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Removing Bias in Language

Sexuality

Avoiding Heterosexual Bias in Language

Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concern¹
American Psychological Association

This document was developed to assist authors in avoiding bias when writing specifically about lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons, as well as in general discussions of sexuality. Because no universal agreement exists on terminology, and because language and culture continually change, the ideas in this article should be considered helpful suggestions rather than rigid rules. Writers should try to understand the rationale for the suggestions offered here, and should be sensitive to social changes that might dictate the use of language not specifically discussed in this article.

History of the development of the guidelines

The Committee on Lesbian and Gay concerns (CLGC) has considered issues of heterosexual bias in language since its beginning in 1980. A first draft of the "CLGC Nomenclature Guidelines for Psychologists" was approved at the September 1985 meeting. Comments were solicited from APA's Division 44 and from the Association of Lesbian and Gay Psychologists. A revised document was approved by the committee in October 1985 and by the Board of Social and Ethical Responsibility in Psychology (BSERP) in spring 1987.

PROBLEMS OF TERMINOLOGY

Problems occur in language concerning lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons when language is too vague or concepts are poorly defined. There are two major problems of designation. First, language may be ambiguous in reference, so that the reader is not clear about its meaning or its inclusion and exclusion criteria. Second, "homosexuality" has been associated in the past with deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, and these negative stereotypes may be perpetuated by bias.

1. **Sexual orientation** is a preferred term for psychological writing over "sexual preference" and refers to sexual/affectional relationships of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual people. The word "preference" suggests a degree of voluntary choice that is not necessarily reported by lesbians and gay men and that has not been demonstrated in psychological research.

The terms "lesbian sexual orientation," "heterosexual sexual orientation," "gay male sexual orientation," and "bisexual sexual orientation" are preferable over "lesbianism," "heterosexuality," "homosexuality," and "bisexuality", respectively. The former terms focus on people and some of the latter terms have in the past been associated with pathology.

2. **Lesbian and gay male** are preferred to the word "homosexual" when used as an adjective referring to specific persons or groups, and **lesbians and gay men** are preferred terms over "homosexuals" used as a noun when referring to specific persons or groups. The word "homosexual" has several problems of designation. First, it may perpetuate negative stereotypes because of its historical associations with pathology and criminal behavior. Second, it is ambiguous in reference because it is often assumed to refer exclusively to men and thus renders lesbians invisible. Third, it is often unclear.

The terms "gay male" and "lesbian" refer primarily to identities and to the modern culture and communities that have developed among people who share those identities. They should be distinguished from sexual behavior. Some men and women have sex with others of their own gender but do not consider themselves to be gay or lesbian. In contrast, the terms "heterosexual" and "bisexual" currently are used to describe identity as well as behavior.

The terms "gay" as an adjective and "gay persons" as a noun have been used to refer to both males and females. However, these terms may be ambiguous

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in reference since readers who are used to the term "lesbian and gay" may assume that "gay" refers to men only. Thus it is preferable to use "gay" or "gay persons" only when prior reference has specified the gender composition of this term.

Such terms as "gay male" are preferable to "homosexuality" or "male homosexuality" and so are grammatical reconstructions (e.g., "his colleagues knew he was gay" rather than "his colleagues knew about his homosexuality"). The same is true for "lesbian" over "female homosexual", "female homosexuality", or "lesbianism."

3. **Same-gender behavior, male-male behavior, and female-female behavior** are appropriate terms for specific instances of same-gender sexual behavior that people engage in regardless of their sexual orientation (e.g., a married heterosexual man who once had a same-gender sexual encounter). Likewise, it is useful that women and men not be considered "opposites" (as in "opposite sex") to avoid polarization, and that heterosexual women and men not be viewed as opposite to lesbians and gay men. Thus, **male-female behavior** is preferred to the term "opposite sex behavior" in referring to specific instances of other-gender sexual behavior that people engage in regardless of their sexual orientation.

When referring to sexual behavior that cannot be described as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual, special care needs to be taken. Descriptions of sexual behavior among animal species should be termed "male-male sexual behavior" or "male-female sexual behavior" rather than "homosexual behavior" or "heterosexual behavior," respectively.

