

Ethics in Gender Research

Ethical considerations are a part of the foundation of any study in psychology. The American Psychological Association (APA) has specified guidelines that must be followed in order to ensure that human participants are protected from forms of distress, such as breaches in confidentiality, deception, and undue physical or mental harm. In addition to APA guidelines, academic institutions also have an institutional review board that engages in a thorough review of a study's data collection procedures, sample selection, and actions in which participants will be engaged. In most cases, certain participants are only excluded from a study with a justifiable scientific rationale (e.g., excluding participants not living in the U.S. when researching voting patterns of individuals in Nebraska). Despite the many safeguards in place for participants, some scholars have called for increased attention in research ethics in marginalized populations. One area that received attention is the ethics of gender research, as some studies have found to completely omit women or misrepresent findings. In this chapter, ethical issues in gender research will be presented, followed by a description of research methods that attempt to reduce bias and share power. Finally, due to recent changes in research ethics in the APA code, research issues with transgender samples will be explored.

Ethics as a Gendered Concept

One widely used conceptualization of ethical decision-making comes from Lawrence Kohlberg, a prominent psychologist who studied moral development in the mid-1900s. Kohlberg posited six stages of moral development within three distinct levels of development. In level one, known as the pre-conventional stage, the individual would attempt to avoid punishment and seek-out personal benefits. Individuals in level two, the conventional stage, would use social norms to guide their behavior. For example, a greater understanding of relational consequences

and the adherence to the “golden rule” are characteristic here. In the final level, the post-conventional stage, abstract reasoning is used to determine if actions are just. Here, laws may even be broken if they are believed to be unjust. Additionally, fairness and democracy are valued. Elements of Kohlberg’s theory of moral development are found in moral guidelines that range from government constitutions to university institutional review boards.

Despite such widespread implementation of this theory of moral development, women frequently scored lower on Kohlberg’s scale of moral decision-making. The reason for this, as some feminist researchers such as Judith Preissle, point out is that Kohlberg developed his theory on the attitudes and behaviors of White, middle class men. Indeed, women were no less moral than their male counterparts, but utilized a different method for decision-making. Women were noted for their emphasis on caring rather than justice or fairness. For example, men often thought of morality as a vertical process, with specific hierarchies and levels of authority, while women thought horizontally, or how moral choices would impact networks and relationships. Preissle described how Carol Gilligan, a prominent feminist and ethicist, developed a model of women’s ethical decision-making in contrast to the work of Kohlberg. Gilligan’s model illustrates how women navigate their perspectives on selfishness versus responsibility. In this model, the earliest stage of ethical decision-making consists of actions that are only good for the self. This is followed by a stage of selflessness, where the primary concern is about the impact that decisions will have on an individual’s social network. Her third and final stage described how women make decisions that included implications for both the self and for others. One can begin to see how an emphasis on relational aspects of decision-making may be just as important as justice and fairness.

Current Concerns in Gender Research

Although many would likely agree that justice and fairness are important factors in ethical decision-making, the lack of relational considerations and a generalization of the values and behaviors of privileged groups to marginalized groups have real-world implications. Sue Rosser, a researcher in women's health and feminism, has noted that androcentric values have led to a number of limitations for women in science and medicine. Rosser stated women and other marginalized groups are frequently ignored in studies. Instead, a focus is placed upon those with social power. Furthermore, Rosser noted women are not sufficiently represented on peer review committees, which dictate how many studies are funded. As a result, Rosser noted several outcomes. One outcome found that gender is not used as a basis of a study's hypothesis often enough. For example, a study in the mid-1980s on drug effectiveness for cholesterol utilized almost 4,000 men and zero women. Another outcome noted were concerns that are specific to women tend to be less frequently studied or funded. According to Rosser, medical issues for men are commonly researched, while women's health issues receive attention primarily when they related directly to men's issues, such as studies on contraception. Additionally, studies generated from the personal narratives of women are also ignored, favoring data and "objective" measures. In this specific area of medical research, the nature of how decisions are made can at times literally mean life or death.

