

Teaching and learning guide for: Guidelines for respecting gender diversity in psychological research

Danu Anthony Stinson¹ | Jessica J. Cameron²

¹Department of Psychology, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

²Department of Psychology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Correspondence

Danu Anthony Stinson, Department of Psychology, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada.

Email: dstinson@uvic.ca

This guide accompanies the following article: Cameron, J. J., & Stinson, D. A. (2019). Gender (mis)measurement: Guidelines for respecting gender diversity in psychological research. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 13 (11), e12506. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12506>

1 | AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Researchers should use inclusive measures of gender/sex in their research, as a means of adhering to ethical guidelines in psychological research, creating an inclusive environment for all of our participants, and to more accurately measure and represent our current understanding of gender/sex. In Cameron and Stinson (2019), we provide simple and cost-effective guidelines for achieving this goal, such as using gender-inclusive language, using and reporting non-binary gender measures, and subsequently reporting the prevalence of non-binary participants and their inclusion and treatment in the analysis. Yet our reasons for creating this teaching and learning guide stretch beyond the specific topic of gender/sex measurement in psychology. We created this teaching and learning guide to encourage more educators to take the leap and include the topic of gender/sex diversity in their psychology courses.

Most educators are excited about the newest science demonstrating that gender/sex is a spectrum and they want to share that science with their students. Many also want to help create a society that is safer and more welcoming to transgender and non-binary people, and they (rightly) perceive that education is an important means to this end.

Yet despite these strong motivations, some educators hesitate. They may be concerned that they do not know enough about the subject to confidently teach others. We can help with that. This teaching and learning guide is chock full of resources that will allow psychology teachers to educate themselves, first, so that they can feel confident teaching their students about gender diversity.

Other educators may hesitate to teach about gender/sex diversity because they do not see how the topic fits into their psychology course. We can help with that too. We happen to believe that there is a place to discuss gender/sex diversity in every psychology course, and we provide suggestions for how and when to incorporate a unit on gender/sex diversity into a range of psychology courses.

Finally, some educators may be concerned about how to respond to difficult questions or even pushback from students. Teaching about topics that contradict important cultural beliefs can be challenging for educators, and the topic of gender/sex diversity certainly falls into this category. Beliefs about binary gender/sex are so fundamental in Western culture that it can be quite “mind blowing” (to borrow a phrase that is often uttered by our students) to learn that gender/sex is actually a multi-dimensional spectrum. This knowledge can have a domino effect, causing students to question other cultural beliefs that they had previously never questioned. In this way, learning about gender/sex diversity is an excellent foray into critical thinking for many students. However, as social psychology teaches us, ideas that challenge the legitimacy of important cultural beliefs and institutions can also feel threatening (and one can certainly argue that the gender/sex binary is a cultural institution). So educators may feel uncertain about how to address the negative feelings that may arise among students who feel psychologically threatened by this topic. Educators may also feel nervous about making a mistake and being called out by more-knowledgeable students, including transgender and non-binary students. These concerns are understandable, and we have personally experienced all of these situations in our own classes. But we want to encourage educators to push through their discomfort and do it anyway. With preparation and practice, educators can build their confidence, and we provide some sample scripts for responding to difficult questions in this guide. Most important of all, though, we want to assure educators that the benefits of teaching about gender/sex diversity far outweigh the short-term costs of uncomfortable feelings and difficult conversations. In our experience, learning about gender/sex diversity has the potential to improve students' critical thinking skills, build empathy among cisgender students, improve scientific, measurement, and ethical practices, and help to create a more welcoming learning environment for transgender and non-binary students.

2 | AUTHOR RECOMMENDS

2.1 | Gender diversity (terminology, theories, broad recommendations)

- 1 American Psychological Association (2015). Guidelines for psychological practice with transgender and gender nonconforming people. *American Psychologist*, 70, 832–864. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039906>

This article provides several guidelines for psychologists working with transgender and gender-diverse individuals. Though the focus is on how clinicians can implement these guidelines to provide an inclusive environment, there are also recommendations for researchers and educators. The rationale for each guideline is supported by research and for each guideline the authors provide examples of how their recommendations can be put into action.

