

Preface

1. Introduction to the Special Issue on Measuring LGBT Populations

In recent years, much progress has been made in the United States, Europe and beyond with regard to legislation that is supportive and protective of LGBT populations (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender persons). For example, in 2011 in the United States, the Institute of Medicine released the watershed monograph “The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People” (IOM 2011). In 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples could legally marry in all 50 US states. Furthermore, US public opinion toward gay marriage changed dramatically in a relatively short amount of time. In Pew Research Center polling in 2004, Americans opposed same-sex marriage by a margin of 60% to 31%. By 2019, support for same-sex marriage had flipped with a majority of Americans (61%) supporting same-sex marriage, while 31% oppose it (Pew Research Center 2019). Most recently in the United States, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine is undertaking a consensus study that will review the available data and future research needs on persons of diverse sexualities and genders.

Also across Europe the legal situation of LGBT persons has improved over the past decades and their visibility has increased in various areas of society (Fischer 2019). Some basic LGBT rights in the European Union (EU) are protected under EU treaties and law. Same-sex sexual activity is legal in all EU Member States and discrimination in employment has been banned since 2000. However, EU Member States have different laws when it comes to any greater protection for same-sex civil unions, same-sex marriage and adoption rights of same-sex couples. For instance, during the last 20 years, legal protection against hate speech towards sexual minorities has increased from five to 23 countries in 2019 (ILGA 2019). With respect to marriage and family laws, same-sex marriage is currently legal in 16 European countries (Pew Research Center 2019). While in 2001, the Netherlands was the first European country to open marriage to same-sex couples, Austria became the latest European nation to legalize the practice at the beginning of 2019. The change in Austria’s marriage laws was prompted by its highest court, which in 2017 ruled that the country was discriminating against gay and lesbian couples by not granting them full marriage rights. Concerning the acceptance of same-sex marriage, however, European countries display a huge heterogeneity: with strong support in Sweden (88%), Denmark (86%), and the Netherlands (86%), and distinctly less support in post-socialist countries, such as Poland (32%) and Hungary (27%) (Pew Research Center 2019). Support of same-sex marriage is strongly correlated with acceptance of homosexuality (Hooghe and Meeusen 2013; Takács et al. 2016) in Europe. For instance, acceptance of homosexuality increased much faster in countries where same-sex marriage

is legal after those countries adopted same-sex relationship recognition policies (OECD 2019; Aksoy et al. 2018).

While these achievements are laudable, it is important to keep evaluating to what extent structural obstacles to equality remain. A recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) concluded that worldwide, LGBT people report widespread discrimination, are at greater risk for mental health disorders, and have worse labor market outcomes than non-LGBT people (OECD 2019). Yet, compared to research on other minority groups, sexual and gender minorities have been studied quantitatively much less in the social sciences, which in part is related to the numerous challenges associated with collecting suitable survey data (OECD 2019; Umberson et al. 2015).

1.1. How Many People are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender?

A first fundamental challenge is due to the fact that neither sexual orientation nor gender identity are routinely collected in many of the nationally representative surveys sponsored by national statistical agencies. Only 15 OECD countries have included a question on sexual orientation in at least one of their nationally representative surveys sponsored by national statistics offices or other public organizations, and only three OECD countries collect information on gender identity (for a detailed overview, see OECD 2019). Additionally, no census has ever asked questions on sexual orientation and/or gender identity to identify LGB and transgender people (OECD 2019). However, at least some statistical offices are experimenting with it. For instance, in Europe, the United Kingdom is planning to include an item on sexual self-identification in the 2021 Census (ONS 2018). In a related pilot study, the overall conclusion was that including a question on sexual self-identification in the 2021 Census would not significantly impact the overall response and that responses to this question are of acceptable quality. However, such attempts at the national level remain an exception. Instead, the bulk of population-based surveys identify sexual minorities indirectly, using reported sex of a respondent's partner, which is only a sub-population of the total LGB population.

When it comes to cross-nationally comparable data at European level, so far only two surveys directly ask about sexual and gender identity, namely the non-probability based EU LGBT survey conducted in 2013 by the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA 2014) and the periodic probability-based Eurobarometer surveys on discrimination carried out by the European Commission (European Commission 2012, 2015). This remains the largest body of comparative data in Europe and it provides a key source on LGBT experiences across many dimensions of social life. In the United States, the National Health Interview Survey (NHIS) began collecting data on sexual orientation in 2013. To date, the NHIS is the only continuing nationally representative survey of the entire adult population to do so.

