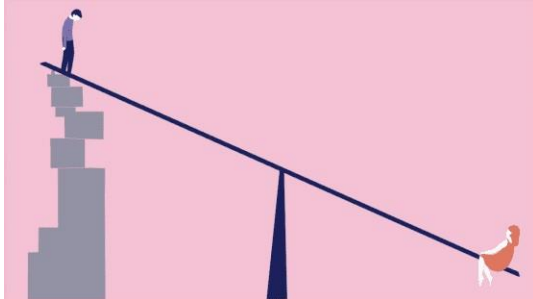


# Getting rid of the gender seesaw



Peter Dankmeijer

Director Global Alliance for LGBT Education



*Peter Dankmeijer, keynote address on the Gapstone Conference, 12 February 2021*

Hello, I am Peter Dankmeijer of the Global Alliance for LGBT education. In this introduction I will talk to you about my doubts, experiences and discoveries with gender. This introduction is called of “Getting rid of the gender seesaw”, because in my opinion, basing education and policies on balancing a perceived gender binary is ultimately counterproductive.

## A question from a school

### Can you advise me how to deal with this?

*In the last months, several students have adopted gender-neutral names. Now they want all staff to use these names, and they get angry when staff don't do this.*

*It looks infectious; it seems every week there is another student changing their name. We don't know how to cope with it.*

#### Gender Neutral Names



I would like to start with a question I got from school a few weeks ago. I was called by a school counselor of a secondary school, and she said: “*In the last months, several students have adopted gender-neutral names. Now they want all staff to use these names, and they*

*get angry when staff don't do this. It looks infectious; it seems every week there is another student changing their name. We don't know how to cope with it."*

I would like you to take a moment to consider how you would answer this question.

## Emotions



- Confusion: why do you need another name? Why so many students?
- Annoyance: it will cost extra effort, it will make our work harder
- Sense of provocation: they criticize us. Is it puberty playing up? How can we make them behave normal?



Throughout this introduction, I will come back to this question. I will try to assess what may be behind the question and will go into how it mirrors wider policies around gender.

In the first place I would like to tell you about the emotions that I sensed were playing in the mind of the school counselor. I sensed she felt confusion. She was wondering why students would want another name than their birth name. And she was wondering why there were so many students suddenly wanting to change their name. But her confusion was also tainted by annoyance. In the course of the conversation, she said that it will take teachers a lot of effort to keep up with changing names; they already have to learn hundreds of names. And finally I sensed there was an emotional threat, a sense of provocation. Students became annoyed when teachers did not want to call them by their chosen name, and teachers experienced that as criticism.

Teachers are not used to being criticized. So there were looking for reasons which blamed the students for the perceived provocation. Was it puberty playing up? How can we make these students behave "normal" again, how can we discipline them?

# The “gender” movements

- Women’s movement
- Men’s movement
- Trans movement



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## Three gender movements

The counselor’s question encouraged me to think about the broader backgrounds of the gender debate. In my perception, there are at least three movements driving the gender debate. The oldest and largest movement is the women’s movement, more recently the women’s movement was joined by a men’s movement, and even more recently the transgender movement has joined the discussion. Each of these movements have more or less different aims.

### Women’s “equality”

1. Help after abuse by men
2. Empowerment of women
3. Leadership of women
4. Dismantling gender stereotypes
5. Equality



*A Class That Turned Around Kids’ Assumptions of Gender Roles!*

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### The women’s movement

In my perspective, the women’s movement focuses on achieving *equality*. One part of their strategies is (1) to help women after they have been abused by men, (2) to empower

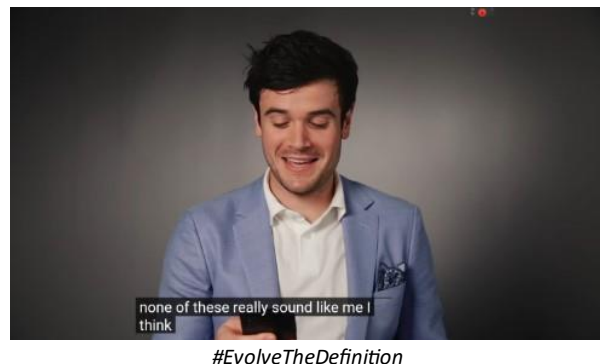
women and (3) to get women in leadership positions. These strategies focus on assisting women themselves. Most of the budget for women’s equality go to these three strategies. Behind this is the expectation is that when we help women, inequality can be overcome.

Of course, it is clear to everyone that there are power mechanisms that cannot be overcome just only helping women. So something needs to be done in the environment as well. The two other strategies that I then see are (1) to dismantle gender stereotypes, and (2) measures and campaigns to force equality, like equal pay.

