

## Categories and Labels: LGBPPTQQQEIOAAAF2/SGL ...

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Arnold M. Zwicky, Stanford University

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Pansexual, Polyamorous, Trans (Transgender(ed), Transsexual, Tranny), Queer, Queer-Friendly, Questioning, Eunuchs, Intersex, Other, Asexual, Androgynous, Allies, Friends, 2-Spirited, and Same Gender Loving

1. This is the Big Tent in the SIP domain (Sexuality / Sexual Orientation, Gender / Sexual Identity, and Sexual Practices), constructed through an initialism that piles up labels for categories in the domain; there are more beyond these, for instance,

the medical/legal Homosexual, the vernacular Fag(got) and Dyke, the proud Out, the alternative Same Sex Loving to SGL, the overbroad Sexual Minorities, the social-service-technical MSM (Men who have Sex with Men), the re-spellings Ghey and Ghay, the Asian-American Downe, insults like Homo, Lesbo, and Pansy, labels for subtypes and subcultures within the LGBQ world (Lipstick Lesbian, Bulldyke, Fem(me) vs. Butch, Bear, Twink, Daddy vs. Boy, Top vs. Bottom, etc.), labels for those who engage in same-sex sexual practices without identifying as LGBQ (LUGs (Lesbians Until Graduation), Gay for Pay, Trade, as well as DL (men on the Down Low), MSMs), labels for fetishes and tastes (Leather, BDSM, X Queen for various Xs (Rice Queen, for example), etc.), and more

[on *homosexual*, see my blog posting “Labels: homosexual”; on *MSM* and *DL*, see the LLog postings “On the DL” and “Implicature in the service of a moral panic”; on *gay for pay* and related terms, see my blog postings “Gay for pay”, “What’s the word for this?”, and “A note on gay for pay”; on *bear*, see my blog posting “Waltzing with bears”]

2. Where does the monstrous initialism come from? Assembled from proposals for organizations, programs, and events addressed to people in various parts of the SIP domain, plus additions suggested by specific people (Eunuchs, Androgynous). Some examples from “The alphabet soup of sexuality and gender” on my blog:

“organizations serving LGBTQQ/SGL youth and young people” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Same Gender Loving) [from Mark Mandel on ADS-L]

acronym for Toronto Pride festival: LGBTTIQQ2SA (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Questioning, 2-Spirited and Allies) [from Mike Reaser on Facebook]

QUILT BAG (QUeer Intersex Lesbian Transgender Bisexual Asexual Gay) [from Tané Tachyon on Facebook]

3. A few more-minimalist strategies:

Gay (GLF (Gay Liberation Front), GAA (Gay Activists' Alliance), Gay Pride events, sometimes called simply Pride)

G(&)L (NOGLSTP, the National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals; *The Gay & Lesbian Review*), L(&)G (PFLAG: Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays)

GLB (Ohio State's AGLBFS, Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Faculty and Staff; many others)

GLBO (O for Other)

GLBT (for a while the dominant initialism)

LGBT (Stanford's LGBT Community (Resources) Center; LGBT now seems to be the most widely used initialism)

Queer (Queer Studies programs many places; QUEST – QUEer University Employees at Stanford – “a group for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered faculty/staff at Stanford and their allies”, described in mailings as “for queer-identified staff and faculty at Stanford, their friends and allies”)

Out (Out at Stanford, Out in Linguistics)

Lavender (Lavender Languages & Linguistics Conference, Minnesota Lavender Bar Association, Lavender Pages, Lavender Graduation at many schools)

the entertaining Alphabet Soup (campus organization at Univ. of Nebraska at Omaha, formerly GALO (Gay And Lesbian Organization), informally known as ABC Soup – report from Frank Bramlett to Outil in 2006)

4. In domains of sociocultural significance – plants, foodstuffs, food service establishments, household furnishings, and clothing are some others I've looked at – we see several common themes

4.1. There are folk categories (and labels) and any number of more technical or specialized categorizations (and labelings). Medical and legal treatments in the domain of sexuality vs. folk treatments are a case in point: the former lump together all sorts of same-sex connections, while the latter are (mostly) inclined to line up with experience.

The lines between the folk domains and the technical / specialized / scientific domains are permeable, with plenty of traffic back and forth across the lines, differences in different sociocultural contexts, and changes in time.

4.1a. each of these categorizations serving some purpose (the categories serve a role in, for instance, welcoming people to Pride events, speaking to them for social-service purposes like AIDS prevention, creating groups for political action or socialization, etc.)

