

Title: **Sex and Gender-inclusive Research: A Guideline for Researchers**

Research with human participants should be equitable, respectful, fair, and inclusive. This *Guideline* has been created to assist researchers in promoting these values within their research design and practice, with respect to the sex and gender of research participants.

Sex and gender are different things. **Sex** refers to a person's sex assigned at birth. A person's sex is 'based on a set of physical and physiological features including chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive anatomy' (CIHR 2023). **Gender** refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people. Whereas "sex" is biological, "gender" is socially constructed. Thus, while there has traditionally been association of sex with certain corresponding gender roles, these associations are constructed. Although gender identity sometimes falls in line with sex designation at birth, this is not always the case and the two can be separate. **Gender identity** refers to the gender category that a person belongs to, i.e., a person's internal sense of being a woman, man, both, neither or somewhere along the gender spectrum.

A list of additional relevant key terms is provided in Appendix A.

Appendix B contains additional resources on inclusivity and diversity in research.

Additionally, the Lakehead University Office of Research Services offers a Certificate in Inclusive Research Leadership Program, designed to empower researchers to understand and embrace equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) within the research space. The program is available in *MyCourseLink*, and more information is available here: [Certificate in Inclusive Research Leadership](#)

Researchers are encouraged to contact the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB) if they have questions related to this *Guideline*: research.ethics@lakehead.ca

1. Guidance from the Tri-council agencies

In addition to consulting this *Guideline*, researchers should consult guidance provided by the relevant Tri-council agencies.

1.1 *Health research*

The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) “expects that all research applicants will integrate sex and gender into their research designs, methods and analyses and interpretation and/or dissemination of findings when appropriate”. CIHR has provided resources for researchers to help effectively integrate sex (biological) and gender (sociocultural and other identity factors) into research, as well as to promote inclusion of under-represented populations within health research based on factors such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation, etc.

Link to CIHR “Sex and Gender in Health Research” website: <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/50833.html>

CIHR also has online training modules dedicated to three different types of research involving sex and gender: Biomedical Research, Primary Data Collection with Human Participants, and the Analysis of Secondary Data from Human Participants. It is recommended that researchers take the most applicable training course for their research area.

Link to these training modules: <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/49347.html>

1.2 *Other Research (not health research)*

Link to NSERC “NSERC guide on integrating equity, diversity and inclusion considerations in research” website: https://www.nserc-crsng.gc.ca/NSERC-CRSNG/Policies-Politiques/EDI_guidance-Conseils_EDi_eng.asp

Link to SSHRC “Best practices in equity, diversity and inclusion in research practice and design “ website: <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/nfrf-fnfr/edi-eng.aspx>

2. General considerations

2.1 Intersectionality: The experiences of people who are trans and/or gender diverse are varied. Research should be attentive to such diversity in all aspects of research, including recruitment of participants and how diverse groups are represented or prefer to be represented in research outputs.

2.2 Research about people who are trans and/or gender diverse should involve individuals with lived experience, and should be conducted with and for such people when it is possible within a research study. If involvement of individuals who are transgender and/or gender diverse is not possible, researchers should consider using an advisory board, committee, or members with direct lived experience to advise on issues of research design, analysis and dissemination. People can be harmed by research if the language, assumptions, and goals of the project are not informed by the values, norms, and goals of the groups/communities, and not respectful of the diversity within groups/communities.

3. Inclusivity in participant pool selection

3.1 The Tri-Council Policy Statement's (TCPS-2) [ethical standard of justice](#) requires fair inclusion and exclusion criteria for research participation, as well as the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of participation in research. This means that people should have the fair opportunity to participate in research, and not be unfairly targeted for research participation where other people or groups could be asked to participate (also or instead).

3.2 When determining the pool of potential participants for a particular research project, the inclusion and exclusion criteria should be determined based on relevance to the research objectives, and consideration given to which pool(s) of potential participants is needed to answer the specific research question(s).

3.3 The TCPS-2 [Article 4.1](#) states that, "Researchers shall not exclude individuals from the opportunity to participate in research on the basis of attributes such as culture, language, religion, race, disability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, linguistic proficiency, gender or age, unless there is a valid reason for the exclusion".

3.4 Use of sex or gender as an exclusion criterion is only appropriate if it is justified by the research objective(s). For example, a research project examining the experiences of non-binary people in professional sports is justified in excluding cisgender people and binary people who are trans, because the focus of the research is specific to people who are non-binary. If the same project wanted to compare the experiences of people who are non-binary with those of cisgender males and cisgender females, then the latter groups of people could also be included in the pool of potential participants.

If researchers are unsure about whether sex or gender are justifiable inclusion/exclusion criteria for their research, they should consult with the Lakehead University REB: research.ethics@lakehead.ca

4. Inclusion in surveys, questionnaires and interviews

4.1 All demographic questions included in surveys/questionnaires/interviews should be relevant to the research objectives, or for answering specific research questions. If there is no connection or relevance between sex or gender and the research objectives, then such information should not be asked.

