

Gender and Sexual Diversity terminology

last updated 08/2020

Iowa State University is committed to the full participation of ISU community members with diverse gender and sexual identities in support of ISU's efforts to develop and sustain a more comprehensively inclusive environment. Our individual responsibility as we engage in improving campus climate is to educate ourselves about language related to gender identity, gender expression, sexual identity, and sexual orientation. This list is curated for those who want to be better prepared to engage in conversations about gender and sexual diversity (GSD), but have little exposure to those opportunities.

Beyond this resource, Gender and Sexual Diversity Initiatives in the Division of Diversity and Inclusion exists to address matters that are important to the LGBTQ+ community and is the touchpoint for those who would like to engage in efforts to improve campus for ISU community members who hold diverse gender and sexual identities.

This resource does not include all GSD terminology. Additionally, language is always evolving. After becoming familiar with this list, read these terminology groupings for better understanding:

Sex and Gender

Sex, Sex Assigned at Birth and Intersex
Gender, Gender Identity and Gender Expression
Cisgender, Transgender and Non-Binary

Gender Identity, Gender Expression, Sexual
Identity and Sexual Orientation
Heteronormativity, Heterosexism and
Heterosexual Privilege

Ally: A person who openly affirms and advocates for the safety, dignity, and inclusion of those from a marginalized social group. Allyship in this context means advocating for the well-being and rights of people who hold marginalized gender and sexual identities.

Binary: The classification of things into two distinct, opposite, and disconnected categories. In this context, masculine v. feminine, male v. female, gay v. straight, and cisgender v. transgender are examples. A binary mindset is problematic when considering gender and sexual diversity.

Cisgender: A descriptor for a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth - sometimes "cis" for short. "Cisgender" is preferred to terms like "biological" "genetic" or "real" when referring to gender as these terms suggest that transgender and non-binary people's identities are not authentic or legitimate.

Cisnormativity: An (often subconscious) notion or belief that everyone is or should be cisgender and the attitudes and outcomes associated with that assumption.

Cisgender Privilege: Advantages that come with identifying or being perceived as cisgender (e.g. acceptance from family and religious institutions, safety in public spaces, access to competent and respectful healthcare, acceptance in one's chosen career field).

Cissexism: Behavior, policies and other actions that grant preferential treatment to cisgender people. A type of sexism that reinforces the idea that being cisgender is somehow better or more "right" than other gender identities and/or makes other genders invisible.

Coming Out: The lifelong process of realizing, defining, and sharing one's gender and/or sexual identities.

Gender: The categorization of people based on social/cultural constructions of masculinity, femininity, and other gender categories. Gender is usually attributed to social roles and the perceptions of others about how gender should be performed instead of the gender that an individual affirms for themselves. Woman, man, boy, and girl are examples of this term. "Gender" is often misused to mean "sex."

Gender Confirmation: The process by which people more closely align their outward appearance with their internal knowledge of their gender. This can be a social process (e.g. dressing and using names and pronouns in alignment with one's gender identity) and/or a medical process (hormone therapy, surgery).

Gender Expression: Everything we do that communicates our gender to others: clothing, hairstyles, mannerisms, way of speaking, roles we take in interactions, etc. Gender expression manifests in a number of ways, including femininity, masculinity, androgyny, and others. Gender expression can vary for an individual from day to day or in different situations.

Gender Identity: How one sees oneself as a gendered or agender person. Gender identity is how we think about ourselves and call ourselves – it is not defined by how other people perceive our gender. Gender identity may be fluid, depending on an individual’s experience of cultural influences. Common identity labels include cisgender, agender, and transgender.

Gender-Inclusive: A descriptor of practices, language, and spaces that seek to include people of all genders.

Heteronormativity: An (often subconscious) notion that everyone is or should be heterosexual and the attitudes and outcomes associated with that assumption.

Heterosexism: Behavior, policies and other actions that grant preferential treatment to heterosexual people. A type of sexism that reinforces the idea that heterosexuality is somehow better or more “right” than any other sexual orientations and/or makes other orientations invisible.

Heterosexual Privilege: Advantages that come with identifying or being perceived as heterosexual (e.g. acceptance from family and religious institutions, safety in public spaces, access to competent and respectful healthcare, acceptance in one’s chosen career field).

Intersex: An umbrella term for people who exhibit biological and anatomical diversity which might include ambiguous genitalia, having traits of both male and female reproductive organs, possessing a chromosomal variance other than XY or XX, having hormone levels that are not considered average, or other biological factors which don’t easily fit into constructed “male” or “female” boxes.

Non-Binary: Not relating to, composed of, or involving just two things. In a gender/sexual diversity context, identities beyond the binary of man/woman; male/female; masculine/feminine; and gay/straight.

Outing: Exposing someone’s identity(ies) to others. Outing someone can have serious repercussions for their employment, economic stability, personal safety, or familial relationships.

Queer: An umbrella term for the myriad of gender and sexual identities. While often used today, it has a long history as a slur, so the decision to use this word should be made after determining the context of the situation.

QTPOC: Initialism that stands for queer and transgender people of color.

Questioning: In the context of gender/sexual diversity, being unsure of, exploring, and/or otherwise being in the process of understanding one’s gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual identity, and/or sexual orientation.

Sex: The categorization of people based on a collection of physical or biological traits and factors, either known or assumed. Sex is usually defined as relating to reproductive organs, genitalia, chromosomes, hormones, and/or secondary sex characteristics. Male, female, and intersex are examples of this term. “Sex” is often misused to mean “gender.”

Sex Assigned at Birth: The labeled imposed, generally by a medical or birthing professional, based on a physical examination of a newborn.

Sexual Identity: How one identifies one’s degree of desire for intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships. Asexual and demisexual are examples of this term. “Sexual identity” is often misconstrued to mean “sexual orientation.”

Sexual Orientation: The direction of one’s sexual interest toward others, if any. Sexual orientation characterizes who one is emotionally, physically, spiritually, and/or sexually attracted to or who one loves. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and pansexual are examples of this term. “Sexual orientation” is often misconstrued to mean “sexual identity.”

Transgender: An umbrella term for someone whose gender identity does not align with social expectations of the sex they were assigned at birth. The term transgender is not indicative of gender expression, sexual orientation, hormonal makeup, physical anatomy, or how one is perceived in daily life. Sometimes shortened to trans or trans*.

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