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Considerate of our participants: The LGBTQIA+ perspective

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For research to capture participants' genuine opinions, it is important that the study is constructed in a way that is sensitive to the unique lived experience of the respondents – this being essential to build rapport and trust with the participants. As researchers, while we may have significant expertise on the topics we study, we recognise that we do not fully understand the lived experience of those who may participate in our research – that's why we need to do the research. Our respondents encapsulate significant and unique experiences, privileges, and identities. And, a failure to consider that can result in participants providing a shallow response or choosing not to participate – with either option skewing our findings.

This is particularly relevant when considering the LGBTQIA+ communities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and other sex, sexualities, and gender identities) who have typically been marginalised because their sex, sexuality, or gender identity departs from the norms established in society. Statistics vary on the proportion of the population that are a part of the LGBTQIA+ communities with some suggesting as many as one in ten are lesbian and gay, one in twenty are trans and a similar proportion intersex. What is certain is that in a sample of the general population, our participants will very likely include people who are a part of the LGBTQIA+ communities. To that end, this article puts forward five recommendations.

One: Reflect on bias

We are all a product of our life experiences which we use consciously or unconsciously to make sense of the world around us. As researchers, we know how the placement of questions and their wording can elicit a different response. We, however, also need to be aware that we may be projecting our own biases in how we construct the research and interpret the findings. This is particularly the case for groups that have been marginalised in society through strong socio-cultural narratives and assumptions. Such assumptions may be displayed through the stereotypical behaviours associated with LGBTQIA+ people, the representation of family being mum and dad as opposed to same-sex parents, the assignment of gender roles, and the types of relationships – monogamous or some form of ethical non-monogamy – people may have. By being mindful of our own assumptions, we can capture data on lived experiences beyond our own.

Two: Protect identity and privacy

In addition to the differences encapsulated by the letters themselves, LGBTQIA+ people have diverse lived experiences including some being out and public about their identity with all, some being out only to selected people or groups, or not at all, with others engaging in behaviours but not seeing these behaviours as their identity – for instance men who have sex with men but do not see themselves as gay. Being mindful of these differences is important for constructing respectful research that protects participants and does not out them

or force them to come out, that does not prescribe or dictate an identity, and that truly captures data relevant to the project.

Three: Consider relevance

The LGBTQIA+ acronym encapsulates people of various sex (e.g. those with intersex variations), sexualities (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual), gender identity (e.g. transgender, non-binary), and expression (e.g. drag kings/queens). It is important to know the difference between the concepts of: sex (the characteristics one is born with), sexuality (who one is attracted to), gender identity (how one sees their gender), and gender expression (how one displays their gender). These concepts are disparate and the relevance of these concepts needs to be determined based on the project. So, studies on male and female hygiene may focus more on sex, while studies on clothing may target gender identity and expression.

Four: Edit sensitively

Language has the power to construct identities and divide. In the research context, language can detract from the way individuals see themselves and the value demonstrated for that unique identity. Othering is explicit when using response options like 'other' (e.g., male, female, other), whereas using positive language like 'an alternative identity' serves the same purpose, but demonstrates respect for diversity. Gender pronouns, when used as a prefix qualifier, can serve to make presumptions of an individual's identity. Phrases like "his penis" assume the person identifies as he/him/his. Asking individuals if they identify as transgender downplays the individual's chosen gender identity, in this context, it is important to ask what is relevant to the research – gender identity and/or sex – and collect the data that is relevant. To affirm transgender identities, it is important to ask both birth sex and gender identity, in that order.

Five: Consult explicitly

Finally, consistent with the notion of pre-testing, consultation with members from the communities being researched can also be used as a sensitivity check. This will help identify hidden nuances that may not be apparent if you do not belong to that community. Some identity labels, for example, may be acceptable when used by members of an LGBTQIA+ community, but seen as degrading when used by non-members. Given the diversity encapsulated within the LGBTQIA+ communities, this is essential even for members of the LGBTQIA+ communities research subgroups – for instance, a gay cis-gendered man researching trans men or women, or a gay-anglo man researching gay-men of colour.

The notions of reflection to avoid bias, protecting participant's identity and privacy, appreciating diversity across and within subcultures, being sensitive in the use of language, and consulting with members of the community, while applied here focusing on the LGBTQIA+ context, can also be used to guide research with marginalised minorities or other potentially vulnerable groups.