



2015

What's in a Name? Examining the Creation and Use of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Labels

Loren B. Brown

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp>

Recommended Citation

Brown, Loren B. (2015) "What's in a Name? Examining the Creation and Use of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Labels," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*: Vol. 37 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol37/iss1/8>

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

What's in a Name? Examining the Creation and Use of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Labels

Loren B. Brown, PhD

Brigham Young University

“**W**hat's in a name?” Juliet famously asks. “That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet” (Shakespeare, 1599/1914, 2.2.47-48). Juliet suggests that the flower's name could easily be changed without altering our experience of the flower's scent. She extends this logic to her label as a Capulet and Romeo's as a Montague, arguing that since a name is not intrinsically connected to one's physical parts or personality, they should not allow their surnames to get in the way of their love for each other. So what's in a name? Juliet might answer, not much. Yet when we consider *Romeo and Juliet* from its violent beginning to its tragic end, we see that names—and the history, emotions, and meanings attached to those names—can be very significant.

During the past several years, in professional literature and public discourse, there has been a proliferation of names used to describe variances in sexual orientation and gender identity (Zimmer, Solomon, & Carson, 2014) as well as a shift towards using these constructs to describe identities rather than behaviors (Foucault, 1976/1990). Some of these labels are found in the popular vernacular (e.g., *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*) while others are newer creations and less commonly recognized (e.g., *pansexual*, *androgynous*, *genderqueer*), and some are unique to specific cultures (e.g., *two-spirit* in Native American traditions, *fa'afafine* in Samoa, *hijra* in South Asia, especially India).

This shifting landscape of identities and labels creates challenges for effective communication (Petchesky,

2009; Sell, 1997). Attempts to be inclusive can lead to cumbersome lists (Zimmer et al., 2014), and attempts to be efficient can lead to reductionist language which leaves some individuals feeling misunderstood, excluded, marginalized, or invisible (Petchesky, 2009). Discussing this topic can lead to related conversations about equality, gender roles, marriage, religious freedom, historical oppression, and politics—subjects on which there is no shortage of firm convictions and strong emotions. These conversations often evolve into debates and arguments, where lines are drawn between “us” (someone who shares my beliefs/values) and “them” (someone attacking my beliefs or trying to impose his or her values on me). The conversation can quickly become, to borrow a phrase from Joseph Smith, a “war of words and tumult of opinions” (JSH 1:10).

Within the Latter-day Saint (LDS) community, individuals in the process of exploring or attempting to understand sexual and gender diversity—in one's self or in others—may feel caught in the crossfire (Grigoriou, 2014; Jacobson & Wright, 2014; Pearson, 2007). Exploration frequently involves learning about various labels and trying them on to see if they fit one's experience or sense of self. For the individual who has experienced a history of heartache attempting to reconcile his or her sexuality and faith, finding a label that fits can contribute to healing, understanding, and self-acceptance. And yet, too often in LDS communities, the labels one uses are treated as a shibboleth, a verbal way of judging who is an insider and who is

an outsider (e.g., assuming the young man who says “I experience same-sex attraction” is more committed to living in harmony with LDS teachings than the one who says, “I’m gay”).

Given this current social climate, mental health professionals who identify as believing Latter-day Saints and who work with clients from LDS or other conservative religious backgrounds presenting with concerns related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity need to be aware of labels and sensitive to larger narratives that may be attached to the labels a client uses. In addition, LDS mental health professionals may also benefit from exploring their own paradigms regarding sexual orientation, gender, spiritual, and religious identities. Increased self-awareness, an understanding of how labels are currently used, and sensitivity to the power of labels to wound or heal will aid us in our work with religious clients conflicted about their own or another’s sexual or gender identity. Simplistic or dualistic language (e.g., gay/straight, affirmative/intolerant, obedient/disobedient) maintains the divisions between “us” and “them.” Rich, nuanced, complex language (which may even seem paradoxical at times) is needed to build bridges of compassion, both in our therapy sessions and in our religious communities.

Although many others have addressed this subject from various angles (e.g., Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Benoit, 2005; Dehlin, Galliher, Bradshaw, & Crowell, 2015; Grigoriou, 2014; Jacobsen & Wright, 2014; Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002), this article represents my effort to contribute to the dialogue, to help “unpack” the labels and consider their utility and inadequacy. I begin briefly reviewing part of the history and evolution of these labels. I will then provide an overview of semiology to help consider labels as a linguistic construct. I will then conclude with some suggestions on how we might apply this understanding of labels in clinical and community settings.

