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Gender as a Variable in Writing Studies: Ethics and Methodology

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/brian-larson/18/
My name is Brian Larson
There are two more proposals here than in my abstract.

My brief talk will take the following route:
1. First, I'll discuss previous studies that used gender as a variable. This justifies me bringing this topic before you today and illustrates the problems I've seen.
2. Second, I'll address the source of my discomfort.
3. Third, I'll discuss each of my proposals briefly.
4. Finally, I'll describe an empirical study I conducted that addressed these concerns
Slides and references at:

http://tiny.cc/WRAB2017 (case sensitive, i.e., not wrab2017)

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Gender as a *variable*?
- If you report results by saying, “the men in this study did X,”
- or “the women in this study tended to Y,”
- then you are using gender as a variable.
So, for example, in some older studies in TC:

- Allen (1994) considered whether women writing theoretical articles in tech comm journals exhibited characteristics commonly attributed to authoritative writing.

In some more recent studies in prof and TC:

- Wolfe and Powell (2006) looked at complaining by students in collaborative work environments in TC education to see whether practices differed based on gender.
- Wolfe and Powell (2009) looked at student perceptions of verbal interaction strategies previously associated with men or women in previous studies.
- Plumlee et al. (2016) looked at writing prepared by students and assessed gender differences/similarities with regard to readability, I vs. you orientation, and tone. No explanation of the ascription of gender to the students’ writing.
1. They don’t say what gender is. In other words, they don’t say what they mean by “gender,” or by “men and women” or by “male and female” etc.

2. They don’t say how they determined the gender of the participants. In other words, we don’t know how the researcher figured out who were the Gender M and who were the Gender F participants in the study.
Studies in computational and corpus linguistics have also looked at gender as a central concern. For example,

- Argamon et al (2003) and Koppel, Argamon & Shimoni (2002) performed a computational analysis of texts from the British National Corpus to see whether there were differences based on author gender. The BNC is a collection of published texts; the researchers used (without any comment) the gender labels applied to authors of BNC texts by third parties.

So there we know how they assigned the gender labels. But things sometimes get more interesting:

- Herring and Paolillo (2006) looked for differences in linguistic characteristics in blog posts by women and those by men. The assigned gender to blog authors “by examining each blog qualitatively for indications of gender such as first names, nicknames, explicit gender statements... and gender-indexical language.” This is a sort of heuristic approach.
- Rao et al. used a computational heuristic: “For gender, the seed set for the crawl came from initial sources including sororities, fraternities, and male and fe- male hygiene products. This produced around 500 users in each class.”
Central problem

These studies usually included very careful descriptions of their methods of data collection and analysis...

How could they purport to tell us something about gender?

- Without saying what they meant by “gender”
- Without saying how they ascribed that category
Problem of research ethics

Validity and reliability are ethical concerns in empirical research (Breuch et al. 2002)

- Not being explicit about the ascription of “gender” as variable brings into question internal and external validity—particularly “construct validity”

Research involving human participants should adhere to Belmont Report (and related) principles

- What is the effect of embracing essentialist, folk narratives of gender?
- How do methods respect participants?
Today’s proposals

Researchers should

1. Make their theory(ies) of gender explicit.
2. Avoid using gender as a variable in their work unless it is necessary to answer their research questions.
3. Make explicit their methods for assigning gender categories to participants and artifacts.
4. Respect difficulties of research participants when asking them to self-identify for gender.

Peer reviewers should

5. Expect researchers to exhibit these behaviors
Make theory of gender explicit

Adopt a construct definition for gender

• Choose a theory OR
• Offer your own

Avoid using gender unless necessary

Don’t collect participant gender information unless you need it

- Example: Pigozzi, Larson & Lazaraton (2014) researched students’ attitudes about technical communication courses. Of interest was their linguistic background (1L or 2L, etc.), but not gender

Don’t report responses by gender as a “throw-away” cross tabulation

Shuffle genders in your reporting (drop a footnote to explain)
Self-identification is probably the gold standard. Except in circumstances where you might not expect complete candor, you can count on a participant to say what her own gender is.

Keep in mind in some cases you might want to know what others think. For example, if studying whether a teacher treats students differently based on student genders, you want to know what genders the teacher ascribes to students.
Respect difficulties of research participants when asking them to self-identify for gender.

In contemporary American college classrooms, it’s not unusual to have students who do not easily identify with one gender or another or who actively refuse to be classed in a particular gender. Others are confidently transgendered.

There are so many ways that folks might choose to describe their genders that listing them might also be impractical, especially as the list itself might have reactive effects.
Peer reviewers should expect these behaviors

1. Demand researchers identify their theory(ies).
2. Ask why data are reported based on gender if gender is not focus of research question(s)
3. Gender category
   - Expect explanation of gender ascription
   - Expect coding guide if ascription was qualitative
4. Suggest (for researcher’s future research) ways to be more thoughtful/sensitive about participants
I’m using methods of corpus and computational linguistics to assess whether the writing of Gender M and Gender F authors exhibits differences tied to their genders.

Definition: Gender knowledge is knowledge about how to signal one’s sex to other humans in appropriate circumstances.

Gender, in sexual animals, is thus an adaptive characteristic, tied with sex, reproduction, and survival. Consequently, gender categories are of such pervasive importance to members of human societies that it’s difficult to interact without reference to them.
Gender ascription in Larson (2016)

Series of “demographic” questions in survey
“Gender:” followed by open box allowing free-form response
Problem?
### Proliferation of labels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not answered</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cis Male</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand Total</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My readers have the choice whether to accept my argument or to challenge it.

But ultimately, I’ve made my decision-making transparent and subject to inquiry while respecting my participants.
Thank you!

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**Bibliography**


