



UNHEARD VOICES

Stories of LGBT History



Definitions Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Anti-LGBT Bias

Prejudice and/or discrimination against people who are or who are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).

Biological Sex

The biological and physiological characteristics of males and females. These are characteristics people are born with that do not usually change over the course of their lives. Although sex is typically defined as being male or female, in actuality, there are more than two sexes. About 1.7% of the population is intersexual—born with male and female biological aspects in varying degrees.

Coming Out (of the Closet)

To be “in the closet” means to hide one’s identity. Many LGBT people are “out” in some situations and “closeted” in others. To “come out” is to publicly declare one’s identity, sometimes to one person in conversation, sometimes to a group or in a public setting. Coming out is a life-long process. In each new situation, a person must decide whether or not to come out. Coming out can be difficult for some because reactions vary from complete acceptance and support to disapproval, rejection and violence.

Gender

The socially-defined rules and roles for men and women in a society. The attitudes, customs and values associated with gender are socially constructed; however, individuals develop their gender identities in two primary ways: through an innate sense of their own identity and through their life experiences and interactions with others. Western society generally defines gender as a binary system — male and female — but other cultures define gender as more fluid and existing along a continuum.

Gender Expression

Refers to the ways in which people externally communicate their gender identity to others through behavior, clothing, haircut, voice and emphasizing, de-emphasizing, or changing their bodies’ characteristics. Gender expression is not an indicator of sexual orientation.

Gender Identity

One's innermost concept of being male or female (regardless of biological sex), including how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. Gender identity is developed through an innate sense of one's own identity and the internalization of common values that are socially, historically and culturally determined by a given society. Most people's gender identities match their biological sex. For some, however, their gender identity is different from their biological sex. In general, consciousness of gender identity emerges between the ages of 18 months and 3 years.

Gender Role

The set of roles and behaviors assigned to females and males by society. U.S. culture recognizes two basic gender roles: **masculine** (having the qualities attributed to males) and **feminine** (having the qualities attributed to females).

Heterosexism

Conscious or unconscious bias based on the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm. Heterosexism can also be understood as the assumption that a dual gender role system based on birth-assigned sex is natural and desirable.

Homophobia/Transphobia

The fear or hatred of LGBT people, both directed at others, but also within oneself (*internalized oppression*).

Internalized Oppression

The way in which oppressed people come to believe, accept or live out the inaccurate stereotypes and misinformation about their group.

Intersex

Individuals with biological and physiological characteristics that are not exclusively male or female as defined by the medical establishment. Although being intersex does not necessarily present medical risks, medical practitioners and family members tend to assign intersex children one sex (male or female). Although many undergo cosmetic surgery to conform to society's idea of "normal," such procedures can damage reproductive organs and emotionally scar children by forcing on them a gender and/or sex role that may feel unnatural to them.

LGBT (or GLBT)

Acronym that groups lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals into one group based on their common experience as targets of heterosexism and their common struggle for sexual and gender freedom. This term is generally considered a more inclusive and affirming descriptor than the more limited "gay" or "homosexual."

Queer

Historically a negative term used against people perceived to be LGBT, “queer” has more recently been reclaimed by some people as a positive term describing all those who do not conform to rigid notions of gender and sexuality. Queer is often used in a political context and in academic settings to challenge traditional ideas about identity (referred to as “queer theory”).

Questioning

Refers to people who are uncertain about their sexual orientation or gender identity. They are often seeking information and support during this stage of their identity development.

Sexism

Prejudice and/or discrimination against people based on their real or perceived sex. Sexism is based on a belief (conscious or unconscious) that there is a natural order based on sex.

Sexual Identity

How individuals perceive and define themselves with regard to their sexual orientation. Such labels include “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “bi,” “queer,” “questioning,” “heterosexual,” “straight,” and others. Sexual identity evolves through a developmental process that varies depending on the individual. Sexual behavior and identity (self-definition) can be chosen.

Sexual Orientation

Determined by one’s sexual and emotional attractions. Categories of sexual orientation include **homosexuals** — gay, lesbian — attracted to some members of the same sex; **bisexuals**, attracted to some members of more than one sex; and heterosexuals, attracted to some members of another sex. Though the origins of sexual orientation are not completely understood, it is generally believed to be established before the age of five.

Straight Ally

Any person outside the LGBT community who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBT people.

Transgender

Refers to those whose gender identity and/or expression do not match society’s expectations with regard to gender roles, or who do not identify as either of the sexes as currently defined.

Transgender is a broad term that includes transsexuals, cross-dressers, drag queens/kings, transgender butch, and a variety of other identities; however, many people find the use of *transgender* as an umbrella term problematic because it reduces different identities into one oversimplified category. When referring to transgender people, use the pronoun they have designated as appropriate, or the one that is consistent with their presentation of themselves.

Transsexuals

Individuals whose gender identities do not match the sex that was assigned to them at birth. Some transsexual people alter their bodies surgically and/or hormonally. This procedure, called a **transition** (formerly “sex change”) is a complicated, multi-step process that may take years to complete.