History: Creating the “Homosexual”

The term *homosexual* first appeared in 1868 in a letter from Karl Benkert, an Austrian-Hungarian physician, writing to the German writer Karl Ulrichs who had published a series of essays in the 1860’s on three types of male sexual orientations (Sell, 1997). Benkert’s neologism was formed by combining both

Greek (*ὁμός* [homos] meaning “same”) and Latin (*sexus* meaning “sex”), which was consistent with the creation of other medical terminology in 19th-century Europe. Benkert used the term again in 1869 in a political pamphlet and it began to spread as it was used by other pamphleteers. It appeared for the first time in English in 1892. The use of the new term quickly increased, especially in the emerging field of sexology (Johnson, 2004).

Prior to the nineteenth-century, same-sex sexuality had generally been viewed as a set of behaviors, often associated with the legal and/or religious prohibitions of such behaviors (Foucault, 1976/1990). As homosexuality emerged as a concept, there also emerged a linking of sexual behaviors to a social identity (Johnson, 2004). In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1976/1990) describes how the homosexual came to be viewed in medical, juridical, and social discourse:

Then nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature.... the homosexual was now a species. (p. 43)

With the creation of the “homosexual” there then followed the creation of the “heterosexual.” The two labels were linked; each label was understood in terms of the other, in terms of what it was not. This transition from labeling behaviors to labeling an identity contributed to cultural changes in how sexuality was viewed in Europe and North America and laid the foundation for the belief in the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy which persisted in science and society well into the twentieth-century (Johnson, 2004).

The nineteenth-century study of the homosexual reflects the larger scientific milieu of the time. This was the age of observation and classification. Naturalists Alfred Russel Wallace and Charles Darwin made their voyages, bringing thousands of specimens back to England to study, categorize, and name. In 1858, the surgeons Henry Gray and Henry Vandyke Carter

published the first edition of *Gray's Anatomy* after 18 months of dissections and making detailed notes and illustrations. Botanists George Bentham and Joseph Hooker spent decades working to organize thousands of plant species into orders and families in a comprehensive taxonomy. Similarly, the physicians, psychiatrists, and sexologists in this time period attempted to observe, classify, and name variations in sexual behaviors and desires. Foucault (1976/1990) lists some examples including "Krafft-Ebing's zoophiles and zooerasts, Rohleder's auto-monosexualists; and later, mixoscopophiles, gynecomasts, presbyophiles, sex-oesthetic inverts, and dyspareunist women" (p. 43). There is an important difference, however, between the naming of an animal, body part, plant, etc. and the naming of a human. Juliet's rose doesn't care if we call it by some other name and a different name would not alter the way we interact with the flower, yet from schoolyard bullying to the Holocaust, we see how labels among humans can significantly affect the way someone is treated.

Evolution: Making "Alphabet Soup"

The list of labels for variations in sexual orientation and/or gender identity is continuously changing and expanding. With the development of the Internet and the creation of social media, the list has been growing rapidly. As individuals connect and engage in dialogues, neologisms are formed that soon begin to appear in public and academic discourse. As Foucault (1976/1990) described it, "The nineteenth century and our own have been rather the age of multiplication: a dispersion of sexualities, a strengthening of their disparate forms...our epoch has initiated sexual heterogeneities" (p. 37). In the present day, these new labels are almost exclusively being generated by individuals naming themselves or joining together in groups, making the process distinctly different from the medical diagnoses and scientific classifications of the nineteenth-century.

The best visual example of the ever-expanding list of labels is the initialism used to collectively refer to individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (i.e., self-concept of gender corresponds to biological sex). The initialism began as GLB or LGB, taking the first letter from the sexual orientations

gay, lesbian, and bisexual. In the early 1990's, T was added to the list representing those who identify as transgender or transsexual. LGBT is still the most commonly used version of the initialism, with the L being placed first as a feminist sensitivity to the history of male precedence; however, LGBTQ has been increasingly used with a Q representing those who identify as *questioning* or *queer*, a label which used to be pejorative but which is now used nonpejoratively in academia (e.g., queer studies, queer theory) (Sell, 1997) and by individuals who prefer the fluidity and nonspecificity associated with the term. Additional letters (and numbers or punctuation in some versions) have been added to the initialism, creating what some refer to as an "alphabet soup" of identities (Petchesky, 2009; Zimmer et al., 2014). I have seen various examples of the alphabet soup including LGBTQQIA and LGBTQQIP2SAA. I have also seen some suggestions in social media and other online forums of rearranging the letters into the pronounceable word QUILTBAG as an attempt to tame the unwieldy initialism into an acronym. There is also the opinion in some circles that one who uses longer forms of the initialism also has a more informed and inclusive attitude (especially if you identify as heterosexual). Someone who uses LGBT to refer to gender and sexual orientation diversities may be judged as insensitive towards or ignorant of individuals who identify as queer, intersex, asexual, agender, etc. The effort to be inclusive can quickly turn into a shibboleth situation.

