

The SDU TEK Guide to Alternative Gender Identities

Executive summary

SDU should be an inclusive, safe place to be, and this needs to be true for people with alternative gender identities as well. In this guide we go through the complexities involved, but the key messages are:

- Not everyone identifies with gender in the same way – and we need to learn more.
 - Show respect to how people present and how they wish to be addressed – even if it shifts.
 - If you're unsure of someone's correct pronouns, simply ask them, "which pronouns do you use?" --it is much better to ask politely than to assume.
 - Use the name and pronoun a person wishes to use – deadnaming is not OK.
 - Don't make assumptions and don't ask questions you wouldn't ask any other students/colleagues (e.g. about people's bodies or personal histories)
 - Gender and sexuality do not necessarily have a direct connection – and it's really not your business.
 - If you make a mistake, that happens. Just remember to acknowledge and apologize, and then move on.
- *Let's make sure our workplace and our classrooms are safe, inclusive spaces!*

What are "alternative gender identities"?

To begin, it's important to know that there's a difference between sex (which is thought of as biological) and gender (which is a social and lived category). When we are born, doctors and our parents assigned a specific sex to us all (usually based on our external genitalia); and our gender corresponded to that assignment, that is, it was determined if we were a little boy or girl based on our assigned sex.

There are many people who feel comfortable with their assigned sex/gender, and their bodies, and have lived their lives within their gender category without feeling uncomfortable with it. People who do not question or feel uncomfortable with their assigned gender are called cis-gender, meaning they identify with the sex/gender assigned to them at birth. However, not everyone has the same experience, nor should you expect that your experience is the only valid one.

There are many ways in which our gender identity can be more complex than the simple boy/girl, man/woman-binary. Some may experience that their bodies are not in line with the gender they consider theirs, others may think that the binary split is too clumsy and restrictive. That is why we today have, both among our colleagues and our students, people who have a different gender identity from the one the majority might identify and be familiar with. This guide works to clarify the terms related to gender identity and gives some advice on how to respectfully treat colleagues and students who have alternative gender identities.

On being transgender

Transgender is often used as the umbrella term used to describe people who do not identify with the sex and gender assigned to them, and rather identify with another gender. This often

involves people who were born with one gender's genitalia and hormone structure, but who identify with a different gender. Earlier one used the term "transsexual", but this is today considered pejorative. Many in society believe that a transgender person is someone who has gone through or wishes for what is socially thought of as a "full transition", including hormone replacement therapy and gender re-assignment surgery, but this is *not true*. While some transgender people do transition fully from one gender to another, others many only want to access some gender affirming medical technologies (e.g., hormones replacement therapy and gender affirming surgeries), and some transgender people might not want to access hormones or surgeries at all. All people who do not identify with the gender assigned to them are transgender, despite whether they seek gender affirming medical technologies.

In all cases, the polite and respectful thing when engaging with a transgender person is to accept the way in which they present and wish to identify. Furthermore, it is important to always refer to the gender that transgender people are now, and not what they were assigned at birth. As such, a transgender woman is a person who now is and identifies as a woman, despite what she was assigned at birth. A transgender man is someone who now is and identifies as a man. It is not up to anyone else to judge or comment on transgender people's bodies, wishes for their bodies and transition processes.

If for instance a student that you previously knew as a boy called Peter turns up after summer break, presenting as a woman and requesting to be referred to as Malou and use she/her pronouns, this is a choice that should be honored. To still call this person "Peter", after she clearly has indicated her preferred name and pronouns as Malou and she/her, is called "deadnaming" and "misgendering" and is considered deeply disrespectful. Mistakes may happen, and trans people know this, too, but mistakes should be acknowledged and apologized for before moving on. A simple, "I'm sorry, Malou" can go a long way. Purposeful and repeated deadnaming and misgendering is considered transphobic.

There are many ways to be transgender, and some transitions, both medical and social, may take more time with some than with others. In all cases, respect and civility should be the hallmark in interactions with all people at the university, including those with alternative gender identities. Just like you wouldn't ask a cis-gender student or coworker about their genitals or their sex-life, the same goes for a transgender student or coworker.

