Capturing Intersectional Identities in Demographic Questionnaires

Kinsey Q. Roberts, MS

Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Introduction

When conducting research, the questions asked end up framing the data collected. This fact is central to good experiment design, but often seems to be overlooked in the associated demographic questionnaires. Forcing participants to choose only one of a few options renders other identities invisible to the researchers and gives the impression that the population being studied is comprised of a small number of heterogeneous groups.

Methods

In designing a masters project on genetic literacy, I wanted to respect the participants' agency in defining their own identities. Lists of race, ethnicity, and gender identity options (Fig. 1) were compiled from several sources. Options were listed individually - e.g. "Mexican," "Mexican American," and "Chicano" were three separate checkboxes as opposed to being grouped into one checkbox on the 2010 Census. For these questions, participants could choose more than one option and each question also included an "Other" option with optional write-in field and a "Decline to answer" option. The "sex assigned at birth" question only allowed one answer, but included "Intersex," "Other," and "Decline to answer" in addition to the traditional "Male" and "Female."

The project materials, including the demographic questions, were submitted to the Case Western Reserve University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and classified as exempt from further review under 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

Participants in the research project completed the demographics questions at the end of the study. Participants were recruited using the Amazon Mechanical Turk platform and were compensated $6-12 each. Of the 105 participants who began the study, 101 completed the study. No participants quit the study during the demographics section or declined to answer any of the demographics questions.

Fig. 1: Demographics Questionnaire

Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin

Do you identify as being of Spanish/Hispanic/Latino origin?
You can choose multiple options.

- ☐ No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
- ☐ Yes, Central American
- ☐ Yes, Chicano
- ☐ Yes, Cuban
- ☐ Yes, Dominican
- ☐ Yes, Mexican
- ☐ Yes, Mexican American
- ☐ Yes, Puerto Rican
- ☐ Yes, South American
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Decline to answer

Ethnicity/Race

How do you identify? You can choose multiple options.

- ☐ African
- ☐ African American
- ☐ Alaska Native
- ☐ American Indian
- ☐ Asian
- ☐ Asian Indian
- ☐ Black
- ☐ Caribbean
- ☐ Caucasian
- ☐ Chamorro
- ☐ Chinese
- ☐ European
- ☐ Filipino
- ☐ Guamanian
- ☐ Japanese
- ☐ Korean
- ☐ Native Hawaiian
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Samoan
- ☐ Vietnamese
- ☐ White
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Decline to answer

Sex (Assigned at Birth)

Which box did they check on your birth certificate?

- ○ Female
- ○ Intersex
- ○ Male
- ○ Other : _____
- ○ Decline to Answer

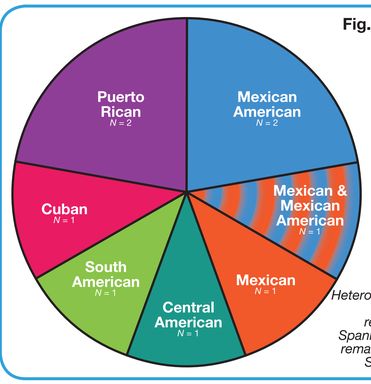
Gender Identity (Current)

With which (if any) gender(s) do you currently identify?

- ☐ Agender
- ☐ Androgynous
- ☐ Bi-Gender
- ☐ Genderfluid
- ☐ Genderless
- ☐ Genderqueer
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Non-gendered
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Third Gender
- ☐ Trans Man
- ☐ Trans Woman
- ☐ Transgender
- ☐ Transsexual
- ☐ Transvestite
- ☐ Two-Spirit
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Other: _____
- ☐ Decline to answer

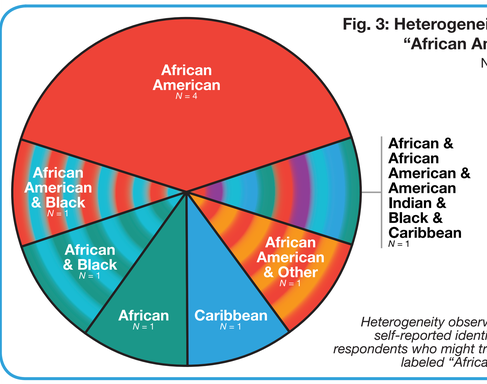
Results

Fig. 2: Heterogeneity among "Hispanics"
N = 9 of 101



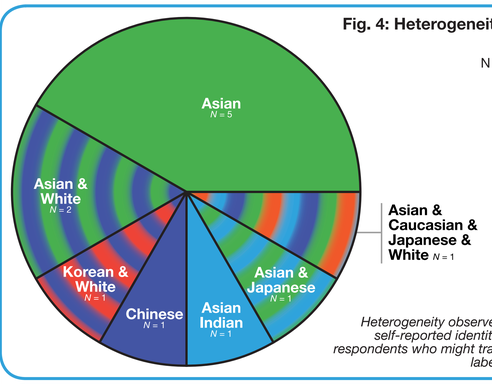
Heterogeneity observed within the self-reported identities of the 9 respondents who reported having Spanish/Hispanic/Latino heritage. The remaining 92 participants reported no Spanish/Hispanic/Latino heritage.

Fig. 3: Heterogeneity among "African Americans"
N = 10 of 101



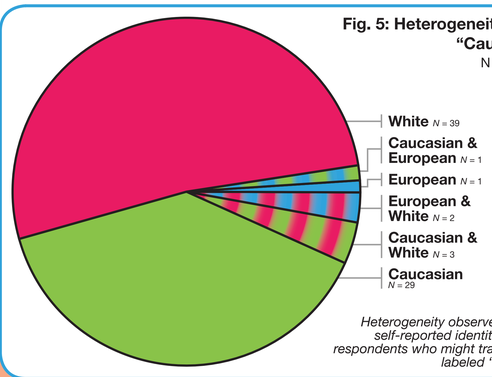
Heterogeneity observed within the self-reported identities of the 10 respondents who might traditionally be labeled "African American."

