

Improving the Understanding of Sex & Gender in Public Administration Research

POLICY BRIEF

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Comparative Public Management
December 27, 2021

Key Messages

This policy brief is aimed at researchers in the field of public administration, especially those studying representative bureaucracy. With the rise of the popularity of the field and the focus on the effect of sex and/or gender, the perspective has narrowed in on a binary, limited understanding of the concept. This policy brief explains why this needs to change, what some common mistakes or bad practices are and how these have erased the experiences of transgender people from the scientific literature. The mistakes hamper the understanding of the effect that sex and/or gender can have and our description of reality. With the 9 concrete recommendations researchers can work on improving measurements for sex and/or gender, better understanding both concepts and empowering the groups that were previously erased. The contents are supported by visual examples and information boxes that provide insights in the difference between sex and gender and why it is relevant to study these concepts. The hope is that, with this policy brief, researchers can implement some much needed improvements in their practices and the understanding of sex and gender in their field.

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Introduction

In the western world, public administration has always been subject to change. According to some, it started in France after 1648 or in German states in the 17th and 18th centuries (1). Whatever the starting point may be, since then, it has developed into the different varieties of democracy we now see in Western Europe and North America. While the critiques, comments and compliments on this development of and current democracy are numerous, there is one topic that has been particularly popular amongst scholars for quite some time. Representative bureaucracy, and especially the effect of sex, gender and diversity, has been widely studied, predominantly in the United States of America (2). This interest is easy to understand: **gender is central to political phenomena** and it structures political life (3). Furthermore, western societies are build around this binary distinction.

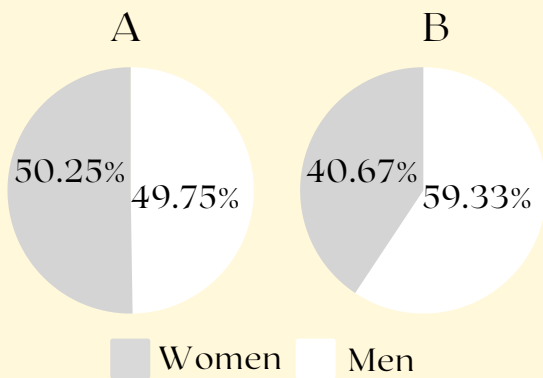
However, the popularity has mainly been for the binary concept of sex and gender: for the distinction between men and women. **Attention to the fluidity and diversity of sex and gender has been lacking** (3). In a world where 'transgender and gender-variant Americans face considerable discrimination and materials hardship' (4, p. 535) and where **transgender and non-binary people** in the UK **face discrimination in all aspects of their day to day life** (5), there needs to be more attention for sex and gender and all its different facets and consequences.

Sex and gender need to be taken into account and we need to take a **critical look at the use and analysis of sex and gender** in every aspect of our modern world. This policy brief aims to **help academics** that wish to do so in their own field. What is the problem with current practices? What can be done differently in future studies to **create a better understanding of sex and gender** and all its aspects and thus the world we call our own?

Gender representation

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The charts below provide an example of gender representation in The Netherlands. In chart A, we see that the Dutch population is almost evenly divided among two genders: men make up 49,75% of the population and women 50,25% (6). However, as chart B shows, only 40.67% of the members in the Dutch parliament (consisting of 150 seats) are women and 59.33% are men (7). So, it is clear that women are underrepresented in the Dutch parliament.



Problem Description

The idea behind representative bureaucracy is simple: it can help better represent the values and preferences of all people in policy outcomes or outputs.

There are multiple characteristics that can be analysed or prioritised, among others: race, age, education level and, the focus of this policy brief, gender.

When studying gender in the field of representative bureaucracy, most academics only make a **distinction between man and woman,**

but this is not an accurate representation of reality. This means that **our understanding of reality** and relevant processes is **hampered**, but it also erases dimensions of variation that could be important (4). An example of this is provided by the analysis of Westbrook & Saperstein (4). They state that in four of the largest and longest-running surveys in the United States, there are several issues with the conceptualization and measuring of gender. Examples of these are the fact that sex and gender are often treated 'as synonymous, easily determined by others, obvious, and unchanging over the life course' (4, p. 534). The same study also shows that **many surveys are misusing 'sex' and 'gender'** and seem to not understand the difference (or the fact that there even is a difference).

