

Queer Up Your Work: Adding Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity to Public and Nonprofit Research

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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) communities are underrepresented in public and nonprofit affairs research. This has led to an incomplete picture of how public and nonprofit organizations can better support LGBTQIA+ individuals and communities. In this article, we discuss how researchers can include the LGBTQIA+ community, why they should care about this community, and the appropriate terminology and distinctions within the LGBTQIA+ community. This article is a call to arms: LGBTQIA+ individuals are an important part of the work in the public and nonprofit sector; and as such the language used to describe their experiences should be supportive and affirming.

Keywords: LGBTQ; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Research Methods

Despite the small but growing body of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual plus (LGBTQIA+) research appearing in disciplines such as psychology, medicine, and education, queer communities are vastly underrepresented in public administration and nonprofit studies (Larson, 2021; Meyer et al., 2021). Research on and involving queer communities, an arguably vulnerable group in society, is typically focused around sexual orientation and gender identity. This means that those often tasked with public service provision (both from a research and practical perspective) not only have an incomplete picture of the needs of queer communities, but also may be at a disadvantage when engaging with this population. This disadvantage stems in large part because the language deemed acceptable when talking about members of the queer community has changed dramatically.

There are many terms used to describe the queer community, including LGB, LGBT, and LGBTQ. In this article, we use LGBTQIA+, an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer (or Questioning), Intersex, Asexual (or Ally), and the plus sign as a way to include anyone else not listed. One reason for the use of different acronyms is because each reflects different aspects of the community. From a research perspective, it may be the case that research focuses on the whole spectrum of sexual orientation and gender identity, in which case LGBTQIA+ would be appropriate. There may be other times, however when the research may focus exclusively on sexual orientation, thereby requiring use of the acronym LGB. Similarly, unless research specifically looks at gender identity, it is not likely to represent the needs of the transgender community and using an acronym such as LGBTQ or LGBTQIA+ would not be appropriate.

In this article, we offer somewhat of a language guide grounded in familiar methodological terms such as positionality, reflexivity, and situatedness to assure that those who both serve and contribute to the growing field of research focused on the LGBTQIA+ community use supportive and affirming language. We offer guidance about how to mitigate the harmful effects of implicit bias that play out in how researchers (and practitioners) talk with and about members of the LGBTQIA+ community. This includes focused attention not only on the importance of using proper terminology, but also advice about how to ask questions in ways that help both researchers and practitioners to learn more about the phenomenon they seek to understand.

The paper is organized in the following way. First, we provide a bit of background information about why it is important to center the LGBTQIA+ experience in public and nonprofit research. We then show why language and grammar (beyond commonly espoused arguments related to respect, dignity, and the desire to avoid reductionism) is so important when engaging with the LGBTQIA+ community. Next, we argue that the logic associated with concepts such as reflexivity, positionality, and situatedness (typically associated with analytical interpretation of data), should also be applied at the start of any research project that involves a marginalized group. We then offer a common lexicon that embraces the different orientations and identities associated with the queer community. We conclude with recommendations for future work.

Positionality Statement

Both authors are nonprofit scholars in the field of public administration. Both identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, one as gay, the other as a lesbian. Both are White, cisgendered, and American. These lived experiences and perspectives surely shape the way we experience both the LGBTQIA+ community as well as the field of public and nonprofit studies. We did, however, follow the advice we offer in this brief essay.

Getting Real: Why Should We Care About the Queer Community?

The LGBTQIA+ community is a particularly vulnerable community stemming from the stigmatization, marginalization, social exclusion, and violence against members of the queer community. Moreover, in some countries, homosexuality is illegal, while in others it is punishable by death. In the United States, over one-third of LGBTQ Americans not only reported discrimination in 2019, but more than half hid or altered aspects of their personal or work lives to avoid discrimination (Gruberg et al., 2020). Over 30 states across the United States have proposed laws in 2021 targeting transgender children (Vagianos, 2021). Bathroom bills, which discriminate against transgender people and make public spaces unwelcoming, have been on the rise since 2014 (Murib, 2020). Though the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of the *Bostock* decision, decided that transgender people are protected from discrimination due to sex (McCandless & Elias, 2021), discrimination of transgender people is still a major concern.

With regard to social and economic indicators, LGBT people were found to have lower income and higher food insecurity than non-LGBT people (Goldberg & Conron, 2019); and in a study conducted by the Williams Institute (n.d.) LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to be unemployed than non-LGBTQIA+ individuals. Studies have varied in reporting the percentage of the homeless population that identifies as LGBTQIA+, with some finding up to 30% of adults experiencing homelessness identifying as LGBTQIA+ (Ecker et al., 2019). Additionally, suicidality is significantly higher in the LGBTQIA+ community, with 42.8% of LGB and 40% of transgender individuals having considered or attempted suicide (James et al., 2016; Kann et al., 2016).

