

Best practice guidelines

for measuring gender and sexual
orientation in research with human
participants



(Sponsored by LGBTQ* Network)

Background



**Northumbria
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NEWCASTLE

This document outlines best practice guidelines on collecting data about gender and sexual orientation for both researchers and reviewers using Northumbria University's online ethics system. It is important for individuals regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation to feel included and represented in research. In the UK alone ¹ an estimated 1.2 million people 16 years and over disclosed an LGB identity. With regards to gender identity, it was found ² from a sample of over 108,000 participants that 13% of the respondents identified as transgender (or trans) and 6.9% of respondents identified as non-binary. This equates to roughly 14,040 transgender individuals and 7,452 non-binary individuals across the UK population.

As a society some progress has been made to promote acceptance and weaken the stigma surrounding various gender identities and the LGBTQ+ community. However, as a society we still have a long way to go in this sector.

³ LGBTQ+ individuals are 2x as likely to ⁴ complete suicide and 27% of young transgender individuals have attempted to complete suicide ⁵. There is a high prevalence for mental health disorders and suicidal thoughts, attempts or completions amongst these individuals that stem from the hate crimes, bullying and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people.

To aid the progression of destigmatizing gender identity and LGBTQ+ individuals it is important to include gender and relationship diverse people in our research and include suitable ethics documentation to collect data in a respectful manner. It is important that our research accounts for these individuals and makes people feel accepted and cared for at Northumbria University in a world where 1 in 6 LGB individuals in the UK ⁶ have experienced homophobic, biphobic or transphobic hate crime.

Including gender and sexuality questions in research can provide demographics that can be assessed for a range of purposes. For example, sexual orientation and gender identity can be analysed as a predictor of health, social, and economic outcomes ⁷.



Furthermore, researchers across the University engage in work specifically targeting LGBTQ+ participants in diverse departments from nursing, law, design, and psychology. Thus, as our University promotes research in these areas, guidelines for best practice are important to educate researchers about the best language to use when interacting with LGBTQ+ participants.

Inclusion and diversity of all kinds is essential for the wellbeing of staff and students at Northumbria University. To prioritise the key ethical principle of respect towards participants it should be utilised for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities. ⁸

This project aims to educate staff and students on the newly proposed ethics alongside educating individuals about Gender identity, Gender equality and Sexual orientation. It is necessary at Northumbria University to provide education in these key areas.



Questions on gender identity



These questions have been developed based on recommendations from the LGBT Foundation and consultation with gender diverse people.

Before conducting your study, one important question to ask is if gender needs to be measured in your study. If you have no specific predictions about gender, perhaps it is unnecessary to measure it. Some researchers may be more interested in the gender norms or expression of participants. In this case continuous scale with one or more dimensions might be more appropriate.⁹ (See footnotes for examples).¹⁰ In some disciplines however, gender information is collected as demographic data. In these disciplines we suggest researchers use one of the following options.

The first option may be the most appropriate for the majority of researchers. In this question, gender identity is given. There are four options Man (including trans man), Woman (including trans woman), Non-binary, Self-identify with the option of filling in a text box.

What is your gender identity?

Man (including trans man)

Non-binary

Woman (including trans woman)

Self- identify _____





If your research is specifically interested in trans people and/or differences between cis-gender and trans participants then you could add this second question to collect data on this variable.

**If you are specifically interested in the trans population:
'Do you identify with the gender you were assigned at birth?'**

Yes

No

The reasoning behind the option choices:

Adding “(including trans man/woman)” in the “Man” and “Woman” categories can help trans people feel included in the research and also clarifies how they should answer the question. Including the non-binary option is important it has been estimated around 1% of the population might identify as trans, including people who identify as non-binary. This equates to around 600,000 trans and non-binary people in Britain. ¹¹

Finally, providing an open text box, allows participant who feel they don't fit into one of the previous categories to write in their preferred way of identifying their gender. (A glossary can be found at the end of this document which may help you understand any self-identifying categories with which you are unfamiliar.) Please do not use the term “other” to describe this category. “Othering is defined by some individuals or groups not fitting into the norms of a social group.” ¹² It is harmful because it is a way of neglecting individual humanity. Also it deems others as being less worthy of dignity and respect.





The second option is to provide an open text box for participants to self-identify their gender. This option may be most appropriate if you are recruiting participants from a LGBTQ+ population and/or people who are gender diverse.

Self-identified Gender

Please describe your gender identity below:

It is important to give participants a choice about disclosing their gender identity. Not everyone may feel comfortable with this and it should be addressed. To adhere with this guideline, please do not force answers on questions concerning gender.



Questions on sexual orientation



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These questions have been developed based on recommendations from the LGBT Foundation ¹⁴ the American Psychological Association, and consultation with relationship diverse people.

Before conducting your study, you should decide whether the collection of data on sexual orientation is necessary as it is a protected characteristic. However, researchers conducting research on romantic relationships, sexuality, health (including mental health), and laws that influence couples would be encouraged to collect data on sexual orientation as people who are LGTBQ+ are often excluded from research.