4. **Bisexual women and men, bisexual persons, or bisexual** as an adjective refer to people who relate sexually and affectionally to women and men. These terms are often omitted in discussions of sexual orientation and thus give the erroneous impression that all people relate exclusively to one gender or another. Omission of the term "bisexual" also contributes to the invisibility of bisexual women and men. Although it may seem cumbersome at first, it is clearest to use the term "lesbians, gay men, and bisexual women or men" when referring inclusively to members of these groups.
5. **Heterosexual** as an adjective is acceptable for people who have male-female affectional/sexual relationships and who do not engage in sexual relationships with people of the same gender.
6. Use of **gender** instead of **sex**. The terms "sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the term "sex" is often confused with sexual behavior, and this is particularly troublesome when differentiating between sexual orientation and gender. The phrase "it was sexual orientation, rather than gender, that accounted for most of the variance" is clearer than "it was sexual orientation, rather than sex, that accounted for most of the variance."

In the latter phrase, "sex" may be misinterpreted as referring to sexual activity. It is generally more precise to use the term "gender."

GOALS FOR REDUCING HETEROSEXUAL BIAS IN LANGUAGE

1. **Reducing heterosexual bias and increasing visibility of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons.** Lesbians, gay men, and bisexual men and women often feel ignored by the general media which take the heterosexual orientation of their readers for granted. Unless an author is referring specifically to heterosexual people, writing should be free of heterosexual bias. Ways to increase the visibility of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons include:
- Using examples of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons when referring to activities (e.g., parenting, athletic ability) that are erroneously associated only with heterosexual people by many readers.
 - Referring to lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons in situations other than sexual relationships. Historically, the term "homosexuality" has connoted sexual activity rather than a general way of relating and living.
 - Omitting discussion of marital status unless legal marital relationships are the object of the writing. Marital status per se is not a good indicator of cohabitation (marital couples may be separated; unmarried couples may live together), sexual activity, or sexual orientation (a person who is married may be in a gay or lesbian relationship with a

- partner). Further, describing people as married or "single" renders lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons as well as heterosexual people in cohabiting relationships invisible.
- Referring to sexual and intimate emotional partners by both male and female pronouns (e.g., "the adolescent males were asked about the age at which they first had a male or female sexual partner").
 - Using sexual terminology that is relevant to lesbians and gay men as well as bisexual and heterosexual people (e.g., "when did you first engage in sexual activity?" rather than "when did you first have sexual intercourse?").
 - Avoiding the assumption that pregnancy may result from sexual activity (e.g., "it is recommended that women attending the clinic who currently are engaging in sexual activity with men be given oral contraceptives" instead of "it is recommended that women who attend the clinic be given oral contraceptives").
2. **Clarity of expression and avoidance of inaccurate stereotypes about lesbians and gay men.** Stigmatizing or pathologizing language regarding gay men and lesbians should be avoided (e.g., "sexual deviate," "sexual invert"). Authors should take care that examples do not further stigmatize lesbians, gay men, or bisexual persons (e.g., an example such as "psychologists need training in working with special populations such as lesbians, drug abusers, and alcoholics" is stigmatizing in that it lists a status designation (lesbians) with designations of people being treated.
 3. **Comparisons of lesbians or gay men to parallel groups.** When comparing a group of gay men or lesbians to others, parallel terms have not always been used. For example, contrasting lesbians with "the general public" or to "normal women" portrays lesbians as marginal to society. More appropriate comparison groups might be "heterosexual women," "heterosexual men and women," or "gay men and heterosexual women and men."

PROBLEMATIC AND PREFERRED EXAMPLES

Issues of Designation: Ambiguity of Referent

1. **PROBLEMATIC:** Sexual preference
PREFERRED: Sexual orientation

Comment: Avoids connotations of voluntary choice that may not be appropriate.
2. **PROBLEMATIC:** The sample consisted of 200 adolescent homosexuals
PREFERRED: The sample consisted of 200 gay male adolescents
The sample consisted of 100 gay male and 100 lesbian adolescents

Comment: Avoids use of "homosexual" and specifies gender of subjects.
3. **PROBLEMATIC:** None of the subjects were homosexual or bisexual.
PREFERRED: None of the subjects were lesbians, gay men, or bisexual persons
All of the subjects were heterosexual

Comment: Avoids use of "homosexual" and increases the visibility of lesbians.
4. **PROBLEMATIC:** Manuscript title: "Gay relationships in the 1990s"
PREFERRED: Manuscript title: "Gay male relationships in the 1990s"

Comment: Specifies gender of gay persons before the term gay is used to describe women and men; avoids invisibility of lesbians.
5. **PROBLEMATIC:** Subjects were asked about their homosexuality.
PREFERRED: Subjects were asked about the experience of being a lesbian or a gay man.

Comment: Changes sentence construction to avoid use of the term "homosexuality".
6. **PROBLEMATIC:** The women reported lesbian sexual fantasies.

PREFERRED: The women reported **female-female sexual fantasies**.

