

Capturing diverse responses across sexual orientation and gender identities: Striving toward accuracy and inclusivity

THE PROJECT

During 2017-2018, OHSU Evaluation Core partnered with a small, volunteer-run organization to help them build internal evaluation capacity. This organization, whose mission is to make schools and communities safer for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, had never collected data on their organization and its efforts prior to this partnership. Through a series of collaborative meetings and a workshop designed to introduce its board members to the ideas and scope of evaluation efforts, the organization decided to collect data on who their events were reaching.

To that end, an information sheet was created by OHSU Evaluation Core. This sheet was designed to collect anonymous informational and demographic data from all organization event attendees. At the request of the organization's board members, data on sexual orientation and gender identity were collected using open-ended responses. While this method for collecting demographic information is highly inclusive, it introduces some challenges for analyzing data. This document describes the process taken by OHSU Evaluation Core to explore data analysis and visualization options for open-ended demographic responses.

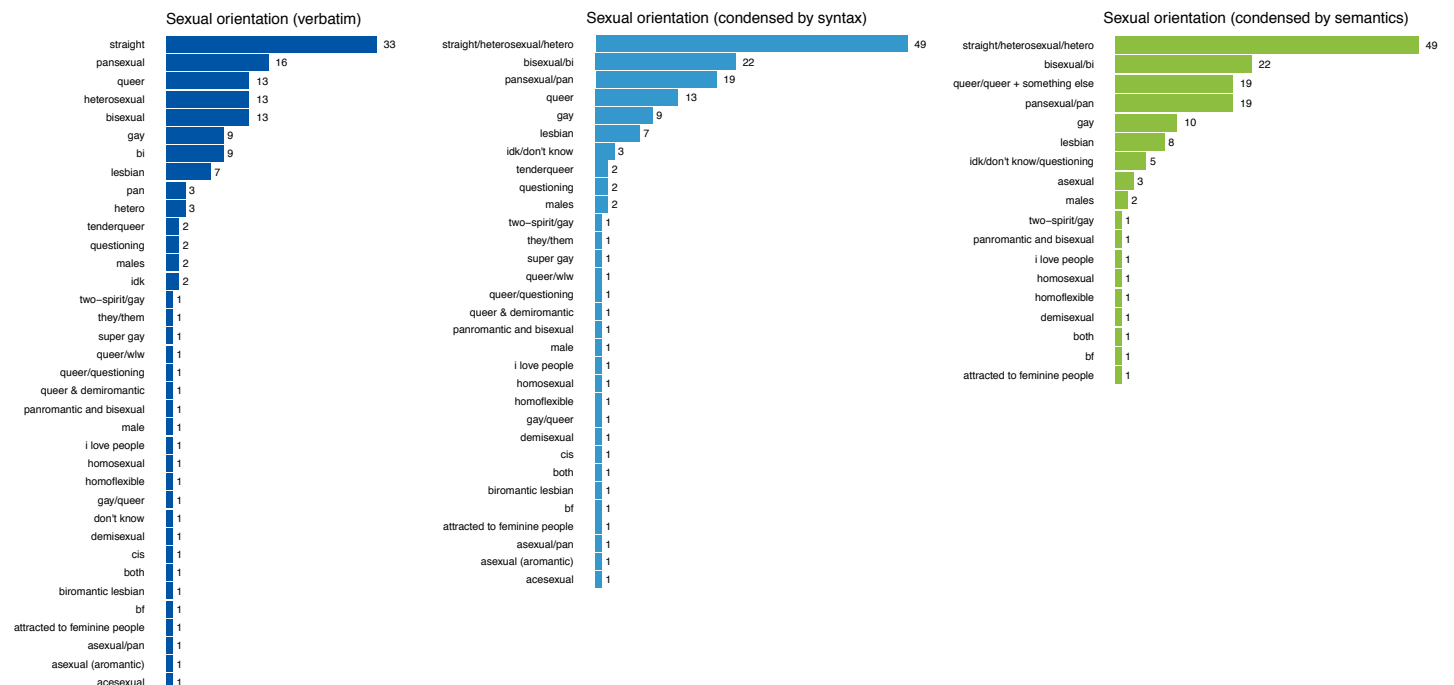
OUR APPROACH

During the partnership's two-year timeframe, the organization collected data from 168 people who participated in either an online member survey or one of five sponsored events to develop their reach profile. Responses to the sexual orientation and gender identity questions were entered verbatim into an Excel spreadsheet, and responses were tabulated and graphed.

