

Helping quantitative sociology come out of the closet

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Abstract

This essay offers some ways quantitative sociology may embrace increasing scholarly and public recognition of sexual and gender diversity. Specifically, we suggest that increasing (1) public awareness and debate concerning sexual and gender fluidity, (2) calls for sociologists to become engaged in public debates, and (3) awareness of gender and sexual nuances underlying the majority of social phenomena create an opportunity for quantitative sociology to begin answering longstanding calls for more empirically grounded measurements of sexualities and gender. To this end, we use our experiences designing quantitative measurements of sexual and gender diversity to provide options for quantitative sociology to better capture the empirical complexity of gender and sexuality within the contemporary world by expanding gender options on survey instruments and expanding sexual identification methods on survey instruments.

Keywords

commentary, gender fluidity, quantitative methods, queer theory, sexual fluidity

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Over 25 years ago, Queer Theory called for scholarship to move beyond binary categorizations into an exploration of the variation and nuance of contemporary and historical bio-social-psychological existence (see, e.g. Butler, 1990; De Lauretis, 1991; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theorists argued that binary categories and self-identifications limited social and political understanding, knowledge creation, and social justice efforts (Warner, 1993). In the years since, increasing recognition of and movement activities by, for example, transgender, bisexual, genderqueer, pansexual, intersex, and other non-binary sexual and gender communities revealed complexities embedded in contemporary social life often masked or erased by existing methodological traditions (see also Nowakowski et al., 2016). Now, maybe more than ever, sociologists face a world where binary or distinct measures fail to capture important nuances, variations, and possibilities (Sumerau et al., 2015; Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). As suggested by sociologists calling for the incorporation of Queer insights into the discipline over the last 20 plus years (see Gamson and Moon, 2004; Namaste, 1994; Plummer, 2003; Valocchi, 2005), such developments recommend revising and resubmitting traditional sociological approaches to gender and sexualities.

Some qualitative traditions within sociology have already embraced this shift. Research in these traditions has revealed that existing notions of male/female or man/woman leave much gender variation and experience unexplored (see, e.g. Sumerau et al., 2015; Davis, 2015; Pfeffer, 2014; Westbrook and Schilt, 2014). Likewise, qualitative analyses have shown existing notions of homo/hetero identification mask much sexual variation present in our world (see, e.g. Burke, 2014; Mathers et al., 2015; Schrock et al., 2014; Ward, 2015). Fulfilling Valocchi's (2005) prediction, however, quantitative sociology has yet to adequately join the conversation (but see Cragun and Sumerau, 2015). How might quantitative sociology 'come out' (Adams, 2011) of the binary 'closet' (Sedgwick, 1990) to explore the non-binary complexity of contemporary gender and sexualities?

In this essay we outline options whereby quantitative sociologists may begin to accomplish such work. We draw upon our own experiences publishing both qualitative and quantitative sociology (see Nowakowski et al., 2016) as well as insights gained from ongoing projects where we quantitatively explore sexualities and gender from a Queer perspective (see Cragun and Sumerau, 2015). We offer methodological suggestions that would allow sociologists to better capture gendered and sexual complexities quantitatively. We provide a framework that may help quantitative sociology leave behind binary simplifications (Sedgwick, 1990) in order to grapple with sexual and gender complexities embedded within our social world.

It is not our intention, however, to suggest that other quantitative sociologists are not already wrestling with these issues in varied ways. Rather, our purpose here is to utilize the experience we have gained managing sexual and gender limitations in existing data sets to offer our colleagues examples of strategies that have worked in this regard (see also Nowakowski et al., 2016 for discussion of conceptual and methodological issues related to revising existing traditions in quantitative research). We draw heavily on ongoing and already published work where our

willingness to expand traditional measurements of gender and sexualities have demonstrated important nuances and variations often lacking in quantitative sociological treatments of social phenomena including but not limited to analyses specifically focused on gender or sexual questions.

In so doing, we – like many sexualities scholars over the past few decades (see Cragun and Sumerau, 2015) – build on observations outlined in the elaboration of the Kinsey Scale (Kinsey et al., 1948, 1953). Rather than treating sexual – and gender – experience as a binary categorization, this approach involves recognizing and attempting to empirically measure the nuanced ways people experience, display, and approach sexualities and gender over the life course (see also Cragun and Sumerau, 2015; Sedgwick, 1990; Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). To this end, we seek to encourage quantitative researchers to shift their attention and measurements from binary simplifications and essentialized claims about some imagined truth to variation in the ways people experience and identify sexual and gendered phenomena shaped by historical, material, and cultural contexts (see also Nowakowski et al., 2016). The following discussion outlines some ways quantitative sociology may embrace the fluidity suggested by Kinsey and other sexualities researchers to better analyze the complexity of contemporary sexual and gender diversity in their studies.

