Standards on Reducing Language Bias in CEO Products

The Department of Labor's Chief Evaluation Office (CEO) aims to communicate in a way that reduces bias toward any particular group of people, reflects a broad range of identities and perspectives, and does not stereotype or demean individuals or groups based on unconscious bias or perceptions of personal characteristics, race, cultural background, or other personally identifying labels or categories. Using language that reduces bias helps build trust and make positive connections with one's subjects and audiences (18F 2021), and shows respect for and acknowledgment of diversity (Linguistic Society of America [LSA] 2016). Unbiased language is more precise, leading to work that is ultimately more accurate (American Psychological Association [APA] 2020, Chapter 5). Below are general standards with examples, a short discussion about how to apply principles to reduce bias in language throughout the evaluation lifecycle, and links to additional resources from which this document was adapted.

General Guidelines

Self-Identification

Prioritizing self-identification of research subjects validates their experiences, cultures, and struggles, and leads to more nuanced and accurate reporting. Note that preferences for self-identification can change over time, on an individual, group and societal levels (APA 2020, Chapter 5.2).

- It is appropriate to directly ask a person what labels they use to identify themselves and define their experiences; this is the best way to determine how a person identifies. Asking a subject or research participant directly will typically produce the most accurate results, and can be accomplished in a number of ways; for example, allowing "fill-in-the-blank" or self-reporting responses in surveys when asking about items like race or gender (APA 2020, Chapter 5.2).

Person-First Language

Defining a group of people by their condition—for example, "disabled people" or "the homeless"—places an undue focus on a person's condition and can be stigmatizing. Instead, putting the person first—"people with disabilities" or "people experiencing homelessness"—is a best practice. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, also known as the APA style guide, advises the following:

- Instead of using adjectives as nouns, include the noun that identifies the person. For example, instead of "males" and "females," use "men" and "women," or "boys" and "girls," (or, if a report is specifically about sex assignment rather than gender identity [see "Gender and Sexual Orientation" section below for more information], use "male participants" and "female participants" or similar phrases) (Tseng, 2008). Instead of "the elderly" use "older adults" (APA 2020, Chapters 5.2 and 5.3).
- Avoid "binary" labeling; for example, the phrase "the opposite gender" implies strong differences between genders and does not acknowledge that many people do not self-identify as either (APA 2020, Chapter 5.2). Also, although race is often an exception to the "person-first" rule (one would generally call someone a "Hispanic person," rather than a "person who is Hispanic"), writers should avoid binary labeling that assumes

some people fall into one default category and that all others are "not" that category. For example, avoid using "non-White" as a racial category, because this assumes "White" is a default category, and has the potential to both diminish the diversity and humanity of those who are not White and cause writing to be less accurate and specific.

Gender and Sexual Orientation
- If an actual person is being identified (rather than a hypothetical or generic group), writers should always use the pronouns that the subject uses to self-identify when they are known. When "they" is used as the subject of a sentence, it takes a plural verb even when it is being used to identify a singular subject (APA 2020, Chapter 4.18). For example, "I know Cheryl. They are the director of marketing."
- According to the current edition of the APA style guide, writers should use "they" when referring to someone or a group of people whose gender is hypothetical or irrelevant to the context; for example, instead of "The respondent can complete his or her profile," it is appropriate to write "The respondent can complete their profile" (APA 2020, Chapter 4.18). This change from the previously advised use of "he or she" (or simply "he" or "she") in hypothetical or gender-irrelevant scenarios is now endorsed by many major publishers and dictionaries, including [Merriam-Webster](https://www.merriam-webster.com) (Merriam-Webster, 2021).
- If use of the singular "they" is inappropriate or makes writing unnecessarily complicated or awkward, text can also be cast in the plural to avoid gender-specific pronouns, for example, "Respondents can complete their profiles" (APA 2020, Chapter 4.18).
- *Gender* is a social identity and *sex* refers to an assignment made at birth based on external, anatomical factors (APA 2020, Chapter 5.2). A person's sex does not always match their gender identity. Unless sex is the predominant focus of the study, gender should be used in most cases, and when referring to sex, avoid language that implies it is an "immutable characteristic" (like the phrases "birth sex" or "biological sex") (APA 2020, Chapter 5.2). A best practice is to only refer to a subject's gender when it is expressly relevant, and to do due diligence to determine a person's gender identity when writing about them, rather than assuming a gender identity.

