

Research Ethics Guidelines on the Use of Gender and Sex in Demographics

Background Principles:

- The REB expects that when researchers collect demographic data, they do so in a way that upholds the TCPS (2018) Core Principles of Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice.
- The REB understands that bias-free language may be specific to English-language documents in Western contexts. The REB expects researchers to consider geographic and cultural norms in the context of their research when deciding to use gendered language in recruitment, consent, and other research materials.
- The REB expects researchers to consider the norms of their specific field of research in the collection and use of demographic data pertaining to sex, gender, and gender identity; and when deciding to use gendered language in research materials.

Introduction:

In the human research setting, researchers may need to ask participants about their sex and/or gender.

Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (the REB) reminds researchers to be sensitive when collecting demographic data. The TCPS (2018) Core Principles of **Respect for Persons, Concern for Welfare, and Justice** remind us that when collecting demographic information, researchers must balance participants' welfare with the research priorities.

Collecting demographic information should be done in a way which allows for participant choice in disclosure, in a way that reduces or eliminates stigmatization, and treats people fairly and equitably. Carleton University's Research Ethics Board (the REB) requires that researchers ask, rather than assume, the demographics of the researched populations.

Collecting information about gender and/or sex assists researchers committed to equity, diversity, and inclusivity who choose to applying gender-based analyses or intersectional approaches ([SSHRC, 2021](#)). However, asking about sex and/or gender in research can create barriers between researchers and participants, as participants may not feel respectfully described by the options presented, or participants may assume that the researcher is interested in drawing gender and/or sex-based results. It is strongly recommended that researchers collect this information from participants, rather than assuming gender and/or sex of participants ([APA, 2020](#)).

Definitions to consider

Sex: "Sex refers to biological characteristics, such as male, female or intersex" ([Government of Canada, 2018](#)). Sex is typically assigned at birth or before during ultrasound based on external indicators ([APA, 2015](#)); however, there are other indicators of sex "that are associated with physical and physiological features including chromosomes, gene expression, hormone function and reproductive/sexual anatomy." ([Heidari et al., 2016](#), p. 1)

Descriptors of biological sex can include:

- Male
- Female
- Intersex

The [CIHR \(2020\)](#) recommends that researchers “consider accounting for sex as a biological variable in basic science, clinical, health system and population health studies where appropriate.” When offering options of biological sex, researchers should consider giving participants an option to not disclose.

Gender: “Gender refers to a social identity, such as man, woman, non-binary or two-spirit” ([Government of Canada, 2018](#)). It includes the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of people and influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society ([Heidari et al., 2016](#)). Gender is composed of both gender identity, the “gender that a person internally feels”, and gender expression, “gender a person publicly expresses.” ([Statistics Canada, 2018](#))

Descriptors of gender identity can include (and are not limited to):

- Gender-fluid
- Man
- Nonbinary
- Trans man
- Trans woman
- Two-Spirit
- Woman

When offering options in selecting a sex, gender, or gender identity in research, it is generally good practice to avoid using “other” as an encapsulating term, as people may experience this category as “othering” and underestimating the unique experiences of that person’s demographic background on the research. Options such as “I don’t identify with any option provided,” “something else” and “I prefer not to answer” are good options for researchers to consider.

These examples were derived using [SSHRC’s Self-Identification Data Collection in Support of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#).

Using bias-free language

Another consideration for researchers is the use of bias-free language. In the context of research, this means referring to all participants by the name that they use to refer to themselves. When assigning pseudonyms, care and consideration should be taken in respecting confidentiality and choosing an appropriate pseudonym. Avoid using “male” and “female” as nouns outside of appropriate and relevant settings; instead using appropriate nouns dependent on age (“women” “men” “girls”).

It is recommended that when referring to occupations (e.g., mailman vs. mail carrier) and human beings, that gendered language is avoided.

APA 7 (2020)’s bias-free language guide promotes authors to use pronouns which are identified by participants, and that when referring to individuals for whom it is not known, stated, or irrelevant, “they” “them” “theirs” is appropriate.

Asking for pronouns is a very good practice. However, the researcher must weigh the pros and cons as to whether asking for pronouns signifies respect to the participant or creates barriers between the researcher and participant. When applying bias-free language, addressing potential participants and partners with prefixes such as “Mr. and Mrs. /Ms.” should be avoided, however, researchers must consider if such language should be used in certain geographic, cultural, or linguistic contexts.

Resources to consider:

APA. (2015). Definitions Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity.

<https://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions.pdf>

Bauer, G. R., Braimoh, J., Scheim, A. I., & Dharma, C. (2017). Transgender-inclusive measures of sex/gender for population surveys: Mixed-methods evaluation and recommendations. *PLOS ONE*, 12(5), e0178043.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0178043>

CIHR. (2019). Key considerations for the appropriate integration of sex and gender in research <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/50835.html>

CIHR Institute of Gender and Health. (2015). *Sex and Gender Training Modules*. <https://www.cihr-irsc-igh-isfh.ca/?lang=en>

Chapter 5.5 in *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association: the official guide to APA style*. (Seventh edition.). (2020). American Psychological Association. <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/gender>

Heidari, S., Babor, T. F., De Castro, P., Tort, S., & Curno, M. (2016). Sex and Gender Equity in Research: Rationale for the SAGER guidelines and recommended use. *Research Integrity and Peer Review*, 1(1), 2.

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