Why queering quantitative sociology matters

Although there have been sociologists calling for and engaging in critical analyses of binary and distinct sexual and gender assumptions since at least the 1980s (see, e.g. Connell, 1987; Rich, 1980; West and Zimmerman, 1987), quantitative sociology has been slow to adapt to this evolution in sexual and gender phenomena. In fact, it is still fairly common to find major sociological surveys that only offer male and female response options for gender despite widespread recognition that gender is neither binary (West and Zimmerman, 1987), limited to sex designation or identification (Davis, 2015), or categorically distinct (Connell, 1987) in the empirical world. Our argument here is merely the latest in a long line of calls for quantitative sociology to revise its methodology (i.e. its ‘rituals’ and ‘traditions,’ see Goffman, 1959) to better fit the world we study (see also Harrison et al., 2011; Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). In the current historical moment, however, we see at least three compelling social patterns that suggest now may be the optimal time for such revision.

First, as we have noted elsewhere (Nowakowski et al., 2016; Sumerau et al., 2015), quantitative sociology is currently unable to speak meaningfully to emerging intersex, transgender, and sexually fluid movements. Whereas transgender, intersex, and sexually fluid communities are gaining more notice, recognition, and, in some cases, rights with each passing year, our surveys continue to leave these people and their experiences out of our data sets for the most part. As a result, quantitative sociologists have little to say in relation to these movements and changes (positive or negative), and people familiar with these movements and

experiences (a number increasing regularly via media attention and movement activity) may have trouble seeing how current surveys relate to contemporary society (Nowakowski et al. 2016). However, as we (Sumerau et al., 2015) and others (Harrison et al., 2011) have noted, adjustments to quantitative traditions could easily help surveys reflect non-binary gender and sexual phenomena and allow more scholars entrance into these debates (see also Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015).

The ability to enter these debates in meaningful ways may be especially important amidst increased calls for public sociology (Burawoy, 2005). As departments, organizations, and universities seek greater relevance in public life, it may be useful to have quantitative data capable of speaking to emerging debates (for example, transgender rights, outcomes, and experiences). Likewise, as entire academic conferences are organized around public engagement (as has become more common in recent years), maintaining our binary models may render quantitative sociology irrelevant, as it cannot speak to an increasingly open and diverse world without data about that world. In fact, our inability to speak to prominent gender and sexuality issues in the public sphere could negatively affect important funding streams for quantitative sociology over time. The push for public sociology and increased demands for external funding may lead to necessary methodological revisions in regard to gender and sexuality.

Finally, recent years have witnessed increased recognition of sexual and gendered dynamics embedded within a wide variety of social phenomena. Despite this recognition, sexualities scholarship is often still seen as illegitimate and sexualities scholars are often stigmatized in mainstream sociology (Irvine, 2015). Likewise, despite widespread recognition of the importance of gender to all aspects of social life (Martin, 2004), it remains common for quantitative research to simply measure it in binary terms (i.e. male/female only) without engaging with existing gender theories (Avishai et al., 2015). Within a social landscape where complexities related to gender and sexuality often drive political (Heath, 2012), educational (Fields, 2008), media (Ezzell, 2009), religious (Sumerau, 2012), and familial (Elliott, 2012) debates, revising quantitative 'traditions' (Goffman, 1959) that have not caught up with these patterns may represent an effective mechanism for integrating sexual and gender scholarship throughout our discipline and revealing missing components of other social outcomes and disparities.

Although the aforementioned patterns reveal the potential of revising our existing quantitative practices, it is important to note that accomplishing such a transition will involve confronting many challenges. As we have noted elsewhere, shifting our sampling and measurement strategies will require making sense of and potentially adjusting longstanding traditions concerning validity, reliability, representativeness, and variable construction in quantitative sociology (see e.g. Nowakowski et al., 2016; Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015 for discussion of these challenges and potential solutions). At the same time, collecting data on gender and sexualities will require dramatic adjustments to current data collection and design practices in the discipline (Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015), and may

require reevaluating the way we interpret, utilize, and discuss results from existing large-scale surveys in the field (Nowakowski et al., 2016). While the following sections outline initial approaches researchers may adopt to begin transitioning from binary to more inclusive quantitative practices, it is important to remember that broader changes in quantitative sociological practice will likely take much time, debate, and consideration in the coming years.

