Capturing Intersectional Identities in Demographic Questionnaires

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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.

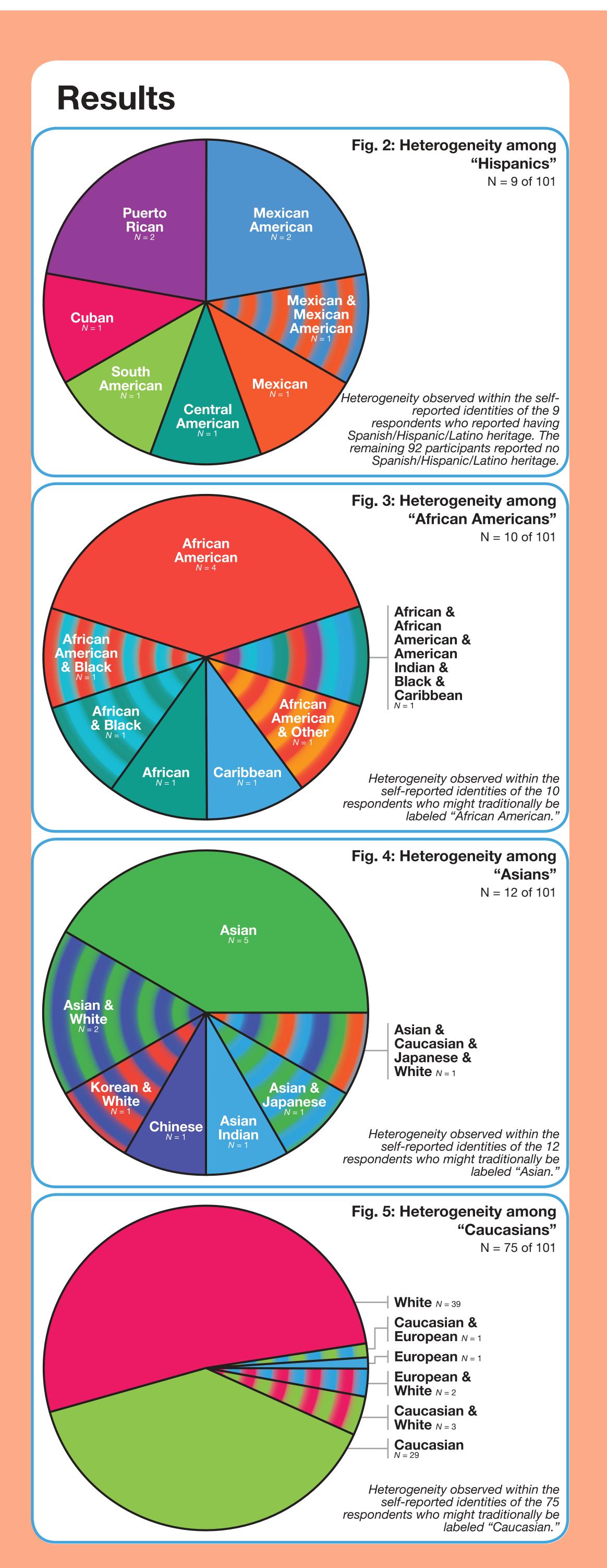
Methods

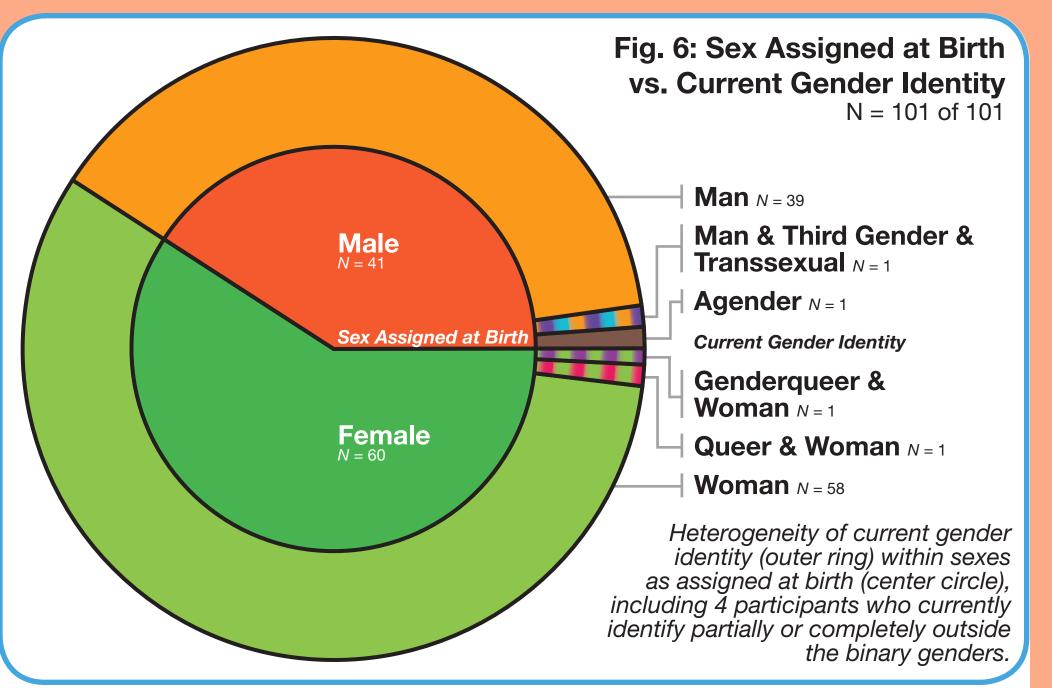
In designing a masters project on genetic literacy, I wanted to respect the participants' agency in defining their own identities. Lists of race, ethnicity, and gender identity options (Fig. 1) were compiled from several sources. Options were listed individually - e.g. "Mexican," "Mexican American," 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, Mexican American ☐ Yes. Puerto Rican Yes. Central American ☐ Yes, South American Yes. Chicano Yes, Cuban ☐ Decline to answer Yes, Dominican ☐ Yes, Mexican **Ethnicity/Race** How do you identify? You can choose multiple options. ☐ Filipino ☐ Guamanian African American Japanese Alaska Native ☐ American Indian □ Korean Asian Native Hawaiian ☐ Pacific Islander Asian Indian Black ☐ Samoan Caribbear Vietnamese ☐ White Caucasiar ☐ Other: Chamorro ☐ Chinese ☐ Decline to answer European **Sex (Assigned at Birth)** Which box did they check on your birth certificate? O Female O Decline to Answer Intersex Male **Gender Identity (Current)** With which (if any) gender(s) do you currently identify? Agender ☐ Third Gender Androgynous ☐ Trans Man Bi-Gender ☐ Trans Woman Genderfluid □ Transgender Genderless Transsexual Genderqueer Transvestite Man ☐ Two-Spirit Non-binary ☐ Woman □ Non-gendered ☐ Other: Queer ☐ Decline to answer







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.

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