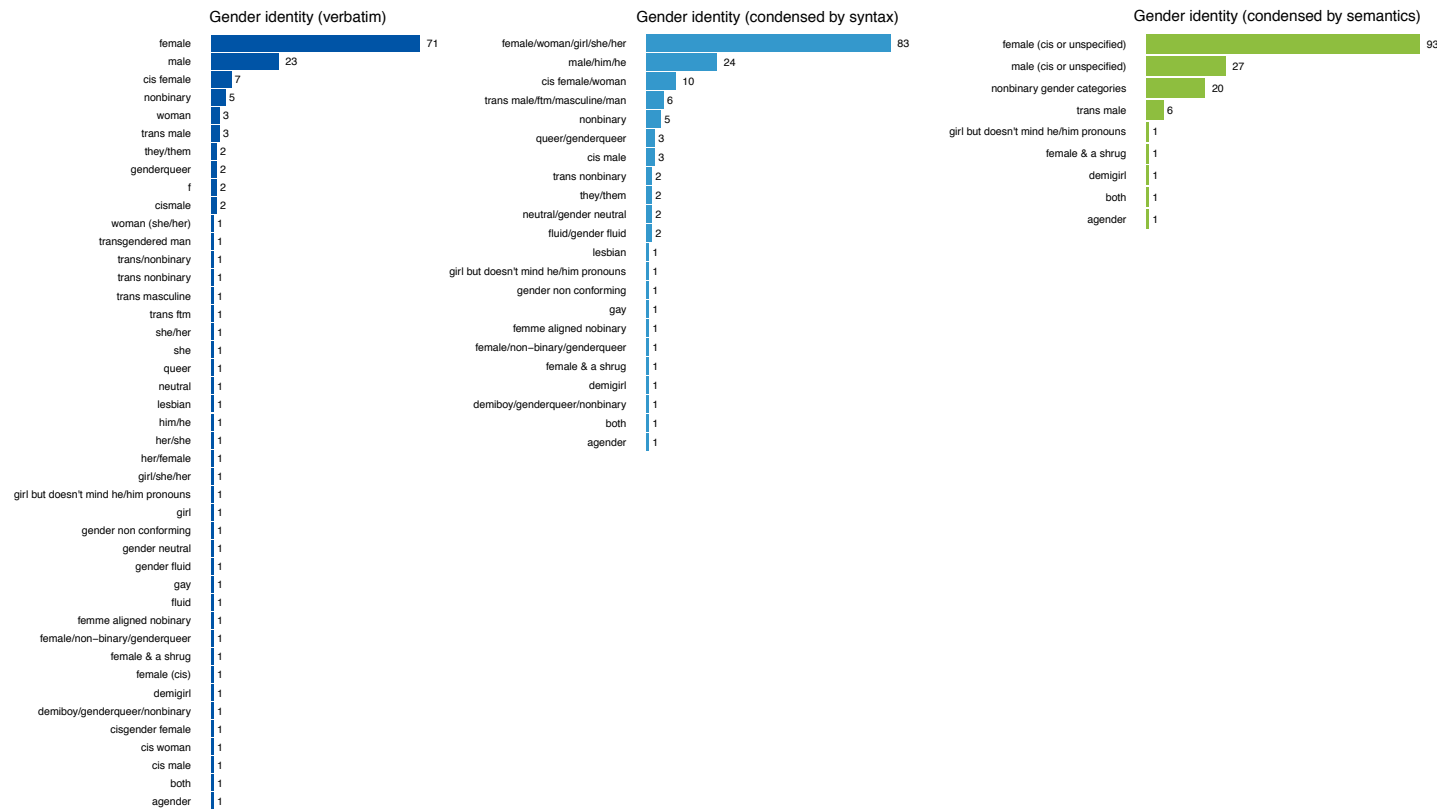
Responses were first graphed verbatim (see Figures 1a and 2a). Given the long tails of single response in these two initial graphs, we set out to condense terms with similar meaning. Due to the sensitive nature of all demographic information, including sexual orientation and gender identity, we separated this into two rounds of condensing: a more conservative round of combining terms that had similar syntax or wording, followed by a more challenging round of combining terms by similar semantic meaning.

The round of syntax condensing included such combinations as *straight* with *hetero* and *heterosexual*, *pan* with *pansexual*, *queer* with *genderqueer*, and all terms and pronouns describing females (*female*, *woman*, *f*, *girl*, *she*, *her*) (see Appendix for a full list of combinations).

Figures 1a, 1b, and 1c.



Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c.



For the second, or semantic, round of combining terms, we consulted with other academic, professional, and community experts who specialize in working with people of different sexual orientations and gender identities. This resulted in further condensing the responses based on meaning, or semantics. This round of semantic condensing included combinations such as *questioning* with *I don't know* (though there was some discussion as to whether these are the same thing), any sexual orientation response that included the word *queer* (though there were many variations), *cis female* with unspecified female terms, and all nonbinary gender categories (*nonbinary*, *queer*, *gender fluid*, *gender neutral*, and *gender non-conforming*).

Each round of condensing left the figures with shorter tails (see Figures 1b, 1c, 2b, and 2c). While this final result still leaves the data display with uncombined responses, it reduces the number of single responses from 22 to 9 for sexual orientation and 33 to 5 for gender identity.

CONCLUSION

OHSU Evaluation Core sought out a solution to simultaneously honor a community-driven data collection process and display those results in a way that is meaningful and accessible. Through a series of data condensing that relied on academic, professional, and community experts, we created a final data display that greatly reduced the number of single-item responses. Through this method, we believe we were able to both capture and honor diversity across identities as well as

report results in a meaningful and practical way. Others can collect data on sexual orientation and gender identity through open-ended response and use a similar condensing process to display data.

