one should always use the most inclusive language. When speaking with someone in the queer community always use the terminology the individual identifies with and when in doubt, ask.

ACRONYMS EXPLAINED:

LGBTQ+

Is an initialism (an abbreviation) that means Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning. LGBTQ+ is used to mean all of the communities within the spectrum.

GLBT – Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning.

LGBTQQIAA+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, Allies and others not in any of these categories.

Note: The identities and gender of people on the gender spectrum continue to emerge.

FtM - Referring to a transgender person who transitions from female to male.

MtF - Referring to a transgender person who transitions from male to female.

GSM – Gender and Sexual Minorities. A term some gender study professionals suggest should be utilized instead of the LGBT term.

DSG – Diverse Sexuality and Gender. A term some gender study professionals suggest should be utilized instead of the LGBT term.

Vocabulary

Ally (noun): a straight- or cisgender-identified person who advocates for and supports the queer community. A good ally uses their straight and/or cis privilege to raise their voices and stories of support of the queer community.

Androgyny/ous (adj): a gender expression that is neither typically masculine nor feminine or has elements of both masculinity and femininity. What is considered androgynous changes throughout history in response to what is typically considered masculine or feminine at a specific time and place.

Aromantic (adj): describes a person who experiences little or no romantic attraction to others. Aromantic folks may or may not also feel sexual attraction (see asexual).

Asexual (adj or noun): describes a person who experiences either no or low levels of sexual attraction to others. Asexuals may or may not experience romantic attraction (see aromantic). Like all sexualities, asexuality exists on a spectrum and varies among different people.

Bigender (adj): a person who identifies as both “man” and “woman” and/or who fluctuates between the identities of “man” or “woman” or who fluctuates between traditional masculine and feminine behaviors and identities.

Binary: See gender binary

Biological Sex (noun): a medical term that refers to the chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical characteristics that are typically used to label someone as male, female, or intersex. Often referred to as simply “sex” on medical or demographical documents. Often referred to as “sex assigned at birth” or “sex designated at birth.”

Biphobia (noun) / Biphobic (adj): the negative attitudes and actions a person or people may harbor towards individuals who identify as bisexual. Biphobia exists both within and outside the queer community, as bisexual individuals are often considered “too straight to be gay “or” too gay to be straight.”

Bisexual (noun and/or adj): a sexual orientation that describes a person who is romantically and/or sexually attracted to both men and women. For some, bisexuality may also be used

interchangeably with “pansexual” to refer to sexual attraction to people of all genders and gender identities/expressions.

Butch (noun and/or adj): a person who identifies as masculine and/or has a masculine gender expression. The term as an identity is most often used by cisgender lesbian or bisexual women who express masculine traits and is often described in contrast to someone who identifies as femme (see femme).

Cisgender (adj): a person whose gender identity is aligned with their biological sex. The opposite of transgender.

Cisnormativity (noun): the assumption, by individuals and/or institutions, that all people are cisgender and/or that cisgender identities are superior to transgender identities.

Closeted (adj): describes a person who cannot or chooses not to disclose their queer sexuality or gender identity. A person may be closeted because they have conflicting feelings about being LGBTQ or queer (often for cultural or religious reasons) or because they do not feel safe or supported in being identified by others as LGBTQ. The term closeted and the phrase “coming out of the closet” originates from the American idiom “skeleton(s) in the closet” which means one has a secret, which, if revealed, would have a negative impact on the perception of that person. The phrase was first used academically to describe people who hid their LGBTQ identities in the 1950s.

Coming Out (noun): one’s act of identifying with a certain sexual orientation (e.g. gay, bi, lesbian or transgender, etc.) and sharing this information with others such as family members and friends. Because much of society lives in a binary world, queer individuals may discover that coming out is a process that occurs again and again over time with different groups with whom they associate.

Cross-dresser (noun): someone who wears clothes typically associated with another gender, either for personal reasons or for entertainment (see Drag Kings and Drag Queens). Not to be confused with transgender.

Demisexual (noun or adj): describes an individual who only experiences sexual attraction after forming a strong emotional connection with someone.

Drag King (noun): someone, typically a cisgender woman, who performs as a masculine performer theatrically, primarily through cross-dressing. Not to be confused with transgender.

Drag Queen (noun): someone, typically a cisgender man, who performs as a feminine performer theatrically, primarily through cross-dressing. Not to be confused with transgender.

Femme (noun and/or adj): a person who identifies as feminine and/or has a feminine gender expression. The term as an identity is most often used by cisgender lesbian or bisexual women who express feminine traits and is often described in contrast to someone who identifies as butch (see butch).

