



ANTHROPOLOGY

Gendered Language Use in Forensic Science (2003-2023)

Dr. Samantha M. McCrane^{1,2}, Ella Tartsa^{1,2} & Dr. Amy R. Michael^{1,2}

¹University of New Hampshire, Anthropology Department; ²University of New Hampshire Forensic Anthropology Identification & Recovery (FAIR) Laboratory



INTRODUCTION

Forensic scientists must use appropriate, accurate, and modern language about gender identity in case reports and research papers.

Misuse of gendered language can lead to inaccuracies that may prohibit identification and/or lead to perpetuation of outdated terminology or stereotypes.

"A clear delineation between sex and gender is typically prescribed, with sex as the preferred term for biological forms, and gender limited to its meanings involving behavioral, cultural, and psychological traits." (Miriam-Webster Dictionary, 2025)

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) How has the use of gendered language in the Proceedings abstracts changed over 20 years (2003-2023)?
- 2) Are researchers across the forensic sub-fields using gendered terminology differently?
- 3) Are there sub-fields who are using terminology more accurately?

MATERIALS & METHODS

DATASET: American Academy of Forensic Sciences Conference Proceedings (2003-2023)

KEYWORDS: Gender, Transgender, Transgendered, Gender Queer, Non-Binary, Cisgender, Transsexual/Transsexualism, Sexuality, Queer, Transvestite/Transvestic, Trans, Gender Identity Disorder, Gender Identity, Gender Dysphoria, Gender Variant, Gender Non-Conformity/Non-Conforming, LGBT, LGBTQ, Homosexual/Homosexuality

Year	Keywords Used	Total N Per Year
2003	gender, homosexual	9
2004	gender, homosexual	9
2005	gender	11
2006	gender, homosexuality, transgender	10
2007	gender, homosexual	9
2008	gender, transgender(ed), gender identity, gender identity disorder, transsexual(ism), transvestism, sexuality, gender varied*, same sex sexuality*	12
2009	gender, homosexual, gay*, bisexual*	15
2010	gender	10
2011	gender, transgender, transsexualism, gender identity, gender identity disorder, sexuality, homosexuality, same same desires*	10
2012	gender, transgender, gender non-conforming, gender identity, gender identity disorder, gender variant, homosexual, homosexuality, intersex(ed)*, gay*, lesbian*, bisexual*, gender variance*	8
2013	gender, transgender, gender variant, MTF, FTM, sexuality, homosexual	20
2014	gender, homosexual, transsexual	12
2015	gender, gender identity, transgender, gender dysphoria, transsexual, sexuality	26
2016	gender, homosexual, transgender, trans, transsexual, sexuality, gender identity, gender non-conformity	32
2017	gender, transgender, LGBTQ, gender queer	24
2018	gender, transgender, transsexual, homosexual	26
2019	gender, gender identity, gender non-conformity, LGBT, LGBTQ, transgender, trans transgender(ed), sexuality, homosexual, homosexuality	23
2020	gender, transgender, gender identity, gender variant, trans, gender dysphoria, cisgender	24
2021	gender, transgender, gender non-conforming, queer, sexuality, non-binary, trans, gender identity, LGBTQ	24
2022	gender, transgender, gender non-conforming, gender variant, gender dysphoria, queer, cisgender, trans, gender identity, LGBTQ	32
2023	gender, transgender, gender identity, gender variant, cisgender	20

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

EXAMPLES OF INCORRECT TERMINOLOGY USE IN AAFS PROCEEDINGS ABSTRACTS

GENERAL

ABSTRACT: "Anthropological measurements also gave an evaluation of fetus biological age and gender" (2022)
PROBLEM: Fetuses do not have a gender

ABSTRACT: "Gender can be determined by the amount of Hg and Pb in hair" (2014)
PROBLEM: Gender is a social construct/identity and cannot be determined via elemental analysis

TOXICOLOGY

ABSTRACT: "Model calculations of alcohol concentration may have differing applicability to subjects within a demographic group involving gender, age, weight, height, and body mass index (BMI)" (2010)
PROBLEM: Alcohol affects sexes, not genders

PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE

ABSTRACT: "...the most frequent method in both genders is mechanical asphyxia" (2021)
PROBLEM: There are more than two genders

ODONTOLOGY

ABSTRACT: "... a new method in gender determination using odontometrical techniques... indicative of sexual dimorphism" (2007)
PROBLEM: Odontometrical methods can estimate sex due to sexual dimorphism. 'Gender' and 'sex' are used interchangeably.

CRIMINALISTICS

ABSTRACT: "Only gender identification can be achieved by using standard STR kits" (2018)
PROBLEM: STR kits determine sex, not gender, using differences between X and Y chromosomes



- Anthropology, followed by Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, utilize gendered terms most appropriately.
- 'Gender' was the most utilized keyword and most frequently misused term (often used interchangeably with, or in place of, 'sex'). Three abstracts reference nonhuman animals or plants.
- Many abstracts recorded gender as a variable, but not enough information was given to infer if its usage was correct.
- The term 'transsexual' was misused in all but two instances.
- Terms such as 'homosexual,' 'LGBTQ,' 'queer,' 'sexuality,' 'transgender,' and 'gender identity' were largely used correctly.

CONCLUSIONS

Outdated and inaccurate language in case reports and research may be reproduced in government systems (e.g., NamUs) where accurate reports are critical for making missing persons matches and achieving positive identification.

Language in forensic science research and casework should be updated to align with the DSM-5-TR (2022) when referring to identified and unidentified decedents, so that all forensic science output is standardized, inclusive, and accurate.

Forensic scientists should familiarize themselves with the differences between 'sex' and 'gender' and resist conflating these terms.

Practitioners should remove and correct outdated and inaccurate terminology out of respect for decedents and to ensure a greater chance of identification and case closure.