4.2 If gender is relevant to the research objectives but sex is not relevant, then gender can be asked about, but questions about sex should not be asked. Alternatively, if sex is relevant to the research objectives but gender is not, then sex can be asked but gender should not be.

4.3 Including demographic questions about sex/gender may be needed in order to meet certain discipline-specific requirements for the replication of research and to identify the population that the findings could be applicable and transferrable to, and should be undertaken in an inclusive manner.

4.4 Questions about sex should be asked with as much specificity as possible to achieve the research objective. For example, asking about sex assigned at birth without consideration of gender-affirming care (e.g. use of hormone replacement therapy) that affects the biology of some people who are trans would not provide an accurate picture of the influence of sex on the variable under study. If these are not considered, then this can be a flaw in the experimental design that can impact interpretation of data.

4.5 The way that surveys/questionnaires/interview questions are worded and presented to participants has an impact on inclusivity and respect for persons. With respect to demographic questions related to sex and gender, listed options for participants to choose from should be inclusive and respectful.

4.6 An option for “I prefer not to answer” should always be provided in self-identification questionnaires.

4.7 Traditional ways of asking demographic questions have tended to be patriarchal, often listing “Male” as the first (highest) option on the list provided, with other options falling lower on the list. As well, traditional ways of presenting demographic questions can be “othering” because they present a scope of options that is too narrow, and attempt to capture all demographics not listed with a box labelled “Other”. When possible, research participants should be provided the opportunity to write their own response for gender.

4.8 **Sex:** For researchers who seek to ask about the sex of participants, the Lakehead University REB recommends the following:

What was your sex assigned at birth?

- Female
- Intersex
- Male
- Prefer not to answer

This presentation of the question is inclusive since it lists all sexes as options, and options are presented in alphabetical order.

4.9 **Gender:** Given that there are many different gender identities and that capturing them all in one list is impracticable: For researchers who seek to ask about the gender of research participants, the Lakehead University REB recommends the following, which allows participants to select all answers that apply to them:

*What options best describe your gender? (*Select all that apply*)*

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gender fluid | <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to answer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> I identify as (please specify): _____ | <input type="checkbox"/> Queer |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Man | <input type="checkbox"/> Two-spirit |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Non-binary | <input type="checkbox"/> Woman |

This presentation of the question about participants' gender is more inclusive since it includes more options than an outdated gender binary [i.e. "man/woman" + "other"], and the options are presented in alphabetical order.

Instead of listing "Other", it is recommended that researchers label a self-input box as "I identify as _____". This prevents othering and presents the other option as a more inclusive option.

Questions? Researchers are encouraged to contact the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (REB) if they have questions related to this *Guideline*: research.ethics@lakehead.ca

Appendix A: Glossary of key terms

2SLGBTQIA+: acronym designating people who are two-spirit (2S), lesbian (L), gay (G), bisexual (B), transgender (T), queer (Q), intersex (I), asexual (A), and those who identify as part of gender diverse communities but use different terminology (+).

Cis or cisgender: an umbrella term that designates people whose gender or sex are congruent with what sex was assigned to them at birth.

Gender fluid: a person whose gender shifts along the gender spectrum, rather than being fixed or unchanging across time and different situations.

Gender identity (or gender): the internal sense of belonging or not belonging to a gendered social category. “Gender identity” refers to a person’s internal sense of being a woman, man, both, neither or somewhere along the gender spectrum. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, and how they act and interact.

Intersex: term for people who have endogenous genotypic, hormonal, or anatomical profiles that fall outside of the medical classifications of male and female – a naturally occurring physical state that is not the product of a gender affirmation or a sex-transition process.

Non-binary: an umbrella term for people whose genders fall outside of the gender binary (man/woman). People who are non-binary may be on the man-woman continuum, outside of it, or some combination of gender categories.

Sex or biological sex: a combination of several physical factors that are commonly known as “sex”, including genotype, hormonal profile, presence or absence of gonads (testicles, ovaries), body hair patterns, genital configuration, sense of physical embodiment, etc.

Trans or Transgender: an umbrella term for people whose gender differs from what was assigned to them at birth. **Trans man** refers to a person whose sex assigned at birth is female, and who identifies as a man. **Trans woman** refers to a person whose sex assigned at birth is male, and who identifies as

a woman. Being transgender does not indicate anything about sexual orientation of the person.

Two-spirit: “Two-spirit refers to a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit, and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity. As an umbrella term it may encompass same-sex attraction and a wide variety of gender variance, including people who might be described in Western culture as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, gender queer, cross-dressers or who have multiple gender identities” (Source: Re:searching for 2SLGBTQA+ Health, <https://www.lgbtqhealth.ca/>). See also: <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/52214.html>).

Appendix B: Additional resources

Canada Research Chairs Program: <https://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/program-programme/equity-equite/index-eng.aspx>

Ontario Human Rights Commission website, Gender and gender identity:
https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/code_grounds/gender_identity

Re:searching for 2SLGBTQA+ Health, <https://www.lgbtqhealth.ca/>

Trans PULSE Canada website: <https://transpulsecanada.ca/>

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