

Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

The Committee on Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and
Sexual Orientation

*The Committee on National Statistics
The Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education*

Developing Standards for the Measurement of Sex and Gender: A NASEM Consensus Study Report The Committee on Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

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Measuring Sex, Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation: A Consensus Study Report

“Data on **sexual orientation and gender identity should be collected** in federally funded surveys...”

--- IOM, 2011 The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People

“**Sexual orientation and gender identity question are presented inconsistently** across data collection tools”

“...**data** on sexual orientation, gender identity and intersex status **are needed to drive research agendas, monitor population trends...**”

--- NASEM, 2020 Understanding the Well-Being of LGBTQ+ Populations

The Committee on Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

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Introduction

- Our identities shape opportunities, experiences with discrimination, and outcomes through our life course.
- Sex, gender, and sexual orientation are core aspects of identity; therefore, it is crucial that measures of these concepts accurately capture their complexity.
- Current data collection efforts in these areas are not standardized, leading to lack of conceptual precision and inability to compare studies. Advances in the conceptualization and measurement of sex and gender should be incorporated across scientific fields.
- Better measurement of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation will also improve the ability to identify sexual and gender minority populations and understand the challenges they face.

1. Review current measures and the methodological issues related to measuring sex as a nonbinary construct, gender identity, and sexual orientation in surveys and research studies, in administrative settings, and in clinical settings.
2. Produce a consensus report with conclusions and recommendations on guiding principles for collecting data on sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation and recommended measures for these constructs in different settings.

Committee Statement of Task

Organization of the Report

1. Introduction, Definitions, and Scope of Report
2. Part I: Measurement Principles, Contexts, and Methods
3. Part II: Measure Recommendations

Definitions



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Definitions: Sex

- A multidimensional construct based on a cluster of anatomical and physiological traits (sex traits)
 - Sex traits include: external genitalia, secondary sex characteristics, gonads, chromosomes, and hormones
- Characteristics
 - Usually assigned as female or male
 - Most often defined at birth based on visual inspection of external genitalia
 - Sex traits usually assumed to be unambiguous, but may not be
 - Sex traits usually assumed to correspond to the same sex, but may not
 - Some sex traits can change or be altered over time

Definitions: Populations Defined by Sex Traits

- Intersex/Differences in Sex Development (Intersex/DSD)
 - People whose sex traits do not all correspond to a single binary sex

Definition: Gender

- A multidimensional construct that links gender identity, gender expression, and social and cultural expectations about status, characteristics, and behavior that are associated with sex traits
 - Identity: A core element of a person's individual sense of self
 - Expression: How an individual signals their gender to others through behavior and appearance
 - Social and cultural expectations: Related to social status, characteristics, and behavior that are associated with sex traits
- Characteristics
 - Often conceptualized as binary (male/female or man/woman) in Western cultures, but also includes categories outside this binary
 - Often used interchangeably with sex, though it is conceptually distinct
 - Often assumed to be determined based on sex assigned at birth but may differ
 - Gender identity, expression, and social and cultural expectations may not all correspond to the same gender
 - May be temporally and contextually fluid

Definitions: Gender Identities

- Transgender: A person whose current gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth
 - Transgender experience: All people who can be classified as transgender, regardless of whether they identify as transgender
 - Transgender identity: People who identify as transgender
- Cisgender: A person whose current gender identity corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth
- Nonbinary: An umbrella term for gender identities that lie outside the gender binary
 - Genderqueer: A person who does not follow gender norms
 - Genderfluid: A person who does not identify with a fixed gender
 - Two-Spirit: Placeholder term for specific gender and sexual orientation identities that are centered in Indigenous tribal worldviews, practices, and knowledges

Definition: Sexual Orientation

- A multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction, identity, and behavior
 - Identity: A person's core internal sense of their sexuality
 - Attraction: A multidimensional concept that includes the gender(s) to which a person is attracted and the strength of this attraction, including whether a person feels attraction at all
 - Behavior: A multidimensional concept that includes the gender(s) of sexual partners, specific sexual activities, and frequency of activity
- Characteristics
 - Often defined based on the gender(s) of a person's desired or actual partners relative to their own gender in Western cultures
 - The three dimensions of sexuality—attraction, identity, and behavior—may not correspond to the same orientation

