


Gender binary #5

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Open Ironholds opened this issue Jan 15, 2017 · 13 comments




Ironholds commented Jan 15, 2017

I really appreciate the intent behind developing this package, to make it easier to extract gender information from say, survey or package pages. Working out the gender distribution of our users, developers and participants is an extremely important thing when it comes to developing an idea of exactly where we need to put in the work to improve the community and ease of contributing.

Having said that, this package - and the package it's based on, and the datasets it's based on - reinforce a false binary around gender (gender is not a dichotomous variable), and reinforce the false idea that one's name maps to one's identity. In doing so it erases people who sit outside of the false gender binary, and people whose genders do not map to their civil names. This is particularly, darkly humorous given our recent words and actions around remapping to Forwards specifically to recognise that an intersectionality beyond a simple men/women binary is necessary.

If we want to know the genders of the people developing packages, or attending conferences, or doing any of those things, there's a really simple way to do it: ask them. Stick a free text field in a survey, plonk a question about gender above it, and wait for the results to come in. Reliance on approaches like this will erase and misgender people on a regular basis, and the reduction in accuracy and the harm that causes is not worth the convenience.



dicook commented Jan 15, 2017

Member

Oliver,

I am going to respond quickly to you because if I don't I'll be stressing over it all day, when I really want to enjoy the tennis games on the first day of the Australian Open that I have bought tickets for.

I really feel bullied by your email. Something that again and again has happened to me throughout life. I understand where you are coming from, and appreciate it. But this group is putting energy into improving things for you and me, as well as other under-represented people. We have so many other commitments and so little time, that we need more encouragement than discouragement in order to maintain our energy levels.

In my role as JCGS editor I need to know what strata our published authors fall into, to get some sense of inequities in publishing. The journal does not collect demographics, and maybe I can push to do this in the future, which is something that I am working on. But if I want to see where we have come from and where we are going I am going to use whatever information is available to estimate the demographics. You should be aware that I am the first women editor of the journal. I was not sure whether I would be capable of this or whether AEs and admin would happily take my lead. It has been very successful from this perspective. This work is the first to begin to measure demographics in association with article acceptance, for this journal. It is useful even though it is not perfect.

cheers,
Di

On Jan 16, 2017, at 7:33 AM, Oliver Keyes <notifications@github.com> wrote:

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Assignees

No one—assign yourself

Labels

None yet

Projects

None yet

Milestone




No milestone

Notifications

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3 participants



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...



Ironholds commented Jan 15, 2017

+ 🗨️ ✎️ ✕

A thought experiment, one which I am sure you will be familiar with given the many instances in your career at which you have had to fight to be treated well or indeed equally due to your gender.

Suppose that the package was being developed to identify the names of male attendees, and everyone else was just bucketed into "meh, no idea, probably male?" You'd undoubtedly have a problem with this, and raise that problem. You'd point out that women are people too, and that women are people worth identifying and treating seriously. You'd point out that dividing the world into 'men' and 'others' erases some very real differences, and does so to a group who have a longstanding history of being erased: from histories, from dialogues around equality and rights, from not only the system we are fighting against but also the groups endeavouring to change such systems.

How would you feel if the response you got to that was that you were bullying people? Not just that that was the response - but that it was the latest response in a whole series and history of responses insisting you did not matter and your existence did not matter and the thing that mattered, much more than this, was the feelings of the people standing in the way of you being treated like a human being.

I have no doubt that you feel you (and us) are fighting to improve the representation of underrepresented groups. But you are *not* fighting to improve the representation and treatment of me, or people like me, if your response to "could we please acknowledge I exist, and people like me exist" is "you're being too negative". This is something that I would hope you would have some sympathy and empathy for, given, as you mentioned, the fact that you yourself have (due to your gender) not been taken seriously in the past. It's why I found your response so disappointing. Not just because it's the latest in a litany of actions from a vast array of people and systems that say "you do not count", but because this time, it's from someone who should know better.