- 2 Egan, S. K., & Perry, D. G. (2001). Gender identity: A multidimensional analysis with implications for psychosocial adjustment. *Developmental Psychology*, 37, 451–463. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.37.4.451>

This article presents a multifaceted model (and measures) of gender identity in children that includes psychological gender compatibility, external pressure for gender conformity, and gender-based attitudes. Moreover, the authors present data on the association between these gender identity dimensions and well-being.

- 3 Factor, R., & Rothblum, E. (2008). Exploring gender identity and community among three groups of transgender individuals in the United States: MTFs, FTMs, and genderqueers. *Health Sociology Review*, 17, 235–253. <https://doi.org/10.5172/hesr.451.17.3.235>

This article reports the results of a survey of transgender and genderqueer individuals. The authors provide a comprehensive list of gender identities provided by the participants (e.g., transman, gender radical, gender fluid) in addition to information on pronoun preference, medical interventions, and use of public washrooms.

- 4 Hyde, J. S., Bigler, R. S., Joel, D., Tate, C. C., & van Anders, S. M. (2019). The future of sex and gender in psychology: Five challenges to the gender binary. *American Psychologist*, 74, 171–193. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000307>

This review article convincingly demonstrates that gender/sex is best understood as a spectrum and that binary conceptualizations of gender/sex are flawed. The authors present recommendations for research and practice. In their article, the authors also coin the term “gender/sex” to reflect the overlapping nature of gender and sex. We adopt the same terminology in our own written work.

- 5 Tate, C. C., Youssef, C. P., & Bettergarcia, J. N. (2014). Integrating the study of transgender spectrum and cisgender experiences of self-categorization from a personality perspective. *Review of General Psychology*, 18, 302–312. <https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000019>

In this article, the authors present a multifaceted model of gender identity, called the gender bundle, which includes sex assigned at birth, one's own gender categorization, gender stereotypes, gender expression, and gender-based attitudes. The authors argue for the unified investigation of gender diverse identities alongside cisgender identities.

2.2 | Measuring gender diversity

- 1 Bauer, G. R., Braimoh, J., Scheim, A. I., & Dharma, C. (2017). Transgender-inclusive measures of sex/gender for population surveys: Mixed-methods evaluation and recommendations. *PLoS One*, 12, e0178043. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0178043>

In this article, the authors test and evaluate two existing gender-inclusive measures for use in population-based surveys. Based on the data collected, the authors create a new gender/sex inclusive demographic measure that is intended to be more inclusive of gender fluid and cultural identities (e.g., two-spirit) while also capturing transgender identities using a three-item approach (sex assigned at birth, current gender identity, and current gender expression).

- 2 Olson, K. R., Key, A. C., & Eaton, N. R. (2015). Gender cognition in transgender children. *Psychological Science*, 26, 467–474. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614568156>

This article outlines an empirical study wherein transgender children had cognitive responses more similar to cisgender children with whom they shared the same expressed gender identity. We recommend the explicit gender identity measure used in this article for any researcher wanting to use an inclusive measure of gender/sex with children.

- 3 Tate, C. C., Ledbetter, J. N., & Youssef, C. P. (2013). A two-question method for assessing gender categories in the social and medical sciences. *Journal of Sex Research*, 50, 767–776. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.690110>

This article presents and evaluates a two-item measure of gender/sex. The two-item measure inquiring about sex assigned at birth and current gender identity demonstrated good psychometric properties.

3 | ONLINE MATERIALS

<https://osf.io/y36gz/>

This page on the Open Science Framework allows educators to download a collection of mini-lectures and slides about gender/sex diversity that we have created and used in our own classes (offered in two different file formats).

The document includes lecture slides and scripts. Educators are welcome to use and revise the content for their own purposes, but please cite this learning guide as a source.