1.2. The Lack of Standards How to Best Measure SOGI

Besides the question of how to reach LGBT populations, another challenge is the lack of standards for how best to measure the constructs of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI). The Williams Institute has produced two reports with suggested wordings and best practices when asking questions about SOGI in population-based surveys, but both

guidelines are now considered somewhat outdated (Williams Institute 2009, 2014). In the United States, the oversight body that regulates how demographics such as race and ethnicity are to be measured (the Office of Management and Budget, OMB), has no standards when it comes to operational definitions of SOGI. However, in 2015, the OMB did form an Interagency Working Group on Measuring SOGI whose mission was to “explore measurement of SOGI, considering multiple different dimensions of sex, gender and sexuality”. This workgroup continues today under the auspices of the Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology and is co-chaired by one of the special issue editors (Nancy Bates). Among other things, the group endeavors to address two of the recommendations from the 2011 IOM report. Specifically, those relevant to survey practitioners and those who depend upon data from nationally representative surveys:

“Recommendation 2. Data on sexual orientation and gender identity should be collected in federally funded surveys administered by the Health and Human Services and in other relevant federally funded surveys” (IOM 2011, 299)

“Recommendation 4. National Institute of Health (NIH) should support the development and standardization of sexual orientation and gender identity measures” (IOM 2011, 303).

At the international level, the UN Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications engages in the discussion about concepts and standards about sex and gender. In addition, in Europe, the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians (CES) in February 2019 published a working paper on the measurement of gender identity. This is a first collective attempt at the European level to summarize and discuss the main needs for statistical measurement of gender identity, the challenges posed, and the current practices in different countries. Moreover, the report ends with a rather cautious recommendation that future development in this area should be closely monitored by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE 2019).

2. Overview of the Special Issue

The idea for a special issue had its beginning at the 2017 meetings of the European Survey Research Association conference in Lisbon, Portugal. At the conference, the co-editors (Stephanie Steinmetz, Mirjam Fischer and Nancy Bates) organized three sessions devoted to sexual and gender minority populations and subsequently discovered a common interest in publishing a journal issue devoted to the topic. The aim of the special issue is to showcase research around the challenges, successes, and best practices when collecting data on sexual minorities.

The special issue starts with a more general question whether sexual minorities can be considered a hard-to-survey population (with the expectation of lower participation rates); (Magnani et al. 2005; Meyer and Wilson 2009; Tourangeau 2014). While this has often been claimed, there is little empirical evidence regarding this issue. In their contribution “*Are Sexual Minorities Hard-to-Survey? Insights from the 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study*” Bates, Garcia Trejo and Vines showcase for the United States that there is no evidence that sexual minorities required higher levels of effort to secure participation in a survey. On the contrary, it seems that in comparison to straight

respondents, LGB persons are more intent to respond, as measured by intent to participate in the upcoming 2020 Decennial Census. The rest of the contributions to the special issue are centered predominantly around the two above highlighted challenges of how to sample LGBT populations and how to measure SOGI.

With respect to the question of sampling and identifying LGBT populations, the three present contributions address the following two questions: What are common strategies for designing sampling frames intended for capturing LGBT populations, and what advantages and disadvantages in terms of data quality can be detected? The first contribution in relation to sampling “*Test of a Hybrid Method of Sampling the LGBT Population: Web Respondent Driven Sampling with Seeds from a Probability Sample*” by Michaels, Pineau, Reimer, Ganesh and Dennis describes and assesses the results of a pilot study of a new sampling approach that combines an implementation of web-based respondent-driven sampling (RDS) with seeds drawn from a probability-based panel of the US population. This aims to develop a less expensive alternative to full probability sampling that could be used to generate large enough samples of sexual and gender minority persons (including smaller sub-groups) to be able to address a wide range of research questions about these populations. Based on testing of two types of respondent-driven recruiting, the authors conclude that, in principle, both techniques can work to generate new LGBT cases.