If you feel bullied by the request that we focus our attentions on systems that don't systemically erase and misgender trans and non-binary people: I am sorry you feel that way. But I will not apologise for raising the issue, and I will continue to give the feelings and experiences of people marginalised by projects like this primacy over the feelings of the people doing the marginalisation. If you think "we can do better than this" is negativity, imagine how "you don't matter enough to be recognised as a person that exists" feels.



 **dicook** commented Jan 15, 2017

Member + 🗨️ ✎️ ✕

Yes, I understand this :)

...



hturner commented Jan 16, 2017

Member + 🗨️ ✎️ ✕

I think you are both right in the sense that we need to make the most of the data we have available. When

we are guessing gender based on first name, we are really estimating the male/female ratio and the presence of non-binary and transgender individuals is just one source of error in this estimate that we have to acknowledge.

We should aim to supplement this with data where the full gender distribution (male/female/non-binary) can be estimated. For example, we could include this for the useR! 2016 participants. Note though that even there we don't have the data for presenters, committee members, chairs, etc and getting the data on that would be difficult as it gets less anonymous as you get to smaller groups. For instance, we wouldn't want to include a question on committee membership in a survey as that likely makes the individual identifiable, given their answers on other questions. So it relies on personal knowledge/self-identification. For small groups it is up to the individual whether they want to be identified in the statistics (not individually, we don't publish full name + gender as it is private data, but even summarising as 1 non-binary person in say 10 committee members could be more information than the person wishes to be public). So we need to ask permission if we're aware that a person identifies as non-binary or wait to be corrected if we are unaware and the person wishes to be counted as non-binary. Maintaining the package on GitHub facilitates this!

We have more influence/control over somethings than others - JSS for example is of interest but not an R Foundation journal. Obviously the R Journal is, so a survey of R Journal authors may be viable. A survey of package maintainers would be very desirable and perhaps should be our next target.



Ironholds commented Jan 16, 2017



We are estimating the ratio of men and women as assigned at birth. Male and female are sexes, not genders.

Your proposed middle-ground is that the identification of trans and non-binary people, along with people whose names are ambiguous or not included in the underlying dataset due to its US- and Western-centric nature, should be handled by (1) hoping we know the people and (2) insisting that trans and non-binary people out themselves to us, *after* being misgendered, if they want to be gendered correctly. This is not really an improvement. In many ways it is a regression.

All of the examples you have brought up are places where we can conduct surveys: in other words, places where this package is not the only option we have. So I ask again: what advantage does adhering to this false binary, with all of the costs that come with doing so, give us? What are the situations in which we have to gather data but cannot survey the people we are interested in hearing from?



dicook commented Mar 29, 2017

Member



First, apologies for invoking a stress response. Obviously this is in nobody's interests, particularly when there are so many stress provokers every day.

On this particular project. There is **no intention of creating a trans-erasing tool!** And we will endeavor to ensure that this does not occur as the work progresses. Please give this work a chance. There is hardly any work done here yet. There are a few lines of code, and that's it. As this small project progresses we are very much interested in getting feedback to improve it and help to ensure that nobody is excluded.

The purpose of the task force is to build the community to be inclusive, and we are very committed to this.



Ironholds commented Mar 29, 2017 • edited



OK; what is the plan to make a tool based on name-gender matching non-trans-erasing? If it's a statement that can be made with certainty then there is presumably an idea for how the current aspects that make it trans-erasing (presuming that name matches gender, probabilistically, and presuming gender == sex and is divided into M and F) will be resolved.

You've got the feedback. It's that the premise of the project excludes people. If the intent is to make it not exclude people, it would be good to know what changes are intended to the premise.



dicook commented Mar 29, 2017

Member



The main purpose is centered on unconscious biases. These articles might get you started on reading in this area:

<http://www.pnas.org/content/109/41/16474.abstract>

<http://www.nber.org/papers/w9873.pdf>

Whether this is the plan going forwards remains to be seen.



Ironholds commented Mar 29, 2017



I am, in fact, familiar with the research on unconscious bias, as someone whose research area is the study of social systems and whose current collaboration is a formal research project around unconscious bias in grantmaking.