Transgender people often face both fear, harassment, and ridicule to a degree we may say that our society is transphobic, as it is not built to accommodate transgender and gender diverse people. It is up to every person at the university not to add to the everyday marginalization that transgender people face and show simple courtesy and acceptance. Sometimes the very small gesture of remembering the name and pronoun a person wishes to be used for them, and correcting others who forget or don't know, can go a long way.

On being genderqueer

There are other forms of gender identification beyond being (or wanting to transition to) a man or a woman. Here we use genderqueer to cover a broad range of alternative ways of identifying one's gender, including but not limited to non-binary, genderfluid, or bigender identification. If a person identifies as e.g. non-binary, that does not necessarily mean that they are transgender, but simply that they are not comfortable about being "boxed in" to one gender or another (some but not all non-binary people also identify as transgender). Some identify as "agender", which means that they identify *neither* as male or female – although some agender people may also identify as transgender and/or non-binary. Others may instead have a more genderfluid outlook, and present

more as male at times, and again more as female at others. This means that just because e.g. a student has a non-traditional “gender expression”, such as wearing makeup and female clothing, does not necessarily mean that they are transgender. They may still identify primarily as male, wish to be called “Jens”, and have male pronouns used, even though they aren’t conformist or bound to rigid gender identifications.

Some might wonder what the difference between non-binary and agender is, and this is understandable. Simplifying a bit, we might say that identifying as non-binary is closer to a genderfluid identity, whereas identifying as agender means that one wishes to escape the binary altogether. That said, people may have their own way of interpreting these categories and may have identifications that do not fit in with what is suggested above. Again, asking how people wish to be identified, and respecting their choices is paramount.

Some expressions that are good to know, even though they are rarer, are “intersex” and “bigender”. An intersex individual is usually one born with a mix of chromosomes, anatomy, and hormones that makes precise identification of their sex complicated, making intersex another sex category other than male and female. Historically, doctors simply decided for the baby, including using surgery to “fix” their sex to fit into the male and female binary. This does still happen today, though there is more awareness around intersex activism. A person who is intersex is not necessarily transgender, although some are, and may identify as both intersex and non-binary or bigender.

A bigender individual is someone who rather than not accepting being either a man or a woman chooses to be both. Whilst it might be difficult for a person who identifies along the gender binary to grasp this, there are people who even identify as multigender. It should be noted that both intersex and bigender are rarer than transgender and genderqueer, but an inclusive organization such as SDU should be prepared to accommodate individuals who are so born or so identify.

Being genderqueer – our umbrella term here – does not need to say anything about either gender expression or sexuality. You may have colleagues who present as male, are heterosexual, and who still identify as e.g. genderfluid. Similarly, just because a student presents as female, they may still be uncomfortable being referred to as “she/her/hers”. In all cases, the most important thing is to be open-minded and respectful.

The tricky question of sexuality

Overall, the sexuality of your colleagues or your students should not concern you. That said, a few words may be necessary when it comes to assumptions regarding gender identities and sexuality. The most important thing to understand is *that gender identity and sexuality do not necessarily have any direct connection*. A transgender woman (and when we say this, we always refer to what a person has become, not what they were assigned at birth) may show a sexual interest to men, women, or both. Generally, people remain attracted to the same gender(s) after transitioning as before. Similarly, a non-binary person that had a specific gender assigned at birth may still be attracted to that gender, the opposite gender, both, or only to individuals who also identify as non-binary. Whilst all this might seem confusing to people who have lived with heterosexuality and cisgender as the norm, one shouldn’t make assumptions one way or another.

In addition, there are categories such as “asexual” or “aromantic”. These terms refer to people who, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation, do not have any desire for sexual intimacy or romantic desire. You can thus be a man or woman, yet have no interest in sex or

romance with either gender. Again, these are deeply personal choices, should not have to be argued for or questioned, and deserve respect and civility in the workplace.

I think I've messed up!

