

HOW TO WRITE GENDER-INCLUSIVE DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

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This check sheet is for those interested in how to write more gender-inclusive demographic questions. It provides examples of both open-ended and categorical questions that can be used across disciplines.

WHY IS WRITING GENDER-INCLUSIVE QUESTIONS IMPORTANT?

While hazards and disasters researchers have long called for more gender-inclusive research (Enarson, Fothergill, and Peek, 2018; Gaillard, Gorman-Murray, and Fordham 2017), research including transgender and/or nonbinary identities remains relatively uncommon (Fraser 2018). This is potentially problematic because when the full spectrum of gender identities is not included, studies risk 1) nonresponse bias (Slade et al. 2020), 2) misgendering participants (Cameron and Stinson 2019), or 3) mischaracterizing and therefore misrepresenting the experience of transgender or nonbinary participants (Broussard, Warner, and Pope 2017). In short, participants who don't feel represented may skip identity questions or answer them inaccurately, which leads to less accurate results (Vriesendorp and Wilson 2024).

Writing gender-inclusive demographic questions is an ethical and inclusive way of capturing a more expansive range of identities (GenIUSS Group 2014). Taking such an approach can help ensure that data more accurately represents study populations while also building trust with queer communities (Moreira et al. 2023). This inclusion also resists dominant Western assumptions about sex, gender, and cisheteronormative power structures (Broussard, Warner, and Pope 2017). By going beyond the two-sex model, which entails offering only male and female response options, researchers resist reinforcing the gender binary and can decolonize their research.

WHAT DO GENDER-INCLUSIVE QUESTIONS LOOK LIKE?

To develop gender-inclusive demographic questions, researchers can use open-ended or categorical approaches. Examples of both approaches follow.

Open-Ended Examples

An open-ended approach includes the option for the participant to write in their current gender identity (Figures 1 and 2) or to choose a non-response option (Figure 2 only). Researchers consider the open-ended response approach to be the most holistic and inclusive (Fraser 2018).

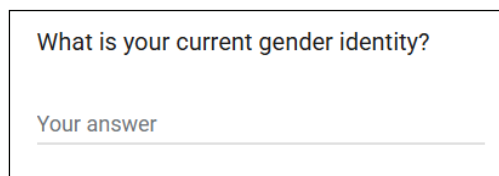
A rectangular box containing the text "What is your current gender identity?" at the top. Below this text is a horizontal line for writing, preceded by the label "Your answer".

Figure 1. Open-ended question (adapted from Slade et al. 2020).

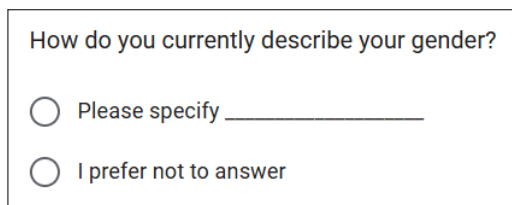
A rectangular box containing the text "How do you currently describe your gender?" at the top. Below this text are two radio button options: "Please specify _____" and "I prefer not to answer".

Figure 2. Open-ended question with non-response option example of gender-inclusive question (adapted from Hughes et al. 2022).

Open-ended questions are advantageous because they help to:

- Build trust between researchers and participants (Hughes et al. 2022; Moreira et al. 2023; Vriesendorp and Wilson 2024).
 - Trust is built by giving autonomy and control to participants to name their current gender identity (Vriesendorp and Wilson 2024). It also avoids othering and alienating participants (Moreira et al. 2023; Vriesendorp and Wilson 2024).
- Create more accurate, representative, and flexible data (Cameron and Stinton 2019; Fraser 2018; Hughes et al. 2022; Slade 2020).
 - Providing open-ended questions such as those shown above reduces bias (Hughes et al. 2022) and minimizes assumptions of which gender identities may be most appropriate for a study (Cameron and Stinton 2019).
 - In addition, such an approach also recognizes that people's gender identity may change over time, and therefore the inclusion of the word "currently," as shown in both figures, matters for capturing gender fluidity.