If unconscious bias is the target then it is not about gender, it is about sex and *assigned and perceived* gender, which is very different from gender. This is not something that has been mentioned in the conversation before - both your responses and Heather's responses simply referred to it as a gender question. This is also not something mentioned in any of the documentation; the README and DESCRIPTION files both say 'gender summaries', the package is named *women* in R, the function is named *gender_summary*.... if the goal is really to study perceived gender, great, but that's literally the first statement made about it that I've seen. Updating the documentation would seem to be a must.



hturner commented Mar 29, 2017

Member



Well as Di mentioned, this repo is very much in an early stage - a few commits were made, then you opened this issue and as we didn't have much time to discuss properly and agree how to proceed, the project has been dormant since. There has been some discussion and thinking off line, but the direction of the project, indeed whether the package is further developed at all, is still up for discussion.

Perhaps I'll start by going back to how this project started:

- Di did some analysis based on names of JCGS authors, estimating the proportion of women authors among submitted articles and accepted articles. So indeed, the main purpose was to look at unconscious bias here.
- Maelle was interested in looking at the proportion of women authors in published R Journal and JSS articles. We thought the genderizer-type approach might be useful as a first approximation - collaboration with R Journal/JSS editors could lead to more accurate and wider diversity monitoring (via survey) and/or looking into unconscious bias, but this is not something we've followed up yet.
- I was interested from the point of view of estimating the proportion of women in varied aspects of the R community. In the past, genderizer-type analyses (by Forwards or others) have been useful to give a rough indication of how things are as far as women are concerned. For example, they were used in the [heR panel at useR! 2014](#), which raised the issue of the under-representation of women and not doubt was instrumental in the Forwards taskforce (originally taskforce for women) being created. A similar analysis of package maintainers is on our [Data page](#) and has been useful in the early days of our taskforce as we tried to highlight the under-representation of women in particular whilst at the same time getting to work on collecting better data and working on other diversity initiatives. I view this as a stop-gap until we run a survey which will provide better data on gender and other demographics, as we obtained through the useR! 2016 survey.

So, do we need this package? In most cases we can and should do better, but I think it does have a place: first for looking at unconscious bias based on name alone and second for a first approximation of the representation of women if better data is not available (yet). A conclusion of this discussion might be that I am wrong about the second case and we should only consider the first.

I am interested in discussing how we can do better in all areas where we have tried to estimate the proportion of women, so that we can work towards a more inclusive approach. Let's review the different methods: how they have been used by the taskforce so far and what we might do in future.

Automatic Genderizer Analysis

As mentioned, this has been used to analyse the proportion of women among package maintainers in 2016. Note here [survey data](#) is available from 2010, but the survey only asked if those contacted were male or female. So we ran the genderizer analysis to see if the proportion of women had changed much. In some cases a genderizer analysis has been used by program/local committee members of useR! as a first pass to estimate gender of useR! participants (see next section).

We are aware that the genderizer analysis has many drawbacks, including

1. Women (cis or trans) will be misgendered if their name is predominantly associated with men in the source data (drawn from social media profiles)
2. Men (cis or trans) will be misgendered if their name is predominantly associated with women
3. Non-binary individuals will always be misgendered
4. Names predominantly associated with women in English speaking countries may be be predominantly associated with men in non-English speaking countries, and vice versa, so people from non-English speaking countries are more likely to be misgendered (source data has English-speaking bias)

- Names rarely used in English speaking countries may not have enough data to estimate the probability that an individual is a man or a woman
- Probabilities based on a general population are likely to over-estimate the proportion of women in the R community.

This package merely addresses point 5. All the other issues remain, so estimates based on this method can only be a very rough approximation of the proportion of women. Despite this, it may be useful for comparative analysis across time or across communities - or in the case of the journal example between submitted and accepted articles.