All research can be boiled down to the same focus: how do we understand the world and how can we improve that understanding? The **binary distinction of gender** does not help this academic goal, it **will produce findings that are disconnected** from the diversity of experiences. It can also create a false understanding, or attribute an effect to sex, when it actually is attributed to gender, or vice versa. It is important that we change our understanding and how we research gender.

Sex & Gender

Sex is assigned to a person based on biological traits: the primary sex characteristics and reproductive functions. It is assigned at birth, but can change over time and does not have to be in line with someone's gender. Terms that are appropriate for sex are, for example: **'male', 'female', 'intersex'**. (2) (4) (5)

Gender is the internal identity of a person themselves. This can change over time and can be in line with the sex assigned at birth (cisgender) or not (transgender). Appropriate terms for gender are, amongst others: **'man', 'woman', 'non-binary', 'agender'**. Gender is often seen as a social concept, as a set of cultural norms that describe of what being or behaving as, for example a man, entails. (2) (4) (5)

Possible improvements

Most contemporary societies are built around the binary distinction (8). However, it is estimated that 1 in 100 people have a disorder of sex development (9). This means that the two standard categories do not describe them. Consequently, all studies that only look at males and females, **miss 1% of the population**. Below follows a concrete description of several poor practices and how to improve them to include this 1% that a lot of research exclude.

The first step is to **improve collecting data** on sex and gender in **survey research**. Currently, interviewers often have to determine the sex and/or gender 'by observation'(4). This is unreliable because it is based on the opinion or guess of the researcher, even though gender expression (the way someone presents themselves and what

the researcher sees and thus bases the observation on) could be different from their actual sex and gender. In addition, there is often very little instruction on how to determine the sex or gender, making **the data even more unreliable** (4). It also assumes that sex and gender can easily be observed and does not leave room for the variable and fluid reality of both concepts. Furthermore, the respondent is often unaware that this is happening and thus cannot challenge the interviewer's observation or 'opt-out of the practice of sex/gender classification' (4, p. 545).

Concrete steps to improve these practices are not assuming that sex or gender are obvious and something that can always be seen from how a person looks. This **data should not be collected by observation**. If there is no way to confirm the guess of the sex or gender, data collectors need to receive detailed instruction on how to determine this or it should be left out of the survey. In all other cases, it is best to **simply ask the respondent** what their sex and/or gender is. There are two things to note. First, in a written survey or questionnaire, it is important to make this an **open question**, not a multiple-choice one. As stated before, gender and sex come in a wide variety and multiple-choice options are very unlikely to include them all. Therefore, it is better to be on the safe side and let people identify themselves, in their own words. Second, it should be both clear to the researcher and respondent **what is meant with sex and gender** respectively. A one-line explanation will suffice in the vast majority of cases.

Another practice that should be removed is copy-pasting the sex and/or gender from a respondent from a survey that was filled out in the past. This is something that happens frequently in the United States (4). Even worse, when the data, taken from the same respondent at two different moments, does not match, this is often considered as an error and all entries are removed. Practices like these literally **remove the experiences of transgender people** from

the scientific field. It does not acknowledge that both sex and gender can change over time. Simply **asking** someone to identify their own sex and/or gender **in each survey**, even if there are multiple over time, can reduce this problem. In addition, when the data differs, it should not be treated as an error.

The third problem with surveys can be **gendered terms** in the questions. A clear example can be asking about someone's relations, for example, son, sister, girlfriend. Again, these questions are packed with several assumptions: that there are only two sexes/genders, or that everyone comfortably falls into one of the two categories (4). To prevent this, consequently using **gender-neutral terms**, for example, child, sibling, partner, is an easy solution. This should be done instead of the gendered terms, not in addition to.

Similar to gendered terms, **pronouns**, for example, she/her, assume the gender of the respondent or the people around them (4). Researchers should consider the **use of gender-neutral pronouns**, for example, they/them. However, this transition can be rougher in some languages. In that case, **rewording a question** to exclude any pronouns will almost always solve the issue.

