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Transgender 101: Terminology

Sex:

The classification of people as male or female. At birth infants are assigned a sex, usually based on the appearance of their external anatomy. (This is what is written on the birth certificate.) However, a person's sex is actually a combination of bodily characteristics including: chromosomes, hormones, internal and external reproductive organs, and secondary sex characteristics.

Gender Identity:

One's internal, deeply held sense of one's gender. For transgender people, their own internal gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. Most people have a gender identity of man or woman (or boy or girl). For some people, their gender identity does not fit neatly into one of those two choices. Unlike gender expression (see below) gender identity is not visible to others.

Gender Expression:

External manifestations of gender, expressed through one's name, pronouns, clothing, haircut, behavior, voice, or body characteristics. Society identifies these cues as masculine and feminine, although what is considered masculine and feminine changes over time and varies by culture. Typically, transgender people seek to make their gender expression align with their gender identity, rather than the sex they were assigned at birth.

Sexual Orientation:

Describes an individual's enduring physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity and sexual orientation are not the same. Transgender people may be straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. For example, a person who transitions from male to female and is attracted solely to men would identify as a straight woman.

TRANSGENDER-SPECIFIC TERMINOLOGY

Transgender (adj.):

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms - including transgender. Some of those terms are defined below. Use the descriptive term preferred by the individual. Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by their doctors to change their bodies. Some undergo surgery as well. But not all transgender people can or will take those steps, and a transgender identity is not dependent upon medical procedures.

Transsexual (adj.):

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. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers. If preferred, use as an adjective: transsexual woman or transsexual man.

Trans:

Used as shorthand to mean transgender or transsexual - or sometimes to be inclusive of a wide variety of identities under the transgender umbrella. Because its meaning is not precise or widely understood, be careful when using it with audiences who may not understand what it means. Avoid unless used in a direct quote or in cases where you can clearly explain the term's meaning in the context of your story.

Transgender man:

People who were assigned female at birth but identify and live as a man may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten it to trans man. (Note: trans man, not “transman.”) Some may also use FTM, an abbreviation for female-to-male. Some may prefer to simply be called men, without any modifier. It is best to ask which term an individual prefers.

Transgender woman:

People who were assigned male at birth but identify and live as a woman may use this term to describe themselves. They may shorten to trans woman. (Note: trans woman, not “transwoman.”) Some may also use MTF, an abbreviation for male-to-female. Some may prefer to simply be called women, without any modifier. It is always best to ask which term an individual prefers.

Non-Binary:

People who are non-binary do not have a gender identity which is either male or female. There are many sub-groups who identify within the non-binary classification. These might be (some of these terms overlap or might be the same but some people prefer one over the other):-

- Agender (not having a gender)
- Bigender (having two genders)
- Trigender
- Neutrois
- Genderqueer
- Gender fluid
- Demi boy
- Demi girl
- Androgyne

Cross-dresser:

While anyone may wear clothes associated with a different sex, the term cross-dresser is typically used to refer to heterosexual men who occasionally wear clothes, makeup, and accessories culturally associated with women. This activity is a form of gender expression, and not done for entertainment purposes. Cross-dressers do not wish to permanently change their sex or live full-time as women. Replaces the term “transvestite.”

Please note: Transgender women are not cross-dressers or drag queens. Drag queens are men, typically gay men, who dress like women for the purpose of entertainment. Be aware of the differences between transgender women, cross-dressers, and drag queens. Use the term preferred by the individual. Do not use the word “transvestite” at all, unless someone specifically self-identifies that way.

Transition:

Altering one’s birth sex is not a one-step procedure; it is a complex process that occurs over a long period of time. Transition includes some or all of the following personal, medical, and legal steps: telling one’s family, friends, and co-workers; using a different name and new pronouns; dressing differently; changing one’s name and/or sex on legal documents; hormone therapy; and possibly (though not always) one or more types of surgery. The exact steps involved in transition vary from person to person. Avoid the phrase “sex change.”

Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS):

Refers to doctor-supervised surgical interventions, and is only one small part of transition (see transition above). Avoid the phrase “sex change operation.” Do not refer to someone as being “pre-op” or “post-op.” Not all transgender people choose to, or can afford to, undergo medical surgeries. Journalists should avoid overemphasizing the role of surgeries in the transition process. Some people prefer the term *Gender Reassignment Surgery (GRS)*.

Gender Identity Disorder (GID):

Outdated terminology, see Gender Dysphoria

Gender Dysphoria:

In 2013, the American Psychiatric Association released the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) which replaced the outdated entry “Gender Identity Disorder” with Gender Dysphoria, and changed the criteria for diagnosis. The necessity of a psychiatric diagnosis remains controversial, as both psychiatric and medical authorities recommend individualized medical treatment through hormones and/or surgeries to treat gender dysphoria. Some transgender advocates believe the inclusion of Gender Dysphoria in the DSM is necessary in order to advocate for health insurance that covers the medically necessary treatment recommended for transgender people.

OTHER TERMS YOU MAY HEAR

You may hear the following terms when doing research on transgender issues or speaking to an interview subject. As they are not commonly known outside the LGBT community, they will require context and definition if used in mainstream media. Their inclusion here is for informational purposes.

Cisgender:

A term used by some to describe people who are not transgender. "Cis-" is a Latin prefix meaning "on the same side as," and is therefore an antonym of "trans-." A more widely understood way to describe people who are not transgender is simply to say non-transgender people.