Given all these drawbacks, we want to use better methods where possible. The cases where this approach might be used in future have already been mentioned:

- comparative analysis, e.g. looking at unconscious bias
- first approximation when better data is unavailable

(Semi)-manual Gender Assignment

A manual approach has been used to analyse historic data on useR! and other R Foundation related activities (such as presented at [RencontresR](#) and on [Data page](#)). In some cases (e.g. for useR! participants in some years) a genderizer analysis has been used as a first pass, followed up by manual assignment for ambiguous names/names that could not be predicted as most likely a man or woman. The advantage of manual assignment is that personal knowledge and internet search based on full names can reduce many of the problems mentioned above. In particular 6 is no longer an issue, 4 and 5 are less so though may still be an issue if internet search is required, the errors from 1 and 2 will be reduced but do risk misgendering individuals whose gender identity does not match the gender perceived by their appearance, non-binary individuals are still most likely to be misgendered as they would only be correctly identified from personal knowledge or if their identity can be inferred from online information.

So this method is not perfect, but better than automatic genderizer assignment and the best that can be done without running a survey. This method is preferred in cases when a survey is not practical, or not available yet, e.g.

- data on activities in past years
- data on activities where we're unable to collaborate with relevant people in order to obtain a sampling frame and relevant permissions to run a survey

Another case is when we are looking at small sub-groups. The problems here are two-fold: in smaller groups there is a bigger problem of identifiability (that is, someone identifying themselves as a trans woman, say, being identifiable simply because the group is so small, or because their answers to other questions on a survey reveal who they are) and it is harder to make meaningful comparisons. An example might be the program committee. Transgender or non-binary people may not want to identify as such in such a small group. Even if they did, it would probably only make sense to report the ratio of women:men as only this can reasonably be compared to the proportion in wider populations as a benchmark.

So, there are a couple of things we could do here:

- In a survey, ask people if they belong to larger groups, e.g. presenter (instead of separating out talk, lightning talk, poster), additional/invited role (instead of separating out invited speaker, tutor, program/local committee member, chair). This would allow us to explore depth of involvement/level of recognition for all under-represented groups without creating groups that are too small to report.
- Possibly additionally use manual assignment to estimate ratio of men:women in small groups. This would allow tracking representation of women in specific roles and attempts to address any issues identified could still be widened to included all under-represented groups.

Surveys

I agree that surveys are the best way to monitor gender as they allow people to self-identify. They also allow us to monitor other demographics that would be very poorly estimated/totally inestimable otherwise. However I'm not sure I'd describe this process as "really simple". Yes, the gender question is simple to formulate, but running a survey means thinking carefully about the best opportunity to run it, thinking about the sampling frame and how to sample or adjust for non-response, designing a survey, testing that design, getting permission from relevant people to run the survey, setting it up on a suitable platform, encouraging people to respond, analysing the results, thinking about actions that might be taken in light of the results and reporting back to the community. Using free text fields for gender and ethnicity is best practice, but means it's harder to automate analysis. We are certainly willing to run more surveys, but might not be able to run surveys in the short-term to collect data on everything we would like to find out about.

Just to clarify though, we are planning to run a demographic survey at useR! 2017 and this along with the 2016 results will provide the data for summaries of useR! participants at least. The ideas above may mean we can replace our manual assignment method for most if not all useR! summaries.

We would like to run another survey of package authors, this has been on the wish list for some time and the R Foundation have given permission for us to contact CRAN package maintainers for this purpose. However no definite plans have been made due to lack of volunteer time. Anyone reading this from outside Forwards that would like to assist is welcome to contact us on rowforwards@gmail.com.

Further surveys, e.g. relating to R Journal/JSS articles are not currently on the horizon. We are open to avoiding genderizer-based analysis here and postponing till such time we can run a survey of authors or have access to data on submitted abstracts allowing analysis of unconscious bias. This may be some time though, so a genderizer analysis could be a quick way to roughly estimate the representation of women in the meantime.

Sorry for such a long post, going beyond this particular package, but given this issue has raised concern outside the taskforce it seemed best to discuss further here. I welcome feedback and suggestions.



