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Asking about Gender & Sexual Orientation in your Questionnaire

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Asking about Gender & Sexual Orientation in your Questionnaire

Asking about Gender, Sexual Orientation and whether someone is Trans is a tricky subject. There's some advice out there, but some of it is good, some of it is bad and some of it is just outdated. So here's another guide based on personal experience and advice ...

Defining principles:

1. Do you need to know?
2. Be as inclusive as you can
3. Avoid terms which will put people off answering (this can include Cis/Heterosexual people too)

What happens if you get it wrong?

I have seen many examples of questionnaires with confusing, badly written or plainly insulting questions on them. More examples of this than of people getting it right.

If you get these questions wrong it may lead to participants approximating the answers, to participants backing out, or to a backlash against your research. None of these are things you want so it's worth thinking about it carefully before creating your questionnaire.

Why do you need to know?

The most important question (arguably even more important now we're in a post-GDPR world) is do you really need to know? Are you dividing your participants into Male and Female just because everyone does? Is there a valid research question associated with gender or sexual orientation, or is it simply a way of dividing the demographic.

If you don't know why you're asking it...don't ask it!

Asking about Gender

Firstly ask yourself again why you're asking. Depending on why you're asking you might need to tweak your approach.

Option 1

What is your gender?

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other: _____

Are you looking to divide your participants into 2 different groups, a male and a female one?

A question asking for Male, Female and Other with a space for people to fill in their gender might work for you. Respondents who pick other might not fit into your categories, but giving the option will keep those respondents in the research.

'Prefer not to say' is another option which is good to include, but may depend on your research. If you need gender to be associated with results, then there's no point in having a 'prefer not to say' option, instead it would be better to mention in your preamble that gender is an integral part of your research. If having gender associated with the result is not as important to you as getting more participants then it's a useful option to help include people who do not want to share their gender.

It's tempting to leave out the space next to 'other' for people to fill in their gender, however a simple 'other' can lead to participants feeling excluded or insulted. Adding a write-in box can keep these participants engaged.

The downside of a write-in box, if you are interested in the data from participants who do not identify as either Male or Female, is that you will probably get as many different answers as people who fill it in.

Option 2

If you're interested in gender variation beyond Male and Female a question such as this would be more appropriate:

Gender

Check as many as are appropriate

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Non-Binary / Genderqueer

☐ Prefer not to say

☐ Other:

You can divide the Non-Binary/Genderqueer option into further groups if you would like, but this works well as an umbrella term to include people who do not identify as Male or Female. There are a large range of other terms that are sometimes used by people to describe their gender. You won't be able to cover all of these, and unless this is a specifically LGBT+ survey, you may end up confusing and/or annoying some of your other participants. You may find that people want to write their specific gender identity in, so it is still useful to include an 'Other' option with a write-in box to allow for all participants to feel included.

Allowing respondents to check as many boxes as are appropriate, although creating more work for data analysis, will allow you to gain a more nuanced view of your participant's gender.

Asking about Sexual Orientation

Sexuality (Confidential, for data analysis)*

Check as many as are appropriate

☐ Gay/Lesbian

☐ Heterosexual

☐ Bisexual / Pansexual

☐ Asexual/Aromantic

☐ Prefer not to say

☐ Other:

This form divides LGB+ identities into the four main groups. As with gender, the aim is to allow people to feel included, but without having to deal with an enormous amount of written-in identities.

Gay, Heterosexual and Bisexual are fairly common and would usually be included by default. Asexual/Aromantic is an additional option that I would recommend including and as with gender, the 'prefer not to say' and 'other' (with a fill in field) are useful but may depend on the research being carried out.

In our example above, we've included Gay/Lesbian instead of just Gay because while Gay is sometimes used as an umbrella term, it can also be associated with only Male sexuality. We've included both Bisexual and Pansexual as both terms are fairly common.

A further option that could be used is Queer. While this has been largely taken back by the LGBT+ community, and is the chosen identity for a growing group of people, some people would consider it a term of abuse. It can also be problematic for research purposes as it covers a range of different identities and is also related to the gender spectrum. It is a term that you are likely to have written in by participants and it is becoming fairly common as a self-definition, but think carefully about whether it's inclusion is useful as an option in your research.

Asking about whether someone is Trans

It's important to not simply include trans status in the gender question - asking someone to decide between e.g. identifying as 'a trans woman' or 'a woman' is insulting.

Two main approaches are usually taken. Either:

Do you consider yourself to be Trans?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ Prefer not to say
- ☐ Other:

This wording works well for the LGBT+ community who are reasonably comfortable with terms such as Trans.

Sometimes people will use trans* as an umbrella term to explicitly include all individuals who do not have a cis-gendered identity. However, this term has fallen out of favour as it implies that there are a group of people who are not quite trans enough to be included without the *. It is now considered better practice to leave out the *.

Or:

Do you identify as the gender you were assigned at birth?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe
- ☐ Prefer not to say

If using this type of question it is important to get the wording right and not use phrases such as 'the gender you were born'.

Summary

When you're writing these types of questions for your survey, first consider what you need to know and how you can get that information. Then consider your participants, put yourself in their shoes, are you being insulting or dismissive? Have you made it difficult for people to answer truthfully? Have you considered how members of minority groups within the LGBT+ spectrum will answer your questionnaire?

If in doubt, ask.

Other Resources

Oxford University (2018). Asking survey questions about gender identity. Accessed 19/06/2018
<https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/eop/transgender/transgenderguidance/10askingsurveyquestionsaboutgenderidentity/>

Stonewall (2018). Do Ask, Do Tell. Accessed 19/06/2018
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