In the picture on the slide we see a scene from one of the suggested video resources by the Gender Equality Mainstreaming project. It is a scene in an elementary school class where students were asked to imagine what a firefighter, a pilot and a surgeon would look like. After the students all draw pictures of men, three women come in to do a presentation. The students are surprised and even say: "it's fake, they are dressed up". This is an example of dismantling gender stereotypes. However, it is a limited intervention. It shows it is possible for women to do a job that traditionally is done by men. I say traditionally, but this is often still the case. So, one could ask to what extent this intervention is an effective way correcting stereotypes. It is also notable that the women's movement tends to give less examples men doing women's jobs, which shows their interest is empowering women, not men.

## Men's movement: feminist men

1. Prevention of abuse by men
2. Dismantling stereotypes of men and women
3. Redefining masculinity  
*Strengthening it*  
*Feminizing it*



### The men's movement

A more recent movement is the men's movement. Although on the surface they seem to have the same goals, their focus of attention is often slightly different. One of their first priorities is to prevent abuse of women by men. They do this by campaigning against physical and sexual violence, usually together with the women's movement. A second preferred strategy is, like the women's movement, to dismantle stereotypes. But in the men's movement, this seems to be more focused on role-modelling that it is possible that masculine men have caring jobs.

Finally, the men's movement is often engaged with redefining masculinity. It is notable that there are two kinds of directions in the men's movement. One direction seeks to redefine masculinity by *strengthening* masculinity. In this direction, activists assume that under the powerful image, men are really insecure, and that empowering men will improve their relationships among each other and also with women. "A true man knows how to restrain his power". The other direction does the opposite, they stress that men have to rediscover their feminine side.

## The trans movement

1. Right to transition
2. Right to access women's spaces



Restroom sign designed by Peregrine Honig in the Museum Hotel in Durham, North Carolina, 2016



## The trans movement

Finally, in recent years the transgender movement entered the scene.

Although gender is of course a central issue in the life of transgenders, their advocacy and

education interests are quite different from the other two movements. Their focus is on the right to transition, both medically and legally, and on the right to access women's spaces. The right to access women spaces focuses on bathrooms, which is more violently debated in the United States than in Europe. Interestingly, the bathroom debate focuses on the right of trans women to enter women's spaces, while there is virtually no discussion on the right of trans men to enter man's spaces. Here we see a reflection of biased social expectations; trans women are stereotyped as former men and therefore a threat to women, while trans men – as former women – are not seen as a threat to men.

It is also interesting to see that there are hardly any links between the trans movement on one hand and there women's and men's movement on the other hand. On the contrary, part of the women's movement is vehemently transphobic. These so-called TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) or gender critical feminists, and they call themselves, maintain that trans women are not authentic woman and therefore cannot be part of the feminist movement or enter spaces or organizations assigned to women.

## The gender binary

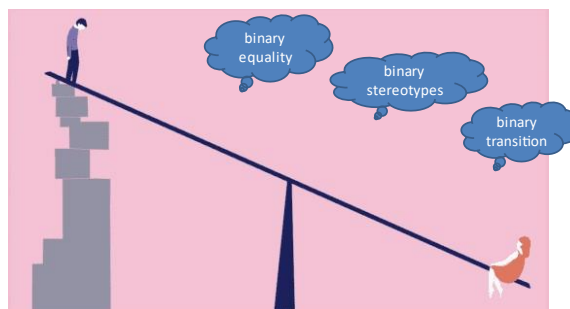
Despite the differences in goals and strategies, the three mentioned movements have one thing in common: they focus on a binary conceptualization of gender. There are men *or* women, and “victimized women” need to be protected against

“violent men”. In the women’s movement the binary is the basis for visualizing equality as a balance (hence the seesaw) between men and women.

In the men’s movement, the binary is conceptualized as the *relationship* between men and women, which implicitly refers to heterosexual relationships. Men should better relate to (their) women. In part of the men’s movement, it is recognized that gay men and lesbian women should not be excluded but at the same time it is not quite clear how to include them in this heterosexual perspective.

And in the transgender movement, the binary is conceptualized as a right to transition from one gender to “the other gender”. The ideal is to transition completely, both in a corporal sense and a legal sense. Some trans people would even say they are not transgender anymore after the transition. In their eyes, they are then a “real” women or a “real” man. In short, the ideological starting points of all three current gender movements are based on a binary conception of gender. It is my contention that this is both not realistic and not effective to truly reach the ultimate goals of the gender movements.

