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Rainbow Research: Challenges and Recommendations for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) Survey Design

Seth J. Meyer¹ · Nicole M. Elias²

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Abstract A growing number of people around the world identify, in some way, as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+); yet, these voices are noticeably absent from nonprofit research. To address issues of equity and the historic marginalization of LGBTQ+ people both societally and in the nonprofit sector, this manuscript seeks to answer the following questions: Why is it important to include sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) survey questions in nonprofit surveys? What are best practices for including SOGIE survey questions in nonprofit research? We present LGBTQ+ inclusive research strategies and suggested questions for inclusive SOGIE survey design. Though this article focuses primarily on surveying LGBTQ+ populations, it can also be instructive for general population surveys.

Keywords LGBTQ+ · SOGIE · Gender equity · Diversity equity and inclusion · Survey research

Introduction

There are several reasons SOGIE research is challenging; namely, because (1) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) identities are diverse and fluid; (2) within the LGBTQ+ acronym, sexual orientation and gender identity demographics are represented, and are often conflated in research settings; and (3) LGBTQ+ identities and norms are not universal across cultures (see Table 1). These challenges are rooted in the unique aspects of studying LGBTQ+ populations, such as fear of being outed and discrimination based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Lewis et al., 2019; Murib, 2020; Moone et al., 2020) and apprehension of researchers to take on this line of inquiry (Colvin, 2020; Daum, 2020).

This article aims to provide a justification along with best practices for SOGIE surveying, and in turn, help those studying nonprofits better understand how to collect inclusive data which will further their research and the field in both theory and practice. Specifically, this article aims to answer the following questions: Why is it important to include sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) survey questions in nonprofit surveys? What are best practices for including SOGIE survey questions in nonprofit research? First, this article explains the significance of SOGIE survey questions for LGBTQ+ populations. Then, it presents the most common pitfalls and strategies to overcome challenges within SOGIE survey research, organized around the three common pitfalls identified. Next, we examine SOGIE survey work from other disciplines and leading research institutes to suggest best practices for stronger survey design that is LGBTQ+ inclusive. Finally, we emphasize how this approach to SOGIE surveying can be applied and benefit

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Table 1 Summary of common challenges and recommendations for LGBTQ+ survey research

Challenges	Summary of recommendations
LGBTQ+ identities are fluid and can be unfamiliar for researchers studying this population	A thorough understanding of the LGBTQ+ population is needed to formulate a research design, research questions, and survey questions to elicit the data appropriate for answering the research question. Research design should align with the fundamental purpose of the study, i.e., what is the researcher seeking to understand about the LGBTQ+ population?
Within the “LGBTQ+ ” acronym, sexual orientation and gender identity demographics are represented, and should not be conflated	Research design should utilize clear questions that target sexual orientation and gender identity as both central questions and as part of demographic data collection. The researcher should have a clear understanding of basic definitions and the nuances of each identity, ensuring that the questions match the purpose of collecting data on each identity category
LGBTQ+ identities and norms are not universal across contexts	Research design should consider place, time, and political climate of the study and how different cultures may treat sexuality and gender. An LGBTQ+ inclusive researcher will not apply norms from their own culture to another context. The heteronormative lens should not be assumed and applied

historically marginalized populations beyond LGBTQ+ communities.

Significance of Including SOGIE Survey Questions

LGBTQ+ individuals, populations, and communities are largely absent from nonprofit studies (Meyer et al., 2021), and this lack of data on marginalized communities poses significant challenges to equity for two central reasons. First, omitting Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE)¹ survey questions limits both researchers’ and practitioners’ ability to understand disparities and inequities LGBTQ+ populations face. Second, this lack of SOGIE data inhibits nonprofit professionals from better serving marginalized communities due to limited data.

By explicitly asking inclusive SOGIE questions in surveys, researchers can obtain a deeper understanding of the topic they are researching and the potential disproportionate impacts of marginalized populations. For example, LGBTQ+ youth homelessness is a key example where SOGIE data is needed (Johnson III, 2018).