This alphabet soup represents a push for social justice, a desire for everyone to have a seat and feel welcome at the table. The individual labels approach, however, creates a situation akin to a seating arrangement with place cards, leaving some individuals scanning the table and asking, Where's my seat? Where's my letter? When this occurs, the good manners of political correctness suggest that we should rush to remedy the situation, producing a new letter and an apology. For example, Facebook announced in February 2014 that it would allow users to select a custom gender identity beyond the dichotomous labels "male" and "female," and offered a list of 58 gender options (from which the user could select up to 10) including the following:

Agender, Androgyne, Androgynous, Bigender, Cis, Cis Female, Cis Male, Cis Man, Cis Woman, Cisgen-

der, Cisgender Female, Cisgender Male, Cisgender Man, Cisgender Woman, Female, Female to Male, FTM, Gender Fluid, Gender Nonconforming, Gender Questioning, Gender Variant, Genderqueer, Intersex, Male, Male to Female, MTF, Neither, Neutrois, Non-binary, Other, Pangender, Trans, Trans Female, Trans Male, Trans Man, Trans Person, Trans Woman, Trans*, Trans* Female, Trans* Male, Trans* Man, Trans* Person, Trans* Woman, Transfeminine, Transgender, Transgender Female, Transgender Male, Transgender Man, Transgender Person, Transgender Woman, Transmasculine, Transsexual, Transsexual Female, Transsexual Male, Transsexual Man, Transsexual Person, Transsexual Woman, Two-spirit. (Zimmerman et al., 2014, p. 470)

The following year, in February 2015, Facebook announced that it had modified the custom gender option after receiving feedback that some individuals found it difficult to express their sex with the pre-populated list of 58 options (Jones, 2015). It now offers a free-form field where users can enter in any term they want to describe their gender identity and are still able to include up to 10 labels. Dacumos (2006) cautions, however, that this rejection of traditional labels and push for new terminology leads to “a type of super-consumer custom-made identity that leaves you with very little upon which to build a movement” (p. 36). Creating more labels, in a sense, waters down the soup.

What about those who desire recognition and respect but who don't want to be part of the soup? Over the years, this effort to acknowledge diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity has become associated with social activism, secularism, and acceptance of a broad range of lifestyles and sexual behaviors. There are those who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender but who, due to personal values including religious beliefs, are uncomfortable using labels that carry these associations. Even though they may reject the alphabet soup labels, there is still a desire to make connections, find communities, and increase self-understanding through dialogue. What occurs is the formation of unique labels. This can be seen among Latter-day Saints, both in official Church communication and in dialogue among Church members.

In the 1960's and 1970's, Church leaders and publications often used the term homosexuality with an emphasis on behaviors rather than identity. The most

widely cited example of this is the chapter on homosexuality in President Spencer W. Kimball's (1969) book *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. By the 1990's, homosexuality was still frequently used, but “same-gender attraction” or “same-sex attraction” also began to be used occasionally. For example, Elder Dallin H. Oaks (1995) gave a General Conference talk entitled “Same-Gender Attraction” and devoted his entire address to the subject. In the 2000's, the balance shifted to using the labels same-sex attraction or same-gender attraction the majority of the time. From around 2010 to the present, same-sex attraction seems to be the most common label used. Examples of how gender identity labels have been used in the LDS Church are practically non-existent. At present, issues related to gender identity, specifically gender dysphoria or transgender identity, are not addressed in Church-wide communication from Church leaders, and are a newly emerging topic of discussion among some Church members.

The sexual orientation labels used by the members of the Church generally reflect the language used by Church leadership, predominantly using same-sex attraction or same-gender attraction. This has led to the formation of the initialisms SSA or SGA. Interestingly, this has also led to some use of the initialism OSA (opposite-sex attraction). The precision of the term SSA allows for a description of attractions without also implying any particular desires, behaviors, lifestyle, or identity; however, there are also a growing number of Church members who use the labels used by the broader culture (gay, lesbian, bisexual, LGBTQ, etc.). Online I have even seen Moho (Mormon homosexual), a label with a more humorous or slang connotation. In self-identifying some LDS individuals exclusively use SSA or SGA, often referring to “experiencing SSA”, while others call themselves gay Mormons or use gay and SSA interchangeably. From the distressed individual telling the bishop about his or her “unwanted same-sex attraction” to the person creating a funny list entitled, “You might be a Moho if...”, there is an increasing diversity of ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity are discussed among LDS communities.