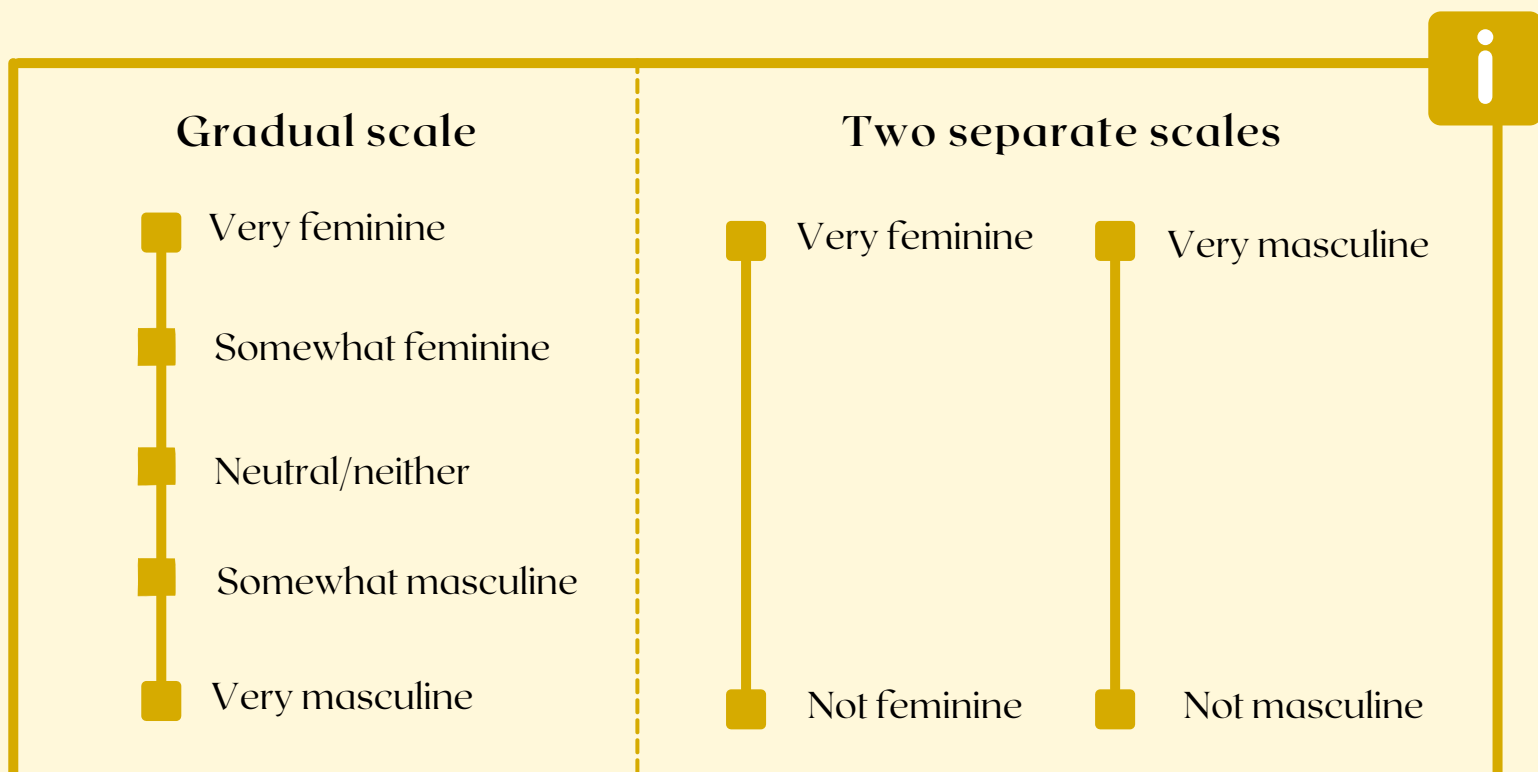


Why study sex and/or gender?

'[A]ctivists dream of a world where a person's sex or gender is irrelevant' (9). If this dream becomes reality, should we even bother with studying sex and/or gender and the potential effects it can have on bureaucracy or policy? It could be argued both ways, but, looking at numerous findings where gender has a significant effect and how our **understanding of both concepts is severely lacking**, is important to further study it. This policy brief is written to assist scientists that want to include gender in their research in a better, more realistic way. The question if sex and gender should be included, is out of the scope of the current document and it is advised that academics debate it in their team.