Race and Ethnicity
Use *specific*, *accurate* and *appropriate* terminology when discussing race and ethnicity in order to reduce bias. Writers should prioritize self-identification and call people what they wish to be called, and work to avoid "color blindness," or the practice of ignoring race and ethnicity. The APA style guide advises a number of measures to follow when writing about race, including:
- Be *specific*: Use terminology that is as specific as possible when writing about race and ethnicity (APA 2020, Chapter 5.1). For example, if a writer is writing specifically about Black people, they should use "Black people" instead of "people of color."
- Be *accurate*: Racial and ethnic identities should be depicted as accurately as possible.
    - For example, the use of the word "minority" to broadly refer to people of color is often inaccurate and ultimately lacks clarity—someone can be a minority in their town but a majority in their country, or vice versa—and it also ignores that there

are many other types of minorities beyond racial minorities in any given community (APA 2020, Chapter 5.1).

- o Another example of accuracy in writing about ethnicity is in reference to the identities "Hispanic" and "Latino," which are often thought of as interchangeable or grouped together as if they are; however, not everyone who identifies as "Hispanic" would also identify as "Latino," and vice versa. Technical definitions of the words provide some distinction—"Hispanic" refers to someone of Spanish speaking origins and "Latino" refers to a person from Latin America, including Brazil (APA 2020, Chapter 5.7). In practice, these definitions have not necessarily been fully embraced by the communities they are describing, so the best way to determine whether someone should be described as either "Hispanic" or "Latino" is to ask them how they identify (Lopez, Krogstad, and Passel, 2020).
- o Ensure that the distinction between *race* and *ethnicity* is clear both in data collection and reporting. *Race* refers to physical differences that are considered "socially significant" by certain groups and cultures, like skin color; *ethnicity* refers to shared cultural characteristics and expressions, like language and religion (APA 2020, Chapter 5.1). For example, someone can be both White (a race) and Hispanic (an ethnicity). Do not report ethnicities *as* races (for example, identifying "racial" categories of "White, Black, or Hispanic") or vice versa. Both race and ethnicity are complex, socially constructed concepts (Blakemore, 2019), and therefore allowing subjects to identify their own race and ethnicity is preferable as a way of promoting the most accuracy and specificity in reporting data and presenting research (Lopez, Krogstad and Passel, 2020; APA 2020, Chapter 5).
- Use words that are *appropriate* for the given scenario: Labels and identifiers should be relevant to the subject matter and the description of the subject should be appropriate for and consider the context in which someone is being described (APA 2020, Chapter 5.1). For example, if a study does not analyze race, then there may be no need to mention it.
- The APA style guide recommends to writers the practice of reading their work with an eye for bias and preconceptions, and asking experts on or people from the groups that are being written about to provide feedback as well (APA 2020, Chapter 5).

Evaluation Life Cycle

It is important to consider how to reduce bias in language early in the evaluation lifecycle when designing survey items, focus group questions, and other data collection tools. This is crucial because it will affect the data collected and the language that can be used later when reporting findings. Applying principles to reduce bias in language during the design phase allows for unbiased and accurate final reports that are inclusive and representative of all subjects being reported on. It is important to be open about why demographic questions are being asked, to give respondents the option to potentially skip questions, and to ask as many open-ended demographic questions as possible to allow for participant self-identification (APA 2020, Chapter 5.2). As the Linguistic Society of America notes "…generic statements about groups based on gender, ethnicity, disabilities, socio-economic status, or other similar types of

information can take on a life of their own and are seldom interpreted narrowly as simple reports of statistical data…" (2016). Therefore, when designing research and surveys, it is critical to be aware of the context, history, and implications of certain words and phrases, and how words can carry different meanings for different groups of people.

Resources

- 18F. "Inclusive Language." 18F Content Guide. 18F, 2021. https://content-guide.18f.gov/our-style/inclusive-language/
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- Centering Racial Equity Throughout Data Integration. Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy (AISP). May 2020. https://www.aisp.upenn.edu/centering-equity/
- Considerations for Conducting Evaluation Using a Culturally Responsive and Racial Equity Lens. Public Policy Associates, Incorporated. June 2015. https://publicpolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/PPA-Culturally-Responsive-Lens.pdf
- DCFPI Style Guide for Inclusive Language. DC Fiscal Policy Institute. December 2017. https://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Style-Guide-for-Inclusive-Language_Dec-2017.pdf
- GARE Communications Guide. Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE). May 2018. https://www.racialequityalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/1-052018-GARE-Comms-Guide-v1-1.pdf
- GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender. GLAAD. October 2016. https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender
- Guidance on Inclusive Writing and Photography from Mathematica. Mathematica.
- Guidelines for gender-inclusive language in English. United Nations. https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml
- Guidelines: How to Write about People with Disabilities 9th Edition. The University of Kansas Research and Training Center on Independent Living. July 2020. http://rtcil.org/products/media

- The HERE to HERE Language Guide: A Resource for Using Asset-Based Language with Young People. Here to Here. July 2020. https://www.heretohere.org/resource/the-here-to-here-language-guide/
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