Semiology: Are You Thinking What I'm Thinking?

In order to continue unpacking sexual orientation and

gender identity labels and critically examine the processes by which they are created and used, we need to consider the building blocks that make up a label. A foray into semiology and the theories of linguists Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and Roland Barthes (1915–1980) may help in deconstructing a label into its component parts.

Semiology is a science of signs (words, images, objects, musical sounds, etc.). In looking at verbal signs, semiology makes the distinction between language and speech. Speech is the individual act of selecting a set of sounds through psycho-physical mechanisms to express a thought (Barthes, 1964/1977; Saussure, 1916/2000a). For example, when I see a four-legged furry animal meowing at me, I think of the word “cat” and to express that thought aloud, I will need to use my lungs, vocal chords, tongue, and jaw to produce the sounds necessary to say the word. But why did I decide to call it a cat? I was taught that association at home and school, within a social context. Saussure (1916/2000a) argues that “speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive of one without the other” (p. 22). Language, then, represents the social side. Language is a social institution made up of agreed upon signs. English speakers collectively agree that *c-a-t* and its corresponding sound is the label for my feline friend. This of course varies from one linguistic community to another. Spanish speakers agree on the label *g-a-t-o*; French speakers use *c-h-a-t*. Saussure (1916/2000a) cautions, however, that “some people regard language, when reduced to its elements, as a naming-process only – a list of words, each corresponding to the thing it names...it lets us assume that the linking of a name and a thing is a very simple operation – an assumption that is anything but true” (p. 25–26). Language not only reflects the collective pairings of words and objects, but also is connected to social values and complex mental concepts.

Barthes (1964/1977) suggests that more than a dictionary, language is like a game with its own rules, which one learns how to follow after study or observation. In addition, the rules of the game change over time. For example, a young adolescent hearing the phrase “Don we now our gay apparel” when listening to Christmas carolers in the late 1800’s would have shown no reaction; nowadays, it often solicits a giggle or snide comment from teenagers (and some adults),

who associate gay with stereotypes of homosexuality rather than meaning joyful, bright, or showy. In order to successfully participate in a linguistic community, one has to not only be familiar with the vocabulary but also the social norms and conventions of how those words and phrases are used.

Saussure (1916/2000a) breaks down the linguistic sign into two parts: the *signifier* and the *signified*. The signifier is the sound-image (i.e., word) and the signified is the mental concept. Together, the signifier and signified form “a two-sided psychological entity” (p. 26). These two sides, like the front and back of a piece of paper, cannot be separated; one recalls the other. When you hear or see the word “butterfly” you connect it to a mental concept (e.g. insect with symmetrical wings that drinks nectar and used to be a caterpillar). If you had no mental concept associated with the word, then the signifier would be meaningless or gibberish. Saussure also emphasizes that the pairing of the signifier and signified is arbitrary. This can be seen in the different languages of the world. *Schmetterling*, *vlinder*, *kipepeo*, *leptir*, *tximeleta*, and *papillon* are extremely different signifiers in terms of letters and sounds, yet all are associated with the idea of “butterfly.” There is no inherent relationship between our idea of a butterfly and the letters and sounds associated with it. A word only means something because we collectively agree on the association.

We can now apply this linguistic analysis to sexual orientation and gender identity labels. The labels are the linguistic signs (e.g., lesbian); the signifier is the words, letters, and sounds (e.g., *l-e-s-b-i-a-n*); and the signified is the mental concept, our understanding of the meaning (e.g., the definition of “lesbian”). Communication about cats and butterflies is fairly simple because the associated mental concepts are generally similar among individuals. When it comes to sexual and gender identities, however, we see that the signified can vary dramatically from one person to another. There is not a collective agreement. With so much variation in mental concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity, it makes clear communication challenging. In addition, the number of labels is increasing rapidly, faster than society’s ability to absorb and agree upon them. This leads to scenarios where the speaker is using a word (signifier) which has no paired association (signified) for the listener. The listener will prob-

ably feel a lack of connection with the speaker and the speaker will likely be frustrated with the listener's lack of comprehension.