### Stuck in the binary



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## Young people searching for gender sense

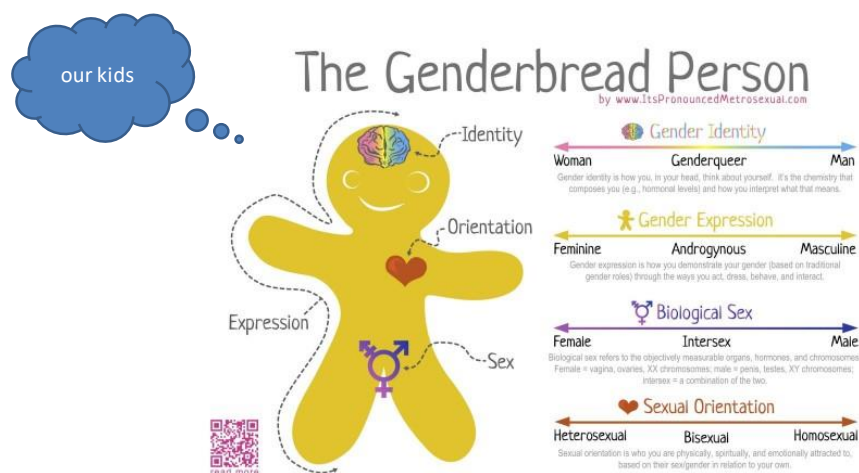
Let's get back to the question of the school counselor I started with. And let's have a look at what is going on in the minds of these young people. I did not speak to them, but I guess they did not feel comfortable with the current sharp distinctions between male and female, and probably felt a high pressure to identify as straight, and if they couldn't, to at least call themselves gay or lesbian.

### The genderbread person

Like teenagers do, they possibly searched the Internet to explore how other people think about this. And they probably came across this very popular image: the genderbread person.

A couple of American educators invented this image about [10-15 years ago](#) and it was popularized in 2011 by Sam Killermann on his website <https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com>. It was such a success, that he later made a separate website for the genderbread person: <https://www.genderbread.org/>.

## Searching for gender sense



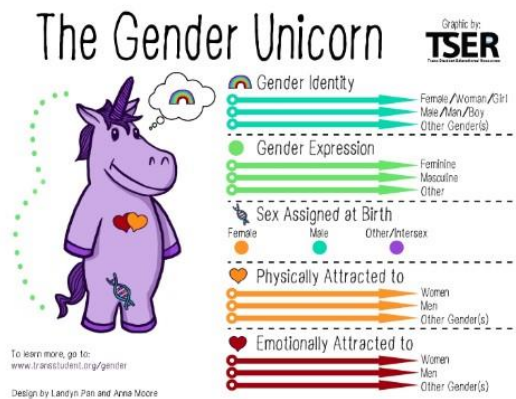
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2012

The most important part of the genderbread person is that it makes a clear distinction between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. A lot of people tend to mix these up. Originally, the genderbread person was meant as an exercise for young people in which they could score their own sex, identity expression and orientation. But as you see in this image, the four dimensions are still presented as a sliding scale between two binaries: man/women, masculine/feminine, male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. But at least it has also names for somebody who is in the middle. Of course there was criticism that the original version of the genderbread person still used the basic idea of a binary scale.



## Beyond the binary



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2014

### gender unicorn

The trans movement tried to overcome this by offering an alternative: the gender unicorn (2014).

The first place my they don't use a human puppet because such a puppet makes you think of stereotypes like "gender is in the brain, love is in the heart and biological sex is in the genitals". In the second place, you see here that they added a fifth dimension. They split sexual orientation into physical and emotional attraction. And in the third place, they replaced the binaries by arrows on which you can indicate the extent to which you identify with this aspect. In this way it becomes possible, for example, to score yourself 75% female and at the same time 75% other genders, like genderqueer. Or you could score yourself as both physically attracted to men and physically attracted to trans men.

However, even the gender unicorn has been criticized, mainly because the trans movement is adamant to state that trans women are "real" women and trans men are "real" men. This is understandable in the context of defending trans rights, but at odds with the attempt of the gender unicorn to show that gender is not a binary thing but a kaleidoscope of aspects.