The solutions provided above are especially relevant when sex and/or gender are part of a bigger survey or not the main focus of the study. If sex and/or gender are the main focus or one of the variables, it could be worthwhile to **consider a different measurement** of sex and/or gender.

The first measurement to consider is the **gradual scale**. Here, respondents are asked to place themselves on it. Scales like these are also used to measure many other concepts, for example, political ideology. These could be scales from 0 to 100 or a point scale (see information box below). The advantage is that it still requires only a **single question**. It also leaves room for the different conceptions of femininity and masculinity people may have (10). Using scales can also help see the differences between those at the extreme ends and those that are more in the middle. It is suggested that these differences could be bigger than the differences between genders (3). It should be noted that this kind of scale is appropriate if the goal is to **differentiate between people that have sex-typical gender identities**.



The second option for a different measurement is using **separate masculinity and femininity scales** (see the information box above), these are 'optimal for **measuring sex atypical gender identities**' (10, p. 31). The assumption behind two separate scales is that femininity and masculinity are not extremes on one scale, but that there are independent variables. It states that femininity is not necessarily the exact opposite of masculinity or the absence of masculinity.

A well-known example of this is the **Bem Sex-Role Inventory** (BSRI) which is made up of 60 personality traits (evenly divided among those considered feminine, masculine or neutral) (10). The classification is based on the comparison of scores: to be classified as 'masculine', the masculinity score would be significantly higher than the femininity score. If there was little difference but both scores were high, the appropriate classification is 'androgynous'. If both scores were low, a person would be classified as 'undifferentiated'.

However, the BSRI has a few **disadvantages**. First, it is based on traits that are considered feminine or masculine in a certain society or culture. These traits or how a specific society values them can change over time, but will also be different across cultures. The BSRI has also been criticized because the scores do not measure gender, but measure conforming to stereotypes instead (10). The BSRI also only scores on character traits, but it could be argued that gender is also influenced by other aspects (speech, appearance, behaviour, et cetera). Furthermore, the BSRI might not capture how a person sees their own gender.

In the end, the BSRI or other separate scales could be valuable for some research and a gradual could be more suitable for other questions. However, **being aware of both measurements and making a conscious decision** is important.

Conclusion & recommendations

Studying sex and gender is becoming more and more popular, especially in the field of public administration and representative bureaucracy. Despite this popularity, many studies **confuse the concepts** with each other or have a very limited understanding of one or the other. To prevent the mistakes and harmful practices that are laid out above, here are **9 do's and don'ts** for scientists that aim to better study sex and/or gender in their work.

1. **Don't determine sex and/or gender by observation.** If there is absolutely no other way, provide detailed instruction on what to base the observation or don't collect this data.
2. **Do ask people to identify their own sex and gender** in an open question (not multiple-choice).
3. **Don't copy-paste data** on sex and/or gender of the respondent from a previous survey – sex and gender are fluid and can change over time.
4. **Do explain** to the respondents what you mean when you use 'sex' and/or 'gender'.
5. **Do replace gendered terms** (mother) with gender-neutral terms (parent).
6. **Do replace gendered pronouns** (she/her) with gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) or reword the questions.
7. **Do consider a different measurement**, such as a gradual scale or separate scales (dependent on your research question) to measure sex and/or gender.
8. **Don't** immediately **discard** papers that make mistakes, but be critical of them and consider what it means for their findings and conclusions.
9. **Do educate yourself, your team and your students** on the importance and variety of sex and gender.

Making these changes can help researchers identify the most vulnerable groups, for example, transgender people, and stop

erasing them from science. The suggested alterations or additions can help give them a voice, but also opens ‘possibilities to further explore inequalities’ (3, p. 8) and empower vulnerable groups. Sex and gender desperately need a better and broader understanding. **Making improvements in the field of public administration is crucial** to better understand the relationship between sex and gender (not only men and women) and how they influence and are influenced by public administration and representative bureaucracy.

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