

Avoiding Heterosexual Bias in Language

Reprint:

American Psychologist

September 1991, Volume 46, Issue No. 9, 973-974

©1991 by the American Psychological Association, Inc.

Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns
American Psychological Association

This article presents suggestions for avoiding heterosexual bias in language concerning lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons. Problems in language occur when terminology is unclear or when terminology has been associated with negative stereotypes. The article suggests preferred terminology and also presents ways of increasing the visibility of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons in language.

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

Meanwhile, in an independent effort, a corresponding document entitled "Guidelines for Avoiding Racial/Ethnic Bias" was developed by the Board of Ethnic Minority Affairs 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 that are being prepared for P&C to be included in an expanded section on language bias in the next edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

CLGC has continued to revise the "CLGC Nomenclature Guidelines for Psychologists" in accordance with the format used in the "Guidelines for Avoiding Racial/Ethnic Bias." The revisions include a change in the title to "Avoiding Heterosexual Bias in Language." The guidelines were submitted to P&C in October 1989, and this article includes revisions suggested by P&C.

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.

Problems of Terminology

Problems occur in language concerning lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons when the language is too vague or the concepts are poorly defined. There are two major problems of designation. Language may be ambiguous in reference, so that the reader is uncertain about its meaning or its inclusion and exclusion criteria; and the term *homosexuality* has been associated in the past with deviance, mental illness, and criminal behavior, and these negative stereotypes may be perpetuated by biased language.

1. The term sexual orientation is preferred to *sexual preference* for psychological writing and refers to sexual and 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 to *lesbianism*, *heterosexuality*, *homosexuality*, and *bisexuality*. 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 the terms *lesbians* and *gay men* are preferred to *homosexuals* used as nouns 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 both identity and 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 in reference because 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.

Terms such as *gay male* are preferable to *homosexuality* or *male homosexuality*, as 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* in place of *female homosexual*, *female homosexuality*, or *lesbianism*.

3. *Same-gender sexual behavior*, *male-male sexual behavior*, and *female-female sexual 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. For example, 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*.

4. *Bisexual women and men*, *bisexual persons*, or *bisexual* as an adjective refer to people who relate sexually and affectionately 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. 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 and sexual relationships and who do not engage in sexual relationships with people of the same gender.
6. 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. For example, 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 the following:
 - a. 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.
 - b. 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.
 - c. Omitting discussion of marital status unless legal marital relationships are the subject of the writing. Marital status per se is not a good indicator of cohabitation (married 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). Furthermore, describing people as either married or single renders lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons as well as heterosexual people in cohabiting relationships invisible.
 - d. Referring to sexual and intimate emotional partners with both male and female terms (e.g., "the adolescent males were asked about the age at which they first had a male or female sexual partner").
 - e. 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").
 - f. 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, gay men, and bisexual persons.* Stigmatizing or pathologizing language regarding gay men, lesbians, and bisexual persons 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. 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 with 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 "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."

The 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 reflects many discussions and written drafts. Not all people necessarily agree with all suggestions in this document.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Esther Rothblum, Department of Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405.

<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/language.aspx>