

QUEER

Historically, the word “queer” has been used as a derogatory term used against members of the bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender community; those perceived to be B/G/L/T; or simply those who don’t fit into the “norm.” No doubt, you have heard this word used many times in your life, usually in very negative and insulting ways.

So, why are some bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people calling themselves queer?

Currently, the word “queer” (although this term is often still used derogatorily), is also used by members of the B/G/L/T community as a way to identify themselves and is seen as an accepted label—one that is more open, fluid, and all-encompassing. Many people who choose to identify as queer do so because they feel it allows for a broader identity as opposed to the more perceived rigid labels of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender. It is important to point out here, though, that not all B/G/L/T people feel comfortable or agree with using the word queer to describe themselves or others. Since it has been used historically as a term of degradation, many people still feel that it cannot be reclaimed and applied in a positive way.

Why reclaim a derogatory word?

Many members of the B/G/L/T community believe that there is great power in reclaiming a word such as queer. As with other marginalized communities, words that were once used as insults lose their power when used in a positive way by the persons whom they were meant to degrade.

QUEER IDENTITY

Queer, as an identity, can be seen as an umbrella term that encompasses all of those people within the B/G/L/T community. It has also been known to include anyone who identifies outside of the “norm,” namely anyone who does not identify as heterosexual or “straight.” On one level, queer can simply be seen as any other sexual orientation or gender identity, such as bisexual, gay, lesbian, or transgender. Queer, sometimes, is used synonymously with the term “BGLT.”

On another level, queer does not stand for the same thing as a B/G/L/T identity. There are queer theorists who discuss on an even deeper level what it means to have a “queer identity” and this often falls in the general realm of identity. However, the purpose of this information sheet is not to get into the details of queer theory, but to introduce the different realms of the term “queer.”

Who should use the word queer?

OBGLTC believes that the word “queer” should only be used by those people who identify as bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, and/or transgender and choose to use it. As with a derogatory term that has been reclaimed by a historically marginalized community, it is most appropriate for those identified as such to use the term. Since the term has historically been used as a form of oppression, great care should be taken when using the word.

HISTORY

Perhaps by looking at the history of this movement, it will be easier to understand how the term “queer” has become an accepted term. As with any movement, the bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender community has seen many changes take place within it. People with same-sex attraction were once popularly referred to as homosexuals, then gay men and lesbians. In more current times, bisexual was added and only in the past few years have people come to hear the term transgender more commonly used. Also within the past few years, queer has become a popular term for sexual orientation and/or gender identity. As Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason write in their book, Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology, “these changes reflect the dynamic nature of both sexuality and the political organizing that has developed around it” (pg. 5).

To find out more about queer identity, queer theory, or queer studies in general, here are a couple of resources available.

Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology edited by Brett Beemyn and Mickey Eliason, New York University Press, 1996.

Queer Theory: An Introduction by Annamarie Jagose, New York University Press, 1996.