Gender Non-Conforming:

A term used to describe some people whose gender expression is different from conventional expectations of masculinity and femininity. Please note that not all gender non-conforming people identify as transgender; nor are all transgender people gender non-conforming. Many people have gender expressions that are not entirely conventional -- that fact alone does not make them transgender. Many transgender men and women have gender expressions that are conventionally masculine or feminine. Simply being transgender does not make someone gender non-conforming. The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual and should only be used if someone self-identifies as gender non-conforming.

Genderqueer:

A term used by some people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the categories of man and woman. They may define their gender as falling somewhere in between man and woman, or they may define it as wholly different from these terms. The term is not a synonym for transgender or transsexual and should only be used if someone self-identifies as genderqueer.

TRANSGENDER NAMES, PRONOUN USAGE & DESCRIPTIONS

Always use a transgender person's chosen name.

Many transgender people are able to obtain a legal name change from a court. However, some transgender people cannot afford a legal name change or are not yet old enough to change their name legally. They should be afforded the same respect for their chosen name as anyone else who lives by a name other than their birth name (e.g., celebrities).

Whenever possible, and especially if you are unsure ask transgender people which pronoun they would like you to use.

A person who identifies as a certain gender, whether or not that person has taken hormones or had some form of surgery, should be referred to using the pronouns appropriate for that gender.

If it is not possible to ask a transgender person which pronoun is preferred, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person's appearance and gender expression.

For example, if a person wears a dress and uses the name Susan, feminine pronouns are usually appropriate.

It is **never** appropriate to put quotation marks around either a transgender person's chosen name or the pronoun that reflects that person's gender identity.

The Associated Press Stylebook provides guidelines for journalists reporting on transgender people and issues. According to the AP Stylebook, reporters should "use the pronoun preferred by the individuals who have acquired the physical characteristics of the opposite sex or present themselves in a way that does not correspond with their sex at birth. If that preference is not expressed, use the pronoun consistent with the way the individuals live publicly." (see AP & New York Times Style)

When describing transgender people, please use the correct term or terms to describe their gender identity. For example, a person who was assigned male at birth and transitions to living as a woman is a transgender woman, whereas a person who was assigned female at birth and transitions to living as a man is a transgender man. If someone prefers a different term, use it along with an explanation of what that term means to them.

Avoid pronoun confusion when examining the stories and backgrounds of transgender people prior to their transition.

Ideally a story will not use pronouns associated with a person's birth sex when referring to the person's life prior to transition. Try to write transgender people's stories from the present day, instead of narrating them from some point in the past, thus avoiding confusion and potentially disrespectful use of incorrect pronouns.

TERMS TO AVOID

Problematic Terms:

Problematic: “transgenders,” “a transgender”

Preferred: transgender people, a transgender person

Transgender should be used as an adjective, not as a noun. Do not say, “Tony is a transgender,” or “The parade included many transgenders.” Instead say, “Tony is a transgender man,” or “The parade included many transgender people.”

Problematic: “transgendered”:

Preferred: transgender or transgender person/transgender people

The adjective transgender should **never** have an extraneous “-ed” tacked onto the end. An “-ed” suffix adds unnecessary length to the word and can cause tense confusion and grammatical errors. It also brings transgender into alignment with lesbian, gay, and bisexual. You would not say that Elton John is “gayed” or Ellen DeGeneres is “lesbianed,” therefore you would not say Chaz Bono is “transgendered.”

Problematic: “transgenderism”:

Preferred: none

This is not a term commonly used by transgender people. This is a term used by anti-transgender activists to dehumanize transgender people and reduce who they are to “a condition.” Refer to being transgender instead, or refer to the transgender community. You can also refer to the movement for transgender equality.

Problematic:

“sex change,” “pre-operative,” “post-operative”

Preferred: transition

Referring to a “sex-change operation,” or using terms such as “pre-operative” or “post-operative,” inaccurately suggests that one must have surgery in order to transition. Avoid overemphasizing surgery when discussing transgender people or the process of transition.

Problematic:

“biologically male,” “biologically female,” “genetically male,” “genetically female,” “born a man,” “born a woman”

Preferred: assigned male at birth, assigned female at birth or designated male at birth, designated female at birth

Problematic phrases like those above are reductive and overly-simplify a very complex subject. As mentioned above, a person’s sex is determined by a number of factors - not simply genetics - and one’s biology does not “trump” one’s gender identity. Finally, people are born babies - they are not “born a man” or “born a woman.”

Defamatory Terms:

Defamatory:

“deceptive,” “fooling,” “pretending,” “posing,” “trap,” or “masquerading”

Gender identity is an integral part of a person’s identity. Do not characterize transgender people as “deceptive,” as “fooling” or “trapping” others, or as “pretending” to be, “posing” or “masquerading” as a man or a woman. Such descriptions are defamatory and insulting.

Defamatory:

“tranny,” “she-male,” “he/she,” “it,” “shim”:

These words dehumanize transgender people and should not be used in mainstream media. The criteria for using these derogatory terms should be the same as those applied to vulgar epithets used to target other groups: they should not be used except in a direct quote that reveals the bias of the person quoted. So that such words are not given credibility in the media, it is preferred that reporters say, “The person used a derogatory word for a transgender person.” Please note that whilst some transgender people may use the word “tranny” to describe themselves, others find it profoundly offensive.

Source: GLAAD (<http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>)