Ironholds commented Mar 29, 2017 • edited



This reply is also going to be pretty long, because well, it's responding to something long and it's about something that I care deeply about, as (to my knowledge!) the only NB/trans person on the committee.

Of all the discussion and thinking outside public spaces that I have seen, none of it contradicts the initial critiques or agrees with the idea that this is for unconscious bias testing. None of it. Faced with two different forms of forum/chat program, multiple email conversations about the issues surrounding the thread, and the thread itself, the idea that this is to study unconscious bias hasn't come up until now, when people are *publicly* taking issue. Which is, y'know, weird, that literally all of these 'offline conversations' would be in different spaces

Slightly more weird is the fact that many of the examples you picked are not amenable to unconscious bias testing. If you sample package maintainers you will have no idea if unconscious bias is involved in who gets on CRAN or who gets to maintain packages, as the only people you can test are already on CRAN and maintaining packages. So this is an idea that hasn't come up, only came up in the context of a PR backlash, and isn't particularly generalisable as a method.

Arguing that surveys are hard makes no sense given that the survey would be asking a *single question* that we could define in advance and that would be identical in all runs, and that we already have a platform on which to do so. I know; I was the one who set that platform up. There are some additional steps, yes, but they are not difficult steps, and presumably 'thinking about what can be done in response to the data' is also something we should be doing if the data comes from an R package.

Regardless, it's very clear from your above message that while you are trying, you don't get it. To pull out some examples of why, because they might be useful learning experiences:

1. when you emphasise that men and women (cis or trans!!!!) will get misgendered you pull the queer equivalent of 'but men too! the patriarchy hurts men too!' - sure, it's true, but the level of harm and experiences of harm are entirely different, so can we please have one context where the experience of the people who already have a leg up isn't jimmied in there?
2. When you say as a blanket rule 'it would probably only make sense to report the ratio of women:men' with the justification of 'but outside comparisons!' you are actively erasing non-binary people. I am *not* saying there always has to be a category because in some contexts that will violate someone's privacy. But the default expectation should not be that there won't.
3. Despite claiming this is for unconscious bias and that you totally get the difference between gender and perceived gender, every term in your reply to my comment about how gender and perceived gender are different things and you are totally talking about perceived gender is 'woman', 'man' or 'gender' as isolated terms.

I don't get it. I don't get why not doing this thing is so hard to do. I don't get why actually listening to and giving epistemic primacy to someone who isn't cis is hard to do. If the people driving this project along genuinely are in our corner, as Di keeps saying, how many times to trans people need to tell you you're wrong before you just go 'okay'?

I've been pushing on these angles for months, now, pretty much since the project was created. I had to push to get the scope of the committee widened so it wasn't just 'women', I had to push (albeit much less!) to get the *membership* of the committee widened so it wasn't mostly *white* women, and it's pretty clear that the actual humans on it haven't followed the expanding remit. I've spent months listening to racists comments and seeing transphobic actions (for clarity, for outsiders, Heather is not the person who made either), and addressing 101-level questions over and over again which I never expected to see in a group of people who purportedly Get It.

And I've spent the entire time having to be the person who just...gets on with things. Who goes off and tries to do the dispute resolution with the racist transphobe, because the people who volunteered for leadership roles are busy or awkward or honestly, I suspect, just don't see how racism and transphobia are problems on a scale that requires them to drop their oar in. Who rephrases gender question after gender question

because it turns out that despite a committee of dozens, many with access to full academic libraries, not one person can muster the energy to check out a copy of Serano's *Whipping Girl* and learn for themselves, nor pass the things they've already learned by watching me do it (and provide a commentary and rationale! for this precise purpose!) on to others.

After all that? It would be really nice if the response to a trans person saying 'this is a problem and needs to stop' wasn't a thousand words for 'well cis people disagree'.

I'm tired of this nonsense and I'm tired of these conversations; I'm tired of apologies that are 'for invoking a stress response', or to other, cis people who raised the issue in public but never to the people who did so in private; I'm tired of throwing my energy into a group that, whatever their name, constantly has any group not white women *next* on the list of people to give a shit about. Consider this a resignation letter. Find a new token queer.