How to queer quantitative sociology

In the discussion that follows, we outline two methods whereby quantitative sociology could begin to embrace non-binary and self-report based data to begin capturing the empirical complexities of contemporary gender and sexualities. While there are likely many more revisions that could be made in this regard (see Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015), we offer the following two, both because they could offer substantial advancements in quantitative sociology, and because they only require relatively minor reforms of existing quantitative practices (see also Nowakowski et al, 2016 and Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015 for other suggestions).

Expanding gender response options

The first and easiest method whereby quantitative sociology could begin to ease out of the 'binary closet' involves simply expanding the gender response options available on survey instruments. It remains common to offer only male and female response options, but such options have long passed their usefulness for making empirical sense of a world populated by people who adopt a wide range of gender identities in practice (Schilt, 2006). Recent years have seen interdisciplinary surveys (i.e. The National Transgender Discrimination Survey) shift to offering more options for gender identity and presentation. In so doing, such surveys have revealed considerable complexity in the gender self-reports of participants and variation in outcomes related to different identifications within and beyond 'male' or 'female' (Grant et al., 2011). Further, such surveys reveal large population samples (see, for example, the 6,450 non-binary respondents in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey) missing from sociological population estimates.

Building on these insights, large-scale sociological surveys, such as the General Social Survey¹ (GSS), could revise their protocols to better capture such complexity. As Table 1 reveals, such revisions could take various forms, but in each case, the important aspect would involve beginning to capture non-binary self-reports in order to gain a better picture of current sex and gender demographics and identifications in our society (see also Nowakowski et al., 2016). As Westbrook and Saperstein (2015) suggest, this would also involve asking respondents explicitly about gender instead of continuing to simply allow interviewers to assume the gender of potential respondents. Whether quantitative sociology adopted efforts

Table 1. Expanded gender response options.¹

	Survey question	Response options
Example One	Which of the following gender identities best fits you?	Female woman Male man Intersex ² man Intersex woman Other: Please write your gender identity ³
Example Two	Which of the following sex identities best fits you?	Male Female Intersex Other: Please write your sex identity
Example Three	Which of the following gender identities best fits you?	Female woman Male man Intersex man Intersex woman Transman Transwoman Other: Please write your gender identity
Example Four	Which of the following sex categories best fits you?	Female Male Intersex
	Which of the following gender identities best fits you?	Woman Man Transgender Cisgender Genderqueer Agender Gender Fluid Bigender Androgynous Other: Please write your gender identity
Example Five	Please tell us your sex and gender identities.	Open Response respondents may write in that survey designers then code into categories

¹It is important to note that none of these options perfectly capture all possible sex and gender identifications (see also Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015). Despite this limitation in any categorical measurement, each of these options will capture more complexity than existing male/female only measures (Harrison et al., 2011).

²It is also important to note that “intersex” is currently used as both a sex and a gender identity by some people, as only a sex identity by others, and as only a gender identity by others (Davis, 2015).

³Data collection efforts may transcribe all written responses, and link these to cases for systematic analyses with other variables in a given data set (see Sumerau et al., 2015).

to provide multiple response categories (see Harrison et al., 2012) or simply added an ‘other’ option before allowing those who self-report as other to write in their gender identity (see Sumerau et al., 2015), such efforts could begin the process of providing data for exploring the entirety of gender variations within our society and in relation to varied social outcomes.

Following Grant and associates (2011; $N = 6,450$), analyses that have included response options for people who identify in non-binary ways typically reveal substantial variation between non-binary and male/female respondents (see also Sumerau et al., 2015; Harrison et al., 2012). In fact, such analyses reveal both that transgender people experience more discrimination than cisgender male/female identified respondents (Beemyn and Rankin, 2011) and that gender variant people experience more discrimination than transgender female/male identified subjects (Harrison et al., 2012). Further, they reveal that such variation may be seen in relation to educational, health-related, employment, and violence outcomes across populations (Miller and Grollman, 2015). Such findings suggest that quantitative sociology’s continued reliance on binary gender measures (especially in cases, like the GSS, where gender is assumed rather than asked explicitly, see Westbrook and Saperstein, 2015) misses variation in the ways people experience and are affected by gender in contemporary society.

By providing broader response categories on our surveys, however, quantitative sociologists could begin to explore such variation while providing sociologically informed insights about such patterns (Miller and Grollman, 2015). If sociology intends to remain at the cutting edge of empirical inquiry, then this type of revision is necessary for understanding core institutions – like family (Pfeffer, 2014), religion (Sumerau et al., 2015), employment (Schilt, 2006), medicine (Davis, 2015), and education (Grant et al., 2011) – that people experience and encounter differently based upon their current and historical social locations within existing gender norms and assumptions (see also Butler, 1990).