## 22 ~ 64 ~ 100 genders

<p><b>PART ONE - BIOLOGICAL SEX</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>Please record your sex chromosome (to the best of your knowledge) in the space above.</p>	<p><b>EXAMPLES</b></p> <p>XX Assigned Female</p> <p>XY Assigned Male</p> <p>XX Turner Syndrome</p> <p>XXX Klinefelter Syndrome</p> <p>XYY Klinefelter Syndrome</p> <p>XYY Jacobs Syndrome</p> <p>For a more exhaustive list of chromosome combinations, please speak to your doctor.</p>																			
<p><b>PART TWO - GENDER IDENTITY</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Feminine Identity</td> <td>Neutral Identity</td> <td>Masculine Identity</td> </tr> </table> <p>Please check any boxes as they apply to you, or leave all blank to indicate "No Gender Identity"</p>	Feminine Identity	Neutral Identity	Masculine Identity	<p><b>EXAMPLES</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Female</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Genderqueer or Non-Binary</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Male</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Demigirl or Bigender</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Demiboy or Bigender</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Androgynous or Bigender</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Transgender or Transgender</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Agender or Genderless</td></tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Female	<input type="checkbox"/>	Genderqueer or Non-Binary	<input type="checkbox"/>	Male	<input type="checkbox"/>	Demigirl or Bigender	<input type="checkbox"/>	Demiboy or Bigender	<input type="checkbox"/>	Androgynous or Bigender	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transgender or Transgender	<input type="checkbox"/>	Agender or Genderless
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<p><b>PART THREE - SEXUALITY</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Attracted to Femininity</td> <td>Attracted to Neutrality</td> <td>Attracted to Masculinity</td> </tr> </table> <p>Please check any boxes as they apply to you, or leave all blank to indicate "No Sexuality"</p>	Attracted to Femininity	Attracted to Neutrality	Attracted to Masculinity	<p><b>EXAMPLES</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Gay</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Lesbian</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Androgynous</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Universal Gay/lesbian</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Universal Androgynous</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Universal or Bisexual</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Pansexual</td></tr> <tr><td><input type="checkbox"/></td><td>Transphobic or Biased</td></tr> </table>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Gay	<input type="checkbox"/>	Lesbian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Androgynous	<input type="checkbox"/>	Universal Gay/lesbian	<input type="checkbox"/>	Universal Androgynous	<input type="checkbox"/>	Universal or Bisexual	<input type="checkbox"/>	Pansexual	<input type="checkbox"/>	Transphobic or Biased
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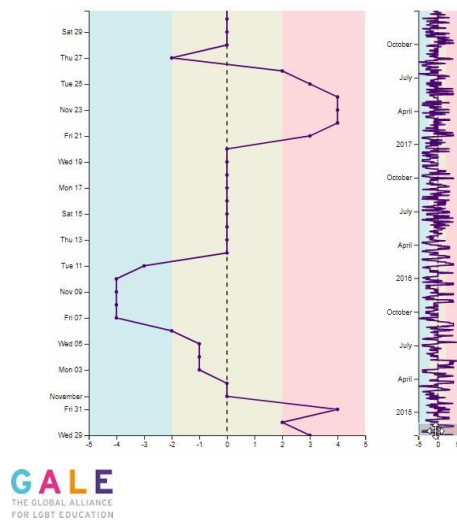
2019

### When you complain, we will add more genders

For young people, this theoretical discussion is a bit far from their daily experience. They simply have feelings, try to express these feelings in words and want to belong to something. Because in our language, we have learned to categorize issues in boxes and binaries, they think they need to label themselves to legitimize their existence.

Young people are even offered checklists for how to score themselves. [This checklist by the artist AMC Almaron from 2019 suggests 22 labels](#), but on other websites the count is already up to 64. I can imagine that people who are more comfortable with binary thinking panic when they hear this number or try to find the politically correct definitions of each label. I can also understand that young people get a little bit frustrated when adults don't want to accept the seriousness of their search to fit in somewhere. I found this T-shirt that expresses their frustration: "[yes, there are 64 genders and every time you complain, we add six more](#)." And in 2019 – [to the outrage of tabloid newspapers](#) – the BBC broadcasted a documentary in which a teacher said there were 100 or more genders. I can imagine that the school advisor I quoted in my question was confronted with this type of feedback of her students.

# Gender fluidity



date	scale	change	changeto1	changeto2	thoughts
11/6/2014	-2	0	NA	NA	Im still just in the middle on the masculine side. A little s...
11/7/2014	-4	1	NA	-3	Today was a little tricky. I knew I was feeling masculine, ...
11/8/2014	-4	1	-2	NA	It was kind of a weird day. I work up feeling crappy and ...
11/9/2014	-4	0	NA	NA	I dont want to do this anymore. Im super emotional and...
11/10/2014	-4	1	-5	-3	Lesser today which is good cause im tired. I guess ive ha...
11/11/2014	-3	1	NA	-2	I actually felt pretty good today. I am still on the masculi...
11/12/2014	0	0	NA	NA	Back in the middle! I was told to really pay attention to ...
11/13/2014	0	0	NA	NA	Not much to report today. I kept waiting to see if I woul...
11/14/2014	0	0	NA	NA	I am still in the middle! It is nice! I am good! I like it! I wo...
11/15/2014	0	0	NA	NA	It was kind of hard from me to pick my number today. I g...
11/16/2014	0	0	NA	NA	Not much to report today. Im just in the middle still. I stil...
11/17/2014	0	0	NA	NA	I think the longer I stay on one thing the more uneasy I ...
11/18/2014	0	0	NA	NA	I dont even know. Havent changed yet. I keep second g...
11/19/2014	0	1	NA	1	I still dont know. It is weird I am still in the flippin middl...
11/20/2014	0	1	NA	1	Still kind of in the middle, but I do seem to be leaning t...
11/21/2014	3	0	NA	NA	I feel pretty girly today! Fucking finally! Not like super al...
11/22/2014	4	0	NA	NA	Its still early now, but definitely feeling all womany and ...
11/23/2014	4	0	NA	NA	Ya know, I was thinking today, it is scary how much of a ...

