

Gender Inclusion in Educational Research, Practice, and Policy: Transitioning Your Vocabulary

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For this special edition of *Perspective on Urban Education*, which focuses on listening to youth in all of their layers and complexity, I asked my niece, Lena Ravitch (she/her/hers), to write about what she wishes the research community, and education community moer broadly, knew about non-binary and trans people and populations given her experience as a trans woman. The guiding inquiry was: *What should researchers understand about non-binary and trans people populations?*

This post, written by Lena, is a loving accountability call to researchers and educators—we can and must do better when it comes to LGBTQIA+ research participants and inclusive research processes, practices, and policies. Broadly, it is vital to take a critical inquiry stance on all aspects of research, practice, and policy. In research, as an example of how to push against power asymmetries, use the term ‘research participants’ instead of ‘subjects’ to resist and interrupt the extractive language (and nature) of Western traditions of research (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Language generates meaning. Specifically, learning people’s identities *in/on their own terms* is a vital foundation for humanizing and culturally responsive research, practice, and policy. It is also, importantly, a measure of study validity for researchers.

Love, in the hooksian sense, means holding ourselves and each other accountable to create the conditions of humanizing and critical praxis that works from the tenet of critical intersectional inclusivity (hooks, 1994; Pak & Ravitch, 2021). In this spirit, based on her own lived experience, Lena offers vital considerations for inclusive, LGBTQIA+-affirming researchers, educators, and policy-makers.

Considerations for Surveys and Forms

People’s Names

When creating a form, always *have an option for the participant to put in a name that they go by separate from their legal name*. “Preferred name” is a better way to phrase this than “nickname”, but doing something like “If you go by a different name than your legal name, please write it here: ___” is probably even better. The phrasing “nickname” implies the name is less legitimate than their legal name, which is disrespectful to a participant like me who sees it as their real name. “Preferred name” can have a similar effect, implying that the name is a preference and not a requirement/the only name they go by like it actually is.

Make this filled-in name actually apply in your systems! I can't tell you how many times I've filled out a form for an interview that gives me an option to put in the name that I go by instead of/in addition to my legal name, but then when I get a follow-up email it is titled "Dear <Insert dead name here>", or I get invited into a room by an interviewer who calls me by my dead name ('dead name' is used to denote my legal name that I no longer associate with). This is demoralizing and frustrating to experience. I know things like this tend to be systemized behind the scenes for efficiency, but please make sure that the system is up-to-date, otherwise you're not going to make a good impression on many queer applicants.

Pronouns

Always have a space for participants to put in their pronouns. Simple as that, but too-often overlooked.

Checkboxes

Offer a diverse array of choices for things like gender identity and pronouns. More options are always better than not having enough to adequately represent a demographic. In addition, it is important to *allow participants to select more than one option* within each section—especially for gender, sexuality, and pronouns. I can't tell you how many times I've been made to feel helpless trying to fight against a form that is not welcoming towards my transgender female identity, or multiple sexuality labels. Set up your questions, options, and structure in a way that avoids this.

No matter what, *have a space for participants to fill in the blank in case their term is not represented*—but avoid labeling this as "Other: ____". This can be, well, *othering*, and make someone feel like they are outside the "normal" (a problematic term) options. Just do something like "Fill in: ____".

Always allow a "prefer not to disclose" option in addition to this. But do not offer this option without a "fill in: ____" option present as well. Some people truly prefer not to disclose, but if you just offer a "prefer not to disclose" option without a "fill in: ____" option, your "prefer not to disclose" is actually a thinly veiled "other" option. This is lazy and makes me feel disrespected, and as I'm forced to pick it and I think, "well I wouldn't mind disclosing my gender identity at all, but you didn't give me the option to do so!" Not at all ok.

A Note on Gender Identity vs. Sex-assigned-at-birth

Consider whether you need to know someone's gender identity and/or sex-assigned-at-birth for your research. In general, though, if you need to ask someone's sex-assigned-at-birth, ask for their gender identity as well, to respect their autonomy. I hate when I'm forced to put in a form that I was assigned male at birth, but don't get to clarify that I am in fact female in my identity.

Guiding Considerations for Interviews

Remember that the goal is to build trust and a genuine relationship founded on respect, so that both parties can mutually benefit. Both a researcher and participant, or interviewer and interviewee, often have things they are looking to gain from the interaction (data, representation, etc.) so be conscientious and make sure your actions at each step align with and reflect this.

Trans, non-binary, and gender-non-conforming people can often be hesitant to put themselves out there in research because of societal discrimination, so, especially if you are a cisgender researcher, please do your best to recognize your privilege and position of power, and be kind and gentle. Be upfront about your goals, conscientious in your communication, and don't be afraid to admit when there are things that you do not know—the section below should help with this!

Some Conceptual Basics (aka Gender 101):

DO your research! Google these topics if you don't understand. Follow people on Twitter to learn without causing others emotional labor.

READ. Some great accessible books to understand concepts related to gender include:
How to Understand Your Gender: A Practical Guide for Exploring Who You Are by Alex Lantaffi and Dr. Meg-John Barker

A Quick & Easy Guide to Queer & Trans Identities by Mady G. and J.R. Zuckerberg
A Quick and Easy Guide to They/Them Pronouns by Archie Bongiovanni and Tristan Jimerson

TRY to ask the hard questions of yourself, even if it feels uncomfortable. Especially when it feels uncomfortable.