The second contribution, by Steinmetz and Fischer “*Surveying Persons in Same-Sex Relationships in a Probabilistic Way – An Example from The Netherlands*” focuses on an approximation sampling strategy for persons in same-sex couples and examines whether this strategy has paid off in terms of reaching the target population, as well as in terms of the quality of the survey data. While the authors conclude that the sampling strategy has paid off by accurately identifying same-sex couple-households, the question of representativeness remains a challenging task in surveying any LGB populations, and couples in particular. The authors point out that especially, aspects related to the sampling strategy, the mode of the survey and the covered topic of the research are central to understanding observed selection patterns in the examined mixed- and same-sex couple samples.

Finally, in the contribution “*Comparing Self-Reported and Partnership-Inferred Sexual Orientation in Household Surveys*” Kühne, Kroh and Richter contribute to the evaluation of the two common strategies of identifying sexual minorities in surveys using the German Socio-Economic panel. The analysis shows, on the one hand, that self-reported and partnership-inferred sexual orientation are not mutual substitutes. Instead, they lead to substantively different conclusions about differences between heterosexuals and LGB persons, which seems to be particularly related to partnership characteristics. On the other hand, the authors are able to show that implementing self-reports of sexual orientation in surveys also comes with the potential of error, as it is sensitive to the data collection mode and interviewer characteristics.

Concerning the question of measuring SOGI in large-scale, general population surveys, the four remaining contributions center on which measure and method is the best and whether sexual orientation can be collected by proxy. All four articles center on production surveys in the United States that produce official statistics. In “*Asking about Sexual Identity on the National Health Interview Survey: Does Mode Matter?*” Dahlhamer, Galinsky and Joestl report findings from a robust split-panel field test designed to measure differences in

sexual minority reporting between interviewer-administered versus a self-interview method with both conditions using computer-assisted interviewing in a personal visit setting. The article explores the prevalence of sexual minority reporting between the two conditions, as well as a subgroup analysis of item nonresponse. Next, Truman, Morgan, Gilbert and Vaghela detail the process of adding both sexual orientation and gender identity to a nationally representative crime victimization survey. “*Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the National Crime Victimization Survey*” details the addition of SOGI in a longitudinal production survey, including qualitative pretesting to minimize measurement error, the exploration of monitoring metrics to gauge degree of missingness, and the examination of population estimates resulting from the new items.

The third article “*Intersections between Sexual Identity, Sexual Attraction, and Sexual Behavior among a Nationally Representative Sample of American Men and Women*” by Mishel focusses more narrowly on the three constructs that comprise the broader concept of ‘sexual orientation’. The paper examines how the different self-reports both overlap and diverge, and how estimates of sexual minority prevalence can vary depending upon which measure is used. The findings serve as useful guidelines when planning new data collections of LGB persons. The final article on measurement addresses an important yet understudied topic when surveying sexual and gender minorities, that is, whether SOGI can be accurately collected via proxy. In many population surveys, a single household informant commonly reports demographics, such as age, race/ethnicity, and sex for all household members. How and whether this is possible in the case of SOGI is the topic of “*Can They and Will They? Exploring Proxy Response of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Current Population Survey*”. Holzberg, Ellis, Kaplan, Virgile and Edgar share findings from a large-scale qualitative testing project that included both cognitive interviews and focus groups, the latter of which included transgender persons. The feasibility of collecting SOGI by proxy are examined in terms of sensitivity, difficulty, and willingness to report on behalf of others.

3. Future Outlook – Making LGBT Populations Visible in National and International Statistics

Based on the findings of the special issue, as well as on a follow-up session at the European Survey Research Association conference 2019 in Zagreb, Croatia, a fundamental prerequisite for improving lives of LGBT persons is making them visible in national statistics (OECD 2019). In times when the empirically documented inequality of sexual and gender minorities is frequently at risk of being treated as a matter of opinion, rather than as the product of rigorous scientific work (Perl et al. 2018), it is more important than ever to expand on the methodological repertoire in this field. This calls for fine-tuning of the scientific tools to document, empirically study, and ultimately improve the lives of LGBT persons everywhere. Collectively, the contributions to this special issue not only provide an extensive overview of the many pitfalls that need to be considered, but also show creative approaches to engaging with these challenges. By addressing some of the common concerns of survey providers, which may have thus far prevented them from including SOGI measures into existing and new data collections, we hope to help remove some apprehension around the topic. With this special issue, we invite scientists and

survey providers to engage in the discussion and embrace the many exciting avenues that the inclusion of SOGI offers for future research. We would like to conclude by highlighting just a few of the most pressing directions that would help address the aim of making LGBT populations visible in national and international statistics.