Comment: Avoids confusion of lesbian orientation and specifies sexual behaviors.

7. **PROBLEMATIC:** The two **bisexual** subjects had engaged in both **gay and heterosexual sexual encounters** in the past year.

PREFERRED: The two **bisexual** subjects had engaged in both **male-male and male-female sexual encounters** in the past year.

Comment: Avoids confusing sexual orientation (bisexual) with specific sexual behaviors.

8. **PROBLEMATIC:** The male antelopes were **bisexual**.

PREFERRED: The male antelopes were observed to engage in both **male-male and male-female sexual behavior**.

Comment: Increases specificity; does not use sexual orientation terms with animal species.

9. **PROBLEMATIC:** It was subjects' **sex**, not their sexual orientation, that affected number of friendships.

PREFERRED: It was subjects' **gender**, not their sexual orientation, that affected number of friendships.

Comment: Avoids confusing gender with sexual activity.

Problems of Designation: Stereotyping

10. **PROBLEMATIC:** **Homosexual** abuse of children.

PREFERRED: **Sexual** abuse of male children **by adult men**.

Comment: Does not imply sexual orientation of participants; does not imply that gay men are rapists.

Problems of Evaluation: Ambiguity of Reference

11. **PROBLEMATIC:** Questionnaire item: Have you ever engaged in sexual intercourse?

PREFERRED: Questionnaire item: Have you ever engaged in penile/vaginal intercourse?

Comment: Increased specificity if penile/vaginal intercourse is the purpose of the item.

PREFERRED: Have you ever engaged in sexual activity?

Comment: Avoids assumption of heterosexual orientation if sexual activity is the purpose of the item.

12. **PROBLEMATIC:** When the mother is employed, her partner may discover that **his** share of childcare has increased.

PREFERRED: When the mother is employed, her partner may discover that **his or her** share of childcare has increased.

Comment: Avoids assumption of heterosexuality and is more precise; increases descriptions of lesbians in nonsexual situations.

Problems of Evaluation: Stereotyping

13. **PROBLEMATIC:** Ten subjects were **married** and five were **single**.

PREFERRED: Ten subjects were legally married, three were living with heterosexual partners, and two were living with lesbian partners.

Comment: Increases specificity and avoids assumption of legal marriage as the only form of committed relationship.

14. **PROBLEMATIC:** AIDS education must extend beyond the gay male population into the **general population**.

PREFERRED: AIDS education must not focus only on selected groups.

Comment: Does not refer to gay men as set apart from the general population.

15. **PROBLEMATIC:** Psychologists who work with **special populations** (e.g.,

lesbians, drug abusers, survivors of sexual abuse) need extra training.
PREFERRED: Psychologists who work with **minority populations** (e.g., **Latinos, lesbians, Black women, older women**) need extra training.

Comment: Avoids equating lesbians with pathology.

16. **PROBLEMATIC:** A client's lesbian sexual orientation may not be the primary reason for seeking therapy; rather, **other issues** (e.g., **incest, addictions**) may be apparent once therapy has begun.

PREFERRED: A client's lesbian sexual orientation may not be the primary reason for seeking therapy; rather, **other issues** (e.g., **work stress, parenting**) may be apparent once therapy has begun

Comment: Avoids equating lesbian sexual orientation with pathology; uses examples often associated only with heterosexual people.

17. **PROBLEMATIC:** Women's **sexual partners** should use condoms.

PREFERRED: Women's **male sexual partners** should use condoms.

Comment: Avoids assumption of heterosexuality.

ENDNOTES

¹The following people contributed substantially to the development of this document: Clinton Anderson, Anthony D'Augelli, Linda Garnets, Gregory Herek, Douglas Kimmel, Letitia Anne Peplau, and Esther Rothblum. This document represents the "best fit" of the authors' opinions and reflects many discussions and written drafts.

Meanwhile, in an independent effort, a corresponding document entitled "Guidelines for Avoiding Racial/Ethnic Bias" was developed by the Board of Ethnic Minority Affairs (BEMA) and by an ad hoc committee of the Publications and Communications Board (P&C). Over several revisions by the authors and several reviews by P&C, the racial/ethnic bias guidelines became the model for the several working papers being prepared for P&C for use in an expanded section on language bias of the next edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

CLGC has continued to revise the "CLGC Nomenclature Guidelines for Psychologists" to adhere to the format used in the "Guidelines for Avoiding Racial/Ethnic Bias." The revisions included a change in the title to "Avoiding Heterosexual Bias in Language." The guidelines were submitted to P&C in October 1989 and this current edition includes revisions responding to P&C's comments.

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