¹ There are many terms that have been used over the years to discuss sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, ranging from homosexual to LGBT to LGBTQIA+, Queer, and SOGI/SOGIE. The terminology is diverse and quickly changing. We use SOGIE when referring to questions around sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. We use LGBTQ+ to capture communities most often excluded from survey questions. This is because SOGIE encompasses everyone, as all people have a sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, with LGBTQ+ communities being impacted disproportionately when questions around SOGIE aren’t asked.

LGBTQ+ people often face discrimination and economic and housing insecurity, because these population are less likely to graduate college and had lower incomes than their counterparts (Conron et al., 2018). The need for services from nonprofit organizations is great for members of the LGBTQ+ community, especially in areas where government responses are limited.

Literature Review: Understanding LGBTQ+ Surveying Challenges

SOGIE nonprofit research is an emerging area of study, with a majority of research appearing since 2010 (Meyer et al., 2021). Yet, SOGIE surveying is not new; in fact, there have been many studies in other fields. Resources, such as LGBTdata.com provide rich resources on how individual studies have contextualized both sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. In the fields of public and nonprofit studies, SOGIE research has languished (Larson, 2021; Meyer et al., 2021). This limited body of scholarship are either: (1) studies that specifically focus on LGBTQ+ populations or (2), studies on other substantive topics which include SOGIE questions. Looking at 46 years of nonprofit research within the top three journals of the nonprofit field, Meyer et al. (2021) found that there were only 40 articles on LGBTQ+ issues, primarily in the context of HIV/AIDS. This limited scope includes an array of research, including the unique philanthropic decisions made by people in the queer community (Dale, 2018; Drezner & Garvey, 2016), alumni/x giving and involvement (Drezner & Garvey, 2016; Garvey

& Drezner, 2016, 2019), volunteer burnout by gay men who work in HIV/AIDS (Molina et al., 2017), and the unique issues faced by SOGIE nonprofit organizations (Lune & Oberstein, 2001).

SOGIE research also includes studies where SOGIE was not the central focus of the study, but instead, is one demographic variable among many (e.g., Drezner, 2015; Fredette et al., 2016; Johnson, 2014). The format and wording of existing SOGIE survey questions is important to underscore in the existing scholarship. For example, Garvey and Drezner (2016) target gender identity, with a question specifically asking if people identify as men, women, transgender, gender queer, or another nonconforming gender identity. Findings from these studies emphasize the unique individual and collective issues of LGBTQ+ communities. In comparison, other studies (e.g., Garvey, 2016), focus solely on LGBTQ communities by reaching out through affinity groups, nonprofits, and other organizations which specifically support LGBTQ individuals.

There are different ways to ask about SOGIE, which have evolved over time (Sell, n.d.). Some studies have asked specifically about SOGIE identifications. For example, Drezner (2018) uses the terms heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual to ask about sexual orientation. Research institutes, such as the Williams Institute (2020) and the Center for American Progress (Baker et al., 2016), present their own SOGIE question recommendations. Baker et al. (2016) provide multiple options based on what the researcher is interested in understanding. Several countries, such as New Zealand, have included SOGIE questions which take into account local terminology and cultural understandings of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (Pega, 2009). Given the varied approaches and complicated histories of SOGIE surveys, we provide suggested SOGIE survey language based on the most recent and inclusive approaches.

We utilize the extant nonprofit literature, independent think tank publications, and our own research experiences to highlight challenges researchers face when studying LGBTQ+ populations and including people who identify as LGBTQ+ within larger research projects. From these sources, we identify three distinct challenges we believe are most prevalent in SOGIE surveying. This is not an exhaustive list. Rather, it is a way to start a meaningful research design conversation around including LGBTQ+ populations as both the focus of research as well as part of demographic controls. Throughout this review, we offer recommendations to address each of the three challenges along with suggested questions in Table 2.

