Recently, I have noticed a tendency for non-binary to be used as the go-to umbrella term for non-normative gender (gender not along the lines of man or woman, specifically) and as an alternative to genderqueer, and a tendency to perceive genderqueer as a specific identity rather than as an umbrella term. Currently, both of these terms are being, and have been, used in an umbrella capacity, and in the case of genderqueer only, as singular identity as well. Genderqueer, when used in its wider sense, is also meant to be a much larger umbrella than non-binary; queer gender (identity or expression) covers a lot of ground; non-binary refers to non-binary identities specifically. They’re not exactly interchangeable.

I have seen some assertion that genderqueer is/should “not” be used as an umbrella term, even at the generally great Queer Dictionary which claims that genderqueer is “sometimes also incorrectly used as an umbrella term”. This bothered me particularly because of the overwhelming amount of research and pouring over books and websites that I’ve done to uncover the history of “genderqueer” and its usages, many of which have defined genderqueer as an umbrella term. It would be more accurate to say that the usage of genderqueer may be shifting away from being used as an umbrella term in favor of non-binary when used in reference to identities rather than expression only, not that using it in this way is somehow wrong, or worse, that it never was used this way. Remember, the terms you prefer are entirely up to you! What you feel describes yourself best and considering the utility of umbrella terms are what is most important. I am writing this piece primarily to find out the relationship and differences between these terms.

To put this complicated issue as simply as possible: non-binary refers to gender that is not binary (not man nor woman) and genderqueer refers to gender that is queer (non-normative). Because gender that is not binary may be regarded as “queer” because it is not normative, it becomes easy to see why these terms have been used interchangeably. However, queer is also often used in a radical or political context, so some who may otherwise have considered themselves genderqueer may feel distanced from the term, or more closely aligned with it, due to this association. In short, genderqueer is often non-binary (except for in the case of referring to expression / performance exclusively), but not all non-binary identified people may consider themselves genderqueer for a variety of reasons, which I will discuss.

An excellent example of an individual at odds with the notion of genderqueer as an umbrella term can be found in Nobody Passes (2006) in this essay by Rocko Bulldagger, excerpted here:

> From Time Out New York, February 3, 2005: “Genderqueer: This umbrella term refers to anyone who doesn’t fit into the traditional binary male-female system—from androdykes to trannyboys.” My own personal definition of genderqueer: (1) A person who is painfully deliberate and consciously political in their gender expression. (2) Someone who identifies with efforts to subvert oppressive power dynamics by undermining traditional gender expectations. (3) A person whose gender presentation is over determined by traditionally gendered signs—somebody who displays excessive femininity or masculinity.

In my research, both academic and personal, I have frequently encountered genderqueer in these capacities, sometimes overlapping:

- as an umbrella term for identities “other” than man and woman
- its political/radical implications
• to refer to “queer” gender performance / expression
• a stand-alone identity

As a stand-alone identity, genderqueer may cover the “it’s complicated” arena of gender, refer to presentation as well as personal identity, and/or be used in place of or alongside more specific identities that may be considered non-binary (androgyne, bigender, and so on). The clearest way I’ve found to describe genderqueer is using a 5-pronged definition: genderqueer identities may include those who identify as 1. both man and woman, 2. neither man nor woman, 3. moving between two or more genders, 4. third gendered or other-gendered (includes those who prefer “genderqueer” or “non-binary” to describe their gender), 5. having an overlap or blur of gender and orientation and/or sex”. The downside to this is potentially incorporating individuals who would not identify themselves as genderqueer; when this may be the case, it is generally better to use the specific identity in question rather than a term that the individual or group may not prefer.