Gay (adj): a term that describes someone who is primarily sexually and/or romantically attracted to members of the same gender. The term most commonly refers to men who are attracted to men, although the term can also be used to describe any person of any gender, and may also be used as an umbrella term to refer to the entire queer community. Like all sexual identities, someone must self-identify as gay to be considered gay; the act of having sex with someone of the same gender does not necessarily mean someone identifies as gay, (for example, men who have sex with men in certain settings, such as while in prison), nor does someone need to have engaged in sexual relations with someone of the same sex to self-identify as gay.

Gender Binary (noun): a system of belief in and categorization of only two complementary genders: male/female or man/woman. The gender binary conflates sex with gender, and assumes that sex/gender and heterosexuality are always aligned (ie: women are inherently and always feminine and are only sexually attracted to men and vice versa). The gender binary perpetuates heteronormativity, enforces stereotypical gender roles, and denies the experiences of non-binary identities, such as intersex or transgender. Gender binarism is dominant in most western cultures with the exception of some indigenous North American cultures (see Two-Spirit)

Gender Dysphoria (noun: medical term): originally called Gender Identity Disorder, Gender Dysphoria is a medical term that describes the dysphoria (distress) that a person experiences when they do not feel an alignment with their biological sex and gender assigned at birth. The term gender dysphoria is the current term used by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) to identify a person who is in clinically significant distress associated with being transgender. Some people who are treated with gender dysphoria may choose to transition from male-to-female (MtF) or female to male (FtM). The current clinical term allows individuals with the condition to be treated through health insurance such as transition / gender confirmation surgery and psychotherapy.

Gender Expression (noun): how someone presents or expresses their gender identity externally, such as through choice of clothes, hairstyles, use of makeup, tone of voice, body language, and social behaviors. Gender expression varies throughout time and cultures and all people of all gender identities express their gender in both conscious and unconscious ways. Example:

someone in America who identifies as male or masculine may express their masculinity through shorter haircuts, wearing pants rather than dresses, and not wearing makeup.

Gender Fluid (adj): a gender identity that is a mix of masculine and feminine, although not necessarily in equal parts or at the same time. A person who is gender fluid may feel like they are both masculine and feminine some days, more masculine on other days, or more feminine some days, etc.

Gender Identity (noun): your internal perception of your gender, not to be confused with biological sex / sex assigned at birth. Gender identity is a self-chosen label, such as man, woman, trans, etc.

Gender Non-Conforming (adj): someone whose gender identity and/or expression does not align with the expectations of their sex assigned at birth or socially expected gender roles and expressions typically associated with their biological sex.

Genderqueer (adj): a gender identity that is non-binary, often used as an umbrella term for all non-binary identities such as transgender, Two-Spirit, or bigender.

Gender Role (noun): the expectations of certain characteristics, societal norms, and behaviors generally associated with a specific gender. Gender roles change throughout time, place, and culture. Gender roles are most often considered socially constructed rather than biological.

Heteronormativity (noun): describes the assumption and belief, by both individuals and institutions, that all people naturally align to one of two complementary, biological genders (man and woman) and that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation, or the only natural or good sexual orientation (also known as gender binary). A heteronormative view reinforces gender stereotypes, homophobia, and transphobia. The term was first popularized in the early 1990s in academia and queer theory.

Heterosexism (noun): a system of beliefs, attitudes, biases, and discriminations, both by individuals and institutions, in favor of opposite-sex coupling as both the norm and superior to queer relationships and identities. Heterosexism is most often associated with the discrimination and biases of straight/heterosexual people against LGBT people, however anyone can harbor heterosexist attitudes and biases, including LGBT individuals, both out and closeted. The term is used as an equivalent to terms such as sexism and racism.

Heterosexual (adj): describes a person who is primarily attracted sexually and/or romantically to members of a different sex or gender. Also called straight.

Homophobia (noun) / homophobic (adj): an umbrella term for the spectrum of negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that individuals and institutions may harbor and/or enact towards any or all members of the LGBT community, or specifically towards lesbians and gays. Also see transphobia and biphobia.

Homosexual (adj: medical term): a term that is used to describe someone who is primarily sexually and/or romantically attracted to members of the same gender. The term is generally considered stigmatizing due to its history of use to describe same sex and same gender attraction and relations as a category of mental illness. The preferred terms are now gay (as an umbrella term or to refer specifically to men), lesbian (in reference to women) or queer (as an umbrella term).

Intersex (noun): describes any of the naturally occurring variations in sex characteristics, including chromosomes, gonads, sex hormones, and/or genitals that do not fit typical binary notions of male or female bodies. These variations are sometimes medically referred to as intersex disorders or disorders of sex development and naturally occur at a rate of about 1% of the population. Intersex folks may have different chromosomes (XXY or XXXY for example) or have hormonal differences (such as androgen insensitivity) that make them develop sex organs and secondary characteristics that are either ambiguous or a combination of what we typically think of as male or female. Historically, due to gender binary beliefs in society, children that were born with intersex characteristics had "normalizing" surgery to make the external genitals look either more male or more female. These types of surgeries are increasingly recognized as human rights abuses and are illegal in some regions, including in California. Intersex people may identify as intersex or may identify as any other sexual or gender identity. While some people who are intersex may fit the medical definition of a hermaphrodite (an organism with both typical testes and typical ovaries) the term hermaphrodite is considered both stigmatizing and a pejorative term as it is a term used primarily to refer to non-human animals and plants.

