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Heterosexist Bias in Research

Heterosexist bias systematically limits what we know and imagine about the world as a result of conceptualizing human experience in strictly heterosexual terms. The term *bias* describes a prejudice against or an inclination toward some ideas or people over others, and as a result, bias creates prejudices within social structures, policies, and conventions. *Heterosexism* is a foundational system that oppresses non-heterosexually identified individuals. Heterosexism stems from the assumption that heterosexuality is natural, universal, and therefore inevitable. In turn, sexualities and identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) are assumed to be not natural, not universal, and/or not inevitable. As a result, heterosexism ignores, rejects, and stigmatizes non-heterosexual identities, behaviors, and relationships.

It is important to note that heterosexist bias does not rely on whether an individual considers themselves to be anti-gay or homophobic. Rather than an individual's personal beliefs, heterosexism derives from implicit norms that are present in formal and informal social institutions. Paired with bias, heterosexism becomes a system of prejudicial attitudes against non-heterosexual individuals, desires, behaviors, and relationships.

The concept of heterosexism is often compared with, or used in place of, the concept of homophobia; however, there are significant differences between the two concepts. *Homophobia* refers to a negative attitude or fear regarding non-heterosexual people. These negative attitudes and fears are held at an individual or interpersonal level. An example of homophobia would be using anti-gay slurs or calling something “gay” as an intentional form of denigration. Homophobia involves intentionally prejudicial words, beliefs, and actions. *Heterosexism*, in contrast, involves a set of practices, norms, and conventions that may not be seen or intended to be prejudicial, but are prejudicial nevertheless. For example, whereas homophobia might be expressed through gay slurs, heterosexist bias might be expressed through school policies that do not punish gay slurs, thereby reinforcing homophobic attitudes in the classroom, school, family, and community.

Heterosexist Biases and Assumptions in Empirical Research

Research on sexual identities, attractions, and relationships is important for developing public policies and, in particular, evaluating whether policies negatively impact some groups more than others. High-quality research is necessary to evaluate the impact of institutional practices and laws that regulate individuals, including, for example, in the areas of schooling, health care, and commerce. Heterosexist bias in research can hinder the

collection of such data.

One example of heterosexist bias in research can be found in the U.S. Census. Until 2020, the U.S. Census, which aims to accurately count all individuals living in the United States, defined the crucial category of “household” based on the sex of the householder and the presence of relatives, which assumed a male/female couple. When querying about a household, response options included “*married-couple family; male householder, no wife present; female householder, no husband present; spouse (husband/wife); child; and other relatives.*” As a result of the heterosexist bias embedded in this research design, LGBTQ individuals were systematically undercounted, resulting in their political and economic marginalization. The 2020 U.S. Census added a new item that allowed same-sex couples to choose between “*same-sex husband/wife/spouse*” or “*same-sex unmarried partner.*” Although this change allowed coupled individuals to be more accurately counted, several limitations remained, including the undercounting of single LGBTQ people. This categorization undercounted other groups as well, including intersex and asexual individuals. Heterosexist bias must be examined in the process of conducting research, although because such biases have become well integrated into the systems, terminology, and norms of research practices, they are sometimes hard to discern. Several recommendations have been developed for ways to observe and avoid heterosexist bias in research. These are discussed in the following sections.

Research Question Development

Heterosexist bias can affect any point in the research process, beginning with the development of a research question. For example, the consistent development of research questions that focus on marriage, childbearing, and monogamous romantic relationships assumes that all individuals have the same values, the same relational norms, and the same access to social and religious institutions such as marriage. When researchers describe marriage and childbearing as the primary goals of adulthood, they systematically exclude those who are legally banned, or even simply discouraged, from participating in these and other activities. To avoid heterosexist bias, researchers should, therefore, consider and study a diverse set of relationships and forms of intimacy in youth and adulthood and should resist making assumptions about the normalcy and universality of certain social and family practices.