Expanding sexual identification methods

In contrast to quantitative renderings of gender, recent years have shown some changes within quantitative sociology concerning sexualities. Starting in 2008, for example, the General Social Survey began asking respondents for their sexual identities (i.e. ‘Which of the following best describes you?’ with responses including, ‘Gay, Lesbian or Homosexual,’ ‘Bisexual,’ ‘Heterosexual or Straight,’ ‘Don’t Know,’ ‘No Answer,’ and ‘Not Applicable’). Likewise, a handful of other national surveys (see the listing in Ivankovich et al., 2013) have begun collecting similar information. However, as Ivankovich and associates (2013) note, surveys capturing sexual identities remain rare. As a result, quantitative sociology – like other fields (see Institute of Medicine, 2011) – currently lacks systematic access to important data for understanding sexualities or the ways sexualities influence other social phenomena.

Even when surveys do contain sexual identity measures, however, quantitative sociology may run into at least two problems in their analyses. First, surveys that

have included such variables, such as the General Social Survey, often only acquire small samples of non-heterosexual people (i.e. out of 2,535 cases, only 65 (2.6%) identified as bisexual and 45 (1.7%) as gay/lesbian in the 2014 General Social Survey), and relatively large collections of missing data (i.e. 233 respondents answered 'Don't Know' or 'Not Applicable' in the 2014 General Social Survey). As a result, it may be difficult to quantitatively explore sexual variation without explicitly oversampling sexual minority groups and/or adopting methods utilized to, for example, study Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist respondents (all of which appear in smaller numbers than sexual minorities in the 2014 General Social Survey), or aggregating data across waves to obtain sample sizes necessary for significance testing.

While small sample sizes create an obstacle for quantitative sociological studies of sexualities (see also Cragun and Sumerau, 2015), rising recognition of sexual fluidity among people identifying with various sexual labels (i.e. gay, straight, bisexual or otherwise, see Burke, 2014; Diamond, 2008; Ward, 2015 for examples) presents an even bigger problem. If, for example, sexual identities do not provide a solid proxy for sexual activities (see Ward, 2015), then we may need to find other ways to measure sexualities. As a result, even including measures of sexual identity via self-reports may miss important aspects of contemporary sexualities. Developing measurements that are not dependent upon or limited to self-reported sexual identity, however, may provide a powerful picture of sexual variation and diversity, and further allow us to understand sexual experiences of people unable or unwilling to self-identify and/or self-report for a wide variety of reasons (Ward, 2015).

One way to accomplish such an approach involves shifting from self-identification measures to self-descriptive measures. In a previous study seeking to ascertain variation in attitudes toward heterosexual, gay/lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and polygamous people, for example, we employed scales whereby respondents could rank each of the groups from highest to lowest (Cragun and Sumerau, 2015). In so doing, we were able to disaggregate impressions of various sexual, gender, and relationship groups to unpack the different ways people viewed each group. As we noted at the time, this approach allowed us to go beyond previous studies focused on one or another sexual, gender, or relationship type (see Worthen, 2013 for a review of such studies), and reveal complexities within people's attitudes toward different identities and practices in isolation from and relative to one another.

As Table 2 reveals, the same type of disaggregated measurement could be employed to gain a more complex understanding of sexualities. Rather than limiting our measurements to self-reported identifications, we could employ scales to measure self-reports on many different dimensions – such as physical and intimate desire, race, gender, body types, and attraction – that influence sexual identity and practice. Considering that each of the dimensions listed in Table 2 have been shown to influence both what sexualities mean to specific people and how specific people experience their sexual and social lives (Gamson and Moon, 2004; Plummer, 2003; Schrock et al., 2014), quantitative sociologists could use these scales (individually and collectively) to dramatically expand sexual knowledge as well as our understanding of the many ways society shapes sexualities and vice versa.

In fact, the use of the scales in Table 2 could easily facilitate multiple lines of scholarship. Quantitative sociologists could, for example, explore the ways self-reported sexual identifications do or do not align with expressed descriptions. Similarly, quantitative sociologists could employ many traditional predictors – such

Table 2. Expanded sexualities measurements.¹

In the following section, please select where you believe you fit (on a scale of 0–100 with 0 being equal to the left option as defined and 100 being equal to the right option as defined) for each element.