Another debate between researchers is what groups should be able to research what groups? That is, what are the potential downfalls of groups with power and privilege conducting research with marginalized groups? It is clear there are significant consequences for groups being completely omitted from the discussion, but there are unique ethical concerns that must be considered when conducting research where differences in power and privilege exist. One issue

is clear from previously listed examples, when results from research focused on men cannot be generalized to other populations. However, other ethical issues are oftentimes overlooked or more difficult to recognize, despite their deleterious nature. Researchers noted one can be thought of as an “insider” or “outsider” when conducting research on gender. Regina Scheyvens and Helen Leslie, researchers of social responsibility and community empowerment, presented a noteworthy example of this. They noted if a man were to attempt research with women in the Solomon Islands, it would be almost impossible unless he were to engage in activities such as bathing and eating with the women to gain their trust. Without doing so, the male researcher would be treated with suspicion by the participant and her husband. Such a suspicion would not exist for researchers who were women, allowing for a greater engagement based on gender alone.

Understudied Populations - Ethics in Research with Transgender Individuals

Research with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) communities often omit those within the T population. Why might this occur? As a whole, it is well documented that the LGBT population is marginalized and frequently discriminated against. Additionally, subsets of the population can, at times, be ostracized within the LGBT community, and many transgender people may not feel as though they are actually a member of this wider group. Research that includes transgender populations is important not only for furthering the understanding of the population, but also for assisting treatment providers or assessors with standards of care and assessment.

According to some researchers, despite elevated risks related to physical and mental health concerns related to the LGBTQ population, limited resources focus specifically on prevention programming for these individuals. Within the research, there is even further

limitations and attention provided to the transgender population. While psychologists are aware there is an elevated risk for suicide, mental health, and physical health problems, the research continues to omit transgender individuals. While there are many hypotheses as to why this may occur, one may be related to the lack of ethical guidelines related to transgender-specific research.

In August of 2015, the APA created guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People to assist with psychologist's therapeutic treatment and assessment of transgender individuals. There are 16 identified guidelines, one of which focuses on ethical considerations for research with individuals in the transgender community. The ethical standards are necessary in order to complete and facilitate therapy, assessment, and research with transgender individuals. However, these concerns are not new for the this population, and the lack of ethical standards prior to August of 2015 shows the continued lack of awareness, research, and treatment of transgender people.

Research with transgender populations may assist with development of understanding and eliminating the long-established stereotypes that often follow the trans community. America is a country where individuals are often socialized in a heteronormative environment. This type of socialization creates myths, stereotypes, and expectations related to sexual minorities, which in turn creates heterosexual bias. In facilitating research with transgender people, researchers must remain cognizant of potential bias or perpetuation of stereotypes and stigmas.

When research is completed with transgender people, researchers must also remain aware of factors related to the subject's gender identity, such as potential painful life experiences, which may include traumatic experiences directly relating to their gender identity. As such, protective factors must be in place in order to conduct ethically sound research. Some of these

protective factors may include a greater emphasis on “insider” research, when transgender researchers conduct research with transgender populations. Another method may be research that studies transgender communities *with* an actual member of the community, rather than conducting research *on* them. For example, considerations for ethically sound research with the transgender population can include an inclusive approach to the transgender community, while avoiding the creation of, or enforcement of hierarchies with transgender identities. Creating a research project that includes transgender people as collaborators with the research will assist with primary researchers questions, comments, or concerns that arise during the development of the research project. Often transgender individuals do not want to participate in research that is not being led by a transgender researcher, as they are potentially concerned about a cisgender bias towards transgender populations. Researchers should review their own cultural bias and make every effort to refrain from allowing their bias to play a role in impacting their study.

While determining what type of study to complete, the researcher may have a quantitative study; however, qualitative or PAR methods may at times be more appropriate, given that each transgender person’s experience is different. In the discussion section of the research paper a notice should be placed describing that the study of transgender communities attempts to remain inclusive, noting that due to the diversity of experiences within the transgender community, this is not always possible.

Conclusion

As of late, significant steps were taken in the area of ethics in gender research. Yet, there are still debates as to the most effective practices and how to ensure that studies meet a broader definition of what is ethical. Feminist scholars took significant strides to better capture the experience of women and other marginalized groups; however, ethical concerns with research

involving individuals in the LGBTQ community continue to persist. Additional research might benefit from including more “insider” researchers who share similar social identities with those participating in the research, as well as allowing the participants to have a greater role in the data collection, analysis, and distribution of findings.

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See also: Feminism, Research, Ethics

Further Readings:

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