Fig. 4: Heterogeneity among "Asians"
N = 12 of 101



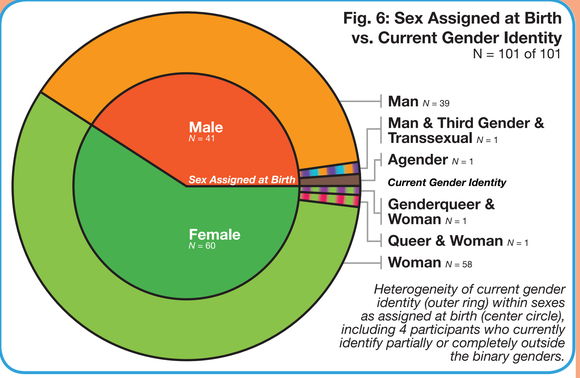
Heterogeneity observed within the self-reported identities of the 12 respondents who might traditionally be labeled "Asian."

Fig. 5: Heterogeneity among "Caucasians"
N = 75 of 101



Heterogeneity observed within the self-reported identities of the 75 respondents who might traditionally be labeled "Caucasian."

Fig. 6: Sex Assigned at Birth vs. Current Gender Identity
N = 101 of 101



Heterogeneity of current gender identity (outer ring) within sexes as assigned at birth (center circle), including 4 participants who currently identify partially or completely outside the binary genders.

Fig. 7: Selected Individuals' Intersections

Participant:	125
Age:	45-54 years
Education:	Some college credit, no degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
Ethnicity/Race:	American Indian, Caucasian
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Male
Current Gender Identity:	Man
Participant:	136
Age:	45-54 years
Education:	Some college credit, no degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
Ethnicity/Race:	American Indian, European
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Female
Current Gender Identity:	Woman
Participant:	146
Age:	35-44 years
Education:	High school graduate, diploma or equivalent
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	Yes, Mexican
Ethnicity/Race:	Caucasian
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Male
Current Gender Identity:	Agender
Participant:	148
Age:	21-24 years
Education:	Some college credit, no degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	Yes, Cuban
Ethnicity/Race:	Caribbean
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Female
Current Gender Identity:	Queer, Woman
Participant:	150
Age:	25-34 years
Education:	Bachelor's degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
Ethnicity/Race:	Korean, White
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Male
Current Gender Identity:	Man, Third Gender, Transsexual
Participant:	152
Age:	25-34 years
Education:	Trade/technical/vocational training
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
Ethnicity/Race:	African, African American, American Indian, Black, Caribbean
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Male
Current Gender Identity:	Man
Participant:	213
Age:	25-34 years
Education:	Some college credit, no degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	No, not Spanish/Hispanic/Latino
Ethnicity/Race:	Caucasian
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Female
Current Gender Identity:	Genderqueer, Woman
Participant:	220
Age:	45-54 years
Education:	Bachelor's degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	Yes, Puerto Rican
Ethnicity/Race:	Caucasian, White
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Female
Current Gender Identity:	Woman
Participant:	236
Age:	25-34 years
Education:	Bachelor's degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	Yes, Mexican American
Ethnicity/Race:	Other, write-in: "Hispanic"
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Male
Current Gender Identity:	Man
Participant:	239
Age:	21-24 years
Education:	Bachelor's degree
Spanish/Hispanic/Latino Origin:	Yes, Mexican, Yes, Mexican American
Ethnicity/Race:	Other, write-in: blank
Sex Assigned at Birth:	Male
Current Gender Identity:	Man

Discussion

Regardless of whether a research project is directly related to personal identifiers such as sex, gender, race, or ethnicity, many projects still ask participants for these data for statistical analysis. If collecting such data, why restrict participants to a few small boxes that may only capture part of their identities?

Be sure to inquire whether our funding source(s) require specific demographic data to be collected. Even if there are requirements on the data collected, it may be possible to create a mapping that translates the more verbose data collected to the simpler options required by a funding source.

Similar mappings can also be developed to assist in statistical analysis of research data, for example to reduce the number of variables in a multivariate regression or ANOVA. These mapping can be convenient when comparing results with multiple prior studies with differing demographic labels (e.g. study A has separate categories for "mixed race" and "other" while study B simply has "other").

The Middle East and North Africa seem to be underrepresented in race/ethnicity lists and this study unintentionally perpetuated this underrepresentation. While participants could have written in an identity from this region, inclusion of these identities is recommended in future research.

Conclusions

When presented with additional questions and options on a demographic form, participants took the opportunity to describe themselves with complex, intersectional identities. Among 101 participants, heterogeneity of identity was observed within the groups traditionally labeled "Hispanic," "Caucasian," "African American," and "Asian" (Figs. 2-5). Additionally, 4 participants identified partially or completely outside the gender binary (Fig. 6). The preceding figures only visualize one or two axes of data each; displaying all of the axes of demographic data in a single figure would be very difficult. By looking at 10 selected participants (Fig. 7), we can see some of the diverse intersections of identities present in the population studied.

The sample is non-representative and too small to draw conclusions from, but the adoption of similar questions in larger studies could bring light to identities and populations previously missed.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Mehmet Koyuturk for serving as my MS project advisor and for providing discretionary funds from his T. & A. Schroeder endowed professorship to support this research. Additional thanks to Andy Podgurski and Michael Goldberg for serving on my defense committee and to John Clochsey and Liz Roccoforte for their feedback.

Contact

Email: kinsey.roberts@case.edu

Download poster at: bit.ly/kr-poster

CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY EST. 1826
think beyond the possible