With a changing legal landscape coupled with the lack of social support facing LGBTQIA+ communities across the globe (Naylor, 2020; Weiss & Bosia, 2013), it is becoming more important than ever to not only research LGBTQIA+ communities but to also incorporate intersectionality into nonprofit research (Larson, 2021). To do so requires explicit attention to the language and terminology used to frame the inquiry. To that end, we offer the following practical advice.

Words Matter

From church groups to school groups as well as groups dedicated to LGBTQIA+ issues, it is not hard to find sections of their websites that talk about the importance of language. For example, GLAAD (Gay Lesbian Alliance Anti-Defamation) in its *Ally's Guide to Terminology* states, "The words we use to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and issues can have a powerful impact on our conversations. The right words can help open people's hearts and minds, while others can create distance or confusion" (n.d., p. 1). The HRC (Human Rights Campaign) asserts that proper terminology allows for the telling of stories that depict people accurately and humanely, in ways that reflect the reality of their lived experience. Finally, as part of Pride Month celebrations, the Children's Home Society of Minnesota, part of Minnesota Lutheran Social Services, dedicated part of their *Words Matter Series* to defining "the growing vocabulary used to describe identity, gender, and sexuality" (Cain, 2020). In another contribution to the series, it is argued that by intentionally choosing current, positive, and supportive language, we elevate the people to whom the conversation matters the most (Creating A Family, 2021).

From a research perspective, language is essential not only because of its conversational and descriptive roles in the research process, but also because failure to use appropriate or affirming terms can have serious data collection and interpretation implications. For example, a research study meant to learn more about sexual behavior will not produce the desired result if the questions ask about sexual orientation. Similarly, as previously noted, using the acronym 'LGBT' if the research ignores the experiences of people who identify as transgender is a misrepresentation and is unacceptable. Making sure that correct language is used when studying and working with LGBTQIA+ populations can help both the researcher as well as support and affirm the queer community.

Intellectual Humility

At the core of every research project is an unanswered question; a desire to learn more than is already known. Yet, for some reason, perhaps related to academic training, the perception that faculty are experts, or because of personal lived experiences, the research process often begins with confidence that the researcher knows enough to find the answers to the questions posed. A core feature of academic training is that researchers should make every effort to assure objectivity in the research process. That is, that there be a clear separation between the producers of knowledge and the knowledge that is created (Lee & León, 2019). And while there is ample advice focused on making sure the research design, conduct, and reporting does not influence the outcome, there is very little attention paid to the kind of introspection and reflection necessary to achieve what we are referring to as intellectual humility.

While there is no clear consensus about what constitutes intellectual humility, much of the literature coalesces around the idea that intellectual humility is the "virtuous mean between intellectual arrogance and intellectual diffidence" (Church & Barrett, 2016, p. 71). That is, people are said to exhibit intellectual humility when they remain loyal to personally held beliefs while being open to the possibility of being wrong (Lynch et al., n.d.). Leary (2018) posits that intellectual humility is a mindset that encourages people to seek out and evaluate

ideas in ways that are less influenced by individual motives and more oriented toward discovery of the truth. In short, objectivity requires attention to both the way the research is designed, and the mindful thinking required to assess whether the researcher knows enough to find the answers to the things they are most curious about (e.g., is the terminology used supportive and affirming).

We argue that although practices such as reflexivity, positionality, and situatedness are often used to describe the methodological contexts that shape the process of doing qualitative research (Lazard & McAvoy, 2020); the reflecting, questioning, and evaluating done in pursuit of these practices can also be used to assure that individual researchers are thoughtful about the language they use when conducting research with and about the queer community. Reflexivity is a continuous process of reflection on the part of researchers as they consider how their values, social background, location, and assumptions shape the research process (Palaganas et al., 2017). Positionality refers to both a researcher's world view and the position they adopt within a particular study (Holmes, 2020). And finally, situatedness is the notion that personal experiences, roles, and statuses shape the way people interpret and respond to the world around them (Engelstad & Gerrard, 2005).

Under the broad umbrella of social perspective taking (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017), we briefly discuss each in turn and explain how the practices of reflexivity, positionality, and situatedness might be used to offer researchers an opportunity to “re-situate the starting point” of their research so that personal assumptions, beliefs, and practices can be acknowledged and addressed (Lee & León, 2019, p. 180). Social perspective taking encourages the researcher to consider alternative points of view thereby reducing the constraints of personal, professional, disciplinary, or other biased frames of reference. Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) identifies three mental operations required to perform social perspective taking: activation, outreach, and synthesis.