One major future direction needs to be the large-scale testing of translations of SOGI items into languages other than English. The research in the field is heavy on English and a few other European languages, as is the research in this special issue. Large international production surveys have the unique opportunity to include SOGI items into existing structures of quality testing and translation processes. This is an efficient and cost-effective step with immeasurable scientific impact. When thoroughly tested translations become available to the wider international scientific community, it enhances comparability of SOGI data across national contexts. This becomes increasingly relevant as language on the topic of SOGI evolves differently across countries. The availability of thoroughly tested multi-language SOGI measures would allow research communities that operate in various non-English languages to use these items despite a possible lack of financial resources to conduct such testing. Lastly, language minorities within English-speaking countries could be included better if non-English translations of SOGI questions were readily available.

Moreover, research is needed to explore the feasibility of proxy-reports for SOGI questions in large international surveys. Often times, such surveys collect information about the household members via one single respondent who reports this information on others in the household. Since this is a widely used and cost-effective surveying technique, its feasibility for SOGI questions needs to be understood better (see also the contribution of Holzberg, Ellis, Kaplan, Virgile and Edgar on this issue). There is an urgent relevance in knowing the sexual and gender identity of multiple household members to make visible the many forms of cohabiting and family-making that exist among LGBT persons. Considering that LGBT persons face legal obstacles to family formation and need to creatively circumvent these, it is important to examine sexual and gender identities as a family matter and in the context of living arrangements and intimate relationships, as opposed to an individual in isolation.

Another future avenue is to address the growing flux of fluidity in categories to measure SOGI. For example, besides lesbian/gay/bisexual, younger cohorts are rejecting these labels in favor of more, broader and more inclusive labels such as queer, pansexual, asexual, and omnisexual ([Trevor Project 2019](#)). Likewise, for gender identity, we see a rejection of the male/female binary in favor of labels like non-binary, genderqueer, and genderfluid. However, introducing such labels in a general population survey is tricky, and can result in large measurement error among the cisgender population. Future research needs to test empirically how we can better accommodate the diversification of SOGI labels in standardized survey formats and how to weigh the risks of possibly increasing measurement error.

In addition, the temporal fluidity of both sexual and gender identities is a pressing matter for future research. SOGI labels are not as constant as coming out narratives would suggest. Rather than ‘discovering’ a time invariant identity, which is then adopted for all time, identity-making is an ongoing process that can result in the changing of labels over the life course. While this is perhaps more tangible for gender identities, since a non-cis

identity by definition implies a change from an assigned identity to another one, this is also relevant for sexuality labels (Diamond and Savin-Williams 2000). Accommodating such fluidity in standardized survey formats means testing the feasibility of retrospective histories and repeat-measurements over time.

Great potential also lies in examining how probability and non-probability approaches can be combined to survey LGBT persons. Rather than dismissing non-probability approaches as unfit for generating generalizable knowledge, more research needs to focus on the creative integration with probability data from probability surveys (e.g., see Michaels, Pineau, Reimer, Ganesh and Dennis on this issue, and Berzofsky et al. 2019). One major advantage of such an approach is that certain underrepresented groups within the LGBT community, who might be difficult to reach via classical surveys, could be targeted and included more easily. The combination of probability and non-probability approaches would also allow to combat the problem of small group size and insufficient power in statistical analyses, when LGBT persons make up a very small fraction of respondents in large probability-based surveys.

Lastly, government administrative registers could be explored as a source for measuring prevalence and characteristics of gender minorities. A handful of countries that derive population statistics from registers are exploring the expansion of gender options to include a non-binary third response option (UNECE 2019). For example, the Netherlands is exploring the feasibility of adding a third response option. Additionally, some government entities now allow individuals who have transitioned to officially change their sex of record on birth certificates, driver's licenses, pension benefit records, and the like. We recommend that practitioners consider these data as another source in need of attention and research as it relates to SOGI measurement.

The opportunities for future research in this field are ample. We are grateful to the contributors to this special issue for filling important research voids in the SOGI field and we hope it serves as a helpful resource to readers as they navigate this timely topic.

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