

Demographic Methods and Trans Populations

Motivating a Critical Trans Demography Research Agenda

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Greater awareness of vulnerable populations and researcher positionality in the social sciences has created a foundation for new interdisciplinary discussion, such as **drawing critical theories of identity into demographic methods**^{1,2}. While there are many open questions, these new research directions represent an exciting area for theoretical and methodological innovation.

At the same time, the health and wellbeing of transgender (“trans”) people have become increasingly prominent in the fields of medicine and public health³ and disciplines, including demography. However, the distinct characteristics of trans populations presents new obstacles for demographers⁴. Drawing on these broader conversations between social sciences and outside literatures, **this work argues that trans studies can inform an emerging “critical trans demography” research agenda.**

6. What is Person 1's sex? Mark ☒ ONE box.

☐ Male ☐ Female

→ NOTE: Please answer BOTH Question 8 about Hispanic origin and Question 9 about race. For this census, Hispanic origins are not races.

8. Is Person 1 of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?

☐ No, not of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin

☐ Yes, Mexican, Mexican Am., Chicano

☐ Yes, Puerto Rican

☐ Yes, Cuban

☐ Yes, another Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin – Print, for example, Salvadoran, Dominican, Colombian, Guatemalan, Spaniard, Ecuadorian, etc.

9. What is Person 1's race? Mark ☒ one or more boxes AND print origins.

☐ White – Print, for example, German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, Egyptian, etc.

☐ Black or African Am. – Print, for example, African American, Jamaican, Haitian, Nigerian, Ethiopian, Somali, etc.

☐ American Indian or Alaska Native – Print name of enrolled or principal tribe(s), for example, Navajo Nation, Blackfeet Tribe, Mayan, Aztec, Native Village of Barrow, Inupiat Traditional Government, Nome Eskimo Community, etc.

☐ Chinese ☒ Vietnamese ☐ Native Hawaiian

☐ Filipino ☐ Korean ☐ Samoan

☐ Asian Indian ☐ Japanese ☐ Chamorro

☐ Other Asian – Print, for example, Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, etc.

☐ Other Pacific Islander – Print, for example, Tongan, Fijian, Marshallese, etc.

☐ Some other race – Print race or origin.

Figure 1: Questions 6, 8, and 9 on the 2020 U.S. Decennial Census ask the respondent to provide their sex, ethnicity, and race.

Lessons Learned from the U.S. Census

While racial and ethnic classifications on the U.S. census have broadened significantly in complexity over time⁵, using nation-wide surveys to understand the nuances of social categories and hierarchies remains a challenge.

Figure 1 shows questions 6, 8, and 9 on the U.S. census which prompt the respondent to provide their sex, ethnicity, and race. Despite the multiple dimensions of questions 8 and 9, their efficacy in mapping to lived experiences of social identity can be controversial⁶.

Large-scale studies of trans and non-binary populations face similar obstacles. As shown in Figure 2, data on trans and non-binary people are particularly sensitive to small methodological shifts. Moreover, describing trans and non-binary identities accurately in categorical data poses a challenging tradeoff between group cohesion and specificity: **Scenario B** in Figure 2 shows a cohesive ‘Other’ category with high cohesion and low specific in comparison to **Scenarios C and D**, which split out more precise identities at the expense of statistical power.

Effect of Questionnaire Design on Data Structure

A growing body of literature examines how interventions at the level of the survey instrument might better represent trans populations in demographic research. Figure 2 illustrates how the design of a survey question affects the shape and texture of data on trans and non-binary populations.