Activation & Reflexivity

The mental process of perspective taking must be activated. That is, in order to accurately consider an alternative perspective, there needs to be intentional effort to examine phenomenon from another perspective. Methodologically, reflexivity typically involves examining personal judgments, practices, and belief systems within the broader context of the research process. It also involves challenging and articulating social and cultural influences and dynamics that affect this context. Yet the process of reflexivity could easily be activated earlier in the research process, at conceptualization, when researchers think and talk about what they want to study and why. In the context of working within LGBTQIA+ communities, this early reflexivity could involve asking simple questions at the beginning of the research process about whether supportive and affirming language is used throughout the research design; whether personal or implicit bias might be shaping the inquiry; or whether disciplinary knowledge is limiting a more sophisticated epistemic position.

Outreach & Positionality

Social perspective taking requires intentional and deliberate efforts to seek out the experiences or perspectives of others (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017). Seeking alternative perspectives requires awareness of the researcher's positionality relative to the research process. Researcher positionality embodies ontological assumptions (what is), epistemological assumptions (ways of knowing), and assumptions about human nature and agency (Holmes, 2020). Acknowledging positionality offers researchers an opportunity to reflect on areas of potential bias, consider the relevance of other perspectives, recognize complexity, and reduce the possibility of arriving at incomplete conclusions. Reflecting on positionality during research conceptualization may sensitize the researcher to the importance of seeking an alternative perspective or taking steps to learn the language, beliefs, or behaviors of those

participating in the research. For queer studies, finding or articulating positionality early in the research process could be an important part of adopting terminology that is supportive and affirming.

Synthesis & Situatedness

The third process required for social perspective taking involves a synthesis of multiple perspectives without imposing commonly understood meaning (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017). Beyond what researchers know and how they know what they know (positionality), in order to effectively integrate multiple perspectives, researchers must take into consideration how they are situated within the context of the research. Part of the situatedness construct is the notion of whether insiders to the culture being studied are advantageously positioned relative to outsiders (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017; Holmes, 2020). For example, Holmes (2020) describes an insider as someone whose personal biography or lived experiences provides knowledge of the group being studied, while an outsider has no such intimate knowledge. He further argues insiders worry that outsiders don't have the ability to competently understand the nuances of the culture; while outsiders worry that insiders will not be able to sufficiently detach, resulting in findings that are biased. Holmes (2020) concludes that insider and outsider roles are "both researcher and context-specific" (p. 7), providing examples of when the researcher might be both an insider (e.g., sharing some characteristic of the culture or group being studied such as religion or nationality) and an outsider on other dimensions (e.g., age, social status).

In her account of the comparison of two similar studies done at the same school, one by an insider and one by an outsider, Finefter-Rosenbluh (2017) concluded that "insider-researchers may obtain a broader study picture when considering the perspective of others" (p. 9). This finding has important implications for those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, namely that it is a diverse community, and being an insider in one dimension does not make you an insider in every dimension. Sophisticated epistemic knowledge is built by successfully balancing, accommodating, and integrating insights from multiple ways of knowing without any one perspective crowding out or dominating the others. When researchers explicitly acknowledge where they are situated within the research space, there are no insiders or outsiders, but rather what emerges is "a more transparent and nuanced inquiry picture" (Finefter-Rosenbluh, 2017, p. 9).

It is important that those engaged in research with and about queer communities reflect upon their engagement throughout the entirety of the knowledge production process, from the intellectually humble reflexive questioning at conceptualization about whether they have the requisite knowledge of the terminology used to frame their inquiry, to the methodologically rigorous processes used to design, conduct, and report the research are free from bias. Only then will they have done the 'deep personal work' required of public administration scholars to assure a goal of social equity and elimination of inequality (Blessett et. al., 2019; Larson, 2021).

Let's Kiki¹ About the Queer Communities

To do research that accurately represents the LGBTQIA+ community, it is imperative to understand the terminology and equally as important to have a clear idea about the contribution that will be made to the literature so that the questions asked reflect the intent of the research. For example, a researcher interested in sexual behavior should not ask exclusively about sexual orientation, particularly because sexual behavior is not always an indicator of sexual orientation. It may be the case that people who identify as heterosexual also have sex with people of the same gender (e.g., experimentation, the 'downlow' or DL community). Similarly, there is evidence to suggest that the hormones released during pregnancy and breastfeeding protect women from certain types of cancers. It may be wrong to

assume that a person who identifies as lesbian and reports only having sex with other women, never experienced pregnancy or childbirth.