<https://ihra.org.au/>

Intersex Human Rights Australia is a national not-for-profit organization run by and for intersex people. Their website includes a wealth of information and resources for teachers and learners. Their archive of multi-media resources is particularly useful.

<https://www.nature.com/news/sex-redefined-1.16943>

This online article published in the scientific journal, *Nature*, provides a succinct and accessible summary of research demonstrating that humans exhibit a wide spectrum of biological sex characteristics.

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLH2AwWZu87Pf-SOm8-VxZQjclm0hrSADf>

The *InQueery* video series by online culture magazine *them*. Includes short, educational videos about the historical origins and cultural meaning of words like queer, transgender, and genderqueer.

<https://radicalcopyeditor.com/2017/08/31/transgender-style-guide/>

This online article, “A radical copyeditor’s style guide for writing and speaking about transgender people”, provides excellent guidance for researchers and educators who are interested in using terminology in an accurate and sensitive manner. It is written by a genderqueer person, Alex Kapitan.

<https://www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/supporting-diverse-students.pdf>

This online publication by the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students subcommittee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity is an excellent resource for tips on supporting students who identify as transgender or non-binary. This resource also defines several terms (e.g., gender fluidity).

<https://www.glaad.org/transgender/allies>

This website from the LGBTQ+ advocacy organization, GLAAD, provides useful information for anyone wanting to support transgender individuals.

<https://www.trans101.org.au/>

This website includes several videos as well as a booklet devoted to discussing a variety of issues relevant to gender diversity from defining terms to being an ally.

<https://www.uvic.ca/equity/education/transinclusion/ally/index.php>

This website from the Equity and Human Rights organization at the University of Victoria (Canada) provides guidelines and resources for people who want to support people with diverse gender identities.

4 | SUGGESTED PLACEMENT OF CONTENT

We advocate that any psychology class is an appropriate place to discuss gender/sex diversity. At a minimum, this topic should be discussed in core undergraduate courses such as introductory psychology, research methods, and measurement. But we recommend that educators include a unit about gender/sex diversity near the start of the term in most psychology classes.

In many classes, especially classes that do not directly address gender/sex in their regular content, that unit may comprise a 10–15 minutes mini-lecture that is incorporated into a broader lecture about discipline-specific research methods and/or ethics. Other classes could include this topic in their early coverage of individual differences. For example, gender/sex differences are a common topic of discussion in classes concerning abnormal or clinical psychology, including discussions of differing prevalence rates, causes, and treatment modalities for men and women. All of those topics would benefit from a more nuanced discussion of gender/sex diversity. Indeed, we suggest that any course that touches on gender/sex differences in psychological phenomena—however, briefly!—needs to address the issue of gender/sex diversity so that students can properly digest and critique the literature. This includes classes like forensic psychology, health psychology, cognitive psychology, and neuropsychology where the relevance of gender/sex diversity to course content may not be readily apparent at first blush.

Educators who teach classes like social psychology, cultural psychology, personality psychology, and developmental psychology, which often include a unit on gender/sex, may wish to dedicate one or more classes to the topic of gender/sex diversity. In this case, educators may wish to expand their coverage beyond the issue of gender/sex measurement to touch on topics like historical and cultural variations in gender roles and presentations, prejudice and discrimination against transgender and non-binary individuals, and the most recent empirical research concerning the psychological experiences of transgender and non-binary people.

No matter how or when they choose to cover gender/sex diversity, educators should be careful to select and explain the terminology that they will use in their class (i.e., gender/sex, sex, gender). For a long time in psychology, the term “sex” was linked with biological factors whereas the term “gender” was linked with sociocultural factors surrounding sex categorization (see Unger, 1979). More recently, researchers have argued for the overlapping and inseparable nature of sex and gender (see Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate, & van Anders, 2019), and have adopted either a blended term use (gender/sex, Hyde et al., 2019). Some use “sex” to reflect a group identity and “gender” to reflect the psychological experience of being categorized to a specific sex group (Eagly, 1995) whereas others recommend using “gender” to reflect social groups and “sex” to reflect sex assignment at birth (APA, 2020). Educators should choose an approach and associated terminology that seems most appropriate, and then explain their choice so that students can correctly interpret educators' terminology.