One of the motives for messing with initialisms is to give something for everyone in the category in question to latch onto, regardless of the labels they prefer for themselves or others. This can be a self-defeating strategy, since people who use one label may reject being associated with people who use another (self-identified “queers” might refuse to

have anything to do with a “gay” group, for example — and might argue that this isn’t just a preference for a different name but a different social identification).

In any case, the purpose of all this categorization and labeling is crucial. For LGBTQQ/SGL above, the purpose was providing social support services to a particular target group picked out by sexual desires. In other social-service settings, the target group is of people engaged in particular sexual practices — notably in providing health and medical services to men who engage in or are likely to engage in sex with other men: G and B men, plus MSMs.

There are other contexts, of course — groups formed for political action or representation (“speaking for” the mumble-mumble-mumble community), groups formed for mutual support, groups formed for socialization with one another, etc. Typically, such groups have mixed and shifting purposes.

4.1b with each of these categorizations grounded in some set of beliefs and attitudes (in this case, medical, legal, religious, psychological, etc.)

In the domain of sexuality / sexual orientation, there are three main grounds for categorization: desire, sexual practices and social behavior, and identification. All of these are complex. (For some introductory exposition with respect to men, see my blog posting on “Taste Y”.) (The following discussion is from the male point of view; I can’t do everything at once.)

**Desire** can be experienced but not recognized, recognized but not seen as significant, or recognized and understood to be important. And same-sex desire can co-exist with varying degrees of other-sex desire (to the point where a fair number of men who take pleasure from considerable man-man sex nevertheless don’t categorize themselves as same-sex-loving -- because they “like women”).

**Sexual practices** (including taking particular roles in certain practices) are also complicatedly related to the other dimensions, even beyond the vexed question of what counts as “having sex” with another person. But even men who engage in clearly sexual practices with other men, though only in an insertor role and without demonstrations of affection, often don’t categorize themselves as same-sex loving. And men who have sex with other men not out of what they experience as same-sex desire, but for money or adulation or power or male bonding also often don’t categorize themselves as same-sex-loving.

Then there are other behaviors, like the **presentation of self**. A fair number of same-sex-loving men don’t see themselves as like other such men who are “recognizably gay” in their behavior; these men are likely to categorize themselves as “regular guys” (or “normal gays”) and even to maintain that they “don’t like gays”.

**Identification** comes in several flavors, beyond the distinction between self-identification vs. other-identification -- starting with the recognition that someone

belongs to a social group and moving on to the recognition that they belong to a social group that defines a type of person.

4.2. The lines between these are permeable, with categorizations moving back and forth between contexts of use and changing in time (see McConnell-Ginet p. 144 on “localized as well as broader uses” and on shifts in *queer*, *gay*, and *lesbian*. Plus her comment on p. 138 on *queer* as “a powerful example of semantic indeterminacy, shift, and, most important, contestation.”)

[Note in particular the many appropriations and reclamations in this story, many contested (Fag(got) is still in vigorous contestation). And the restriction of some of the usages (notably, Downe, Ghey / Ghay) to subcultures. Often these two features occur together, as in the development of a set of men who identify themselves, defiantly, as Sissies, Sissyboys, or Sissyfags. The monster initialism doesn’t (yet) have an F for Fag(got) or an S for Sissy/etc. (though Arne Adolfsen suggested, not entirely facetiously, on Facebook that the initialism should be FDF for Fags and Dykes and Friends).]

4.3. The categories don’t cover the domain fully and aren’t always mutually exclusive

This is true of folk categories in general; see my 2005 handout.

4.4. Though some of these categories are labeled, in ordinary or (semi)technical language, many taxons (especially the larger taxons, like SIP) are unlabeled

The domain of SIP is packed with unlabeled higher-level taxons – the category structure of the domain is complex -- which is another reason for the initialisms in this domain (cf. STEM for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics). LGB, for example, picks out a higher-level taxon well short of the whole SIP domain.

It’s also true that (as McConnell-Ginet stresses, p. 152ff.) the labels come with a history (see points 4.6 and 4.8), so that the initialisms tend to incorporate many labels for overlapping (or even virtually identical) categories. As I noted above, people who accept one label might (vehemently) object to related labels, so if inclusiveness is an important motive for you, you’re likely to pile on descriptors.

The early history of the higher taxons is closely tied to the history of gay political and social movements, with the initial unity of G alone (embracing both men and women) fragmented into L and G, and then into L(&)G and B. Then followed various genuine expansions, with T as the first addition.