<https://www.gaytascience.com/plotme-genderfluid/>  
Kelsey Campbell

If we follow the lead of young people, maybe we should see gender more like a mosaic than as a binary. I think we can learn a lot from transgender young people, because they are forced to cross the lines that society has set to keep us in controllable boxes.

I found one report of a transgender young person, Kelsey Campbell, who was training to be a scientist and who plotted their daily feelings around gender during their transition phase. In this slide you see their diary and the moving graph they made of her male, gender-neutral and female feelings over 2015, 2016 and 2017. It is immediately obvious that their gendered feelings were not only like a mosaic, but also widely fluctuating, like a kaleidoscope. This seems to suggest that when someone is open to honestly examine their feelings on a day-to-day basis, you discover there really is no basis to assume gender is a stable concept. It may be that cisgender people - that is people who feel comfortable with the biological sex they were assigned at birth, and who were raised to identify with and express this gender - feel their gender as "natural", but the experiences of transgender young people and of an increasing number of other young people seem to indicate that gender is anything but stable. It would be more useful to see gender as a way of thinking - a social construct - that is designed to control our interactions.

## Heteronormativity

For an educational organization like GALE it is important to understand and to explain how gender plays a role in society and to give recommendations on how to combat the inequality that clearly is there.

# Questions to gay/lesbian peer educators



1. Why do you behave so extravagant? Why do you provoke?
2. Why are gays so effeminate? Why are lesbians so butch?
3. Why are gays so promiscuous? How do lesbians have sex?
4. Do you become gay by seduction? Is there a cure?



## Four types of questions

A long time ago we started to develop a model for this. Originally, we based this model on the questions that gay and lesbian peer educators get when they go to schools to do testimonials, answer questions and engage in a discussion. We identified a huge number of questions, but we were able to categorize them in four types of questions. Here we give a few examples of them.

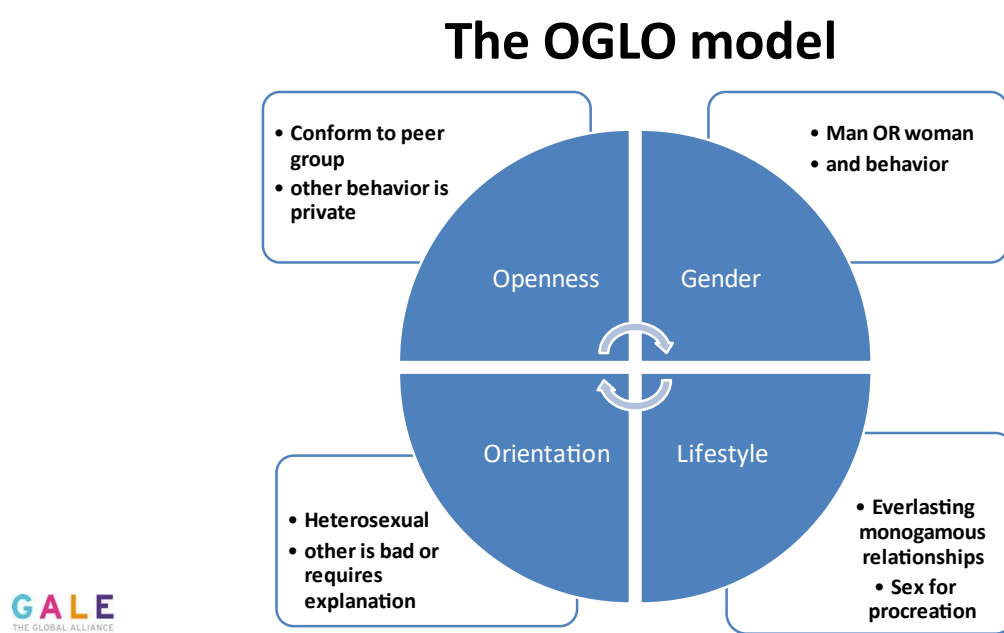
1. Why do you behave so extravagant? Why do you provoke? These questions refer to why people are behaving differently from their peer group. These questions can be about LGBT people, but just as well to other people don't conform to peer norms. They are about being "different".
2. Why are gays so effeminate? Why are lesbians so butch? These questions refer to gender. You see these questions often mix up sexual orientation and gender expression. Although these questions were asked in the context of gay and lesbian peer education, most students also had critical questions about heterosexuals or transsexuals who don't conform to the gender binary. Whoever you are, being ambiguous in your gender expression always seems to be the worst option.
3. Why are gays so promiscuous? How do lesbians have sex? These questions refer to sexuality and relationships. Here to, critical questions could also be asked to heterosexuals who don't conform to social expectations of "decent" relationships or sex.
4. Do you become gay by seduction? Is there a cure? Despite that the sessions we researched were focused on gay and lesbian issues, these questions were the only

