

Categorizing Identities: Race, Gender, Disability, and Sexual Orientation

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In survey research, the treatment of demographic information often ignores the complexity of identity. Instead of treating aspects of identity as clear-cut, simple questions, self-categorization theory illustrates the fluid and contextual nature of self-identification (Abdelal, 2009; Onorato & Turner, 2004; Turner, Oakes, & Haslam, 1994). Accounting for the fluidity and multiplicity of individual identity in survey research can be difficult. For example, the U.S. Census in 2000 was the first time that respondents could select more than one racial category. Certainly, this change in the survey could lead to more accurate representation of individual identity, but there may be disadvantages to augmenting demographic questions, such as difficulty comparing to data from previous years or unintended consequences like multiracial individuals being 'lumped' together despite having very different experiences. For institutional researchers, collecting demographic data can create competing priorities between uniform data reporting for national agencies, specialized information gathering for institutional partners, and inclusive question wording that represent the complexity of identity.

Session Goals

The goals of good survey practice can be in contrast to the variable and complex nature of identity. This session will focus on how to balance the competing needs of creating clear, concise, and easily answerable questions on aspects of student identity which are sensitive, complex, and not easily defined. Participants will share ideas about how to balance best practices in writing survey items and recognizing the complexity of respondent identities. Participants will also share their challenges and solutions for collecting information about complex aspects of a student's identity.

NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement)

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) annually collects information at hundreds of four-year colleges and universities about student participation in programs and activities that institutions provide for their learning and personal development. More specifically, NSSE asks students how often they engage in various effective educational practices as well as their perceptions of their college environment and perceived learning gains. nsse.iub.edu

Discussion Questions

- What demographics are of interest to study at your institution?
- What challenges have you faced in trying to collect demographic information from students?
- How does your institution ask about complex identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation?
- How are students categorized in results and reporting at your institution?
- What's the right balance between a good survey question and the desire to be inclusive?
- There is no perfect survey question, how can we get closer?

Abdelal, R. (2009). *Measuring identity: a guide for social scientists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Onorato, R., & Turner, J. (2004). Fluidity in the self-concept: the shift from personal to social identity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 34(3), 257-278.

Turner, J. C., Oakes, P. J., & Haslam, S. (1994). Self and collective: cognition and social context. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20, 454-463.

The Evolution of NSSE Demography

RACE/ETHNICITY

2012

What is your racial or ethnic identification?

(Select only one.)

- American Indian or other Native American
- Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander
- Black or African American
- White (non-Hispanic)
- Mexican or Mexican American
- Puerto Rican
- Other Hispanic or Latino
- Multiracial
- Other
- I prefer not to respond

2013

What is your racial or ethnic identification?

(Select all that apply.)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other
- I prefer not to respond

GENDER

2012

Your sex:

- Male
- Female

2013

What is your gender?

- Male
- Female

2014

What is your gender identity?

- Man
- Woman
- Another gender identity, please specify
- I prefer not to respond

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

2013

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Questioning or unsure
- I prefer not to respond

2014

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Another sexual orientation, please specify
- Questioning or unsure
- I prefer not to respond

DISABILITY

2014

Which of the following have been diagnosed? [If answered "yes" to having been diagnosed with a disability of impairment]

(Select all that apply.)

- A sensory impairment (vision or hearing)
- A mobility impairment
- A learning disability (e.g., ADHD, dyslexia)
- A mental health disorder
- A disability or impairment not listed above