Another way to reduce heterosexist bias is to resist assuming that sexual identity represents a primary source of group difference. This theoretical position implies that being heterosexual or LGBTQ leads to fundamentally different experiences or beliefs. While there may, of course, be important differences between those who do and do not have same-sex relationships, desires, or fantasies, the development of research questions that

assume group difference based on sexual identity, attraction, or behavior may be shortsighted. It is essential to acknowledge that group differences may be driven by factors outside of the individual, such as exposure to discriminatory policies, media images that focus on heterosexual relationships, or lack of family support for same-sex relationships. Researchers are encouraged to develop research questions that do not assume that sexual identity, in and of itself, creates group differences, and to develop a set of broader questions that theorize a range of factors that shape how heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals behave, relate, and develop.

Sample and Recruitment

The process of developing a study sample often follows from the development of a research question. Heterosexist bias in sampling has been an area of concern because bias at this stage of a study systematically reduces the number of people and the diversity of experiences that are represented in research. Some researchers mistakenly conclude that there are few or no LGBTQ individuals in a particular neighborhood or community when LGBTQ participants have been reluctant to participate in research studies. There are, however, several reasons why LGBTQ individuals might be reluctant to participate in research studies. Some individuals may fear being publicly identified as LGBTQ. Other individuals may find that conventional sexual identity labels (which vary significantly by region, race/ethnicity, generation, and education level) do not adequately describe them. Researchers need to recognize the range of factors that can impact how often, when, and under what conditions LGBTQ individuals participate in research. Without such awareness, researchers risk incorporating heterosexist bias into their sampling designs and underrepresenting the experiences of non-heterosexual individuals.

To avoid this, researchers should consider several recruitment strategies for non-heterosexual populations, including using community informants to understand local sexual identity and behavior terminology, and accessing samples through community networks that enable participants to understand the risks (and rewards) of participation. Researchers should also consider the biases that can be introduced when LGBTQ individuals are sampled largely from specific locations such as bars, parades, hospitals, or clinics. LGBTQ individuals sampled primarily from such locations will have specific concerns, characteristics, and behaviors that do not necessarily reflect the diversity of all LGBTQ individuals. As a result, policies developed from these specialized samples might reinforce prejudices (e.g., assumptions that all non-heterosexual individuals use drugs or abuse alcohol) and could potentially limit social support for LGBTQ individuals and communities.

Research Design

Heterosexist bias can also be introduced into a study through the questions a researcher asks, the way these questions are posed, and the options for response provided. For example, providing only the options of “man” or “woman” to describe one’s gender ignores those who do not identify with either of these categories. Researchers should also avoid using language that positions heterosexual individuals as the primary group and LGBTQ people as “other.” Such positioning suggests that heterosexuality is easily understood, whereas only non-heterosexuality requires explanation. Even simple language choices such as using the term “other” to describe non-heterosexual gender or sexual identities can communicate heterosexist bias, given that the term suggests a nonnormative and “strange” status. A preferable approach is to allow participants to endorse a less stigmatizing category, such as “a gender not listed here,” “a sexual identity not listed here,” or “none of these options describes me/my experience” rather than “other.”

Similarly, demographic questions that refer to a person’s “spouse” or “husband/wife” typically assume that all participants have the same investment in the institution of marriage, which was restricted for many LGBTQ people until 2015 when the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision recognized same-sex marriage in the United States. Researchers are encouraged to use the term *partnered* or *unpartnered* instead of *married* or *single* and avoid response options that prioritize marriage as the key (or only) type of partner status. Lastly, researchers should consider whether their study implicitly presumes that participants are heterosexual and that all participants have equal access to or desire for “traditional” partnered activities. For example, a study that asks participants to imagine a scenario in which they are on a romantic date at the movies presumes that all participants can equally imagine such a date, occurring safely in public with a partner of their choice. Research designs like this can obscure the ways that individuals do not or cannot imagine this scenario as relevant; this could include same-sex couples who must navigate the potential for discrimination in these romantic scenarios, as well as those who do not want or seek romantic attachments.

