

LGBTQUIAWhat? The ABC's of Sexuality

Rev. Stacey Midge

This article first appeared in the Winter 2012 issue of the RfA newsletter.

When I was young, “gay” was the only word I knew to describe anything other than heterosexuality. Somewhere along the line, perhaps in junior high, the term “lesbian” popped into my vocabulary as well. A little later, the concept of bisexuality was added to my frame of reference.

When I got to college, “GLBT” was common parlance in some of my classes, although there was some confusion over what the “T” stood for. Currently, depending on what context I’m in, I might hear people refer to GLBT, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQIA...the list seems to grow continuously.

It’s no wonder, then, that when I have given presentations involving the terminology of sexual and gender identities and gender expression (confusing phrases in themselves), people often give me befuddled looks - even people who are advocates, allies, and members of the demographics I’m describing. But it’s important to know what we’re saying, because so much of the language used in conversations about these issues is inaccurate and often hurtful.

With that in mind, I give you this handy guide to the ABC’s of sexuality and gender. This should not be considered an exhaustive list since, as I mentioned above, the language is always being refined and new terms being coined to more accurately and compassionately describe these human realities.

Rev. Stacey Midge serves as Associate Minister of Mission, Outreach, and Youth at First Reformed Church of Schenectady, NY, and was a member of the founding board of Room for All.

The ABC's

Updated in January 2015, with the acknowledgment that terms are fluid, not all terms are acceptable or preferable to those whom they seek to describe, and the immense breadth of LGTBQ terminology cannot be fully addressed here.

Ally: a non-LGBTQ person who supports and advocates for the rights of LGBTQ people.

Asexual/Nonsexual: a person who lacks sexual attraction or interest in sex.

Assigned male or female at birth/ Assigned gender: The gender a person’s parents or guardians present them as at birth (most often based on the reproductive anatomy one is born with). See: **Cisgender, Intersex, Transgender.**

Binary (Gender): the belief or practice (conscious or unconscious) that gender and sexuality are a two-part system (men and women/ male and female). The binary doesn’t allow space for individuals who identify outside of those groups; it is important to note that the cultural standard is binary, making life for non-binary individuals difficult.

Biphobia: fear of or anxiety about bisexual persons.

Bisexual: a person who is attracted to both men and women.

Cisgender/ "Cis": Cisgender – someone who feels comfortable with the gender identity and gender expression expectations assigned to them based on their physical sex; the opposite of **Transgender**.

Closeted / "In the Closet": people who choose to keep their sexual or gender identities a secret from some or all people.

Coming Out: the process of acknowledging one's sexual and/or gender identities to other people.

FAAB/ MAAB: Female Assigned At Birth/ Male Assigned At Birth. See: **Assigned male or female at birth/ Assigned gender**

Femme: a feminine identifying person of any gender or sex.

FTM/F2M: abbreviation for female-to-male transgender person. See: **Transgender**

Gay: a person who is attracted only to members of the same sex. Most commonly used for male-identified individuals who are attracted to men; "lesbian" is usually the preferred term for women who are attracted to women.

Gender: See: **Gender Identity**

Gender Dysphoria: Persistent unease and discomfort that one's assigned gender does not match one's gender identity.

Gender Expression: the manner in which a person outwardly expresses gender.

Gender Identity: a person's way of self-identifying with a gender category, such as male, female, some combination of both, neither, etc. Most people develop a gender identity that corresponds to their biological sex, but many do not. Some societies have third-gender categories. See: **Sex (Biological)**.

Gender Norms: The societally approved presentations of one's assigned gender. Western culture's gender norms include: men play sports and have short hair, women wear makeup and have long hair, etc. Gender norms vary from culture to culture. Western gender norms are based on the **binary** system.

Hermaphrodite: an out-of-date and offensive term for an intersex person. See: **Intersex**.

Heterosexism: the attitude that heterosexuality is the only valid or acceptable sexual identity.

Heterosexual/Straight: a person who is only attracted to members of the opposite sex.

Homosexual: a person who is only attracted to members of the same sex.

Homophobia: fear of or anxiety about homosexual persons.

Intersex: a general term for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive/sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of male or female.

Lesbian: a female-identified individual who is only attracted to other women.

LGBTQ/LGBTQQIA): initialism for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (sometimes with the added categories of Questioning, Intersex, and Asexual).

MTF/M2F: abbreviation for male-to-female transgender person. See: **Transgender**

Openly Gay / Lesbian / Bisexual / Transgender/ Queer: people who publicly acknowledge their sexual or gender identities.

Outing: the act of revealing an LGBTQ person's sexual and/or gender identities without that person's consent.

Pronouns: a word that functions as a noun/ describes a person either within or outside a conversation. One may prefer various pronouns to describe themselves. Examples: he/him/his, she/her/hers, they/their/them. **Note:** they/their/them, while typically plural, may be the preferred singular pronouns for an individual who does not identify with "he" or "she" pronouns.

Queer: a term used by some to describe their sexual identity, gender identity or gender expression when other terms are inadequate. In the past, this term has been considered offensive and some LGBT people still consider it so, while others have come to prefer it; typically a term meaning that one's gender or sexual identities/expressions are contrary to the **binary** or **gender norms**.

Questioning: people who are unsure about their sexual or gender identities.

Sex (Biological): the reproductive organs (ex. male or female) sex characteristics you are born with. These do not necessarily equate to one's gender identity or expression. **See also: Intersex.**

Sexual Identity/ Sexual Orientation: a person's attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex. Includes gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual, and asexual.

Trans*: an umbrella term used by many to encompass the wide array of possible gender identities/expressions. These include Transgender, but may also include any gender expression that doesn't fit the binary or societally expected gender norms. It is important to note, the asterisk (*) does not typically relate to a specific footnote, but rather is a symbol of the inclusion of all gender identities/expressions within this term.

Transgender: people whose gender identity does not correspond to their biological sex/ the gender they were assigned at birth. Transgender persons may or may not alter their physical characteristics or gender expression through medication, surgery, or other means to appear more typical to the gender with which they identify; the opposite of **Cisgender**.

Transphobia: fear of or anxiety about transgender persons.