Once the topic of gender/sex diversity has been introduced, we recommend that educators briefly return to the issue throughout the term whenever they discuss gender/sex. For example, when presenting research that describes mean differences between men and women on a particular variable, educators could say, “In this study, the researchers used a binary measure of gender, so we don't actually know how non-binary people would score.” Making a habit of weaving these kinds of comments into lectures helps to normalize gender/sex diversity and highlights the many subtle ways in which cultural biases can influence science, both of which are important learning outcomes for psychology classes.

In the first entry of the previous section, *Online Resources*, we have provided a link to a document that we prepared to demonstrate how we have incorporated this content into some of our classes (e.g., Introduction to Social Psychology, Measurement, and Assessment). Educators are welcome to use and revise the content for their own purposes, but please cite this learning guide as a source.

5 | SUGGESTED RESPONSES TO CHALLENGING SITUATIONS

As we mentioned previously, students can sometimes experience negative emotions when they encounter information that contradicts their cultural values or threatens the legitimacy of important social systems. This can prompt a variety of responses intended to reduce psychological distress. Most notably, they may summarily dismiss the contradictory information (an avoidance response) or they may express hostility toward the idea (an approach response). Unfortunately, students who express these kinds of responses in the classroom may miss out on learning opportunities, at best, or create a hostile learning environment, at worst.

We have used a variety of techniques to attempt to minimize these kinds of responses among cisgender students when we present gender/sex diversity in the classroom. First, before we introduce this topic, we educate students about psychological threat. We explain why it happens and describe the common methods that people use to quell the negative emotions that it can produce. We also explain how these kinds of negative emotional reactions can interfere with learning and critical thinking, two (hopefully!) important goals for most students. Thus, we explain that overcoming those kinds of negative reactions is an important skill for learners, and indeed, one of the main benefits of higher education. Second, we provide students with some empirically validated tools they can use to self-soothe if they do feel threatened by new ideas in class, including self-affirmation, self-compassion, and mindfulness. Finally, we offer students a way to frame the learning experience that may feel less threatening. Specifically, we suggest that they adopt the goal of simply *understanding* what they are being taught, rather than deciding whether the

idea is right or wrong. We have included a sample mini-lecture about coping with a psychological threat in the online lecture notes (see Part 1 in the lecture slides in the first link under *Online Resources*).

We then briefly reiterate this message immediately prior to introducing the topic of gender/sex diversity (if presented in a later lecture). In most cases, this kind of preparation and framing is enough to minimize these kinds of reactions and avoid disruptions in class. In our experience, most students either express their discomfort subtly with facial expressions or body language, or they come see us during office hours to discuss the topic one-on-one. However, in those very rare instances where a student expresses negative emotions in class, we refer back to the tools when responding to their concerns. A sample exchange might look like this:

STUDENT [folding their arms and frowning, confused]: There are only two genders!! Everyone knows that!!

INSTRUCTOR: [to the distressed student] I know it can be hard to learn about this kind of stuff. I get it! It's hard to learn about things that contradict our cultural beliefs and I'm sure you're not the only one who is struggling with this. [to the whole class] But I want to remind everyone that the binary definition of gender represents a particular cultural perspective, and it is not universal. Many cultures around the world believe that there are more than two genders. And there are also non-binary and genderqueer people living here, right now, in this culture, whose gender identities and lived experiences are valid and important. So I just want to encourage anyone in the class who feels uncomfortable with this topic to remember our critical thinking skills. Sit with those negative feelings, just notice and name the feelings and let them pass. And try to just *understand* what I'm talking about. You don't have to decide if you agree with it right now. It's enough to just be present and to listen non-judgementally right now. And if you want to talk more after class, just come see me.

