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Katherine Deibel

Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, katheride@pcom.edu

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Survey Headaches

Katherine Deibel

*Keywords: survey, self-identification, academia, inclusive data collection,
microaggressions*

*A climate survey to determine the campus's feeling of safety and inclusion
after a violent incident*

*A climate survey to establish a baseline on diversity, inclusion, and equity
experiences at a university*

*A research study to explore impostor syndrome across gender beyond the
traditional binary*

You would hope that these well-intended data collection efforts would do their best to be welcoming, inclusive, and safe. Yet, all too commonly, these efforts fail in asking the question “What is your gender?” Too many times, I have felt othered or outright excluded as a trans woman by the way that question and its answers are phrased. The same transphobic errors happen again and again and have left me in tears each and every time. I wish those were tears of laughter at the ineptitude of the researchers, but more often it’s a reminder that trans people like myself do not exist in the eyes of the survey makers. In the act of asking a simple demographic question, a person can experience systemic hate and bias. And that experience of bigotry can drive a person away from participating in a survey, destroying the diversity representation we all claim to desire.

University of Washington Climate Survey

It was late August in 2017 when I sat down to fill out a campus diversity climate survey for the University of Washington (UW). As was a common and, as of 2021, still ongoing trend in higher ed, the university wanted to gather data on how included and safe everyone felt on campus. Admittedly, my answers were not going to be great. As a trans woman who had transitioned fifteen years earlier as a grad student at that university, I had seen a gradual slide away from what had been fairly supportive actions and policies. Notably that January, Milo Yiannopoulos had been brought on campus despite much outcry regarding his hatemongering, including the transphobic mocking of a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student in December. Thus, the university that said it embraces diversity and promises a welcoming and safe environment showed their true colors as the leadership argued the importance of protecting hate speech. They took back the promise of a safe campus. Staff were advised to leave work early to avoid the expected massive, and likely violent, protests. That former sense of safety and inclusion was further shattered that night with an actual shooting on campus. For me personally, I got to enjoy how the press's photograph of the shooter was taken only a hundred yards or so outside my office space in Suzzallo Library on the famous stairwells.

And then I read that first question: "What is your gender? Are you a: Man, Woman, Transgender Man, or Transgender Woman?" I bristled immediately. That question has so many flaws, including but not limited to its strict adherence to the gender binary. Personally, I reeled in pain and anger at the implicit othering. **REAL** men and **REAL** women are not transgender. If you are trans, you're not truly man or woman. Thank you so much for that EpiPen of dysphoria straight to my heart!! I closed the survey right then and never returned to it.

A part of me regretted doing that, not just because I knew that getting survey responses can be like pulling teeth. At that time, I had already announced that I was leaving my position as web applications specialist at the University of Washington Libraries to become the Inclusion

& Accessibility Librarian at Syracuse University. In less than a month, I would be taking on a much more active role in promoting diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in libraries. I already had experience advocating for disability access but admittedly felt worried about my qualifications for promoting inclusion more generally. That diversity climate survey really interested me for my future work directions.

Syracuse University Climate Survey

Three years later, I found myself again looking at a diversity climate survey for the university I worked at. In Seattle, that survey was motivated, in part, by a transphobic asswipe guest speaker on campus and subsequent campus shooting the same night. Although not as violent a motivation as a shooting, Syracuse University (SU) had its own recent spate of hate. Multiple racist and antisemitic incidents motivated and spurred the need for massive inclusive change. Since everything must be data-driven, the university commissioned an external party to conduct a campus climate survey on diversity and inclusion. Despite serving on some institutional inclusion groups, I was not involved in the crafting of the survey. I did have some hopes, though, as the company chosen had a good track record of doing the same at other universities.

That did not happen. As has been my experience with these climate surveys, the first questions are always the demographic ones. In this case, there were two transphobic questions. First, the survey asked for my sex (as in male, female, or intersex). Then, it asked for my gender with a single choice between Man, Woman, Transgender/Gender-non-conforming, and a fill-in text option if your preferred response was not given. I learned later that, if you chose the Transgender option, the next page of the survey would include a question asking for clarification about your identity. To be perfectly clear, you only discovered this if you chose Transgender. There was no way to know that otherwise.

This is the other way gender survey questions turn transphobic. While the UW question othered trans status, this question instead outright cleaved away part of my identity. I identify as a trans woman. I

am a woman and transgender. This question required me to deny one if I were to answer.