ones being strictly about the topic sexual orientation. It was clear that the challenges cisgender heterosexual students felt when discussing “gay and lesbian” issues were much wider than just aversion towards gays and lesbians. Like already suggested in the scientific literature, we had to conclude peer educators were not dealing narrowly with homophobia, but with a much broader heteronormativity.

You may have noticed that these questions are not the type of questions you can answer with a cognitive, informative reply. These questions are comments disguised as questions. Most of these implicit comments imply stereotypes and rejection. One of the main conclusions for the GALE educational framework is that stereotypes and rejection cannot be changed by “correcting prejudice”, by offering information or by presenting alternative images. People who are stuck in fear and blaming are not interested in new information; they just confirmation of their own judgements. So for GALE, it was important to get very clear what the pre-set ideas are behind heteronormativity, and to assess what can we do to change them.

### The OGLO-model

Based on the four categories we developed the OGLO-model. OGLO is an acronym for Openness, Gender, Lifestyles and Orientation. These relate to the four categories of questions we discussed.



In our societies our communities stimulate or even force us to conform to our own peer group: our country, our culture, our church and the peer groups of our families and friends.

Nonconforming behavior is often rejected or punished. Children soon learn that nonconforming feelings or behavior should be kept private or even secret.

In our societies you are supposed to be a man or a woman and you have to behave like that. This makes it understandable why trans people may feel more comfortable with a radical transition, than a partial transition or a choice for a more fluid or ambiguous gender expression.

We label the category about sex and relationships “lifestyle” for training purposes in traditional environments. In many circles, sexuality is still so taboo that people already feel uncomfortable when you mention the word “sex”. GALE uses the word “lifestyle” because it can be used as an euphemism to start talking about these issues. In the Western world values about sexuality have become relatively more relaxed since the invention of contraception. But it is still generally assumed that everybody ideally looks for a relationship which is romantic, everlasting and monogamous. Other options are deemed less desirable and in some circles still outright rejected. Even our expectations of the physical part of sexuality remains relatively rigid: the general image of a standard sexual deed is of a man on top of the woman, penetrating her, and ultimately doing this to create children. Other behavior is euphemistically called “foreplay” (before the real performance) or to some extent perverse. I remember reading a handbook on sexuality when I was a teenager, which had two parts: the “normal sexual life” (which was about heterosexual coitus and procreation) and “perverse sexualities” (anything else). “Foreplay” was not deemed to be “perverse”, because it was needed as a warm-up for coitus.

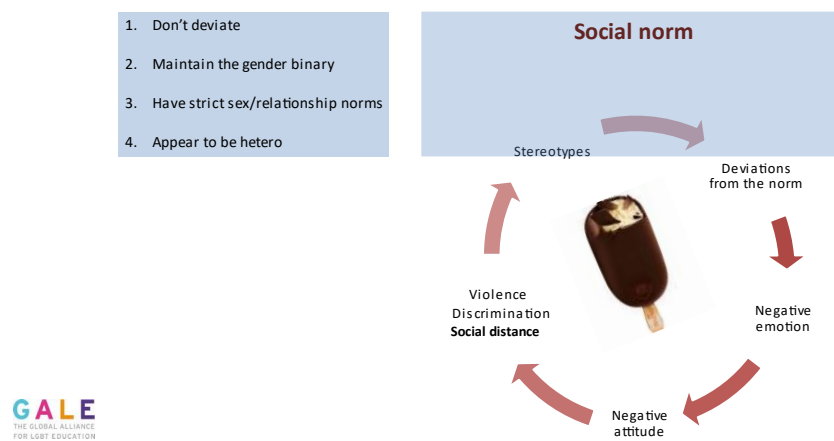
The fourth category of the OGLO model is sexual orientation, which refers to the expectation that everybody is considered heterosexual until proven otherwise. Heterosexuality is considered “normal” while others sexual attractions require a revelation (coming-out) and ideally also an explanation why you are “different”. Not revealing homosexual or bisexual feelings can be perceived as threat to heterosexuals, especially by men. In some countries, such “homosexual panic” (anger of a heterosexual man when he realizes another man in gay) can be used as a legal reason to justify a homophobic murder.