In looking at the labels used in LDS communities, we can see some unique differences. For many LDS individuals, *gay* and *SSA* are not interchangeable signifiers. Sausurre (1916/2000b) argues that "any conceptual difference perceived by the mind seeks to find expression through a distinct signifier, and two ideas that are no longer distinct in the mind tend to merge into the same signifier" (p. 112). In recent years, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has made an effort to be clear about what does and does not constitute a sin when it comes to homosexuality. As a result, a conceptual difference has emerged. Rather than simply viewing homosexuality as sinful, there is now the conceptual distinction between same-sex sexual behaviors, which are considered sinful, and same-sex attractions, which are not. Distinct concepts have led to distinct signifiers. For many LDS individuals, *gay* is associated with the mental concept of "living a gay lifestyle" (i.e., pursuing or engaging in same-sex romantic and/or sexual relationships), whereas *SSA* is associated with experiencing sexual attraction towards same-sex individuals to some degree and choosing to follow LDS standards of sexual conduct (i.e., celibacy or heterosexual marriage).

As mentioned previously, there also exists a lack of collective agreement among LDS individuals similar to the broader culture. Some of the labels used have shifted in meaning or have acquired additional mental associations. As social change occurs, the relationship between the signifier and the signified also changes (Sausurre, 1916/2000a). In the broader culture, *gay* has become associated with concepts of acceptance, pride, or the absence of shame over one's sexual orientation. Within LDS communities, increasing numbers of non-heterosexual Latter-day Saints are using *gay* instead of *SSA*. Many of these individuals are still committed to following LDS standards, but also want to acknowledge that they have accepted, or even embraced, their sexual orientation. They are proud of being *gay* and Mormon. These individuals may associate the signifier *SSA* with the concept of feeling dislike or shame over one's sexual orientation. Yet there are many who use *SSA* and are just as accepting of their sexual orientation as those who identify as *gay*. There-

fore, in the LDS dialogues surrounding sexuality and identity, we cannot assume that the person who says "gay" is not committed to living as a faithful Latter-day Saint and we cannot assume that the person who says "SSA" is ashamed of his or her sexuality.

Clinical Application: Exploring the Dilemmas

Increased awareness of labels and the politics, hidden narratives, and the inconsistent mental concepts connected to them might leave a clinician feeling overwhelmed or self-conscious about his or her terminology used when working with clients. In times past, I have felt paralyzed by political correctness, unable to say anything for fear of saying the wrong thing and hurting or offending my client. Yes, sexual orientation and gender identity labels can be problematic and provoke arguments, but they can also be important and powerful, especially in therapy. Rather than seeing this as a conflict to be avoided, I would encourage clinicians to see it as an opportunity to be embraced. Exploring the dilemmas associated with labels can be a parallel process for both therapist and client. As the therapist works to avoid simplistic or dualistic thinking (Morrow, Beckstead, Hayes, & Haldeman, 2004) and is transparent about his or her struggle with labels and their meanings, clients may be able to decrease simplistic or dualistic thinking about their sexual or gender identities and be more open to struggling with unanswered questions and uncertain futures. To help therapists embrace this opportunity and model acceptance and compassion, I have the following three suggestions.

First, embrace your own dilemmas and pay special attention to the labels which are connected to sources of tension. As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1934) suggests, "Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves... Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer" (p. 33–34). Learning to sit with your own dilemmas related to sexual orientation, gender identity, professional ethics, and personal religious beliefs will help to increase empathy for your clients who are going through a similar process, understanding the reality in which they live. For most of us who work as therapists, this is not a new concept. The majority

of graduate programs and professional associations have practice guidelines for working with clients who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2012, 2015). These practice guidelines may have language and recommendations which we feel are in conflict with our personal or religious beliefs. During graduate training or at some time since then, many of us have felt unsure of how to reconcile professional and religious identities. Reflect on that time. Lean in to the struggle you might have felt. Questions you might ask yourself include, "How has the way I talk about sexual orientation or gender identity changed over time? What experiences have contributed to that change?" and "Of the labels that my clients use to describe their sexuality or gender, which do I respect and which do I have a hard time taking seriously?"