Ironholds closed this Mar 29, 2017



Ironholds reopened this Mar 29, 2017



hturner commented Mar 29, 2017

Member



Sorry that it has got to this point and the whole experience has been so frustrating for you Oliver.

There is much to respond to in the above, but perhaps the main thing to say is I accept that Forwards should not use genderizer analysis to approximate the proportion of women in future. You hit the nail on the head with your comment in 1. above - when I was listing the drawbacks of the method, I was thinking of all these as sources of error, in a statistical sense, without appreciating the exclusionary effect this has on transgender and non-binary folk. So, I was wrong, sorry for being so slow.

Perhaps I can explain some of the weirdness about unconscious bias, by trying to clarify my earlier comments. I didn't intend to suggest all our previous gender summaries were somehow related to studying unconscious bias and you are right, this is not an issue that we have discussed much on the taskforce. Di mentioned it in email discussions with Maelle and myself when we set up this repo, as it was something she looked at in the analysis of JCGS data as I mention in my first bullet. Nearly everything else in my last comment was purely about monitoring demographics in subsets of the R community, with a focus on estimating the proportion of women, as the taskforce was set up to address the under-representation of women, initially. The comment near the end about the R Journal/JSS was a new suggestion, by me, reflecting on a possible way the package here might still be useful. Finally the issue of unconscious bias was discussed at our last core team meeting, the minutes of which caused you to highlight this issue again for further discussion.

I'm not sure if you meant it, but I do not think we would run a survey with a single question. If we are going to survey people we should at least take the opportunity to ask about other demographics. You are right, we have a good pack of questions to run from the useR! 2016 survey and these would not be difficult to run again - as we plan to do at useR! 2017 (my comment about using free-text boxes was not meant to imply we would not do this again, I agree we absolutely should, but I was just pointing out this requires a little more work to analyse). However if we are to survey CRAN authors, I imagine we would also like to a further questions, to help inform our initiatives, e.g. about people's programming background, how they learnt to write R packages, etc - I haven't thought it through, but it is this part that would require more work. Package authors have provided their email primarily for contact about package maintenance, so I don't think we can run very frequent surveys and expect a good response, this is why we need to think carefully about what we want to ask.

On your point 2. above I was not making a blanket rule, but a specific point about small subgroups. I agree allowing non-binary should be a default option and my suggestions about adding questions regarding general roles in useR! rather than very specific ones was precisely so that we might be able to keep non-binary (or other smaller groups of people) as separate categories when reporting.

So in relation to the original issue: you are right we are not should be using a genderizer based method to work out the gender distribution of subsets of the R community. We should put our efforts into surveys instead.

It's an open question whether this package might still be useful for studying unconscious bias. Maybe given limited time of people on taskforce, this should not be a taskforce project if pursued at all.

To come back to your own role, I'm sorry if I didn't support you enough in my role as a leader. I have valued your input to challenge my thinking on many issues and have learnt a lot. If you have had enough, then of course I can't make you stay, but you are welcome to stay, or come back after a break. Either way I do plan to use what you have taught me in future work on the taskforce and wish you all the best.



Ironholds commented Mar 30, 2017



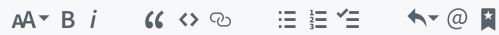
I'm glad that my input has been useful. I want to be very clear that the primary driver of me out of the group is not just the repeated basic issues; it is that many of them and much of the erasing, bigoted language (not just referring to trans and non-binary people) has come from the same person and that said person has to my knowledge never been confronted about this by anyone involved in the project except me.

IOW, my feeling of unsupportedness is not people saying the wrong thing. It's the failure of dispute resolution and +1ing and statements of 'no, that's not ok' that creates the impression that such behaviour and such statements, on topics from gender to race, are acceptable. That's the main leadership issue here. And on that note, I'm going to swiftly get out of these spaces; it seems better for both my blood pressure and y'all's progress that I do so. I wish you the very best of luck with your outreach events and future work.



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