The whole of my gender identity is more than the sum of its separate parts. I am a woman. I am trans. Making me choose only one is to deny my existence. I cannot separate out my experiences of one from the other. And yet that survey, as far as I could determine, demanded I do exactly that. Asking me to choose only woman or only transgender diminishes me. And while I could have utilized the survey's fill-in text option, that itself comes off as othering as it still implies that I can't belong in either group.

I wish I had abandoned the survey then as I had with the UW survey. Instead, I reluctantly persevered due to my role as a DEIA advocate on campus. After all, I had encouraged the libraries' staff to take the survey. I ultimately listed myself as a Woman. But I could not sit in silence, so I immediately contacted the survey company and the campus's chief diversity officer about my concerns. I even apologized to members of the library staff I had encouraged to participate in the survey, since I had potentially exposed trans colleagues to the same abuse. I had to apologize and warn others.

Needless to say, I made waves that were not fully welcome. The dean of the libraries and the chief diversity officer responded. The survey company immediately responded in email in defense of their survey. A virtual meeting was arranged where I would talk directly to the survey people. The diversity officer and my dean would be there, too, alongside the interim head of the university's LGBT center. Although I cannot fully confirm it, I greatly suspect that I was the lone, uppity trans person in a meeting of cis people wanting to stem a crisis.¹

1. I do want to clarify that despite their being cisgender (to the best of my knowledge), I absolutely hold no ill will regarding either the chief diversity officer nor the head of the LGBT center. I worked with both gentlemen multiple times fruitfully and with respect. Both even kindly reached out at times to make sure I was taking care of myself as I advocated for others. Still, fighting against the obstinance regarding trans rights in higher education, their cis allyship went unheard in their attempts to face and fight back against the embedded power and privilege of the status quo.

I reckon the purpose of that meeting was mostly to assuage me and prevent me from making more noise. They also stated they were hoping to learn from me as if I could speak on behalf of all trans people on campus. While I do have some social research experience, it is not in gender studies and is by no means strong enough to be advisory. Much of the meeting was a rearticulation of the survey company's defense against my objections, my responses to them, and their continued deflection of those criticisms:

- They mentioned how the survey's questions had been vetted by a major university's LGBT center. Given the rapid changes in trans rights advocacy in recent years, I asked how recent that vetting was and if a trans rights specific group could also be consulted. No response.
- I asked why both sex and gender were asked for and how that data would be used. I was repeatedly informed that they understood how a person's notion of their sex could change on a daily basis. Honestly, I am still confused to this day exactly what they meant. My only certainty is that it did not pertain to my question about how the data would be used.
- I continued to ask for details about how they would use the two sets of collected data. Would they use the sex or gender answers to split the responses into groups for statistical analyses? Would they somehow use both and perhaps operate perverse logic about them? For example, would some sick logic take a person saying male and trans man and "correct" it as having a female sex? Despite my queries for some transparency, I was told how much they understand the flexibility of sex and gender in some people's lives.
- The survey software itself was blamed for its lack of flexibility in that survey logic could not add the question until the next page. I pointed out several ways they could have addressed that issue, none of them unique to the software.
- Most importantly, they kept emphasizing that all the questions were optional. As they insisted, anyone could "...omit responses to any

questions they feel uncomfortable with or would prefer not to answer.” I kept reminding them that a campus climate survey’s main purpose was to get insights about the comfort people at SU have around their diversities. If the design of the survey makes some underrepresented groups uncomfortable to answer questions directly relevant to their identities, how are their experiences to be represented? If I skip questions abusive to my identity, how do I get represented? How is that not silencing?

The conversation endlessly returned to the importance of science and statistical rigor and the problem with capturing small group representation. It came off to me as lip service. Here I was, providing comments and citations for how to better capture trans representation in surveys to address their expressed concerns. Instead, I was repeatedly informed of how their method was not harmful. And speaking of harm, at no point did I ever hear any acknowledgment of what I was doing. Despite the barrage of transphobia happening in society, I dared to out myself to these strangers and rationally discuss how to avoid the presumably unintended transphobia they had proliferated. I mentioned the emotional labor of doing that. I got thanked for providing some links. That’s it.

That meeting ended with everyone agreeing the matter was resolved. I did not object. Agreeing to the meeting was a mistake on my part. It was never going to change anything. Afterwards, the dean of SU Libraries wanted to send an email to staff reassuring them about the survey. Fortunately, he asked for my opinion before he sent it. His first draft implied my concerns had been satisfactorily addressed by that conversation. He graciously dropped that point and only shared his opinion when encouraging staff to complete the survey.