Second, allow clients to label themselves and question the labels they use. Rather than listing common sexual orientation or gender identity labels, ask the client how he or she identifies. Pope and Reynolds (1991) advocate, "We must not assume we know the sexuality of other individuals. We must not label the sexual orientation of others. Naming ourselves is one of our few fundamental rights, and it must be honored and protected" (p. 210). Using the labels your client chooses gives validation, can help to strengthen the therapeutic alliance, and models respectful thinking (Benoit, 2005). For example, a non-heterosexual woman who identifies as LDS and queer may be uncertain about therapy, worrying that a LDS therapist might not understand her sexual orientation. As you use the term queer in reflecting statements and additional questions, she will begin to sense that you are honoring the label she has chosen for herself (even if you don't have a full understanding of what it means). It is also helpful, however, to question the labels that your client uses, which can be another way of showing genuine curiosity as well as helping your client to step back and look at his or her thoughts and values. Questions you might ask include, "How would you define that label?" or "How well does that label describe your sexual orientation/gender identity?" and "How did you learn about that label? How did you decide that it was right for you?" The client's answers to these types of questions will help you to better understand the signified (mental concept) that your client associates

with the label and will help the client to consider the process of labeling and self-identifying.

Third, encourage clients to seek out social connection and help them to not be defined by what others think of them. Labels can help clients find communities of like-minded individuals (e.g. searching for online forums for individuals who have SSA, finding the LGBT resource center on a college campus, attending a local Trans support group). A client may want your help in preparing to come out to friends, parents, or partners and will want to discuss what labels to use and express fears about how they might respond. These are situations where labels can influence the degree of connection felt. It is important, however, to also help clients understand that everyone has different mental concepts connected to sexual orientation and gender identity labels and some people will misunderstand. For example, author Helen Boyd is married to a transgender partner. Boyd (2006) describes the way she has been labeled by others and how she labels herself:

I've stopped caring about what others think I am...I've just realized that who someone else thinks I am has little to do with who I actually am, and that I have almost no control over what a person might see when they see me. Sometimes they don't have the language or the labels or the imagination to be accurate...Mistaken for a boy at seven, called butch at nine, a lesbian at twelve, homeboy at seventeen. I knew myself as a daughter and a sister and a friend and an aunt. (p. 241)

In Boyd's statement, we see that the labels she has received from others focus on her individual identity or attributes and the labels she chooses for herself focus on relationships and connection. Although she does not care about what others think of her identity, I think we can safely assume that she cares very much what her parent, sibling, friend, and niece/nephew think of her, not as an identity but as a whole person. Brown (2012) describes finding the balance between caring and not caring about what others think as a tightrope walk. She suggests, "When we stop caring about what people think, we lose our capacity for connection. When we become defined by what people think, we lose our willingness to be vulnerable" (p. 169). Questions you might ask to help a client navigate this tightrope include "How would you like to respond when someone misunderstands or mislabels

you?” and “When you feel that others are stereotyping you, who can you turn to for support who sees, respects, and values the whole you?” and “What can you do to be less defined by what others think of you and more defined by what matters most to you?”

Community Application: Building Bridges of Understanding

In our work with individual clients, especially religious clients with sexual orientation and/or gender identity concerns, we often can connect to both sides of the debates. We can empathize with the client who talks about his new boyfriend and tearfully describes how he finally feels seen, accepted, and loved for who he is after years of depression and self-loathing. We can also empathize with the parents who talk about their son who has chosen to pursue an openly gay lifestyle and tearfully describe how they want their son to be happy but also believe that true and lasting happiness comes through faithful adherence to God’s commandments. This ability to connect with both the “us” and the “them” can help us facilitate building bridges across the divide, increasing understanding and compassion within our professional and religious communities.

To build bridges within our professional communities, we would benefit from encouraging the virtue of respectfulness. Benoit (2005) defines respectfulness as “a balance between the twin errors of intolerance and relativism” (p. 320). He suggests that a question we might ask ourselves is, “How can I be respectful of this person’s beliefs, although my worldview is fundamentally different from his or hers?” (p. 321). Similar to the example presented earlier of respecting a client’s choice of label, we can do the same in professional dialogues and use the labels chosen by our peers in presentations and journal articles when responding to their ideas.

Specifically within the LDS professional community, we can build bridges of understanding among ourselves by trying to avoid engaging in pass/fail politics (Mattilda, 2006) or treating the language one uses as a shibboleth. In the Old Testament, the word *shibboleth* was used by the Gileadites to identify if one was an Ephraimite (the Ephraimite dialect lacked the *sh* sound):

[W]hen those Ephraimites which were escaped said, Let me go over; that the men of Gilead said unto him, Art thou an Ephraimite? If he said, Nay; Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him... (Judges 12:5–6)