That's OK. Everyone slips up. The reason we've written this is not to say that one should be afraid of being around people with different gender identities, but rather that one should be aware of the same. Most people who are e.g. transgender or non-binary confront misunderstandings or hatred on a day-to-day basis, so a little kindness goes a long way. If you feel that you've misgendered a person or asked an inappropriate question, a good way to counter this is to apologize and to ask what the person you've offended would like to say in response (and then, obviously, to listen to this). People with non-normative gender identities may not want to answer prying questions about their bodies or personal histories, but will usually be very happy to answer questions about how they wish to be addressed and what would make a work- or teaching-situation more safe for them.

We all mess up at times, but it is also up to us all to be mindful of the people we work with and the people we teach. It is not up to us to tell them how to be or love, and instead we should pay attention to how we can be respectful and kind towards all the people we interact with at the university, regardless of whether they live their lives or define their identities in the same way as we do. At SDU, we should strive to create an inclusive and supportive environment for everyone, be mindful of our words and actions, and accept that not everyone might be just like us – and that's completely alright.

A few words and definitions to know:

Agender: A person who distances themselves from any gender assignment or expression. Some, but not all, non-binary individuals identify as agender, and some agender people identify as transgender.

Aromantic/asexual: An individual who has no interest in romantic or sexual relationships. This category can contain both cisgender, genderqueer, and transgender people.

Bigender: A person who identifies as being both male and female at the same time, or who might even identify with more genders than the two traditional ones.

Cisgender: An individual who identifies with the gender assignment they received as a child – i.e. your parents were told you were a boy/girl, you were raised as this, and you have never questioned the same. If you find this guide odd and confusing, there is a great likelihood that you are cisgender.

Deadnaming: To refer to a person with their “dead name”, i.e. the name they were given at birth belonging to the other gender than what they now identify as. This is considered exceptionally hurtful and very harmful, and should be avoided.

Genderfluid: A person who is comfortable switching between various gender expressions, e.g. so that they might at times present as being one gender, at others the opposite gender, and possibly a mix of both. A genderfluid person might be non-binary, or exploring their gender identity and later identify as transgender, but may also just prefer not to be fixed in their gender expression.

Genderqueer: A broad category that contains a number of non-traditional ways to identify with and express gender. Note that not all people who may seem to fit under this heading identify as being genderqueer.

Intersex: An individual who was born with chromosomes (e.g., XXY, XXX or XO), internal sex organs (e.g. a person might have both ovarian and testicular tissues) or genitals that do not neatly fit common ideas about male or female bodies. Surgeries and medical interventions are often offered to babies and children in order to make their intersex bodies fit into the binary gender categories we have, though, intersex activism is helping to change this norm. Intersex people may end up identifying with the sex and gender assigned to them, or they may end up being transgender or genderqueer.

Transgender: Individuals who do not identify with the gender assigned to them at birth and feel that this is incorrect, and who instead identify as being a person of the opposite gender to this. May be transitioning medically using hormone replacement therapy, gender affirming surgeries, or a combination of these, or neither. Please be aware of how they prefer to be referred to in terms of name and pronouns

Transsexual: An old way to refer to transgender people which is today seen as pejorative and hurtful. Avoid using this term, unless the trans person specifically asks you to use this term about them.

Transitioning: The process through which a transgender person is finding their own, comfortable gender identity. This may include, but does not have to, hormonal treatments and gender affirming surgical procedures. This could also mean only socially transitioning (e.g., changing name, gender markers on official documents, and changing pronouns). A transition is a personal thing, and unless asked to talk about it, you should not ask about it (cf. someone's divorce or someone's personal health issues). People transition in a multitude of ways, and not everybody wants to transition to what is culturally understood as "the opposite gender." Furthermore, it is not a linear process. In all cases, the person's choice should be respected and treated with civility.

Two-spirit: A non-binary gender identity in Native American and First Nations individuals. Mentioned here only to point out that there are cultures where diverse gender identities have been both accepted and respected for thousands of years.

Misgender: When a person uses the wrong gender markers or wrong pronouns about a transgender person. For example, in the above example, saying the student Malou is a man and using he/him pronouns for Malou when Malou says herself that she identifies as a woman and uses she/her pronouns is misgendering Malou.

Non-binary: A person who does not identify exclusively with either gender in the gender binary, but instead rejects having to pick one over the other.