Creating awareness and understanding of the terminology specific to the queer community is both essential to promoting a supportive and affirming research environment and assuring research is exploring the things that it is meant to explore. While certainly not exhaustive, the following is a list of terms and corresponding definitions related to gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. However, we disclose three important disclaimers. First, anyone reading this article should recognize the dynamic nature of language and how it evolves over time. The terminology and research-related guidance we offer today, may become more specific and nuanced over time, particularly with increased attention, inquiry, and discovery. Second, it is important to note that many LGBTQIA+ groups (e.g., GLAAD, Human Rights Campaign, Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)) also publish language and terminology guides. Researchers would be well served to explore those sites prior to engaging with the queer community. And finally, both authors are from the United States and, therefore, the guidance we offer is suitable for research conducted within those borders. If researchers were to investigate queer communities in another part of the world, we encourage engaging with the kind of intellectually humble work suggested here to build a deeper knowledge of localized identities and terminology (see, for example, Epprecht, 2013).

Opening the Umbrella: Terminology and Diversity within the LGBTQIA+ Community

In this section, we explore the various definitions and terms associated with the LGBTQIA+ community in two distinct categories: sexual orientation and gender identity. Table 1 (Sexual Orientation) and Table 2 (Gender Identity) provide abridged versions of the definitions, as well as when these terms might be used and recommendations for application in public administration research. Building on other work, such as Meyer and Elias (2022), which encourage the addition of LGBTQIA+ individuals in nonprofit and public administration research and the queering of the field (Meyer et al., 2021).

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation can be complex because the term can be used to describe a person's sexual identification, sexual behavior, and to whom the person is physically or sexually attracted (gay/straight/bisexual/pansexual/asexual, etc.), all of which impacts how a person sees themselves and their sexual and romantic partner(s). For the research scientist, it will be important to know which of these attributes are of interest for study.

Sexual Attraction

Sexual attraction is about who a person finds to be sexually appealing. Attraction could be based in familiar gender binary constructs (male/female), or other aspects of a person (e.g., height, weight, hair color). Attraction could also include a lack of sexual desire. Attraction can be different from behavior and orientation specifically because having an attraction does not mean a person will act upon it.

Asexual

Not to be confused with abstinence, asexual is term used to describe the spectrum of people who are not particularly attracted to any person or who lack the desire to have sex. While some may consider asexuality a sexual orientation, others consider it a sexual behavior. Indeed, some asexual people (aces) have attractions to people, but not necessarily sexual attractions.

Table 1. Sexual Orientation

| Term | Definition | When to Use? | Recommendations |
|-------------------|---|---|---|
| Sexual Attraction | To whom a person is sexually attracted | To better understand who people are attracted to and how that might be different then how people act and identify | Questions about sexual attraction might ask what gender(s) a person is attracted to sexually; Sometimes, people may not be attracted to any gender sexually (asexual) but have romantic attractions |
| Sexual Behavior | With whom a person has sexual relations (e.g., intercourse) | To learn more about or explore sexual interactions | Questions around sexual behavior might be categorical, but may also be open ended to acknowledge the complex gender diversity that people experience |
| Sexual Identity | How people self-identify | To understand how a person thinks of themselves | Questions around sexual identity often ask how a person identifies on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum |

Asexual individuals may be in relationships and engage in sex with those partners, despite the lack of attraction or desire for sex.

Sexual Behavior

Sexual behavior focuses on sexual activity. Though behavior and orientation are often considered to be synonymous, the reality is sometimes people’s behavior and orientation do not match. This disconnect is most notably seen in the downlow/DL community where men who identify as heterosexual but engage in intercourse with other men. When doing research focused on sexual orientation, it is important not to assign a sexual orientation or identity to people based on their behavior, but let them explain their identity, orientation, and behavior in a safe and supportive environment.

Sexual Identity

Identity is an individual's conception of themselves, such as homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, queer, heterosexual, or straight. While sexual identity and sexual behavior are closely related, they should be distinguished with identity referring to how someone thinks of themselves and behavior referring to the sexual acts performed by an individual. This is a personal identity which may evolve or change over time. Sexual identity is also cultural in nature; most of the terms referenced above are European based.

Bisexual

Bisexuality refers to being emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to more than one gender or gender identity (e.g., male, female).

Pansexual

Pansexuality refers to people who are attracted to people of all gender identities. While bisexuality focuses on the gender binary (male/female), pansexuality rejects the gender binary and emphasizes an attraction to people all across the gender spectrum.