The way an Ephraimite said the word would betray him and he would not pass (literally). Too often, I have seen situations where a LDS therapist is in a setting surrounded by other LDS or religious therapists and he or she is hesitant to share any thoughts regarding sexual orientation or gender identity for fear of being judged or misunderstood, fear of not passing. Mattilda (2006) writes in her introduction to *Nobody Passes*, “In a pass/fail situation, standards for acceptance may vary, but somebody always gets trampled” (p. 9). Each of us have been or will be in a situation where we are judged by someone else as not passing based on the words we say. Rather than perpetuating pass/fail situations, let us try to create an environment where someone could say, figuratively, Sibboleth, and we would respond by saying, “It’s okay, I understand what you are trying to say,” or, if we don’t understand, to ask “Help me understand what you mean when you say...” We need to try and move past the either/or, pass/fail, and us/them mindsets that permeate our culture, including within our professional communities (Pope & Reynolds, 1991).

As LDS mental health professionals, we also have the opportunity to help in the current efforts to build bridges of understanding between the LDS Church and LGBTQ communities. We can help individuals and groups both honor deeply-held beliefs or convictions and find common ground. The Persian poet and Sufi mystic Rumi wrote, “Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I’ll meet you there” (West, 2015, p. 74). LDS poet and playwright, Carol Lynn Pearson (2007) argues, “Can we be ‘kind’ to others when we see them as a different ‘kind’? We can be polite to our homosexual brothers and sisters, but we are not being ‘kind’ unless we acknowledge them as ‘kin,’ not as ‘the other,’ but as our very own kind” (p. 22). And on the website created by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to discuss same-sex attraction it states,

The human family comes in every shade of difference.
The greatest and smallest of us possess as many unique

talents as we do weaknesses. Yet it is so easy to miss the common ground we all walk on. If we want to understand one another we have to see ourselves in one another. Open the book of each individual life and you will find a familiar story. (mormonsandgays.org, n.d.)

One of the ways in which we can help others find the familiar story, see each other as kin, and meet in the field beyond our differences is to find and highlight the common humanity beneath the labels we use. As therapists, we listen for the feelings beneath the words or we also attend to what is said in the silence, and then we try to draw connections or help our client form those connections. On a broader scale, these same skills are needed as we try to build bridges in what is becoming an increasingly divided and political landscape.

Conclusion: Love Thy Neighbor

At the beginning of this article, I shared the example of Romeo and Juliet, with Juliet arguing that names (labels) shouldn't matter and that she and Romeo could, in some way, discard their family connections. "Deny thy father, and refuse thy name; / Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, / And I'll no longer be a Capulet," she says (Shakespeare, 1599/1914, 2.2.38-40). Juliet's logic appears naïve and simplistic, analogous to one who suggests that racism would decrease if we could just "not see color." Labels and their associated meanings are not easily discarded or ignored, and given Juliet's tragic end, I would advise against following her line of reasoning. In conclusion, I offer a model I would recommend, another story of two individuals from families with a history of division and discord.

A parable was once told of two men, one who was called a Samaritan and the other who was called a Jew (Luke 10:30-35). When the Samaritan encounters the Jew on the road to Jericho, stripped, beaten, and left half-dead, his heart fills with compassion and he disrupts his journey to care for the injured man, freely giving of both his time and his money. Although fully aware of their differences and the histories of their ancestors, he does not allow notions of "us" and "them" to get in the way of binding up wounds and providing shelter.

When Jesus originally shared this parable, his listeners likely understood that "the Jews have no deal-

ings with the Samaritans" (John 4:9). Although the Savior could have shared this parable without using labels and still have illustrated the commandment to love "thy neighbor as thyself" (Luke 10:27), he specifically included these labels associated with a history of conflict and division. To suggest that the Samaritan somehow ignored his own Samaritan identity and the other man's Jewish identity significantly reduces the impact of the parable. The labels transform the story from a fictional anecdote of an act of kindness into an illustration of "the pure love of Christ" (Moroni 7:47). It is my hope that this model might influence our efforts to understand the individuals of various sexual orientations and gender identities which we meet, especially those who may have been emotionally wounded and come to therapy, looking for shelter.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2012). Guidelines for psychological practice with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. *American Psychologist*, 67(1), 10-42.
- American Psychological Association. (2015). *Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people*. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf>
- Barthes R. (1977). *Elements of semiology*. (A. Lavers & C. Smith, Trans.). New York, NY: Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1964)
- Bartoli, E. & Gillem, A. R. (2008). Continuing to depolarize the debate on sexual orientation and religion: Identity and the therapeutic process. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 39(2), 202-209. DOI: 10.1037/0735-7028.39.2.202
- Benoit, M. (2005). Conflict between religious commitment and same-sex attraction: Possibilities for a virtuous response. *Ethics & Behavior*, 15(4), 309-325.
- Boyd, H. (2006). Persephone. In Mattilda (Ed.), *Nobody passes: Rejecting the rules of gender and conformity* (pp.236-242). Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Brown, B. (2012). *Daring greatly: How the courage to be vulnerable transforms the way we live, love, parent, and lead*. New York, NY: Gotham.
- Dacumos, N. (2006). All mixed up with no place to go: Inhabiting mixed consciousness on the margins. In Mattilda (Ed.), *Nobody passes: Rejecting the rules of gender and conformity* (pp.20-37). Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.