While open-ended questions have their advantages, there are also drawbacks. For example, it takes more time to code open-ended responses, and therefore these options may not be useful or possible in studies that involve large populations. Further, open-ended questions may be less likely to capture participants who identify as transgender and may be more likely to elicit untruthful or "mischievous responses" (Fraser 2018). Options for addressing these concerns include:

- Running frequencies on response types to standardize data for analysis (Hughes et al. 2022). This entails counting how many times a response is given using data analysis software.
- Adding additional questions about sex assigned at birth and/or transgender identity (Fraser 2018; Hughes et al. 2022; McGuire et al. 2018).
- Identifying "mischievous" responses and then categorizing, removing, or assigning them as "missing" (Fraser 2018).

Categorical Examples

A categorical approach offers a series of close-ended, gender-inclusive options that are non-ordered and distinct. This approach can allow participants to select a single answer (see Figure 3) or to select multiple answers along with a self-response option (see Figures 4 and 5). It is also possible to include a separate question about transgender identity (see Figure 6). The terminology you use for each option may differ depending on the geographic and/or cultural focus of your research (Brown and Herman 2020).

In research, we often must present demographic information in categories. We understand these labels are limiting. If you had to select one of the options below, which one best describes your gender identity?

- ☐ Agender
- ☐ Genderfluid
- ☐ Genderqueer
- ☐ Gender questioning
- ☐ Māhū, muxe, or two-spirit
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Nonbinary
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

Figure 3. Categorical question which allows for a single answer to gender identity (adapted from Hughes et al. 2022).

Which option best describes your gender identity? (multiple selections possible)

- ☐ Agender
- ☐ Genderfluid
- ☐ Genderqueer
- ☐ Indigenous or other cultural minority (e.g. two-spirit)
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Nonbinary/nonconforming
- ☐ Woman
- ☐ I self-describe as _____
- ☐ I prefer not to say

Figure 4. Categorical question which allows for self-response in addition to multiple response options (adapted from Moreira et al. 2023).

What best describes your current gender identity?

- ☐ Male or primarily masculine
- ☐ Female or primarily feminine
- ☐ Neither male or female (e.g. gender non-conforming, genderfluid, nonbinary, agender)
- ☐ Indigenous or other cultural gender minority (e.g. two-spirit)
- ☐ Another gender (please specify _____)
- ☐ I prefer not to say

Figure 5. Categorical question that allows for self-response in addition to other response options (adapted from Slade et al. 2020).

Do you identify as transgender?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I prefer not to answer

Figure 6. Categorical question that asks about transgender identity (adapted from Hughes et al. 2022).

Categorical questions are advantageous because they:

- Avoid othering and potentially alienating the participants (Moreira et al. 2023).
 - Offering a comprehensive list of options such as those shown above can ensure that participants' gender identity is available for them to choose.
- Minimize risk of missing or non-response data (Fraser 2018; Vriesendorp and Wilson 2024).
 - By including a larger range of possible options, participants may be more likely to complete these questions.
- Are simpler to code because using a categorical approach to gender identity allows researchers to easily run analyses on each variable (Fraser 2018).

Categorical questions that include additional options can also be problematic. They obviously increase the length of the demographic questions in any given survey. They also, even with additional options available, still may not fully capture all possible responses (Cameron and Stinton 2019). Further, they may be less likely to capture participants who identify as transgender (Fraser 2018). Options for addressing these concerns include:

- Allowing participants to select more than one option (Fraser 2018).
- Including an open-ended question in addition to the categorical question responses (Fraser 2018).
- Using precise terminology to capture demographic information that is relevant to your research (Moreira et al. 2023).
- Adding a question about sex assigned at birth and/or transgender identity (Fraser 2018; Hughes et al. 2022; McGuire et al. 2018).

CONCLUSION

Using gender-inclusive demographic questions is an effective way of capturing data on marginalized gender identities and allowing participants to self-identify. This check sheet offers an overview of open-ended as well as categorical approaches that include transgender and gender non-conforming response options. This check sheet is meant to serve as a general guide to encourage consideration of gender inclusive possibilities in collecting demographic information. Each study, of course, may demand different options, language, or approaches to best honor the methodological approach or populations included in the research.

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