Challenge 1: LGBTQ+ Identities are Fluid and Can be Unfamiliar

Clear definitions are the building blocks of a strong study, this is especially important for SOGIE research, where terms are commonly conflated and there is a lack of academic clarity on basic definitions. When terms are unfamiliar, researchers may shy away from including them in survey design, which is problematic for several reasons. Excluding LGBTQ+ identities from public and nonprofit research leads to a lack of data on these populations, data which is needed to inform future policy and practice decisions. Baker et al. (2016) explain, “In the United States today, there remains a persistent lack of routine data collection on sexual orientation and gender identity, including the disparities that affect the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, or LGBT, population—leaving the challenges facing LGBT communities largely unmapped” (p. 1). Though some may see SOGIE questions to be sensitive, recent research finds respondents felt that these questions were less difficult to respond to than questions around income, education, or disability (Ellis et al., 2017). The lack of SOGIE data can lead to individuals identifying as LGBTQ+ to be left out of public discourse and policy considerations. The result of these data collection omissions can result in inadequate “support toward the programs and policies that most effectively provide services to communities in greatest need” (Baker et al., 2016, p. 1).

Recommendations

A contemporary understanding of LGBTQ+ populations is needed to create thorough and accurate survey questions. In addition to clearly defining the populations, research design should align with the fundamental purpose of the study, i.e., the researchers should ask themselves what it is they are seeking to understand about SOGIE. Once the purpose is clear and the target populations are identified, the next crucial step is defining LGBTQ+ populations.

Collecting more and better quality data about SOGIE is essential to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ populations, and the foundation in this data collection is clearly defining the LGBTQ+ populations. As a starting point, we suggest researchers begin with the following basic definitions of “sexual orientation” and “gender identity”: “sexual orientation” is defined as: “An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people,” while “gender identity” is defined as: “One’s innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth” (Human Rights Campaign 2020).

Table 2 Questions for LGBTQ+ survey research design

Topic	Sample question(s)
Studying gender identity	<p>What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Male 2. Female 3. Non-binary <p>How do you currently describe yourself?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Male 2. Female 3. Transgender 4. Non-binary 5. None of these
Question on sexual orientation	<p>Do you identify as:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Straight 2. Bisexual/Pansexual 3. Gay/Lesbian 4. Queer 5. Other

Challenge 2: Conflating Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Within the LGBTQ+ acronym, both sexual orientation and gender identity demographics are represented, but should not be conflated. This is not easy in practice, because sexual orientation is closely linked to traditional gender identity norms. Furthermore, terms constantly evolve, cultural differences impact SOGIE identities, and researchers need to be aware of how terminology may be perceived by survey respondents. From the foundational definitions provided, we will now explain the nuance of using these identity categories in surveys.

Sexual Orientation

Survey questions on sexual orientation typically center around three areas: sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity (Federal Interagency Working Group, 2016). Sexual attraction identifies who a person finds sexually interesting, while sexual behavior explores with whom a person currently or previously has had sexual relations, and sexual identity looks at a person's identity category, such as gay, straight, or bisexual (FIWG, 2016; Pega, 2009). Each of these aspects of sexual orientation requires different types of survey questions and will yield different data. Usually, sexual identity refers to sexual orientation and will be the main focus of the remainder of this manuscript.

An individual may identify themselves in a multitude of sexual orientations. There have been many different

perspectives with how to ask about sexual orientation, with some replacing sexual orientation categories altogether in favor of a continuum approach to sexual orientation (Savin-Williams, 2016). Studies assess whether categories capture the lived experiences and suggest “*in-between*” sexualities to support an alternative, continuum-based perspective regarding the nature of sexual orientation for both women and men. A continuum conceptualization has potential implications for investigating the prevalence of nonheterosexuals, sexual-orientation differences in gender nonconformity, causes of sexual orientation, and political issues” (Savin-Williams, 2016, p. 37). However, including too many sexual orientation categories in survey questions can be difficult for researchers because they may only have a limited number of respondents. The most common sexual orientation categories are: gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, queer, and lesbian identities.