Definitions: Sexual Orientation Identities

- Straight or heterosexual: Sexually oriented toward people of a different, usually binary, gender
- Gay or homosexual: Sexually oriented toward people of the same, usually binary, gender (Note: The term “homosexual” can be considered offensive and outdated)
- Lesbian: Women who are sexually oriented toward other women
- Bisexual: Sexually oriented toward both men and women
- Queer: An umbrella term for belonging to the LGBTQI+ community; also used to refer to a person who is sexually oriented toward people of more than one gender
- Pansexual: Sexually oriented toward people of any gender
- Questioning: Uncertain about sexual orientation identity
- Two-Spirit: Placeholder term for specific gender and sexual orientation identities that are centered in Indigenous tribal worldviews, practices, and knowledges
- Same Gender Loving: Nonheterosexual sexual orientation identity used by some within African American communities as a resistance to Eurocentric language for sexuality

Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in an Indigenous Context

- The committee recognizes that the U.S. federal government has a trust responsibility to the 574 federally-recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes
- “Two-Spirit” is an intertribal umbrella term first coined in 1990 that is used as a placeholder for tribe-specific gender and sexuality identities
 - Many tribes recognize three or more genders
 - Within many tribal communities, gender and sexual identity are not easily distinguished and are part of an individual’s broader social role within their tribe
 - The use of an intertribal term allows these Indigenous identities to be measured and counted in a way that individual tribal identities do not
 - The term is widely—but not universally—recognized and used within tribal communities

Scope of the Report

- Measures that can be used in the **general English-speaking adult population**
 - More detailed response options may be necessary for measures used within LGBTQI+ populations
 - **Modifications** to recommendations **may be needed** if they are used **within younger populations**
 - Also **prioritized representation of indigenous sexual and gender minorities**
- Focus on measures of identity that can also be used to identify sexual and gender minority populations

Part I: Measurement Principles, Contexts, and Methods



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Data Collection Principles

- **Inclusiveness**

- People deserve to count and be counted

- **Precision**

- Use precise terminology that reflects the constructs of interest

- **Autonomy**

- Respect individual identity and autonomy

- **Parsimony**

- Collect only necessary data

- **Privacy**

- Use data in a manner that benefits respondents and respects their privacy and confidentiality

The Importance of Conceptual Clarity: Sex and Gender

- Conceptually distinct
- Each comprise multiple dimensions
- **Conflating sex and gender** or measuring either concept using a single binary measure **can lead to mismeasurement or misuse of the data**

Conclusion 1:

Gender encompasses identity, expression, and social position. A person's gender is associated with but cannot be reduced to either sex assigned at birth or specific sex traits. Therefore, **data collection efforts should not conflate sex as a biological variable with gender** or otherwise treat the respective concepts as interchangeable. In addition, in many contexts, including human subjects research and medical care, **collection of data on gender is more relevant than collection of data on sex as a biological variable**, particularly for the purposes of assessing inclusion and monitoring discrimination and other forms of disparate treatment.

Recommendation 1:

The standard for **the National Institutes of Health should be to collect data on gender and report it by default**. Collection of data on sex as a biological variable should be limited to circumstances where information about sex traits is relevant, as in the provision of clinical preventive screenings or for research investigating specific genetic, anatomical, or physiological processes and their connections to patterns of health and disease. In human populations, collection of data on sex as a biological variable should be accompanied by collection of data on gender.

Using Context-Specific Measures

- Much of the research is in survey research context
- Where possible, the panel evaluated measures that have been used in clinical and administrative settings
- Panel opted to **recommend that the same measures be used within all three data collection settings**, in absence of clear evidence indicating that poor performance or feasibility

Panel's Measure Evaluation Criteria

- Questions
 - **Consistency with data collection principles**
 - **Comprehensible within LGBTQI+ and general populations**
 - Tested within LGBTQI+ and general populations
 - Consistent estimation across data collection contexts
 - Tested using multiple administration modes
 - **Select one response**
- Response Options
 - Terminology is **comprehensible within both LGBTQI+ and general populations**
 - Can measure recent trends
 - **Can track and incorporate changes in terminology**
 - **Balances comprehensiveness with complexity**
 - Minimizes need to reclassify respondents
 - **Ordering follows generally accepted practices**

Part II: Measure Recommendations



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