A recent report by the UK Government Equalities Office highlights the importance of collecting data on LGBTQ+ participants. The report states that sexual orientation can influence a diverse range of outcomes including satisfaction with life, harassment, being victims of crime, negative experiences in healthcare, discrimination at work, and homelessness.

Thus it is clear that LGBTQ+ individuals' identities and the prejudice they face in society may play a role in a diverse range of variables in their lives. These issues necessitate further study to understand how we can improve the lives of LGBTQ+ people and reduce inequalities in society. The following question can be used to ask about sexual orientation.

What is your sexual orientation?:

Asexual

Bisexual

Gay

Heterosexual/straight

Lesbian

Pansexual

Queer

Self-identify _____



Reasoning behind the answer choices: Heterosexual/straight: Straight is becoming the more common term for people who are attracted to men who are attracted to women and women who are attracted to men. Heterosexual should also be used as this may be a term older participants understand. The 5 other categories provided are the most commonly occurring categories drawn from the UK Government Equalities Office Report conducted in 2018. Finally, we recommend an open answer response labelled as “self-identify” for those participants who do not see themselves as fitting into any of the previous categories.

It is important to give participants a choice about disclosing their sexual orientation/sexuality. Not everyone may feel comfortable with this and it should be addressed. To adhere with this guideline, please do not force answers on questions concerning sexual orientation.

It should also be noted that participants can tick more than one box if they wish as some participants may identify with more than one of the sexual orientation options.

The second option is to provide an open text box for participants to self-identify their sexual orientation. This option may be most appropriate if you are recruiting participants from a LGBTQ+ population.

Self-identified sexual orientation

Please identify your sexual orientation below:

For both the gender identity and sexual orientation questions, the responses were deliberately listed in alphabetical order. It has been recognised that alphabetically ordering items is the most suitable to avoid implying any kind of hierarchy.¹⁵ It eliminates the possibility of those not in the portrayed default category, for example heterosexual, from feeling judged¹⁶ or less important. The only acceptable exception for this is when we leave the ‘In another way, specify if you wish) option at the end of the list.

The inclusion of a Glossary is necessary to educate individuals on the jargon of the LGBT community enabling the appropriate terms to be used in research.

AFAB	Assigned female at birth
Affirmed gender	An individual's true gender, as opposed to their gender assigned at birth. This term should replace terms like "new gender" or "chosen gender" which will imply that an individual's gender was chosen.
AMAB	Assigned male at birth
Androgene	A non-binary gender identity in which a person may feel a mix of male and female, or neither.
Acquired gender	The new gender of a person who has transitioned, with or without physical transition. A legal term as oppose to one used in the trans community.
Asexual	A person who experiences little or no sexual attraction. Asexual people often still feel romantic attraction and can have just as fulfilling relationships as non-asexual people.
Assigned sex	The sex you were assigned at birth and raised as.
Biphobia	Irrational fear, hatred, abuse etc. of bisexual people. Often differs from homophobia as it is based around common stereotypes and misconceptions about the bisexual community.
Bisexual	Being attracted to more than one gender.
Cisgender	An adjective to describe a person whose sex assigned at birth matches their gender.





Cisnormativity	The assumption that all individuals we come in contact with are cisgender.
Coming out	A process by which a trans person will tell friends/family/co-workers etc. about their trans status, or a person who is not heterosexual will tell friends/family/co-workers etc. about their sexual orientation.
FTM, Trans man, a transsexual man	Someone assigned female at birth but has transitioned or intends to transition to male live full-time as such. The term trans man is strongly preferred.
Gay	Being attracted to people of the same gender. Most often used to describe men, but not always.
Gender	How a person feels in regards to male/female/neither/both/fluid. A cognitive process of recognising one's identity.
Gender fluid	This term can be used to refer to a person who does not identify as having a fixed gender.
Genderqueer	A gender diverse person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or a combination of male and female.
Gender dysphoria	A recognised medical diagnostic term which refers to the physical/mental/social discomfort of being perceived as living as one's assigned sex.
Gender incongruence	A term defined in the ICD 11 as a 'marked and persistent incongruence between the gender felt or experienced and the gender assigned to at birth'.
Gender reassignment	The process of transitioning from one gender to another.
Heterosexist, Heterosexism	Beliefs, systems and attitudes that privilege heterosexual/straight people and relationships. Often includes the assumption that all individual are heterosexual.
Queer	Queer is an umbrella term that describes sexual orientations other than straight and genders other than cisgender.
Pansexual	The attraction to all genders, including non-binary people.



Sexual Orientation	Attraction to people i.e., gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual etc.
Sexuality	The feelings and attractions felt by people towards other people.
Straight	A person attracted to the 'opposite' gender.
Third gender	This refers to people who do not identify as male or female but as both, neither, or a combination of the two.
Transgender	An adjective to describe a person whose gender is a different gender than the one assigned at birth.
Transphobia	Irrational fear, hatred, abuse etc. of trans people and people who do not conform to traditional gender norms.
Unsure	A person who is not certain about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Resources

Researchers may wish to give resources for support, specifically targeting LGBT participants.