4.5. Ordinary speakers (and, usually, “scientific” or other specialized analysts) have access to the categories only through the labels, and are likely to assume that the labels are the categories (*gay* “means” so-and-so), to analytic and social confusion (see 4.8)

4.6. The categorizations (and accompanying labels, as in the putative basic vocabulary in the monster initialism) compete with one another and are often at cross purposes

4.7. The categorizations, especially at the higher levels, may be in dispute: in particular, do they represent (socioculturally or psychologically) real groupings?

As a result, some people object to elements of the monster initialism as not belonging in it.

4.8. The labels pick up associations (or connotations) from their contexts of use, at least as individual speakers experience these, and so are promoted or disfavored

[Note that associations / connotations can be reinterpreted over time as denotations, at least for some groups of speakers.]

The result is that the labels become “politicized” or “ideologized” by virtue of their history. *Homosexual* is a case in point; from “Labels: homosexual”:

(1) The term originated, as an adjective, in a medical context, in translations of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, from which it spread to non-technical contexts. So it has a “clinical” tone to it that suggests disease to many people.

(2) For the noun use, which developed a bit later than the adjective use, *OED2* notes that

In non-technical contexts it is often taken to mean a male homosexual, a female one being termed a lesbian.

As a result, some people object to the term as being insufficiently inclusive.

At the same time, the fact that *homosexual* has *sex* so prominently in it combines with the disease associations of the word and the fact that some public figures (especially religious and political ones) take sexual practices to be the defining characteristic of the category in question means that *homosexual* has become the term of choice in much anti-gay rhetoric – and, as a result, it has become an objectionable term to gays and lesbians, except in medical and legal contexts (and, increasingly, even there). Inclusive calls for Pride events and school and social organizations don’t invite *homosexuals*; there’s no H in the big initialism.

*Gay*, in contrast, spread fast from largely group-internal uses into the wider world (though it took the *New York Times* a long time to get the news), though it’s not without its own historical associations that make it problematical for some: the association with men, who dominated the early political and social enterprises (which gives us *lesbians and gay men* as a favored label for gender-neutral reference, despite its verbosity); the association with movement politics (any number of men have told me that they don’t call themselves *gay* because they’re “not political”); and an association with the flamboyantly gay (“drag queens and men in totally revealing leather”, as the expression goes), as in my passage on presentation of self above.

*Lesbian* has had its own travails. Like *gay*, it has associations with political and social action, and, more important, for many it has strong historical associations with “man-hating” feminism (see McConnell-Ginet’s discussion, pp. 144-8). Here’s Bonnie Morris on one consequence:

[last September, at the welcome-back reception at Georgetown’s LGBT Center] Diverse allies throng the event, which is garnished with “I AM” posters portraying a dozen Georgetown figures claiming different identities – I AM a gay man, a queer woman, bisexual, an ally, etc. How far we’ve come [since she came to Georgetown, in 1994], I think. But it doesn’t take long for me to notice that absolutely no one on the poster identifies as a lesbian.

Morris’s analysis of the situation (which is more widespread than this one occurrence) is that “the terms most popular in identity discourse today” are

all gender-neutral or male-inclusive. They embrace masculine possibilities and identities or relationships with men. “Lesbian” is the one identity that remains challengingly “exclusive” of men. Thus the *L* term reads as alarmingly separatist even to women who might be personally unfamiliar with actual lesbian-separatist movements or politics.

Instead the *L* remains boxed up in initialisms, and *queer woman*, or the adjective *queer*, replaces *lesbian*. Maybe some day (after “The *L* Word” passes into history) we’ll be saying that the *L* in LGBT “doesn’t stand for anything”, like the *S* in SRI, International.

As for *queer*, read McConnell-Ginet. It’s had great success as a label for a higher-level taxon, though one that’s by no means a simple replacement for *gay* or an equivalent to LGBT (and a fair number of people just hate it). Here’s Richard Goldstein (2002: xiv-xv) being deliberately provocative:

I’m drawn to *queer* as a logo—if not as garlic to wave in the gay right’s face—but that might mean changing familiar phrases such as *gay liberation* and *gay rights*. So I’ve decided to use these terms in a somewhat arbitrary way. By *queer*, I mean the whole gestalt, including sluts, punks, s/m dykes, trannies, sissies, sailors on leave, and Anne Heche. By *gay*, I generally mean out and proud homosexuals. But don’t hold me to these definitions. At the risk of offending or confusing some, I’ve done what feels right. Why else would I be . . . a major ’mo?

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