### **The exclusion spiral**

So how does this work in practice? We should review expectations represented in the OGLO model as a dominant normative system. When people are confronted with behaviors or images that are different from these expectations or norms, they usually experience a negative emotion. This emotion has been labeled the “fight or flight impulse”. Negative emotions, if not checked, result in negative attitudes. GALE considers attitudes like riverbeds

that are carved out by emotions that are constantly being rewarded. When negative emotions create such negative attitudinal channels, it becomes easier for them to be expressed. Science shows that negative attitudes are a strong predictor of negative behavior. In the gender and LGBTI movements, people tend to think of negative behavior in terms of violence and discrimination, but the most prevalent negative behavior is social distancing. We don't want to be confronted with people or images we don't like. As a consequence, we tend to produce stereotypes. These are like images from people from a distance. Prejudices function as a way of recognizing people based on the crude characteristics you can make out from a distance. These crude images may be true, but they only represent the aspects of people that are different from your expectations, or from your normative framework.

## The exclusion spiral



## Gender policing to sustain heteronormativity

When we apply the OGLO-model and the exclusion spiral to the question of the school counselor, we could make an interpretation. The counselor said:

## Recap: the question

*In the last months, several students have adopted gender-neutral names. Now they want all staff to use these names, and they get angry when staff don't do this.*

*It looks infectious; it seems every week there is another student changing their name. We don't know how to cope with it.*



But the background of her words probably was:

## Deconstructing the question

*In the last months, several students have adopted names that are **ambiguous and make us insecure**. Now they want all staff to use these names, and they **provoke us** when staff don't do this.*

*Our **expectations of normality are challenged** and the more **we allow it**, the **more freedom they claim**. We don't know how **discipline them back to the binary**.*



In terms of the OGLO-model, the school counselor expressed a fight or flight impulse because the students did not conform to peer group expectations. They also challenged the gender binary. In the conversation it became clear that when she considered the questions, she appeared not really curious about what the needs of the students were; her prime but not openly expressed interest was to find out how she could force the students to conform to school standards, which implicitly did not allow crossing the gender binary, ambiguity or changing names. This could be called “gender policing”.



## Non-violent communication

Most schools are asking for very concrete suggestions on how to deal with this. I found inspiration in the method of nonviolent communication as designed by Marshall Rosenberg. Despite the title of the method, “non-violent communication” is not only about communication, but on a wide set of ways to deal with emotions, attitudes, behavior and judgements. Rosenberg once said he actually would have preferred to label his approach “compassionate”, but waived this label because it is often used in the context of help for people who are suffering, which is not what Rosenberg is referring to. He is referring to behavior that stems from attempts to meet universal human needs.

### Marshall Rosenberg



- We live in structures designed for domination
- The basic domination strategy is using binaries  
*right/wrong, good/bad, normal/abnormal, healthy/sick, male/female, homo/hetero*
- When people comply, they become subservient
- Because their real needs are not met, they are *emotionally upset* they don't know how to NOT be subservient, and start to perpetuate violence by blaming and selfblaming



Like GALE, Rosenberg states that we live in social and school structures that are designed for domination. One of the most basic domination strategy is to use binaries. Rosenberg refers more to general binaries like right/wrong, good/bad, normal/abnormal and healthy/sick, but it would apply as well to male/female or heterosexual/homosexual. We use these distinctions to police ourselves and other people to behave according to such categories. It makes our life easier to some extent because we don't have to re-evaluate each event all over again. But when people comply with pressure to conform to categories, and especially along binaries like good/bad, correct/incorrect, they become subservient. They become slaves of the need to look “good” in the eyes of others. And this subservience has a function in larger power mechanisms in society to make entire groups subservient to other groups.

As a consequence their real needs are often not met. And because their real needs are not met, they get *emotionally upset*. Because they don't know alternatives to being subservient,

or to not judge things as a right or wrong, correct or incorrect, they tend to express their emotions by blaming others and by self-blaming. This blaming process evolves into a perpetual cycle of violent communication and ultimately in actual violence.

