



A149 A Push for Trans-Inclusive Language in Forensic Sciences

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will: (1) understand the extent and urgency of current trans-exclusive language regarding the forensic sciences; and (2) have the tools necessary to implement trans-inclusive language in everyday practice.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by highlighting the inherent and often unintentional trans-exclusive language that is consistently overlooked by practitioners. This presentation will present data and propose methods to make our discipline more trans-inclusive in both theory and practice.

It has been established in the anthropological community that gender and sex are disparate classifications of an individual that present a tangled web of biological, social, and cultural identity.¹ Yet, the academic literature within the forensic sciences itself is still trans-exclusive. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, most victims of hate violence homicides (72%) in 2013 were transgender women.² A study conducted by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention revealed that 41% of transgender individuals have attempted or committed suicide.³ Based on the published statistics, it is highly likely that forensic scientists will encounter individuals who identify as transgender. For this reason, when presenting work in a forensic and/or applied setting, the researcher should take care to not mis-gender unidentified victims. Such error could lead to inaccurate reporting, introduce bias, and/or result in an inappropriate representation of how the decedent may have identified.

This study hypothesized that gendered language would be commonly used in forensic academic writing when referring to unidentified remains and sex identification/estimation. To test this hypothesis, forensic academic articles were searched through the Criminal Justice Abstracts database accessible by all Texas A&M University students. Using a variety of keywords to pull as many articles relating to the topic of unidentified remains and sex identification/estimation as possible, a total of 611 articles were evaluated. After reading the 611 abstracts, only 105 of them were considered topical and were read through completely to be marked for the use of trans-exclusive language. For the purposes of this research, trans-exclusive language was defined as “language that gendered an unidentified body” or “language that confused the terms sex and gender.”

Of the 105 academic papers reviewed, approximately 49% of the articles reporting on unidentified remains utilized gendered language, as denoted using pronouns such as he or she, when referring to the remains, even though the gender was still unknown. Approximately 93% of articles dealing with sex identification/estimation would use sex and gender interchangeably when gender was mentioned. The high rates of error could be easily addressed by adopting gender neutral reporting in the forensic field. While the goal of the forensic anthropologist working on an unidentified remains case would be to estimate biological sex, to effectively create a profile, the anthropologist would need to respect the possibility that the unidentified individual could be transgender. Since gender cannot be determined from remains alone, implementing gender neutral language would keep the possibility of the remains belonging to a transgender individual a constant in the mind of the investigator and could greatly decrease the probability of the unidentified individual being mis-gendered. Therefore, gender neutral language will be both beneficial to the forensic science community as well as the individual being identified.

Reference(s):

1. Walker, Phillip L. and Della Collins Cook. Brief Communication: Gender and Sex: Vive La Difference. *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, vol. 106, no. 2, 1998, pp. 255–259., doi:10.1002/(sici)1096-8644(199806)106:2<255::aid-ajpa11>3.3.co;2-f.
2. Ahmed, O. and Jindasurat, C. (2014). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2013. *National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs*. http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/2013_ncavp_hvreport_final.pdf
3. Haas, A., Rodgers, P., & Herman, J. (2014). *Suicide Attempts Among Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Adults*. Los Angeles: Williams Institute, UCLA.

Transgender, Gender Neutral, Forensic Reporting