Lesbian (noun): a term used to describe women who are primarily romantically and/or sexually attracted to other women. First used in history in the book, *The Toast*, written by William King in 1732. Additionally, the term "romantic friendship" would describe close women relationships prior to the 1950s when the term lesbian became part of American vocabulary. Like all sexual identities, someone must self-identify as lesbian to be considered lesbian; the act of having sex with someone of the same gender does not necessarily mean someone identifies as lesbian, nor does someone need to have engaged in sexual relations with someone of the same sex to self-identify as lesbian.

Non-binary (noun): a term used to describe gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine or which otherwise fall outside the gender binary. A person may identify as non-binary if they do not feel like they fit the traditional definition of man/male or woman/female.

Many transgender folks identify as non-binary. Similar terms to describe this identity are genderqueer or gender-expansive. See also: gender binary

Out/Outing (adj/verb): the act of disclosing someone's sexual orientation or gender identity without that person's consent. Some students may choose to be out at school or with their friends but not out with their family at home. (Most schools consider it illegal to out a student as LGBT to school staff or parents/guardians without the student's consent).

Pansexual (adj): a sexual orientation that describes a person who experiences sexual and/or romantic attraction for members of all gender identities and expressions. The term is sometimes used interchangeably with bisexual, although the term pansexual rejects the notion of a binary gender system. Pansexual people may or may not be attracted to all genders and gender expressions equally.

Passing (verb): a term typically used to describe transgender folks who are accepted or able to "pass" for a member of their self-identified gender identity regardless of biological sex/ sex assigned at birth. The term may also be used to describe any queer person who can "pass" for or be perceived as straight. Passing may be a goal for some transgender folks but it is not a goal for all transgender folks, particularly those who identify as specifically nonbinary.

Polyamory/Polyamorous (noun/adj): describes the practice of or the sexual orientation towards having consensual relationships with multiple partners at once. This may also include people who are in consensual open relationships (where one or all partners are allowed to seek out additional partners). Polyamory may be an ethnic or cultural expectation, a rejection of a society that expects compulsory monogamy, or the result of an individual being forced to maintain one relationship, typically an opposite-sex marriage, to fulfill social expectations while pursuing a more meaningful relationship that may not be socially accepted (such as a same sex or same gender relationship).

Pronoun (noun): a word that can function by itself as a noun phrase that refers either to the participants in the discourse (such as I or you) or to someone mentioned elsewhere in the discourse (such as she, he, or they). In English the masculine pronouns are typically he/him/his and the female pronouns are she/her/hers. Transgender, gender nonconforming, or non binary folks may prefer the singular they, as in they/them/their, or other gender-neutral pronouns such as ze/zer/zirs. The current favorite term for such pronouns is "personal pronouns" or "gender pronouns." The term "preferred gender pronouns," (often abbreviated as "PGP") has fallen out of style as some argue that the word "preferred" implies that other people have a choice not to use the pronoun the person requests they use.

Queer (noun, adjective): the currently preferred umbrella term for all sexual and gender identities that are not heterosexual or cisgender. Many queer-identified people prefer the term to describe their identity because it is both broader and deliberately ambiguous than the identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The word queer is often capitalized as a proper noun when used to describe an identity or community.

Queer Theory: a field of post-structuralist critical theory that emerged in the early 1990s out of the fields of queer studies and women's studies. Queer theory includes the theory of “queerness” itself and includes research, readings and texts. Includes queer history.

Queer History: The study about individuals and the events of the gay rights movement which include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.

Questioning (verb, adjective): an individual who is unsure of or undecided, or who is currently exploring, their own sexual orientation or gender identity.

Sexual Orientation (noun): one’s inherent sexual, romantic, and/or spiritual attraction towards others, either of a different, the same, or multiple genders. The term “sexual preference” which implies choice or alternative option is sometimes mistakenly used to describe sexual orientation or a person's sexual preference or identity as bisexual, heterosexual, or homosexual.

Third Gender (noun): a term for people who do not identify as either man/male or woman/female or who otherwise do not identify with a binary gender.

Trans/Transgender (adj): an umbrella term, first used in the 1960s, that refers to a range of gender identities that do not conform to typical expectations of binary genders or one’s biological sex/ sex assigned at birth. Gender nonconforming and non binary are also terms that are often used to describe transgender identities. Opposite of cisgender.

