

Say What?

When dealing with identity politics, proper word-choice is important. Here is why we say what we say.

By Nick Shepard

What words do we (or should we) use to describe ourselves and our communities? Does LGBTQ cover all the bases? Where did "gay" and "lesbian" come from? And most importantly, why does it matter? These were the questions on the minds of LAMBDA writers when we revamped this publication last fall. We found that before we could decide what term to use to describe ourselves, we had to take a look at how sexual and gender minorities have been labeled in the past. These labels at times have been confusing, verbose, imprecise, contradictory and downright ridiculous.

In the late 19th century, sexologists began to categorize human beings as distinct groups based on their sexual behavior and desires. This new separation, couched in medical and psychological terms, created a need for a semantic way to distinguish these sexual outcasts. The people who nowadays are often referred to as "gay" or "lesbian" at different times have been known as invert, sexual intermediates, Uranians, fairies, the third sex, Urnings, and a host of other bizarre appellations. As the first sexual minority organizations in the U.S. arose in the 1950's and 60's, most members self-identified as *homosexuals*, a term coined by German writer Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1868. Doctors and psychologists had begun using the term decades earlier as a means of describing same-sex desire and behavior as a pathology or disturbance.

During the 1960's, activists were searching for a new vocabulary with which to define themselves. Many turned to the term *gay*, a common slang for homosexuals for decades, though largely unknown to the public. Charles Thorpe, one of the founders of the Gay Liberation Front, offered the following explanation for his chosen label: "Homosexual is a straight concept of us as sexual. Therefore, we are in a sexual category and become a sexual minority, rather than an ethnic group, a people! But the word gay has come to mean (in its street usage) a life style in which we are not just sex machines."

In the early 1970's, female gay activists inspired by the feminist movement began speaking out against marginalization in gay rights groups. Many dropped the common label "gay women" in favor of *lesbian*, a more female-specific word derived from the Mediterranean isle of Lesbos, home of the legendary woman-loving poet Sappho in the seventh century B.C. As "gay" came to be seen less and less

as a gender-neutral term, U.S. organizations began to shift their names; for example, UNC's first student group was founded in 1974 as the Carolina Gay Association, but in early 1985 students changed the name to the Carolina Gay and Lesbian Association.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, *bisexual* people began vocally demanding inclusion into the gay and lesbian movement. In 1992, the CGLA became Bisexuals, Gay men, Lesbians, and Allies for Diversity (BGLAD). Also, transvestites, pre- and post-operative transsexuals, cross-dressers, and others were uniting under the label *transgender*, coined by activists in the 1970's as an umbrella term for gender-variant people. Concurrently, "queer theory", a new academic discipline theorizing sexuality as fluid and socially constructed gave rise to the label *queer*, signifying a dynamic and unstable sexual identity that operates outside of restrictive binaries. Queer, originally meaning odd or different, has also come to be used as an umbrella term for all those outside of the heteronormative framework. In 2000, BGLAD changed its name to the Queer Network for Change in 2000

Arguably, the most common term today used to describe our community is the acronym *LGBT* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender). *LGBTQ* is sometimes used to include queer or questioning, and in this publication and elsewhere *LGBTIQ* is used to include intersex persons, born with "sex chromosomes, external genitalia, or an internal reproductive system that is not considered 'standard' for either males or females."

Some activists view *LGBT(Q)* as ethnocentric, excluding especially persons of color who identify with no label at all or indigenous conceptions, such as the Native American *Two-Spirit, mati* (an African woman-loving female), or countless others. *Gender-queer* (people with unstable or fluid gender expressions), *pansexual* (people with the potential to be attracted to all people, outside of a gender binary system), and countless other labels have been claimed by individuals attempting to navigate the turbulent waters of identity.

In a culture in which identity politics still matter, the words we choose can exclude, reflect phobias, and even reinforce oppressive hierarchies. Although our choice proved difficult, LAMBDA has chosen to use *LGBTIQ* throughout this publication in an effort to recognize the diversity in sexuality, gender identity, sex designation and gender expression. •

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