Here are a variety of definitions and mentions of genderqueer that I’ve come across that point to meanings of the concept; they vary and you may not identify with some or all of these definitions:

“People who identify as genderqueer or intergender may consider themselves as being both male and female, as being neither male nor female, or as falling completely outside the gender binary. Some genderqueer people see their identity as one of many possible genders other than male or female, while others see genderqueer as an umbrella term that encompasses all of those possible genders…Genderqueer people are united by their rejection of the notion that there are only two genders.” (Serving LGBTQ+ Library and Archives)

“Genderqueer is also a colloquial or community term that describes someone who identifies as a gender other than ‘man’ or ‘woman’, or someone who identifies as neither, both, or some combination thereof. In relation to the male/female, genderqueer people generally identify as more ‘both/and’ or ‘neither/nor’, rather than ‘either/or’. Some genderqueer people may identify as a gender and some see it as a third gender in addition to the traditional two.” (Creative Encounters: New Conversations in Science Education and the Arts)

“Genderqueer people—those who choose to live their lives somewhere between the usual gender roles—are softening the boundaries of gender and demonstrating what life without the binary might look like.” (Dossie Easton, The Ethical Slut)

“Genderqueer: 1. A term which is used by some people who may or may not fit on the spectrum of trans or be labeled as trans but who identify their gender and sexual orientation to be outside of the binary gender system, or culturally proscribed gender roles. As with any other groups that may be aligned with transgender identities, the reasons for identifying as genderqueer vary. 2. People who identify as both transgender and queer, individuals who challenge both gender and sexuality regimes and see gender identity and sexual orientation as overlapping and interconnected.” (Trans* and Queer Wellness Initiative)

Although there are nuances with these definitions, they largely cover the same region of gender other than man and woman and illustrate that some may consider themselves genderqueer and see genderqueer as the gender that they identify as, while others understand it and utilize it in a broader sense. While the meaning of genderqueer as a concept may be relatively clear, what it means to individuals will vary and, particularly, where political and radical concepts may be applied will create variation and divergent reactions to the potency of a term like “genderqueer”. It is important to note that the earliest usages I’ve come across are all utilizing genderqueer either as an umbrella term or a term with a meaning of something along the lines of “not man and woman”.

2/3
What about non-binary, then? *Non-binary gender* is a term I’ve encountered most often in academic texts, though less often overall than genderqueer and (so far) never encountered in a glossary (check out these [Google Books results for a sampling](https://books.google.com)). It needs to be understood that the widespread usage of this term as an alternative to genderqueer’s umbrella capacity is a relatively recent development.

There are pros and cons to the umbrella usages of these terms. Genderqueer is problematized by (mis)understandings of the implications of *queer* and that some people use it as a stand-alone identity as well; non-binary is only recently gaining currency as an umbrella term of choice for a wide range of identities. The discourse around these terms seems to indicate that non-binary is more inclusive somehow because of the association of genderqueer with female-assigned individuals and the United States. I would challenge that it is more of an assumption than association, because many of the pioneers of genderqueer identity and “gender outlaws” themselves were actually male-assigned (Riki Wilchins and Kate Bornstein, for example) and, from the two surveys I’ve conducted right up to the Genderqueer Health survey I’m scanning through now just completed a couple of days ago, people who identify themselves as genderqueer are an incredibly diverse bunch and are not strictly from the U.S.

I am divided personally about where I stand with this issue. Genderqueer is the term I’ve encountered most often in my research and is the initial word that really clicked in my head and made me think “This is me!” I think queer itself is a term with fantastic utility, as well as recognizable limitations, although I think many of these perceived limitations come from assumptions rather than actualities. Non-binary, however, doesn’t seem to have the baggage that genderqueer may carry and thus may, in time, end up being the umbrella term of choice in reference to identity. As an exchange I had with Nat (@quarridors) recently reminded me, not all genderqueer people identify as non-binary, because the term is also used in reference to their expression rather than identity.

Ultimately, I would like to make it clear that, historically, genderqueer has *frequently* been employed as an umbrella term and *is still* being used that way, although this usage is increasingly being questioned (a great thing, I think) and the alternative of non-binary is more often being brought to the table when it is applicable. Again, the distinction should be made between the *wide-reaching* purpose of genderqueer, and the identity specific utility of non-binary.