Another strategy for avoiding heterosexist bias involves the measurement of characteristics such as gender(s), sexual identity, sexual orientation, and relationship status. Researchers are encouraged to use items that allow participants to report on aspects of their previous and current identities. For example, two items that query sex and gender separately allow for them to be uniquely assessed and for change over time to be normalized. For example, “What sex were you assigned at birth? (For example, on your birth certificate),” (*female*, *male*, and *intersex*), followed by an item such as “What is your current gender?” (*woman*, *man*, *transgender*, and *a gender not listed here*). Researchers interested in understanding participants’ self-rated gender

should also consider items that assess an individual's experience of their femininity and masculinity on two separate scales (e.g., “In general, how do you see yourself?” *not at all feminine* ... *very feminine*). These design decisions allow researchers to distinguish between sex and gender; in addition, the nonbinary response options allow participants to accurately endorse multiple identities (e.g., intersex and transgender). Lastly, LGBTQ individuals should not be described as a single homogenous group (e.g., “the gays”), but rather in reference to a relevant characteristic (e.g., “individuals who identify as gay or lesbian” or “individuals in a same-sex relationship”), to avoid suggesting that an individual's sexual identity or orientation is the person's single most important or defining characteristic.

Researchers who examine sexual health, sexual function, and sexual relationships have additional factors to consider in order to avoid heterosexist bias. In addition to considering terminology for gender and relational status, researchers should describe sexual activities in such a way that penile–vaginal intercourse is not presumed to be participants' sole or primary form of sexual activity. Researchers should use measures that allow participants to describe a range of sexual activities and avoid terminology that prioritizes heterosexual intercourse or makes nonintercourse behaviors secondary, or that makes sexual activity an assumed behavior that is expected of everyone. In assessments of sexual function, for example, researchers should consider how questions focusing solely on experiences of penetration or vaginal dryness might be relevant to participants who engage in vaginal intercourse and may exclude participants who engage in other sexual activities. Considering such factors can help reduce heterosexist bias and can allow participants—regardless of sexual identity—to imagine and share aspects of their sexual lives in research settings.

Analysis

At the analysis stage in research, heterosexist bias emerges in the process of forming explanations, making interpretations, and deriving meanings from data. Researchers are encouraged to resist the common practice of comparing heterosexual and LGBTQ groups and positioning heterosexual experiences as the implicit norm and LGBTQ experiences as “the effect to be explained.” Instead, researchers are encouraged to consider analytical strategies that position majority groups (e.g., heterosexual, White people) as requiring just as much explanation as minority groups. For example, researchers should analyze the causes and prevalence of gender conformity among heterosexual men and women, rather than simply analyzing the causes and prevalence of gender *non*conformity among lesbians and gay men. Such an approach provokes new and valuable questions and interpretations. Researchers should consider whether they have inadvertently analyzed group differences in a manner that implicitly privileges a heterosexual norm and presumes this norm to be stable

and to require no explanation.

Research Dissemination

Finally, there is the issue of how heterosexist bias can influence the reception and support of research. For example, journal editors and reviewers are encouraged to recognize the legitimacy of research on issues relevant to sexual identity, relationships, and communities. Most important, this body of research should not be dismissed as overly specialized or only relevant to LGBTQ individuals. An especially pernicious form of heterosexist bias is the assumption that all individuals should find research about heterosexuals relevant and useful, while research about LGBTQ individuals or issues is only relevant to other LGBTQ individuals.

There is a compelling and important history of researchers working to reduce heterosexist bias. In 1985, the American Psychological Association formed the Task Force on Non-Heterosexist Research; this group developed a set of guidelines for psychologists to avoid heterosexist bias in their research and clinical practice. Specifically, the task force recommended that researchers include more non-heterosexual individuals in their studies; employ research methods that lead to a greater understanding of sexual identities, relationships, and behaviors; and change current attitudes and assumptions about gay people. One of the most important statements of the task force was that these efforts are not only the responsibility of non-heterosexual psychologists or those studying LGBTQ people but also the responsibility of the entire research community.

See also [Defense of Marriage Act \(DOMA\)](#); [Gender Binaries](#); [Heteronormativity](#); [Homonormativity](#); [Homophobia](#); [Legal Recognition of Nonmarital Same-Sex Relationships](#); [Sampling](#)

Further Readings

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