



Terms Paradox

www.forge-forward.org
PO Box 1272, Milwaukee, WI 53201
AskFORGE@forge-forward.org

Many people feel more comfortable when they have a list of terms and accompanying definitions. In fact, some people believe that knowing exactly what a set of terms means is a critical component of being culturally competent. FORGE takes a different approach. We recognize that the meanings of terms are in a constant state of flux and evolution, and that every individual defines particular terms in very different ways. This may be especially true in the transgender community, where there are literally hundreds of words used to describe transgender and gender non-conforming identities and experiences. We therefore believe a better approach to transgender terminology is to focus on the Terms Paradox:

The Terms Paradox

THE TERMS PARADOX CAN BE APPLIED TO:

- Identity labels
- Experiences
- Personal history
- Body part names
- Pronouns
- Nearly any component of who a person is.

TERMS ARE CRUCIAL		TERMS ARE MEANINGLESS
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Finding out what terms a person uses and then using their language is a primary way of conveying respect and openness.

To be culturally competent, you need to find out what terms a person uses to refer to themselves and then reflect those terms back to them. The use of a client's terms tells them that you are listening closely and respect their right to self-define.

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

There are two primary reasons why terms are meaningless:

1. There has never been consensus on any transgender-related term.
2. What you really need to know about transgender people in order to serve them appropriately isn't going to come from an identity term, but from asking specific questions related to their needs, concerns, experiences.

Empowered Language = Healthier Outcomes

When working with transgender individuals, especially with survivors, it is essential to reflect the client's language. Mirror and echo their words and phrases. If in doubt about a term a client uses, sensitively ask for clarification when there is a pause in the discussion so that you can better understand and interact with your client.

For most providers, the goal of communication is to enhance and build rapport. Remembering to hear and reflect your client's language will help your client feel...



Language is powerful.

Talking about who they are, what has happened to them, and what they need are all important and basic ways that survivors can begin reclaiming control over their lives, control that was typically taken from them by the abuser(s) or trauma. This is also true of transgender people, whether or not they are trauma survivors: finding their voice, or putting their experiences into words, is critical to mental health. The chart below explores these commonalities and how professionals' respect for survivors' language can help them provide more effective and supportive services.

Erasure examples

TRAUMA

Most professionals who work with survivors do not challenge or argue with their client's use of language, believing that the "correct" use of words is not nearly as important as assuring the survivor that they are heard and understood. Consider the advocate who interrupted a sexual assault survivor's story of what happened to explain to him that technically, he wasn't really "raped" as he keeps stating, but that his experience was actually a "sexual assault." While this might be precise, the advocate's "correction" likely would not be helpful in building rapport with the client or encouraging his free disclosure.

TRANSGENDER

All too often, providers working with trans* clients "correct" the client's language or accuse them of misrepresenting themselves. Many transgender people report providers saying things like: "Oh, so you are really a transsexual, not transgender?" or "Your vagina is not a manhole or bonus hole; you need to use accurate language," or "You may want to be a female, but since you haven't had the surgery you are still a man," or "Genderqueer isn't a gender, I'm going to mark the form to indicate you are female."

RESULT

The result is the same: correcting, changing, and invalidating a client's language will...

- **Shut down communication**
- **Discourage a client from seeking additional services**
- **Cause emotional distress**
- **Re-victimize a client who has already experienced a profound lack of respect**