Mind out offers online, telephone and email support for the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people. All LGBT people are welcome.



Switchboard provides information, support and a referral service for LGBT people.





Footnotes

¹ Census, 2018; Office for National Statistics (2020) *Sexual orientation, UK: 2018*, Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/sexuality/bulletins/sexualidentityuk/2018>

² National LGBT Survey, 2018; Government Equalities Office (2018) *National LGBT Survey*, Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/722314/GEO-LGBT-Survey-Report.pdf

³ Mind, 2016; [Mind \(2016\) Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer good practise guide](https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4687/mind-lgbtplusguide-2016-webres.pdf), Available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4687/mind-lgbtplusguide-2016-webres.pdf>

⁴ The phrase 'commit suicide' is beginning to be replaced by 'complete suicide'. Suicide was a crime in England and Wales until 1961 hence the use of the archaic term 'commit'. It is more appropriate to say completed suicide to not stigmatise suicide as a crime. Neeleman, J. (1996) *Suicide as a crime in the UK: legal history, international comparisons and present implications*, Available at: <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/8911560/>

⁵ Stonewall, 2014; Youth Chances (2014) *Trans Key Stats*, Available at: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/sites/default/files/trans_stats.pdf

⁶ Bachmann, C.L., Gooch, B. (2017) *LGBT in Britain Hate crime and discrimination*, Available at: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_hate_crime.pdf

⁷ Almazan, E., Ayala, G., Lee Badgett, M.V., Bye, L., Carpenter, C., Chae., H.D., et al (2009) *Best Practices for Asking Questions about Sexual Orientation on Surveys*, Available at <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Best-Practices-SO-Surveys-Nov-2009.pdf> <

⁸ Oates, J. (2021) *BPS Code of Human Research Ethics*, Available at: <https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/www.bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Human%20Research%20Ethics.pdf>

⁹ Attitudes towards gender norms (GEM Scale) – It is a scale that measures attitudes toward gender norms in intimate relationships or differing social expectations for men and women, boys and girls. There are 24 items across two subscales. In scale 1, an example item is 'It is the man who decides what type of sex to have' and an example item from scale 2 is 'A couple should decide together if they want to have children.' https://www.measureevaluation.org/prh/rh_indicators/mens-health/me/percent-of-men-who-hold-gender-equitable-beliefs#:~:text=Definition%3A,24%20items%20in%20two%20subscales





¹⁰ The Genderqueer Identity (GQI) Scale – The scale was developed to allow for a multidimensional assessment of genderqueer identity, including non-binary identity and gender fluidity among other elements. The GQI was designed to assess gender identity across a full spectrum of gender, at any age after mid-adolescence; McGuire, J. K., Beek, T. F., Catalpa, J. M., & Steensma, T. D. (2018). The Genderqueer Identity (GQI) Scale: Measurement and validation of four distinct subscales with trans and LGBTQ clinical and community samples in two countries. *The international journal of transgenderism*, 20(2-3), 289–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2018.1460735>

¹¹ Stonewall (2017) *The Truth About Trans*, Available at: <https://www.stonewall.org.uk/truth-about-trans>

¹² Gerry, K. (2020) What is Othering?, Available at: <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-othering-5084425#:~:text=Othering%20is%20a%20phenomenon%20in,norms%20of%20a%20social%20group.>

¹³ Advance HE, 2021; The alphabetical ordering of the gender identity terms is supported by the Advance HE Guidance document which advises response options to follow an alphabetical pattern. Advance HE (2021) *Guidance on the collection of diversity monitoring data*, Available at: AdvHE_Guidance_on_the_collection_of_diversity_monitoring_data_2021_1619535292.pdf

¹⁴ A Good Practise Guide to Monitoring Sexual Orientation- Aims to better meet the health and social care needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual people (LGB) through improved data collection. Newton, J., Winter, A., Varney, J., Passman, R., Humphreys, C., Sanidas, M., et al (2017) *Good Practice Guide to Monitoring Sexual Orientation*, Available at: <https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/lgbt-website-media/Files/b577e0cd-041a-4b10-89b6-f0f5f3384961/LGBTF%2520SOM%2520Report.pdf>

¹⁵ Office for National Statistics, 2008; Betts, P. (2008) *UK experiences of administering survey questions on sexual identity/orientation*, Available at: [file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/ukexperiencesquestionssexualidentity_tcm77-181189%20\(1\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/ukexperiencesquestionssexualidentity_tcm77-181189%20(1).pdf)

¹⁶ Mind, 2016; Mind (2016) *Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer good practise guide*, Available at: <https://www.mind.org.uk/media-a/4687/mind-lgbtplusguide-2016-webres.pdf>

¹⁷ LGBTQ+ Terminology/Vocabulary Primer, Available at: <https://www.nyp.org/documents/pps/cultural-competency/Understanding%20Disparities%20-%20LGBTQ%20Terminology.pdf>

¹⁸ Macmillandictionary (2021) *gender-fluid*, Available at: <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/gender-fluid>

¹⁹ Macmillan dictionary (2021) *Third Gender*, Available at: <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/third-gender>