- Dehlin, J. P., Galliher, R. V., Bradshaw, W. S., & Crowell, K. A. (2015). Navigating sexual and religious identity conflict: A Mormon perspective. *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*, 15(1), 1–22. DOI: 10.1080/15283488.2014.989440
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality* (Vol. 1). (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage. (Original work published 1976)
- Grigoriou, J. A. (2014). Minority stress factors for same-sex attracted Mormon adults. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 1(4), 471–479. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000078>
- Jacobson, J. & Wright, R. (2014). Mental health implications in Mormon women's experiences with same-sex attraction: A qualitative study. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 42(5), 664–696. DOI: 10.1177/0011000014533204
- Johnson, M. D. (2004). Homosexuality. In *glbtq Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <http://www.glbqtarchive.com/>
- Jones, K. (2015, February 27). Facebook now allows users to create their own gender identity. *Breitbart*. Retrieved from <http://www.breitbart.com/big-hollywood/2015/02/27/facebook-now-allows-users-to-create-their-own-gender/>
- Kimball, S. W. (1969). *The Miracle of Forgiveness*. Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book.
- Mattilda (2006). Reaching too far: An introduction. In Mattilda (Ed.), *Nobody passes: Rejecting the rules of gender and conformity* (pp.7–19). Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Mormonsandgays.org. (n.d). *mormonsandgays.org*. Retrieved from <http://mormonsandgays.org/>
- Morrow, S. L., Beckstead, A. L., Hayes, J. A., & Haldeman, D. C. (2004). Impossible dreams, impossible choices, and thoughts about depolarizing the debate. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 32(5), 778–785. DOI: 10.1177/0011000004267564
- Oaks, D. H. (1995). Same gender attraction. *Ensign*, 25, 7–14.
- Pearson, C. L. (2007). *No more goodbyes: Circling the wagons around our gay loved ones*. Walnut Creek, CA: Pivot Point Books.
- Petchesky, R. P. (2009). The language of “sexual minorities” and the politics of identity: A position paper. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 17(33), 105-110.
- Pope, R. L., & Reynolds, A. L. (1991). Including bisexuality: It's more than just a label. In N. J. Evans & V. A. Wall (Eds.), *Beyond tolerance: Gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus* (pp. 205-212). Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.
- Rilke, R. M. (1934). *Letters to a young poet* (4th letter, dated July 16, 1903). M. D. Herter Norton (Trans.). New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc.
- Sausurre, F. (2000a). The nature of the linguistic sign. (W. Baskin, Trans.). In L. Burke, T. Crowley, & A. Girvin (Eds.), *The Routledge language and cultural theory reader* (pp. 21–32). New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1916)
- Sausurre, F. (2000b). Linguistic value. (W. Baskin, Trans.) In L. Burke, T. Crowley, & A. Girvin (Eds.), *The Routledge language and cultural theory reader* (pp. 105–113). New York, NY: Routledge. (Original work published 1916)
- Sell, R. L. (1997). Defining and measuring sexual orientation: A review. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 26(6), 643–658.
- Shakespeare, W. (1914). *Romeo & Juliet*. In W. J. Craig (Ed.) *The Oxford Shakespeare: The complete works of William Shakespeare*. Retrieved from <http://www.bartleby.com/70/3822.html>. (Original work published 1599)
- West, W. (2015). One western size fits all: Counsellor training in different countries and cultures. In G. Nolan & W. West (Eds.), *Therapy, culture, and spirituality: Developing therapeutic practice* (pp. 70–77). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Yarhouse, M. A. & Burkett, L. A. (2002). An inclusive response to LGB and conservative religious persons: The case of same-sex attraction and behavior. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 33(3), 235–241. DOI: 10.1037//0735-7028.33.3.235
- Zimmer, B., Solomon, J., & Carson, C. E. (2014). Among the new words. *American Speech*, 89(4), 470–496.