The Subsequent Report and Blaming “Science”

I tried to put that climate survey behind me. It had been a major time sink and apparently not a good use of my work time, as I would later learn in my annual performance review. Unfortunately, as one of the

leaders in DEIA efforts in the SU Libraries, I had to read about the report of the survey's findings. It was only the first public draft, but it was a doozy.

A part of me began my reading with a hopeful cursory scan for any mention of my concerns with the gender questions and caution about interpreting some of the gender results. Call it a mix of wanting some pride in and results for my hard-fought labors. There was no such discussion.

Then I began reading the report as I would the evidence section of any social science article. Quick scans of the sections revealed so many tired practices. The section labeled gender results only looked at a breakdown between men and women. No mention of data collection concerns. No mention of genders outside the binary. And, because I had to choose between woman or transgender, I was represented here among the cis women. I had no influence on the data about the trans experience.

So where was the trans experience discussed in the results? It really never was discussed. Any trans data was saved for later in the LGBT section, where all the LGBT survey responses were compared against the data of the heterosexual responses. Despite the fact that every Trans 101 diversity training goes over how gender and sexuality are distinct aspects of identity, here we had a survey in 2020 placing trans people as a sexuality! Why was it done? Apparently, it improved the statistical power of the data if you combined these two smaller groups into one. It was SCIENCE! Not good statistical science, admittedly, since you should only pool data if your research framework has valid reasoning for it. Instead, the unique experiences of trans people compared to cis people gets completely washed out. The statistical power is stronger, yes, but it's no longer truly representative of the cultural experience of trans people on campus.

But then there was a footnote. The footnote had nothing to do with the limits of the study when it came to gender or trans issues, but it did mention the word transgender. Ultimately, the entire footnote was removed from the final survey report, but I have chosen to replicate it

here in its entirety. It does discuss several types of assaults. As a content warning, the following quoted text mentions transphobia, Islamophobia, and antisemitism.

Microassaults are the “biggest” and most explicitly violent type micro-aggressions identified by Dr. Derald Wing Sue (2007, 2010). They are obvious. They are usually deliberate and on purpose. They can be subtle, but usually aren’t. They usually happen when the perpetrator is anonymous, they are being supported by peers around them, and/or they know they can get away with it. There’s no guesswork in determining if you were the victim of a microassault. They are characterized primarily by a verbal or nonverbal attack, meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behavior, or purposeful discriminatory actions. In some instances, they can rise to the level of physical assault. A particularly heinous example would be attempting to grope a transgender individual to “check if they should be in the restroom.” These are referred to as microassaults, because these are DEI-challenged interactions that take place at the interpersonal level, between individuals, or between individuals and the environment, for example when someone touches your hijab, or a swastika is placed on the wall. The term “micro” is in no means meant to suggest that these events are unimportant or minimal. To the contrary, they are just the opposite. That challenges often abound in small-scale ways should be taken very seriously by leaders hoping to create diverse, equitable, and inclusive environments.

I apologize to the reader for having to confront that block of text. Beyond its convoluted syntax desperate for editing, the sudden example of assaulting a trans person floored me on first reading. At least I was gracious enough to offer a content warning. That “attempted” gender-conforming grope is a “**micro**” assault. While the text states that this term is not meant to belittle the impact of said events, I cannot help but shudder at comparing an attempted sexual assault to the seemingly less invasive affronts of witnessing hate graffiti or having a part of religious garb touched. I do not intend to belittle any of these hate experiences but rather to note the difference in the level of description for each. The trans assault is made far more visceral by using the verb “grope” versus “touch.” The trans assault is also the only example in which they give a justification or reasoning for the attacker.

Upon reading the report, I did take one action of advocacy. I emailed both the chief diversity officer and the head of the LGBT center with a list of these concerns. Moreover, I made clear that I did not wish to further engage with the survey company. I openly shared how I had felt as the lone trans person having to speak for an entire community. Despite what many others said about feeling like good outcomes coming from that meeting, I did not share those sentiments. I have even less faith that the questions will be rephrased better in future instances.

Fortunately, as I said, the footnote was dropped in a later edition of the climate survey report. I have no idea if my complaint had any sway in that editing decision.

