

Brave new (genderfluid) world

A few tips for those baffled by the host of new gender identities. Plus: what to do when your college-age child comes out as asexual.

By [Dan Savage @fakedansavage](#)

Q You may not be the right person to answer this, but your commenters might be able to help. I love and support my friends who are transgender, but I don't understand all the 18- to 21-year-olds among my friends who are declaring themselves "gender neutral." I am a bit older, and have always been interested in queer culture and history. But it feels like they've forgotten, or never knew, that butch lesbians who wear strap-ons are still women, or that it's very common for straight men to wear lacy underwear. They don't seem to know that they can be gender nonconforming without having to discard gender. Because they're so young and all of them have decided this at the same time, it seems to be some kind of trend. Some may be on their way to coming out as trans, which is fair enough, but I strongly suspect some of them will be completely conventional in a couple of years. It would be rude and dismissive of me to tell them that it's just a phase, so I would never do that, but I don't really understand the point of being gender neutral. What has changed in the last few years that this is suddenly a thing? —Longtime Reader

A Ah, gender identities—you need an Excel spreadsheet to keep track these days.

Some folks are gender neutral, some are bigender, some are agender. Then there's pangender, genderless, genderfluid, and genderqueer. There's also gender nonconforming, gender questioning, and gender variant, as well as genderfuck, trigender, and intergender. Add in every gender-blue-plate special's very own set of random and unpredictable and ever-shifting pronoun preferences, and you've got a blizzard of special snowflakes, each one primed to take offense at some real or imagined microaggression so they can dash to Tumblr for some macroventing.

What has changed in the last few years? There's more discussion about gender now, LR, and that's a good thing. Culturally enforced gender norms are ridiculous, and the policing of gender expression/identity is oppressive and often violent. This critical and necessary discussion about gender has sparked a great deal of interest in—and, in some quarters, generated a lot of sympathy for—people who aren't just talking about gender but struggling with it, doing something about it, and redefining it. But "interest in" and "sympathy for" have a way of attracting poseurs and attention seekers. That's nothing new. Pay sympathetic attention to a plate of tater tots long enough and it'll attract poseurs and attention seekers too.

But since it's (almost always) impossible to tell the attention-seeking poseurs from the actual items, LR, your best course of action when someone declares themselves to be gender neutral—or bigender or pangender or etceteragender—is to smile, nod, inquire about pronoun preferences, make a mental note

not to use pronouns around that person (easier than committing multiple sets to memory), and then change the genderfucking subject.

Q I recently "friended" someone online whose bio mentions that their preferred pronoun is "their." They are not a transgender person. I've been told that they are "genderfluid," but it is commonly understood in our friend group that they are female. Questions: (1) If you're genderfluid, are you suddenly not male or female? Does anyone really need to say that they're genderfluid? Aren't we all a bit fluid where gender is concerned? (2) Does someone who is cisgender take away from the "trans experience" by taking on pronouns like "they/their" or "ze/zir," or are they being helpful by normalizing these pronouns? (3) Am I a jerk for asking these questions? I want to be sensitive to gender issues, but I'm worried that I can't keep up. —Observant One Prefers She

A (1) A genderfluid person is someone "whose gender identity shifts," says the *Washington Post*. Wikipedia defines *genderfluidity* like this: "Moving between genders or with a fluctuating gender identity." An actual genderfluid person—Astrophy—put it this way in a post at Jezebel: "I am genderfluid, though I was assigned female at birth . . . What does this mean? For me, it means that sometimes I am a woman, sometimes I am a man, and sometimes I am androgynous. I do not mean that sometimes I feel manly; in every internal sense, I am a man in those moments."

So someone who is genderfluid isn't a melange of stereotypically male and female traits, OOPS, but someone who considers themselves a man sometimes and a woman at other times.

(2) Helpful, I suppose, but nevertheless exhausting, potentially attention whoring, and doubtless contributing to the extinction of pronouns altogether.

(3) There's being sensitive to gender issues, and then there's being so sensitive to gender issues that you're practically allergic. But rest assured: you are not a jerk, OOPS, as there are so many freshly minted gender identities and pronouns sloshing around out there that no one can keep up.

Q My intelligent, lovely, in-all-ways-phenomenal 18-year-old daughter just came out to me: as asexual! I am struggling with my reaction to this. If she had said she was a lesbian, I would have been fine with it, except for all that discrimination and stuff. I will always support her, but I can't help but think that (1) something bad happened to her that (despite my near-helicopter parenting) I don't know about, and/or (2) she'll miss out! Is asexuality really a thing? Can it be some sort of opt-out-of-this-sex-stuff-until-later thing? 'Cause that I get. —Parenting Asexual Undergrad Since Evening

A Asexuality is a real thing, PAUSE, and your daughter could be an intelligent and phenomenal example. That said . . . for some, asexuality has functioned as an opt-out-of-this-sex-stuff-until-later thing. But just as some gay men identifying as bisexual before coming out as gay doesn't mean bisexuality is a phase (or nonexistent), the fact that some people identify as asexual before ultimately coming out as—here we go—heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, pansexual, graysexual, demisexual, autosexual, antisexual, hyposexual, etc, etc, etc isn't proof that asexuality isn't a real thing.

Keep listening to your daughter, PAUSE, and learn more about asexuality at the [Asexuality Visibility and Education Network](#).