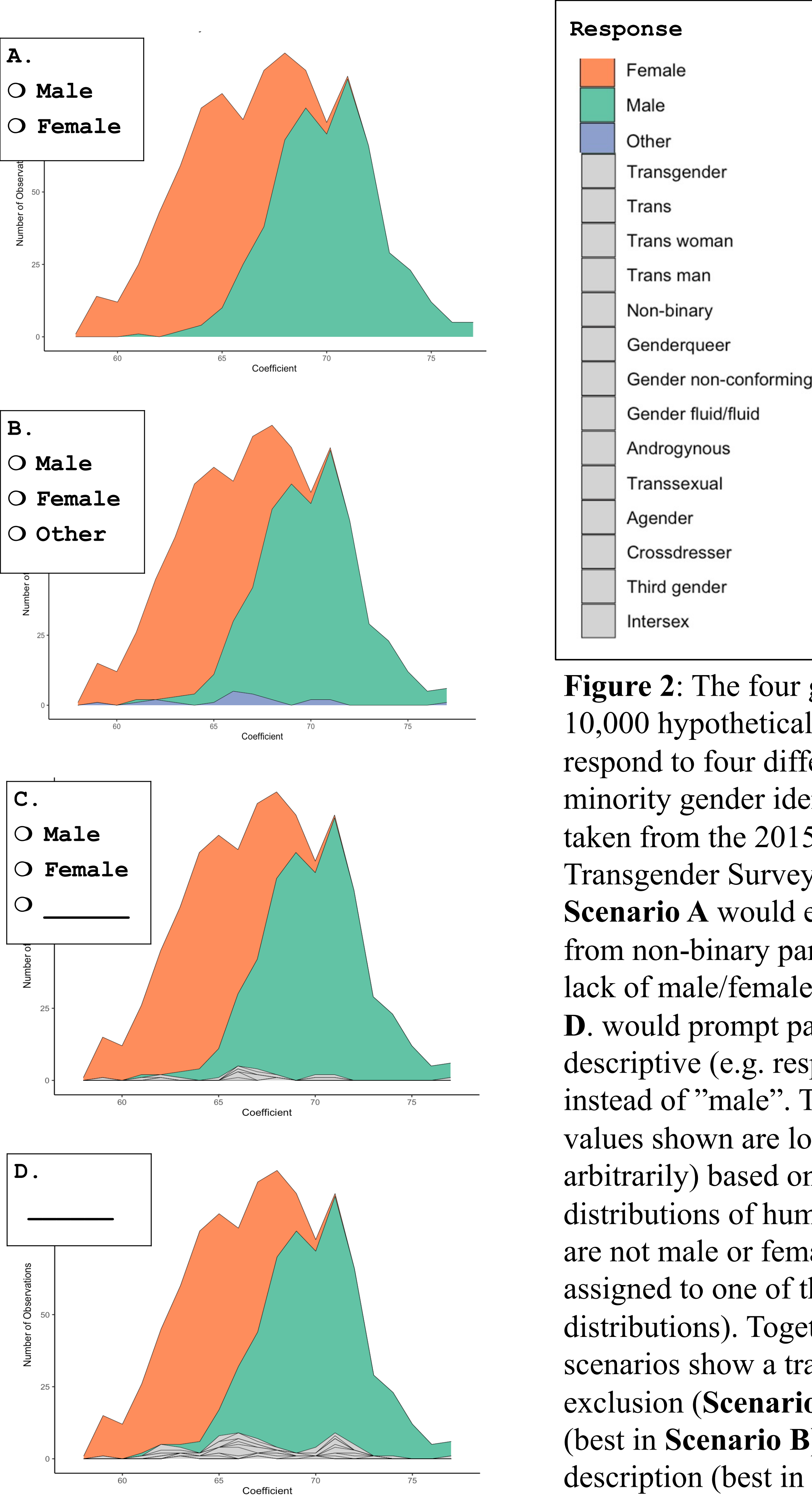


Figure 2: The four graphs illustrate how 10,000 hypothetical respondents might respond to four different questions⁷. The minority gender identities (gray) are taken from the 2015 United States Transgender Survey⁸. It is assumed that **Scenario A** would exclude all responses from non-binary participants and that the lack of male/female options in **Scenario D**. would prompt participants to be more descriptive (e.g. responding “trans man” instead of “male”). The “coefficient” values shown are loosely (and arbitrarily) based on the male and female distributions of human height (those who are not male or female are randomly assigned to one of the two normal distributions). Together, the four scenarios show a tradeoff between exclusion (**Scenario A**), group cohesion (best in **Scenario B**), and accurate description (best in **Scenarios C and D**).

Next Steps: Incorporating Ethnographic Methods

Trans theorists^{9,10} have demonstrated that a reliance on conventional identity categories of gender and transness will always further disenfranchise trans populations. However, the emerging methods for augmenting demographic methods with ethnography^{1,2} presents new opportunities for grounding large-scale population studies in lived experience. Such ethnographic techniques allow the researcher to surface a guiding value system based on their interactions with a community of interest.

References

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