

Transgender 101

By definition, transgender individuals must piece together a self-identity that is different or in opposition to what everyone tells them they are. Although the rise of the internet and growing public visibility of transgender people and issues are making it easier for individuals to tap into preexisting identity models and resources, the transgender experience is still largely an isolated, individual one.

This might be the primary reason why the nomenclature for the trans experience is both unsettled and, among trans people themselves, very hotly contested.¹ There are literally hundreds of words used to describe a trans identity or experience. Therefore, the definitions offered here, like all trans definitions, should be used gingerly and in a way that makes it possible for each trans individual himself² to use the term(s) sie considers most reflective of hir self-concept and experience.

The Terms Paradox

One absolutely essential concept to be mindful of is what FORGE³ has coined as the Terms Paradox. Quite simply:

Terms are crucial: Finding out what terms a person uses and then using their language is a primary way of conveying respect and openness.

Terms are meaningless: Terms tell you none of what you need to know to provide appropriate services or have respectful, meaningful interactions.

Two Broad Definition Categories

Due to the lack of consensus and the expansiveness of identity terms, only two broad categories will be defined in this document:

Transgender or Trans: An umbrella term that encompasses a wide range of people whose gender identity or expression may not match the sex they were assigned at birth, including (but not limited to): MTS, FTMs, genderqueers, transsexuals, cross-dressers, intersexed individuals, androgynes, butches, bigendered persons, femmes, SOFFAs (Significant Others, Friends, Family and Allies) and others.

SOFFA: Significant Others, Friends, Family, and Allies. Everyone has a SOFFA circle; in this context, SOFFA refers to individuals who have a personal connection with a person whose gender identity or expression transcends societal norms. [The ratio of trans people to SOFFAs is approximately 1:30.]

What does gender mean, anyway?

Examining gender may seem either overt and obvious or confusing and complicated. Four key concepts help clarify what is meant when referring to “gender.”

Gender Identity: An individual’s inner sense of their own gender, of being male, female, something in between, or any other gender.

Gender Expression: How a person expresses their gender through clothing and accessories, grooming, speech, body language, social interactions and other behaviors.

Gender Perception: How a person’s gender is perceived by others. External perceptions of an individual’s gender may or may not be in alignment with that person’s gender identity or intended gender expression, thus there may not be a consensus from outside observers about what gender an individual might be.

Gender and Sexual Orientation: In the United States, there is widespread confusion between gender identity and sexual orientation. Therefore, it is important to explicitly state that gender identity (whether a person sees himself or herself as male or female or some other gender) and sexual orientation [whether a person is generally physically and/or emotionally attracted to someone of their same gender (gay, lesbian), someone of their “opposite” gender (heterosexual), both genders (bisexual), or no genders (asexual)] are two separate characteristics.⁴ Thus, trans people can be of any sexual orientation, and any given sexual orientation can include multiple genders.

NOTE: *Every person has a gender, gender identity, gender expression and gender perception – not just transgender people. Commonly, most cisgender (people who are not-transgender) Americans, think very little about their gender, typically taking it for granted.*



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Key concepts

- The number of transgender people in this country is extremely large because “trans” can include everyone who bends gender and those brave enough to associate with them.
- Our culture places great value in maintaining a gender binary, where people are supposed to fit in either one of only 2 gender boxes.
- Gender is not 2-sizes fit all, but rather a fluid constellation of multiple identities, experiences, expressions, desires, and expectations that form a construct.
- Individuals may use (or not use) many techniques to bring out their gender (identity) and/or make their internal state match their external reality, including: hormones, clothing, name change, mannerisms, surgery, hairstyle, or many other possibilities.
- Transgender people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight or asexual. Partners of trans people can be gay, lesbian, bisexual, straight or asexual. Many couples with a trans person have “mixed orientation” relationships where the couple holds seemingly “opposite” identities such as lesbian and heterosexual.

A Small Sample of Trans and SOFFA Identity Terms

admirer	either	girl	merm	post-op	transsexual
agender	<i>enaree</i>	girlfag	mesbian	pre-op	transfag
ally	epicene	goy	metamorph	prettyboy	transfagdrag
ambigender	FTM	grrl	mixed-gendered	queen	transfaghag
ambiguous	FTX	gurl	mohabbazin	queer	transfeminine
androgynous	faerie	guy	monogender	questioning	transgender
androgynous	fairy	guydyke	mukhannathun	salmacian	transgenderist
anomalous	female	gynandroid	multigender	scrat	transgirl
asexual	female-assigned	gyrl	mutarajulat	sekrata	transguy
bent	female-bodied	herm	nadle	self-defined	transhag
berdache	feminine	hermaphrodite	neither	sererr	transman
bigender	feminist	hermaphrodyke	neuter neutral	shaman	transmasculine
bioboy	femme	heterosexual	neutrois	shapeshifter	transperson
biogirl	fluid	hijra	new man	shemale	transsensual
boi	fourth gender	homoemotional	new woman	single-gender	transsexual
both	freak	homovestite	ninauposkitzipsp	sir	transvestite
boy	galla	human	no-gender	sissy	transwoman
boychick	gender bender	intergender	no-op	sister	trisexual
boydyke	gender defender	intersex	none of the	soft butch	twin-spirit
brother	gender gifted	khal	above	static gendered	two-spirit
bull dyke	gender	lady	none of your	stone butch	undecided
burl	normative	MTF	business	stone femme	undeclared
butch	gender outlaw	MTFTM	nongender	switch third	undefined
butchdyke	gender refusenik	MTM	omnigender	gender	unspecified
crossdresser	gender	MTX	omnisexual	tomboy	walyeh
diesel dyke	transcender	mahu	other	tomgirl	woman
drag hag	gender variant	male	other-gendered	tranny	womyn
drag king	genderbent	male-assigned	pangender	trannyboy	XO
drag prince	gendered	male-bodied	pansexual	trannychaser	XTF
drag princess	genderfuck	man	pansy	trannygirl	XTM
drag queen	genderqueer	man-chick	person	trans	Xanith
dyke	genderstraight	masculine	plumber femme	transboy	
effeminate	gink	me	polysexual	transdyke	

End Notes

1. In a survey conducted by the Loree Cook-Daniels and Michael Munson, participants were offered 13 transgender identity terms from which survey respondents could choose. 15% of respondents objected so strongly to being “boxed in” to only 13 categories that they wrote in (often angry) comments of complaint. Over 17 additional gender identities were suggested by respondents. For some of the results of that survey, see <http://www.forge-forward.org/newsletters/v07i01/surveyresults.htm>.
2. “Hir” and “sie” belong to one of several gender-neutral pronoun systems; they encompass not only males and females, but also individuals who claim a gender identity outside or beyond “male” and “female.”
3. FORGE is a national organization, founded in 1994, serving transgender individuals and SOFFAs. FORGE houses the Transgender Aging Network.
4. Note that the term “bisexual” presumes two genders. For that reason, many trans individuals and SOFFAs are creating or adopting terms such as omnisexual, pansexual, homoflexible, heteroqueer, and transsensual to express the belief that there are more than two possible genders to which someone could be attracted.