## Non-violent communication

1. Recognize and express emotions compassionately\*
2. Recognize and express your needs
3. Make clear requests

1. Listen emphatically
2. Consider requests as gifts, not as demands
3. Search for ways to get everybody's needs met
4. Don't get addicted to your wishes



### Knowing what you need

According to Rosenberg, we can only and this perpetual cycle of negativity for ourselves by:

1. Recognizing and expressing emotions compassionately
2. Recognizing and expressing our needs
3. And by making clear requests

Each of these three prime strategies are quite challenging. In the first place because we have never learned to sincerely express our emotions, and certainly not to express them in a compassionate way which does not hurt others. We also have great problems really recognizing and expressing our needs. We often think that our *wishes* are the same as our needs, but that's not true. Part of the challenge of expressing emotions and needs is that they are categorized as "feminine" and "weak". To really break these assumptions, we need to structurally raise the status of expressing emotions and of true needs. This is like learning social distancing during the COVID-10 epidemic. In the beginning it feels unnatural because you are not used to it. It has to become a habit and the norm.

### Speaking up

Finally it is very difficult to make a clear request. The word "request" is used in non-violent communication to signify that it is not like a simple question and neither like a demand. In educational programs, the skill to be empowered to make requests is often called

assertiveness. Many people are not empowered enough to get to make a clear request. If they are, it may be challenging to make it clear enough. For example, when we ask: “I need more respect” is not a clear request. A clear request could be: “I want you to let me finish speaking and to not interrupt me”. I think schools should spend much more time and attentions on teaching students how to recognize their needs and to speak up about them. It does not work to have nice policy papers on active citizenship but at the same time punish students for speaking up or “not conform to the rules”.

### **Connection as a gift**

Equally important is that it is not just about empowerment of the speaker, but also about respect of the person being addressed, who:

1. Listens emphatically
2. Considers requests as gifts, not as demands
3. Searches for ways to get everybody's needs met
4. Doesn't get addicted to your wishes

Just like the person who is claiming their needs to be met, the person who is addressed needs to be open by listening emphatically. Listening with preconceived and gendered thoughts and reasoning based on negative emotions or attitudes will block a successful communication. Even though someone may be asking for something, like being called by a different name or wanting you not to interrupt, this could be better considered a gift than as a demand. Like good listening, a sincere request is a gift because the person asking something is expressing a need and therefore is trying to make a connect with you. I think this authentic connecting is the key axis to break down gendered domination strategies.

### **Assume your wishes will not be met (completely)**

In responding to requests it is important to consider not only your own needs, but also the other person's needs and attempt to balance these needs. If the need of both persons is not met, it will inevitably result in open or hidden frustration and possibly negative consequences for the relationship. We are not talking only about individual relationships here; this also goes for relationships between social groups.

Rosenberg adds that we shouldn't get “addicted to our own wishes”. If you have a predetermined set of wishes that you want others to comply to, there is no space for the autonomy of others, and requests will not be heard in an authentic way.

In the case of the students choosing gender-neutral names, it is simply not possible to give a nonviolent response by simply denying them to use their new names. But there may be authentic and practical challenges in remembering all these new and changing names. By sharing their fears and insecurity of teachers about this while at the same moment showing that the teachers really are interested in supporting the personal development of the students and respecting their choices, there's probably a possibility to solve the situation in a way that meets the needs of both teachers and students.

## Reflection

I have used a concrete question of a school as a case study to explore the complicated nature of adequately dealing with gender issues. I realized that my perspective as a director of the Global Alliance for LGBT Education colors my perspective that an emphasis on seeing gender as a binary construction limiting the effectiveness gender equality strategies. Instead, I request that people consider integrating perspectives on gender in broader education of basic ways of communication and connecting. By learning a non-judging repertoire of interaction, I hope both girls, boys and people of other genders will be able to connect in a way which does not lead to domination over others. I think when we would achieve this, we would reach a deeper level of gender mainstreaming. And not only gender mainstreaming, but equality and peace mainstreaming in general.

### Reflection: go deeper than gender

- We should question whether “binary” gender strategies are ultimately effective to deconstruct stereotypes and to reach “equality”
- Consider integrating “gender” in broader ways of communicating and connecting
- Learn non-judging interaction in a way that is empowered and unafraid, but does not blame or dominate (compassionate interaction)
- Integrate compassionate interaction in our cultures and organizational mechanisms



A question that remains is how we can integrate such a broad cultural shift in peaceful behavior among large groups, in cultural traditions and in organizational and political mechanisms.

On one hand, we can attempt to change legalistic texts and guidelines and include specific needs and requests of marginalized groups. But longtime practices with activism have shown that this type of integration is largely symbolic if not accompanied by social change. Political and legal texts are important because they legitimize social action, but they do not automatically affect real change in emotions, attitudes and behavior. Real change occurs when emotions, attitudes and behavior are changed in individual relationships, whether they are in the classroom, in the workplace, in political arenas and among people who create the culture of public and private organizations. I think we need to do more work to establish good practices on this level.



Thank you!

*Text on sign: "I FANCY... an innocent smile"*

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