



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies**

## **Heterosexist Bias in Research**

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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 nonheterosexually 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, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) are assumed to not be natural, universal, or inevitable. As a result, heterosexism ignores, rejects, and stigmatizes nonheterosexual identities, behaviors, and relationships.

It is important to note that heterosexist bias does not rely on whether an individual considers him- or herself to be antigay 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 nonheterosexual individuals, behaviors, and relationships.

The concept of heterosexism is often compared with or used in place of the concept of homophobia; however, there are important differences between the two concepts. *Homophobia* refers to a negative attitude or fear regarding nonheterosexual people. These negative attitudes and fears are held at an individual or interpersonal level. An example of homophobia would be using antigay 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 definition of "household." When collecting data on all of the individuals living in the country, the U.S. Census has recognized households only as "married," "widowed," "divorced," "separated," or "never married." These categories demonstrate how heterosexist forms of data collection can systematically obscure alternative family structures, particularly among families that have been historically denied access to the institution of marriage. Under the U.S. Census definition of "household," many different forms of family, including but not limited to same-sex couples, have been made invisible. As a result of the heterosexist bias embedded in this research design, social policies and other forms of support have been made less available to LGBTQ individuals and families because they were not recognized through the available

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 desires. Researchers are encouraged to develop research questions that do not assume that sexual identity creates group differences in and of itself, and to develop a set of broader questions that theorize a range of factors that shape how heterosexual and nonheterosexual individuals behave, relate, and develop.

### **Sampling**

The process of developing a study sample often follows from the development of a research question; it is the way that a researcher decides who will be asked to participate in a study. 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 must recognize the range of factors that can impact how often, when, and under what conditions LGBTQ individuals may participate in research. Without such awareness, researchers risk

incorporating heterosexist bias into their sampling designs and underrepresenting the experiences of nonheterosexual individuals.

To avoid this, researchers should consider several recruitment strategies when sampling nonheterosexual 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 sampling biases that can be introduced when LGBTQ individuals are sampled largely from specific locations such as bars, 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 nonheterosexual 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 “male” or “female” to describe one’s gender ignores those who do not identify with either of these gender choices. 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 nonheterosexuality requires explanation. Even simple language choices such as using the term “other” to describe nonheterosexual gender or sexual identities can communicate heterosexist bias, given that the term suggests a non-normative 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” have typically assumed that all participants are heterosexual or have the legal right to be married. Researchers are encouraged to use the term “partnered” or “un-partnered” instead of “married” or “single” and avoid response options that do not provide same-sex couples an option to indicate a partner status. It is also important to avoid creating an implicit hierarchy among partner statuses, with married as the prioritized 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” partnering 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.

Another strategy for avoiding heterosexist bias involves the use of continuous dimensions rather than dichotomous categories to measure characteristics such as gender(s), sexual identity, sexual orientation, and relationship status. Researchers should consider how dichotomous categories systematically represent and reinforce majority groups, while systematically excluding or inaccurately representing sexual-minority groups. Lastly, LGBTQ individuals should not be described as a single

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homogenous group (“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 and defining characteristic.

Researchers that examine sexual health, sexual function, and sexual relationships have additional considerations to make 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 non-intercourse behaviors secondary. In assessments of sexual function, for example, researchers should consider how questions focusing solely on experiences of penetration or vaginal dryness might be more 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., heterosexuals, Whites) 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 *nonconformity* 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 importantly, 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 (APA) 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 nonheterosexual individuals in their studies; employ research methods that lead to a

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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 nonheterosexual 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](#)

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### Further Readings

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