Recommendations

Central to SOGIE survey questions is ensuring accurate and appropriate terminology is utilized (FIWG, 2016; Garvey, 2017; Wolff et al., 2017). For example, gay men or lesbian women may not respond positively to the term “homosexual,” preferring gay and lesbian, due to the negative connotation “homosexual” (FIWG, 2016). Garvey (2017) suggests adding “queer” as a separate sexual orientation option, despite “queer” itself not having a single, agreed upon definition (Garvey, 2017). “Queer” represents the fluidity of both sexual orientation and gender identity (Garvey, 2017). When including straight identity,

the use of the term “straight” is recommended over “heterosexual,” as it is a more recognizable term (Wolff et al., 2017). For a sample sexual orientation question, see Table 2.

Sexual orientation terminology is continually evolving and expanding, making it difficult for researchers to determine which sexual orientation response options to include. For example, “bisexuality” is a term traditionally used for people who identify as being attracted to both men and women. Some argue for the use of “queer” over “bisexual,” because it allows for more fluidity and great representation (Bogaert, 2015; Garvey, 2017). “Pansexual” entails attraction not only to those who identify as part of a gendered binary (male/female) but all people, regardless of gender identity (Evans, 2015).

Gender Identity

Gender is socially constructed and rooted in how people see themselves and how others see them, contrasting with sex, a biological construct assigned at birth (Amaya, 2020). Gender identity is one of the most rapidly evolving demographic categories in the U.S. today. As of 2020, approximately “one-in-five U.S. adults know someone who uses a gender neutral pronoun such as ‘they’ instead of ‘he’ or ‘she,’ and 17 states and the District of Columbia have adapted to this evolution in gender identity by adding a nonbinary option to driver’s licenses” (Amaya, 2020 p. 1). Survey research on questions surrounding gender identity is likewise evolving, with new terms for survey respondents to select and a new two-part question format (Williams Institute Scholars, 2020). Having distinct sexual orientation and gender identity questions is important for obtaining the most comprehensive and accurate SOGIE data.

Recommendations

Survey research has historically asked gender identity questions with “male” and “female” response options. In recognition of gender identity that goes beyond the heteronormative binary, more recent studies, such as the National Crime Victimization Survey, ask: “Do you currently describe yourself as male, female or transgender?” (Amaya, 2020). Consistent with the PEW Research Center, Williams Institute, and Center for American Progress, we propose expanding gender identity questions using a two-step format by asking about current sex assigned at birth and current gender identity.

Gender identity is fluid and should be treated as such. Understanding one’s sex assignment at birth and one’s current gender identity (at the time of survey completion) has the potential to provide a fuller picture of survey

respondents. Researchers may compare sex assigned at birth with current gender identity. The two-part question also gives survey respondents more options, especially for those whose sex assigned at birth and current gender identity are different, but they do not identify as transgender. Also, consistent with recent changes in non-binary birth certificate and other identity document options, we added a non-binary option to both questions (Elias & Colvin, 2020). Williams Institute Scholars (2020) clarify that the two-step version of the gender identity question should not include response options such as “Transgender man” and “Transgender woman,” which are not universally understood. Rather, the Williams Institute Scholars (2020) “recommend the 2-step version of gender identity because it captures anyone whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth, treating ‘transgender’ as both a social status and an identity” (p. 1). The two-step survey question would read as follows:

What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Non-binary

How do you currently describe yourself?

1. Male
2. Female
3. Transgender
4. Non-binary
5. None of these

Researchers should have a clear understanding of basic SOGIE definitions and take into account the population being surveyed. Then, researchers should make intentional choices on terms used for the most accurate data collection possible. This will ensure that the questions match the purpose of collecting data on each identity category.