Table 2. Gender Identity

| Term | Definition | When to use? | Recommendations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Transgender | Someone whose identity does not fit into the gender they were assigned at birth | To learn more about those who identify as transgender | Use a two-part question that acknowledges the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity to better explore transgender identity (Meyer & Elias, 2022) |
| Nonbinary Genderqueer Gender Neutral | Someone who does not identify within the gender binary | When asking about gender | Include a genderqueer or nonbinary gender option on surveys; when interviewing, ask about pronouns, including 'they/them' or 'Zhe/Zhem' pronouns |
| Intersex | Someone who was born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit typical definitions for 'male' and/or 'female' | To learn more about the experiences of those who were born Intersex; can sometimes be used when discussing gender identity and expression | Include intersex as a survey response on gender identity and expression |
| Cisgender | Someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth | To recognize the complexity of gender and gender identity | Add 'cisgender' to familiar male and female classifications (e.g., cisgender male, cisgender female) |

Gender Identity

Gender identity refers specifically to how a person understands their gender and may or may not correspond to the gender assigned at birth. Familiar terms to describe a person who expresses themselves differently from what might be expected from their assigned gender at birth include gender non-conforming, gender variant, and gender diverse. Other terminology used when discussing gender identity include transgender, non-binary/gender queer/gender neutral, intersex, and cisgender.

Transgender

A term used to describe someone who does not identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. How a person expresses their transgender identity varies. Some people make the decision to have gender-affirming surgery, while others will adopt the social and behavioral norms associated with their gender identity. Terms to avoid (unless instructed otherwise) include transsexual/transvestite as they may be perceived as insults. It is also important to remember that transgender is an adjective, not a noun. People are not 'a transgender' nor are they transgendered. The point is that every individual expresses their transgender identity differently and researchers should be aware of those nuances. When in doubt, use the person's chosen name along with preferred pronouns. Providing a safe and welcoming environment

where individuals are encouraged and free to express their identity is essential for getting good information on gender identity.

Non-Binary/Genderqueer/Gender Neutral

These are terms used to describe individuals who identify in ways much more complex than can be understood by assigning the person to either gender. It may also be the case that a person may describe themselves as gender fluid, expressing or identifying themselves in different ways on different days. It is not uncommon for people who identify as non-binary, genderqueer, or gender neutral to prefer gender-neutral pronouns. These terms hold nuanced and complex meanings for people and should be explored in the context of any research project that seeks a deeper understanding of people along this dimension.

Intersex

This is an umbrella term for people who were born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that do not fit the typical characteristics associated with how we understand male and female. Examples include a person who is born with ambiguous genitalia; someone who is born with what appears to be female genitalia but with mostly male-typical anatomy on the inside; or someone who is born with 'mosaic genetics' (Intersex Society of North America, n.d.). It is important to note that intersexuality does not (on its face) denote a particular sexual orientation or gender identity, and some will live their entire lives with intersex anatomy without anyone (including themselves) ever knowing.

Cisgender

A term used to describe a person who identifies with the gender that they were assigned at birth. The term is often also shortened to 'cis.'

Conclusions

There are many social, economic, and political reasons to include LGBTQIA+ populations in public administration research (Blessett et al., 2019; Larson, 2021; Meyer et al., 2021). Expanding the field of public administration to include LGBTQIA+ populations not just as a separate population but as part of larger studies can help public administration research and practice to better support and affirm this vulnerable population. In this article, we ground an approach to intellectual humility in the familiar methodological language of positionality, reflexivity, and situatedness.

While we framed our logic under the broad umbrella of social perspective taking, encouraging researchers to consciously consider different ways of knowing all throughout the research process, we were particularly focused on the language used when the project is designed. This attention to language is just as important to researchers who identify as 'insiders' (e.g., those who identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community) as it is for those who do not identify as part of the community. Moreover, the reflexive process of examining how personal assumptions, biases, and beliefs might affect research decisions including the selection and wording of questions is critical to producing high quality research. The process of writing a positionality statement not only provides readers with an open and honest disclosure of who the researcher is, how they see the world, and their relationship to the research, it also explicitly acknowledges that researcher positionality shapes the entirety of the research process from design to interpretation of data.

As public administration and nonprofit research makes strides to assure LGBTQIA+ voices are amplified and lived experiences are valued, it is essential that we do not further traumatize

an already vulnerable population with non-affirming language. Our hope is that researchers mitigate the harmful effects of implicit bias by using proper terminology and reflecting on the purpose of the research so that questions yield the desired data.

Notes

1. To kiki is to get together and chat or gossip.

Disclosure Statement

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