Transition (noun or adj): refers to the process of transitioning physically, medically, socially, and/ or emotionally to a gender identity and/or expression that is different from one’s biological sex / sex assigned at birth or expected gender identity/expression. The process of transition is not necessarily completed or the result of a single event.

Transphobia (noun): an umbrella term for the spectrum of negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that individuals and institutions may harbor and/or enact towards transgender or gender nonconforming people.

Transsexual (noun and/or adj): a term that typically describes a person who wishes to permanently transition to the gender they identify with rather than their biological sex or

sex/gender assigned at birth. The term was first used in the 1920s to refer to people who underwent what was then called genital reassignment surgery or sex reassignment surgery, but is now referred to a medical transition and gender affirmation surgery. Some transsexual people also identify as transgender, but not all transgender people identify as transsexual.

Transvestite (noun): describes a person who dresses in attire typically associated with a different gender (see cross-dresser) for any number of reasons, including performance (see Drag King/ Drag Queen), for relaxation or fun, or for sexual gratification. The term transvestite typically refers to cisgender men and historically referred to those who cross-dressed for sexual gratification. Today the term is generally considered both outdated and derogatory. Not to be confused with transgender.

Two-Spirit (noun): a pan-Amerindian umbrella term first adopted in 1990 during the third annual Intertribal Native/First Nations gay and lesbian conference to describe gay, lesbian, bisexual, and nonbinary genders within the indigenous communities. Rather than purely related to sexual orientation and gender identity, the role of Two-Spirit is recognized as a spiritual role, in which the individual's spirit or soul is both masculine and feminine. The term Two-Spirit was created by LGBT indigenous people to replace the term berdache which had historically been used by non-native anthropologists and academics to describe indigenous people who fulfilled multiple gender roles. The term Two-Spirit rejects the conflation of native gender and sexuality variant identities with western identities such as gay, lesbian, or trans, as these terms tend to simplify and mis-categorize the diverse identities and experiences of gender and sexuality in indigenous North American cultures. Many indigenous communities recognize at least four genders (feminine female, masculine female, feminine male, masculine male), and most indigenous communities and tribes have specific terms for sexual and gender variant members. Two-Spirit is generally recognized as a positive umbrella term to describe these identities. As this word is specific to indigenous culture it would be considered an inappropriate appropriation for non-native folks to self-identify as Two-Spirit.

Pejorative / Slang Terms Explained:

Dyke (adj): Refers to a lesbian person. Originally meant to be a slur, it has been "reclaimed" by many Lesbians who might use it to identify themselves or other Lesbians. It is considered rude to use the word "Dyke" unless you self-identify as one.

Fag(got) (noun): an offensive term used to refer to a male homosexual or any member of the queer community.

“That’s so gay” (adj): in addition to its formal meaning, the word “gay” has also been used historically as a pejorative term beginning in the 17th century. The original definition of the

word “gay” was “joyful or carefree: bright and showy.” As early as the 14th century the term became sexualized and was sometimes used to refer to people who were addicted to immoral pleasures, such as women who were sex workers / prostitutes or men who had sex with multiple partners or had sex while unmarried.

Along with the clear association of gay as specifically meaning homosexual also came the use of the word gay as a specifically pejorative term when used as an adjective. This usage first began in the 1970s and gained widespread popularity, especially among young people, in the 1990s. In this context, to describe something as “gay” means it is lame, pathetic, or otherwise bad. The use of the term gay as a pejorative is widely considered to be an example of hate speech, homophobic language, and microaggression, as it conflates gayness and/or LGBT identity to a generic put-down or negative term.

Hermaphrodite (noun): A scientific term that describes an organism that is at once both fully male and fully female; a medical term that formerly described intersex spectrum disorders / disorders of sex development. The term hermaphrodite is still used in reference to plant and animal species that have both male and female sexual characteristics but it is both medically incorrect and considered derogatory to use the term to refer to people as it implies they are less than human or animalistic. Many members of the intersex community also feel the term “intersex disorder” is offensive as it implies that the naturally occurring differences in chromosomes, gonads, and/or sex organs is not natural or is inherently wrong. Some people who identify as intersex have reclaimed the word hermaphrodite but the term is still generally considered offensive. Legal term used by the medical profession, etc.

Queer (adj): The original definition of the word was “strange,” “peculiar,” or “odd,” and generally had a negative connotation. By the early 1900s the word queer began to be used to refer to feminine men and people who were sexually deviant. In the mid 1900s the word queer was used as a pejorative to describe specifically men who were believed or perceived to be effeminate and/or who engaged in “passive” (receiving) anal or (giving) oral sex with other men. It was not until the 1980s that the term queer began to be reclaimed, first by LGBT people of color and later by the larger LGBT community, as a word of empowerment and positive self-identity. Queer as a positive identity is currently primarily used by academics and younger generations as many folks of older generations still feel the the association with the word as a pejorative.