Challenge 3: LGBTQ+ Identities and Norms are not Universal Across Contexts

SOGIE identities and norms are not universal. Place, time, and context can significantly impact perceptions and treatments of LGBTQ+ individuals. One critique of research targeting LGBTQ+ populations is that they often take a white, Eurocentric approach (DeBlaere et al., 2010). Depending on the country, cultural, and sociopolitical context, different perspectives of SOGIE may emerge. For example, in New Zealand, research on sexual orientation included Maori terms so as to be inclusive (Pega, 2009). Murray and Roscoe (1998) identified many cultural relationships within Africa which are same-sex. Epprecht (2013) found that researchers studying HIV transmission in

Africa were inefficient in their research because they asked about same-sex behavior in a culturally insensitive manner. In Malawi, a famous case of what was perceived as a same-sex wedding is complicated by the fact that the two participants did not consider themselves gay (Epprecht, 2013).

Recommendations

Researchers should consider place, time, and political sociopolitical climate of the study as well as how different cultures may treat SOGIE. An LGBTQ+ inclusive researcher will not apply norms from their own culture to another context. Instead, they will work with the local community to understand the unique ways they understand and enact SOGIE and incorporate this context into the survey design.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Nonprofit survey research should include SOGIE questions to collect richer data, and in turn, improve interventions and services for members of LGBTQ+ communities. Ultimately, this will result in greater attention to challenges LGBTQ+ communities face and more equitable outcomes when these challenges are addressed by nonprofits. To do inclusive SOGIE survey work, we have identified challenges in studying LGBTQ+ communities, proposed recommendations, and suggested SOGIE question wording. While this work targets surveys of the LGBTQ+ community, we encourage these questions to be used in general population surveys, as well.

Including LGBTQ+ populations in nonprofit research can deepen understandings of nonprofit organizations, systems, populations, and program usage with important implications for practice. Indeed, by including SOGIE questions and expanding research on LGBTQ+ populations, researchers are able to better understand critical phenomena being explored in nonprofit studies, such as homelessness, mental health, and discrimination, which are critical to nonprofit interventions for LGBTQ+ communities. Specifically, the addition of LGBTQ+ individuals means that nonprofit studies and organizations can better identify how these individuals use services compared to those who are not in the LGBTQ+ community, if they are using services as compared to those who are not in the LGBTQ+ community, and how LGBTQ+ individuals experiences with nonprofits differ from those who are not in the LGBTQ+ community.

Future projects should extend this work to include qualitative research design strategies, particularly LGBTQ+ interviews and focus groups where the lived experiences of these populations can be captured. As a

field, the following questions should be addressed in future scholarship: How do LGBTQ+ individuals experience nonprofit services differently from their heterosexual and cisgendered peers? How can nonprofits better support and meet the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities in specific social services? and Why is understanding the historical and current trends impacting LGBTQ+ individuals and communities important for designing nonprofit programs and services?

The challenges of SOGIE surveying identified here have implications beyond LGBTQ+ communities. As the field of nonprofit management expands its understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the strategies identified in this article can provide scholars with guidance to produce LGBTQ+ inclusive research for other historically excluded, emerging, or under-studied populations. For example, limited research has explored disability and ableism (Yanay-Ventura, 2019) or race/ethnicity and multiracial categories (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2021; Freeland et al., 2015) within nonprofit studies. This article is a first step toward understanding how and why surveys can be more inclusive and, therefore, provide us with a better understanding of the way many individuals and communities engage with nonprofit organizations.

Looking ahead, SOGIE research has the potential to move beyond stringent categories towards a continuum approach. From queer theory (Meyer et al., 2021), non-binary gender identities and expressions (Elias & Colvin, 2020), and the fluidity of sexual orientation (Katz-Wise, 2015), research design should keep pace with evolving SOGIE identities and norms. This entails an openness to new and mixed methods research in the field. Nonprofit researchers should design qualitative and quantitative studies to better understand how SOGIE shapes social forces, and in turn, nonprofit organizations impact LGBTQ+ communities. Ultimately, this work has implications for how nonprofit organizations can meet the diverse and quickly changing needs of LGBTQ+ communities they serve. This manuscript should not be treated as the final word on SOGIE surveying; rather, it is the beginning of a conversation on how to create methods which are accurate and inclusive for LGBTQ+ communities.

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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