Another challenging situation that can arise when teaching about gender/sex diversity is that more-knowledgeable students may call you out in class if you make a mistake. This is particularly likely to happen if you are a cisgender educator teaching about gender/sex diversity at a progressive institution where transgender and non-binary students and their (often LGBTQ+) allies feel comfortable advocating for themselves. When this happens, the most important thing to do as an educator is to *listen* to the student's concerns non-defensively, no matter how angry or frustrated they may be. Then, check that you understand the critique by repeating it back to the whole class in your own words (especially if it is a large lecture where some students may not have heard the critique), making sure to define any terms for the class that they may not know, so that they can understand the critique properly. Next, thank the student for their feedback, apologize for making the mistake, and assure them that you will correct your lecture in future. A sample exchange might look like this:

STUDENT [during a lecture about sexuality]: This study is cissexist!! It uses gendered labels for body parts, and talking about it in class perpetuates transphobia and cissexism!!

INSTRUCTOR [to the distressed student]: You're right. I'm sorry, and thanks for pointing that out, I appreciate your willingness to educate me. [to the whole class] OK, so this student has just pointed out that this study is cissexist. Cissexism is the assumption that everyone is cisgender, and in this case, that is evident by the fact that the researchers assume that all women have certain reproductive anatomy. So equating a particular gender with particular body parts is inaccurate and harmful, because it erases trans and non-binary people. I'm sorry I didn't notice that before, and I will revise my lecture in future to point out this issue with the researchers' term use.

6 | CLASS EXERCISES

1. *Inclusive Gender Measurement*. Ask students to prepare the following prior to class. For small seminar classes, this can spark a discussion wherein students present their findings. For larger classes, you may want students to either report this in a article summary that is formally submitted or that is shared in class in smaller groups.

Assignment for students:

Find five empirical research articles in any topic in psychology. Read the methods section. Do the authors report the gender/method of their participants? What genders do they report? Do the authors report how they measured gender/sex?

[For upper level courses, you may also want ask: Do the authors conduct analyses with gender/sex?]

After discussing the results of this exercise in class, we recommend presenting content from “Part 3” of the lecture slides we prepared (see link in the first entry under *Online Resources*).

2. *Awareness*. For small to medium size classes, ask students to form small groups (up to four people) and discuss the activity. The goal of this exercise is to create awareness of the privileges afforded to people who have gender and sexual orientations that align with the societal majority (i.e., cisgender and heterosexual). Note that many students find this assignment to be an eye-opening but somewhat uncomfortable experience, even if they are already aware of gender diversity. It may be useful to begin and end this activity by revisiting some of the tools for coping with negative emotions that we discussed earlier.

Assignment for students:

What about people who exist outside the gender binary? To help you consider this perspective, look at the handout “Privilege for Sale” (available at: <https://thesafezoneproject.com/activities/privilege-for-sale/>).

Each privilege on the activity sheet costs \$100. Imagine your group only has \$500 to spend. As a group, decide which ones you would like to buy (list the specific privilege items). Then discuss: How did your group decide which ones to buy? How did this activity make you and your group feel about privilege?

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Eagly, A. H. (1995). The science and politics of comparing women and men. *American Psychologist*, 50(3), 145–158. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.50.3.145>
- Hyde, J. S., Bigler, R. S., Joel, D., Tate, C. C., & van Anders, S. M. (2019). The future of sex and gender in psychology: Five challenges to the gender binary. *American Psychologist*, 74, 171–193. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000307>
- Unger, R. K. (1979). Toward a redefinition of sex and gender. *American Psychologist*, 34(11), 1085–1094. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.34.11.1085>

How to cite this article: Stinson DA, Cameron JJ. Teaching and learning guide for: Guidelines for respecting gender diversity in psychological research. *Soc Personal Psychol Compass*. 2020;e12535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12535>