Important Concepts (covered in the books above):

Gender vs. Sex (-assigned-at-birth) vs. sexuality (they are *not* the same thing).

Sex is a medical term based on chromosomal, hormonal, and bodily factors. It is viewed as a binary consisting of only two options (male and female). The concept breaks down when you really look closely at it anyway, which is why I refer to it as “assigned at birth” here, to acknowledge the arbitrary labeling by an external party, often a doctor. It is not a concept that accounts for intersex people and people with other medical conditions related to chromosomes and hormones that do not fit neatly into these boxes.

Gender is a term referring to how a person perceives themselves, and it is purely personal and up

to each individual to decide. Nobody gets to tell another person what their gender identity is, and even if a person's gender expression at a first glance (how they dress, act, talk, etc.) does not line up with our internal perception (usually based on societally informed stereotypes) of that gender identity, it is important that we recognize when we are making assumptions and that we respect everyone's autonomy regarding their gender identity.

Sexuality is used to denote attraction towards another person. It is a whole expansive concept of its own that I won't get too much into, but just know that being "gay" is not the same as being "transgender", for example. One is a sexuality and the other is a gender identity. Also, it is important to recognize that a lot of sexuality is built on the gender binary which is not true to everyone's experience, such as "straight", "gay", and "bisexual" relying on a "one vs. the other" framework. Neither gender identity nor sexuality are a choice, they are part of who the person is.

Pronouns (Always ask!)

It can often be rude and too personal to ask someone about their gender identity, but you can and should *always ask* a person about what pronouns they use (she/her/hers, they/them/theirs, he/him/his, ze/zir/zirs, etc.). It is not up to you to decide what you think someone's pronouns are or should be. Never assume, just politely ask! Many queer people can be nervous about volunteering this info, so please meet us halfway by asking. Tell us your pronouns too so we all do our part in not making assumptions!

Cis vs. Trans

Cisgender is a term that refers to when someone's sex-assigned-at-birth aligns with their gender identity, and transgender is when it does not. So a cisgender man was labeled male at birth, and their gender identity happens to align with that assumption. A transgender man likely would have been assigned female at birth, but actually identifies as a man. In case it needs to be said, "transexual" is an outdated and offensive term that was rightfully replaced by "transgender". Don't use it.

Conceptualizing Gender (Rainbows and Soup)

There are far more than two genders! Gender can be conceptualized as binary for some people (e.g., cisgender male, cisgender female, transgender female, transmasculine, etc.), and not at all binary for others (e.g., queer, genderqueer, agender, non-binary, etc.). Even within these designations it is a diverse spectrum/soup (note the subtle binary/non-binary implications in those words) of experiences. Some non-binary people may perceive themselves as "on the binary", just "in the middle", and others may disregard the binary entirely. A genderfluid person may identify as such because they feel like they are at a masculine point on the gender spectrum one day and a feminine point the next, or they may feel like their gender is never rooted in the binary. Agender people may do away with the spectrum and soup altogether in their internal truth.

Most importantly (Assumptions and Challenging Yourself)

People are beautifully diverse and no boxes and boundaries are concrete, and that's amazing! It is important to be accepting and respectful, acknowledge that these concepts are ever-changing and growing, and allow people to express who they are for themselves. This relates back to pronouns as well: even if we may have associations between certain gender identities and pronouns (male and he/him/his, female and she/her/hers), not everyone will fit into these generalizations. I have a friend who identifies as broadly queer, and female, and uses they/them pronouns, not she/her. Another friend of mine is non-binary and uses any pronouns! Some people may have more than one gender identity term they resonate with, or more than one set of pronouns they use, so make sure to respect and account for this.

Even if someone else's gender identity or pronouns seem to challenge our perception of ourselves, it is important to remember that we are all entitled to our own gender identity, and one person's perception of gender does not invalidate another's. A non-binary person is not attacking the cisgender way of life by being non-binary, for example; they just want to be their authentic self and go about their day, minding their own business. It can be understandably uncomfortable for a cisgender person to confront the idea that the gender constructs they have been basing their identity off of their whole life is just one framework, but do your best to be open-minded and kind, and separate your internal biases from other people's existences. At the end of the day, we are all people with stories to share—no matter how we identify, who we love, or how we present ourselves.

Useful Resources

Baker, A. & Kroehle, K. & Patel, H. & Jacobs, C. (2018). Queering the Question: Using Survey Marginalia to Capture Gender Fluidity in Housing and Child Welfare. *Child Welfare*. 96. 127-146.

Leung, E. & Flanagan, T. (2019). Let's do this together: An integration of photovoice and mobile interviewing in empowering and listening to LGBTQ+ youths in context. *International Journal of Adolescence & Youth*, 24:4, 497-510.

Suen, L. W., Lunn, M. R., Katuzny, K., et al. (2020). What Sexual and Gender Minority People Want Researchers to Know About Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Questions: A Qualitative Study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49, 2301–2318.

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Pak, K. & Ravitch, S. M. (2021). (Eds.). *Critical Leadership Praxis for Educational and Social Change*. Teachers College Press.

Ravitch S. M. & Carl, M. N. (2021). *Qualitative Research: Bridging the Conceptual, Theoretical, and Methodological*. (2 Ed.). Sage Publications.