The Language of Gender

The power of language to shape our perceptions of other people is immense. Precise use of terms in regards to gender can have a significant impact on demystifying many of the misperceptions associated with gender. However, the vocabulary of gender continues to evolve and there is not universal agreement about the definitions of many terms. Nonetheless, here is some working language and examples of frequently used (and misused) terms. We offer them as a starting place for dialogue and understanding, which begins by clarifying how we are using various terms, rather than asserting that they represent the final or only definition of the various terms.

Affirmed gender - An individuals' gender self-identification, rather than the gender that was assumed based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

Agender - A person who sees themself as not having a gender. Some agender-identified people see themself as being gender neutral, rather than not having any gender, but in any case do not identify with a gender.

Cisgender - Refers to people whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex at birth (cis- from Latin, meaning, "on this side [of]." In contrast to trans, from the Latin root meaning "across", "beyond", or "on the opposite side [of]").

Dimensions of gender - Our body, expression, and identity are three distinct, but interrelated components that comprise a person's gender. Each of these dimensions can vary greatly across a range of possibilities. A person's comfort in their gender is related to the degree to which these three dimensions feel in harmony.

FtM - A person who was assigned a female sex at birth and whose gender identity is boy/man.

Gender binary - A system that constructs gender according to two discrete and opposite categories: boy/man and girl/woman. It is important to recognize that both cisgender and transgender people can have a gender identity that is binary.

Gender expression - This is our "public" gender. How we present our gender in the world and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Gender expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses those roles to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Gender fluid - People who have a gender or genders that change. Gender fluid people move between genders, experiencing their gender as something dynamic and changing, rather than static.

Gender identity - A person's innermost core concept of self which can include boy/man, girl/woman, a blend of both, neither, and many more. Gender identity is how each person perceives themself and what they call themself. One's gender identity can be consistent with, or different than, their sex assigned at birth. The language a person uses to communicate their gender identity can evolve and shift over time, especially as someone gets older and has access to a broader gender vocabulary.

Gender role - The set of functions, activities, and behaviors commonly expected of boys/men and girls/women by society.

Gender-expansive - An umbrella term used for individuals that broaden their own culture's commonly held definitions of gender, including expectations for its expression, identities, roles, and/or other perceived gender norms. Gender-expansive individuals include those with transgender and non-binary identities, as well as those whose gender in some way is seen to be stretching society's notions of gender.

Genderqueer - Is an umbrella term to describe someone who doesn't identify with conventional gender identities, roles, expression and/or expectations. For some, genderqueer is a non-binary identification, and for others it is not.

Intersex - Also referred to as Disorders/Differences of Sexual Development. About 1% of children are born with chromosomes, hormones, genitalia and/or other sex characteristics that are not exclusively male or female as defined by the medical establishment in our society. In most cases, these children are at no medical risk, but most are assigned a binary sex identity (male or female) by their doctors and/or families.

MtF - A person who was assigned a male sex at birth and whose gender identity is girl/woman.

Non-binary - An umbrella term for gender identities that are not exclusively either boy/man, or girl/woman.

Sex – Used to label a person as "male" or "female" at birth, this term refers to a person external genitalia and internal reproductive organs. When a person's sex is assigned a particular sex at birth, it is often mistakenly assumed that this will equate with their gender; it might, but it might not.

Sexual orientation - Our sexual orientation and our gender are separate, though related parts of our overall identity. Gender is personal (how we each see ourselves), while sexual orientation is interpersonal (which people we are physically, emotionally and/or romantically attracted to).

Transboy - A child who was assigned a female sex at birth and has a boy gender identity.

Transgender - Sometimes this term is used broadly as an umbrella term to describe anyone whose gender identity differs from their assigned birth sex. It is also used more narrowly as a gender identity that reflects a binary gender identity that is "opposite" or "across from" the sex they were assigned at birth.

Transgirl - A child who was assigned a male sex at birth and has a girl gender identity.

Transition - A term commonly used to include the steps a transgender, agender, or non-binary person takes in order to align aspects of their life to be consistent with their gender identity. This term can be misleading, however, as it implies the person's gender is changing from one gender to another; in actuality the person's gender remains relatively stable. It is others' understanding of that gender that shifts. What people see as a "transition" is actually an alignment in one, or more dimensions of the individual's gender, as they seek congruence across those dimensions. A transition is taking place, but it is often those associated with the person (parents and other family members, support professionals, employers, etc.) who are transitioning in how they see the individual's gender, and not the person themself. Thus we prefer the term seeking congruence or congruence measures. A person can seek congruence in any or all of the following ways: social congruence-through changes of social identifiers such as clothing, hairstyle, gender identity, name and/or pronouns; hormonal congruence-through the use of medicines such as hormone "blockers" or cross hormones to promote gender-based body changes; surgical congruence in which an individual's body is modified through the addition or removal of gender-related physical traits; and legal congruence through changing identification documents such as one's birth certificate, driver's license, and passport.

Transphobia - Fear, dislike of, and/or prejudice against transgender people.

Transsexuals - An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities. Still preferred by some people who have permanently changed, or seek to change, their bodies through medical interventions, including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries. Unlike transgender, transsexual is not an umbrella term. Many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer the word transgender.