Romantic (i.e. “I feel or desire intimate connection with others”)	Aromantic (i.e. “I do not feel or desire intimate connection with others”)
Sexual (i.e. “I enjoy and desire sexual activity with others”)	Asexual (i.e. “I do not feel or desire sexual activity with others”)
Static (i.e. “My sexual desires and partner preferences remain stable”)	Fluid (i.e. “My sexual desires and partner preferences shift regularly”)
Gendered (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain gender”)	De-gendered (i.e. “I do not care what gender my sexual and romantic partners are”)
Oriented (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain sexual orientation”)	Non-oriented (i.e. “I do not care what sexual identity my sexual and romantic partners are”)
Dominant (i.e. “I desire to always be in control in sexual and romantic endeavors”)	Submissive (i.e. “I desire to never be in control in sexual and romantic endeavors”)
Racialized (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain race”)	De-racialized (i.e. “I do not care what race my sexual and romantic partners are”)
Classed (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be of a certain economic standing”)	De-classed (i.e. “I do not care what economic standing my sexual and romantic partners have”)
Aged (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain age or age range”)	De-aged (i.e. “I do not care what age my sexual and romantic partners are”)
Nationalized (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain nationality”)	De-nationalized (i.e. “I do not care what nationality my sexual and romantic partners are”)
Bodied (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain body type”)	De-bodied (i.e. “I do not care what body type my sexual and romantic partners have”)
Religious (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be a certain religion”)	Non-religious (i.e. “I do not care what religion my sexual and romantic partners are”)
Monogamous (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must only be engaging sexually and romantically with me”)	Polyamorous (i.e. “My sexual and romantic partners must be engaging with other people sexually and romantically”)

¹It is important to note that (a) this list is by no means exhaustive in relation to dimensions of sexualities, but represents the most empirically validated elements at present in existing literature, and (b) that survey researchers could take any one or more of these measures to establish aspects of sexualities rather than necessarily utilizing all of these scales in every data collection endeavor.

as education, economic resources, religious identification, and racial self-identification to name just a few – to uncover and explore patterns in the ways people interpret and experience sexual selves and inequalities. Finally, quantitative sociologists could combine these scales with expanded gender response options (using one or both as predictors and outcomes in various studies) to map the complexities between contemporary sexual and gender experiences, identifications, and inequalities. In all these ways (and likely others), a more complex approach to measuring sexualities could produce powerful results, questions, and theoretical insights that may be missing from our discipline at present while granting us informational resources for speaking to ongoing sexual-social policy debates (see also Worthen, 2013).

Concluding remarks

If there is one constant feature of science, it may be the necessity of shifting our methodological and theoretical paradigms in relation to new empirical discoveries (Kuhn, 1962). As researchers who all regularly do quantitative and qualitative research, we argue that contemporary empirical realities necessitate transforming existing quantitative traditions. Making sense of a world where transgender, bisexual, intersex, and other gendered and sexually variant communities have come out of the closet and into increasing mainstream attention will require quantitative sociology to leave its own ‘binary closet’ behind if it hopes to speak to these important issues in the public sphere (see also Nowakowski et al., 2016).

As we have noted elsewhere (Nowakowski et al., 2016), we can look to previous and ongoing examples of methodological evolution for clues in this regard. When we look at the ways measurements of race, class, and religion have shifted and changed over time in relation to historical, ideological, and cultural shifts within given societies, for example, we can see how revising and resubmitting existing measurement and sampling strategies may lead to more nuanced and complex insights concerning social life. At the same time, the recognition of variations in what types of measurements work best in a given situation related to these measurement shifts over time (e.g. measuring class versus income or measuring belief in God versus church participation) can direct attention to the potential and possibility of adopting multiple forms of measurement and analyses concerning sexualities, gender, and other emergent social phenomena. Rather than being inherently problematic, we suggest the gaps in existing quantitative sociological methods may be viewed as an opportunity to continue the ongoing evolution of the field and the ways we make sense of diverse social issues and experience.

In fact, previous instances wherein methodological traditions have been revised to better understand shifting social phenomena suggest that increased recognition of Queer and otherwise non-binary experience is not antithetical to quantitative analysis. Rather, adjustments could expand existing gender and sexuality measurements to better explore the complexity of our contemporary social world and respond to calls for public sociology (Burawoy, 2005) that can benefit these often excluded and ignored populations. Furthermore, implementing these

developments could reveal wide avenues of unexplored terrain for a whole new generation of quantitative sociologists. Like any coming-out experience (Adams, 2011), however, we recognize that such changes may be difficult for scholars trained via binary understandings of the social world. It is with this difficulty in mind that we have offered concrete options that may help quantitative sociology ‘come out of the closet’ and reclaim its empirical and methodological rigor.

Note

1. The General Social Survey (GSS) is a large-scale survey administered across the USA that measures Americans’ attitudes about a variety of topics.

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