Gender Questions: Reconciling Explicit Representation and Category Resistance in Survey Research

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With increased attention for gender identities outside the male-female binary, new questions have been raised in demographic and sociological research on how to most accurately and most ethically ask participants about their genders (Bauer et al. 2017; Medeiros et al. 2020; Guyan 2022). At the same time queer linguistics has moved away from working with static categories, aiming to resist the essentialising effects of using those categories (Jones 2021). This raises the question of whether it is possible to collect data in a quantitative way that does not harm queer participants, and if so, how.

The current study investigates this through a large-scale survey of queer participants (N=682), based primarily in the United Stated, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands. It explores how well gender diversity is measured across five types of demographic gender questions, how often those are refused, and how they are evaluated by trans, non-binary and genderqueer participants. It is found that rather than preferring open questions (hypothetically allowing for the most detail and nuance, as well as space for resisting rigid categorisation), participants perferred a 6-option multiple choice question which included both 5 pre-set options ('man', 'woman', 'non-binary', 'indigenous or cultural minority identity', 'prefer not to say') and an option to type out one's gender manually ('something else, please specify:'), and generally evaluated this very positively. At the same time we find that there are a number of participants who do evaluate the 6-option gender question negatively or choose not to answer it.

By acknowledging both groups, as well using the preferred 6-option question, quantitative researchers may be able to reconcile both interests in the collection and analysis of data from queer participants.

References

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