University of Kentucky (UK) Office of Research Integrity (ORI) Guidance
Use of Gender Inclusive Language

The UK IRB strongly recommends gender inclusive language and consciousness in all study materials, including surveys. This recommendation is consistent with the Belmont Report principles of Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice, which are the pillars of human subject protection regulation. This guidance explains the rationale behind this recommendation, how to comply, and examples of respectful language.

Gender inclusivity, in this context, refers to considering all possible options regarding sex, gender, and sexual orientation when collecting research data.

Definitions

- *Gender/Gender Identity* describes how a person refers internally to the self, regardless of biology.

- *Gender Inclusivity* will be used as a catch-all term to include representational equity with respect to sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

- *Sex* refers to the anatomy of chromosomes, hormones, and secondary sex characteristics.

- *Sexual Orientation* refers to an individual's emotional, physical, and sexual attraction to other people.

Rationale

The UK IRB supports a culture of inclusivity, so researchers are expected to conduct research in a way that demonstrates respect for research subjects' gender identities and sexual orientations.

The Belmont Report, issued in 1979 by an act of Congress, outlines three principles guiding the protection of human subjects: Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice.

Respect for Persons dictates that "individuals should be treated as autonomous agents." As such, the UK IRB acknowledges that individuals maintain the right to exert control over their own personal information. Respect for Persons commonly manifests in voluntary consent. However, the UK IRB understands Respect for Persons to include a responsibility to respect individual autonomy in all areas, including the diverse ways in which individuals self-identify.

Beneficence is generally regarded as protecting subjects from harm and securing their well-being. You can maximize well-being by use of inclusive survey or demographic options, while minimizing risk of emotional harm from feeling excluded or misgendered by a questionnaire that does not include options corresponding to their identity.

Justice is often equated with fairness or the distribution of benefits and risks in research. By being gender inclusive, investigators can ensure that the risks, burdens, and benefits of research are equitably distributed.

Compliance

Sex, Gender/Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation are specific terms and should not be used interchangeably. In that regard, investigators must be specific in their language, the questions they ask, and the information they collect.

Investigators who wish to collect research information about sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation must consider the following:

1. **Necessity of the question:** Investigators should consider how the information will be used: if the information is used for tabulation purposes only or for ensuring diversity of a sample, or if the information is germane to research hypotheses or data analysis. If the information is not needed for analysis purposes, there may be better ways to ensure sample diversity than asking personal or potentially invasive questions.

2. **Appropriateness of the question:** Investigators must determine what specific information they need for their analyses. For instance, sex would be more relevant than gender identity in research primarily concerned with the effect of hormonal differences. Or if the research is about people's adjustment to college life, the investigator might want to ask about sex, gender identity, *and* sexual orientation. Investigators should ask questions and use language appropriate to their research objectives.

3. **Not requiring a response for participation:** Voluntary participation is a central requirement for human subjects research. This voluntariness extends to individual survey or interview or demographic items. Investigators must allow individuals the option to not respond to questions about sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation (or other sensitive or personal characteristics), or provide an option indicating that the subject chooses not to reply.

4. **Privacy and confidentiality concerns:** Sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are sensitive and personal characteristics. Similarly, they are not always externally apparent. As such, it is important to protect this information, especially when it is recorded with identifiers. Investigators should enable research subjects to provide this information in a setting where they are comfortable, and which ensures their privacy. In addition, all identifiable data must be securely stored, whether in a password-protected computer file on a password- protected cloud server or in a locked cabinet in a locked office. The UK IRB strongly recommends maintaining anonymous or de-identified data whenever possible as further protection.

5. **Gender inclusive language:** All study documents should use gender-neutral language, avoiding gendered terms (e.g., mailman, chairman) and gendered pronouns (he, she, he/she). Gendered terms should be replaced with non-gendered versions (e.g., mail carrier instead of mailman or chairperson instead of chairman). Sentences using gendered pronouns should either use gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., singular *they* as in "Each subject will receive their gift card upon completing the study.") or be reworded entirely to avoid such pronoun use (e.g., "Subjects will receive their gift card upon completing the study.").

   Please consult the 18F content guide for principles, resources, and specific suggestions for writing and talking about diverse groups of people https://content-guide.18f.gov/inclusive-language/#gender-and-sexuality.

6. **Pronouns:** When interviewing individuals or in situations where the researcher might use quotes or refer directly to individual subjects, it is considered respectful practice to ask subjects which pronouns they use.

Consent documents, survey questions, interview questions, and other participant-facing documents should use language that is both **precise *and* inclusive**. The IRB may, at its discretion, require revisions. However, the IRB understands that there may be some conflicts between inclusive data collection and methodological needs, such as establishing representativeness. In these cases, the researcher should provide justification for using less inclusive methods.

Acceptable Questions and Response Options

Sex

If it is necessary to ask about participants' sex (as opposed to their gender), investigators should not use binary male/female language. However, researchers should only ask for participants' birth sex if necessary, i.e., when asking for gender alone would not suffice.

An example of an acceptably worded question follows. Note that "Not Listed" is used instead of "Other" so as not to marginalize individuals who are not represented by the options listed.

Sex assigned at birth:

__ *Female*
__ *Intersex*
__ *Male*
__ *Not Listed: _____*
__ *Prefer not to reply*

Gender/Gender Identity

Again, investigators should not use binary man/woman language. Whether an individual is transgender or cisgender should be asked separately, so as not to imply that transgender men or women are not real men or women. Investigator should also include cultural genders as needed (e.g., Two-Spirit, Māhū, Fa'afafine). Examples of appropriately worded questions follow.

What is your gender?

__ *Woman*
__ *Man*
__ *Genderqueer*
__ *Non-Binary*
__ *Not Listed: _____*
__ *Prefer not to reply*

Are you transgender or cisgender (i.e. not transgender)?

__ *Cisgender*
__ *Transgender*
__ *Prefer not to reply*

Sexual Orientation

Investigators should include all relevant categories for the research project. Some individuals interpret the word "homosexual" as pejorative, so its use is not advised. An example of an appropriately worded question follows.

Sexual Orientation:

__ *Straight*
__ *Gay/Lesbian*
__ *Bisexual*
__ *Pansexual*
__ *Asexual*
__ *Not Listed: _____*
__ *Prefer not to reply*

Pronouns

When appropriate, investigators should ask subjects which pronouns they use. An example question that can be used in a survey (or reworded into an interview question) follows.

Pronoun Use:

__ *He/Him/His*
__ *She/Her/Her*
__ *They/Them/Their*
__ *Not Listed: _____*
__ *Prefer not to reply*

Additional Resources

Please note that guidance and recommendations regarding best practices for the use of gender inclusive language may change.

For further information on this topic, please see the following resources:

- [Designing forms for gender diversity and inclusion](#)
- [National Center for Transgender Equality](#)

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