CONSIDERATIONS

Be aware of the assumptions made when condensing data as they may detract from the authenticity of open-ended responses. There may not always be agreement about whether and how terms should be combined, and in this case it's important to note that the individuals who provided these responses were not involved in the decision-making about how their responses were handled. As an example of these assumptions, during a presentation of this work at the 2019 American Evaluation Association Conference, an attendee asked why we chose to combine *male* and *cis-male* but not include *trans male* in this same category. This question highlights assumptions about the default category being cis and demonstrates how transparency in condensing decisions is of utmost importance. It also further emphasizes the need to include a variety of expertise when making decisions about which identities to combine.

Scalability of this approach may be an issue. While we combined terms by hand, we believe that people trained in machine learning may be able to create rules that would allow for larger data sets that use open-ended responses to be displayed in a similar manner.

SUGGESTED APPROACHES FOR COLLECTING AND ANALYZING OPEN-ENDED DATA ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

If you are interested in collecting sexual orientation and gender identity in an open-ended way:

- Consider how you will use the information you collect. If you will not use the data, don't collect it (this is true for all demographic information).
- Determine what level of data analysis is needed for your intended audience. Not all organizations need their data condensed before being displayed; a word cloud or list of responses may suffice.
- Utilize stakeholder input to help you decide how to condense and display responses. If possible, seek input from the individuals or groups providing the responses.
- Be transparent about the processes and decisions made when condensing data.

OTHER PRACTICES FOR COLLECTING DATA ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

If you want to make sure your questions on sexual orientation and gender identity are inclusive, but not necessarily open-ended, consider the following:

- For gender, do not limit response options to *Male* and *Female*.
- When using online survey forms, randomize the order of responses so the first option isn't always "straight" for sexual orientation or "male" for gender.
- Allow respondents to self-describe their sexual orientation or gender identity. Avoid using the word *Other* for this option; instead, try *Prefer to self-describe*: and leave room for open text.
- Allow respondents to check more than one box in a fixed response format.
- Whenever possible, include a *Prefer not to answer* option, or make the question optional.
- Ask about gender and trans separately, as trans is not considered to be a gender (again, only ask this question if it is useful for your research).

Example:

How do you identify your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary
- Prefer to self-describe: _____
- Prefer not to answer

Would you describe yourself as transgender?

- Yes
- No

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on collecting data on sexual orientation and gender identity, we recommend the following resources:

Current Measures of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Federal Surveys

This working paper describes and documents how sexual orientation and gender identity are currently measured in U.S. Federal surveys (published in 2016).

https://dpcpsi.nih.gov/sites/default/files/WorkingGroupPaper1_CurrentMeasures_08-16_508.pdf

Collecting Transgender-Inclusive Gender Data in Workplace and Other Surveys

This article by the Human Rights Campaign outlines options for asking about gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation for programmatic purposes.

<https://www.hrc.org/resources/collecting-transgender-inclusive-gender-data-in-workplace-and-other-surveys>

Finding the Right Words: LGBTQ+ Glossary

This glossary created by the It Gets Better Project includes videos to help further understand the labels that some LGBTQ+ people use. Glossary also available as a downloadable PDF (free with registration).

<https://itgetsbetter.org/blog/lesson/glossary/>

APPENDIX: COMBINATIONS MADE BY ROUND

Sexual Orientation

Combinations by syntax:

- *Straight, heterosexual, hetero*
- *Pan, pansexual*
- *Bi, bisexual*
- *IDK, don't know* (referred to as *I don't know* below)

Combinations by semantics:

- *Questioning, I don't know*
- *Asexual/pan, asexual (aromantic), acesexual*
- *Gay, super gay*
- *Lesbian, biromantic lesbian*
- Any response that included the word *queer* (*queer, tenderqueer, gay/queer, queer & demiromantic, queer/questioning, queer/wlw*)
- Remove terms that seem like gender/pronoun (*cis, male, they/them*)

Gender Identity

Combinations by syntax:

- Female terms/pronouns (*female, woman, f, girl/she/her, her/female, her/she, she, she/her, woman (she/her)*) (referred to as *female* below)
- *Male, him/he* (referred to as *male* below)
- *Cis female, cis woman, cisgender female, female (cis)* (referred to as *cis female* below)
- *Trans male, trans ftm, trans masculine, transgendered man*
- *Queer, genderqueer* (referred to as *queer* below)
- *Cismale, cis male*
- *Fluid, gender fluid* (referred to as *gender fluid* below)
- *Neutral, gender neutral* (referred to as *gender neutral* below)
- *Trans nonbinary, trans/nonbinary*

Combinations by semantics:

- *Female, cis female*
- *Male, cis male*
- All nonbinary gender categories (*nonbinary, queer, gender fluid, gender neutral, demiboy/genderqueer/nonbinary, female/non-binary-genderqueer, femme aligned nonbinary, gender non-conforming*)
- Remove terms that seem like sexual orientation (*gay, lesbian*)