All of Us are Fallible

I look at experiences like this and ask, how could we do better next time? I am not sure if that is just a part of my personality or a wannabe optimistic habit gleaned from years of various DEIA advocacy work. Often, one of the more common answers is to say that greater diversity will change things. Maybe that will happen, but too often it erroneously presumes that just one person can make a difference. Maybe that works sometimes, but we must recognize that singular representation is not a panacea.

For example, I have one other notable experience with a flawed gender demographic question in a survey. For a small study for a conference talk, a trans librarian aimed to collect data on perceptions of impostor syndrome among library technologists and analyze the results by gender. I admittedly found this to be an awesome idea for a research study, so I chose to participate in the survey.

The original version of the survey had three options for the gender identity question: man, woman, and trans. You could only select one. As I have explained, this forces a trans woman like myself to have to make a tough choice and cleave my identity in two for my experiences to offer data and research insight. I chatted in some public library forums

about my frustration with the survey, and eventually through various conversations, I was connected with the researcher.

I wish I could say that the conversation went well; Twitter conversations rarely do. I do wish I had an archive of our exchange to try to understand where the confusion started. I do not know if I had made clear my own trans identity to them. I tried to explain that the setup of the answers created a transphobic situation, which was not the best tactic. I probably offered the solution of: cis man, cis woman, trans man, and trans woman. I got accused of being transphobic as the researcher defended that they just wanted a survey where their gender of “trans” was finally an option. My then go-to set of answers did not acknowledge genders outside the binary. I was transphobic and so were they. We both wanted the same thing: representation. It took some deep breaths from both of us to realize that. Changes were made to the survey and the study went forward with better data collection.

My point in sharing this experience is to remind all of us that even a singular trans person will do this survey question wrong. They had biases. I had biases. Their approach failed to represent me. I failed to represent them. We are all fallible. Moreover, we also should not pressure ourselves to take on that burden individually. When I had that meeting at SU regarding the climate survey, I regretted doing so because I felt so alone. We need to work together.

Asking the Question Correctly

The purpose of my sharing these experiences was to do exactly that. I wanted to share how a simple demographic question has repeatedly made me confront systemic transphobia as an academic librarian who just happens to be a trans woman. Pushing back on this is part of my DEIA advocacy, but that constant labor is emotionally exhausting.

I truly believe that educating people about how to ask gender demographic questions well is the way to achieve systemic change. However, this book is not the right venue for a detailed breakdown of how to ask

about gender in a survey. This book is about lived experiences and not a guide to research methodologies. Still, I want to part with some advice based on what I have learned. Although I don't expect anyone to pick up this book for methodology advice, perhaps these words may inspire or remind a reader to do better and prevent some future trans frustrations.

At the time of this writing, more and more good practice guides are being written and shared, many online. To design a survey that respects trans people when asking for gender demographics, I would recommend starting with their current advice. For a start, though, here are a few key concepts that you will not go wrong with:

- Just ask for gender. For most demographic breakdowns, especially in library surveys, that will be more than sufficient. If you think you need more nuance, do some research into the concepts you need to explore, be they medical, legal, sociocultural, etc. Find recommended best practices that have been lauded by both researchers and trans and gender diverse people.
- Avoid mutually exclusive options. Let a person select multiple options and be prepared for the impact which that will have on your analyses.
- Avoid the binaries of man versus woman and cis versus trans. Gender is complex and you need to learn and respect that (like I had to).
- Offer a fill-in option, just in case. Also think about how those may impact your analyses. How will you process them, especially if you are going to conduct statistical analyses that require you to pool participants into groups?
- When presenting your results, openly discuss how the data was processed, pooled, and analyzed in regard to the varied identities captured in your study. In fact, be prepared to answer such questions when collecting data. Transparency about methodologies allows for deeper and better nuanced discussion of the findings and their relevant impacts.

Demographic questions in surveys may seem minor, but if they perpetuate systemic bigotry, you will fail to capture the responses of those you push away from participating. This is not unique to gender. We should all do better.

About the Author

Dr. Katherine “Kate” Deibel, PhD has had a varied career in academia working within and across many disciplines, including computer science, education, disability, comics, digital literacies, and libraries. After transitioning in her first year of graduate school, she earned her PhD in computer science and engineering at the University of Washington in 2011 with a multidisciplinary study of the social and technological factors that hinder adoption of reading technologies among adults with dyslexia. As an ardent advocate for usable and accessible technologies, she works and educates to ensure that library technologies are effective tools for both library patrons and staff.