

Research Paper

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## **Measurement of Gender and Sexualities in National Surveys: An Exploration into Hidden Attitudes and Messages**

### **Introduction**

Social surveys serve as a tool to reflect attitudes, behaviors, characteristics, and other information about the social world. They, like other institutional measures and tools, are shaped by the social constructs and definitions around us. The question “Are you male or female?” serves as an example (Spade 2011). Surveys use socially constructed understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality when framing their questions and responses, often limiting those participating in the surveys to two choices.

Additionally, national surveys can include questions that follow patterns of assumptive language that are beyond the demographic questions and can shape participants understanding and beliefs around sex, gender, and sexuality (Westbrook and Saperstein 2015). Beyond this, surveys can also create and follow patterns of omission by binary gender and overt biased priming and phrasing, therefore shaping and reflecting social views around these social constructs. By exploring how surveys follow these patterns it becomes clear that surveys are not only following non-inclusive habits in their demographic questions, but throughout the surveys they produce.

## **Literature Review**

Following the theory of heteronormativity (Kitzinger 2005) and understanding its union with binary gender (Schilt and Westbrook 2009) creates a social understanding that the world around us is dictated by two genders, that gender is tied to sex, and that opposite sex attraction is considered normal. By surveys using and perpetuating questions shaped by binary gender and heteronormativity, surveys show how they use these social constructs to create patterns that can frame sex, gender, and sexuality in ways that surround the heterosexual male/female perspective and experience. Cisnormativity, the ideology that cisgender experience is what is considered normal, also shapes surveys to frame experiences and responses around one that is considered normal for cisgender identified participants. These socially constructed patterns not only shape the social world in our understanding of sex, gender, and sexuality, but surveys as well.

Given recent expansion in social understandings of gender, most notably the development of the umbrella terms of non-binary gender to include those who do not fit in the traditional binary construct of male and female (Webb, Matsuno, Budge, Krishnan, and Balsam 2016) we expect surveys to create more inclusive and expansive responses for those who fit beyond the gender binary. Additionally, we find that that in most recent generations that people are more likely to know people who identify as non-binary as well as support transgender acceptance (Pew Research Center). However, even as we find surveys follow these developing social understandings, they can still include patterns of exclusion throughout their surveys.

As explored by Westbrook and Saperstein (2015), we find that surveys use assumptive language that is framed around the traditional “male/female”, “brother/sister”, and “husband/wife” perspective that limits the ability to denote variation in gender experiences. By

exploring manuals, questionnaires, and other related materials, they denote how surveys can perpetuate practices of inequality by framing surveys from a heteronormative perspective that limits both variance in gender and sexuality experience and identity.

This research hopes to expand beyond previous research of how surveys can use patterns of assumptive language to explore how surveys can also follow patterns of omission by binary gender and overt biased priming and phrasing. Also going beyond current research exploring how surveys develop their options of gender and sexuality over time, this research explores historical and current surveys use of hidden messages through methods that perpetuate inequality. By exploring how surveys follow patterns we hope to identify specific methods used by surveys to limit expression and inclusion in their surveys while dictated by social habits of heteronormativity and binary gender.

## **Methods**

This research began by selecting top utilized United States surveys with an emphasis on those that were on a national scope and were longitudinal in nature. Surveys were broken down from there into specific categories by fitting academic area. These included health, criminal justice, economic, and general surveys, general counting for surveys that had a focus that included multiple of these areas or a focus that did not target specific information from participants. Surveys included the American Housing Survey, American National Election Studies, Fragile Families and Wellbeing Survey, General Social Survey, National College Health Assessment, National Crime Victimization Survey, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), National

Survey on Drug Use and Health, New Immigrant Survey, National Youth Survey, Panel Survey of Income Dynamics, and the Survey of Income and Program Participation,

Surveys were then hand coded by going through every version, wave, or year of each survey. Data was found in the questionnaires, codebooks, waves, and other accessible resources found on databases provided by the surveys. When going through the surveys, focus was put on questions that related to sex, gender, and sexuality throughout the entire codebook, with special focus on the demographic portions. Questions were identified as clearly asking the participant information about their sex, sexual identity, and gender identity. Additionally, questions that referred to sex, gender, and sexual identity in any capacity, including and beyond participant demographics and questions, were collected.

Based off of this second type of question, this research used data that was collected inductively. Finding questions relating to sex, gender, and sexual identity beyond the demographic portions of surveys, the data was developed inductively. By first gathering data that featured all information in surveys and their different versions, we were able to gather information related to how surveys frame questions around sex, gender and sexuality throughout their surveys. For this research, special focus was put on questions found outside of demographic portions of surveys to highlight the ways that questions throughout the survey were framed. Any moment that was thought to be framed from an interesting or non-inclusive framework was also identified and collected using screenshots along with the year, survey, and other information. From there, patterns were characterized to better identify if questions throughout the surveys differed in their approach, language, hidden messaging, and development over time. Patterns included use of heteronormative experience as the normal, the shaping of questions around binary language, along with others.

Upon identifying patterns, the framework for our research was developed which classified additional questions found in surveys as using assumptive language, omission, and overt biased priming and phrasing. Using assumptive language from the framework of Westbrook and Saperstein (2015), surveys can include questions that use an assumed identity and experience around binary gender and heteronormativity. Finding that most surveys frame entire surveys from binary gender, questions around families and household rosters served as examples when framing experiences around a “father/mother” and “brother/sister” binary. In this, heteronormativity was embedded in the language of surveys, often making binary gender assumptions about the participant. Surveys also often rarely included gender neutral terms such as “sibling” or “partner” when discussing familial and other relationships. Questions indicated an assumption used by surveys that everyone falls on one end of the gender binary.

Additionally, data also identified patterns of omission by binary gender. This was identified when surveys did not ask questions to those of a specific identified sex or gender. Questions identified under this framework included those that did not ask those of a specific sex questions related to work, family, income, or other information. While under this framework some questions were not included, most notably those that asked specific health information such as that related to menstruation and other sex-specific processes and experiences, others revealed assumptions from surveys about experiences of those of different genders.

Surveys revealed assumptions of “impossibility” or “unlikelihood” of all genders experiencing or participating in similar types of activities and experiences. Questions that asked gendered attitudes from a one-sided perspective also fell under this framework. Surveys included questions that reflected feelings of exclusion and exclusivity when it came to framing questions

that asked about gendered attitudes. By omitting certain questions from participants, surveys fell under the larger framework of perpetuating habits of gender inequality.

Lastly, a framework was developed for questions that followed patterns of over biased priming or phrasing. Understanding the power of gender priming to shape participants responses based off of the reminding of stereotypes, surveys can include language within their surveys that reveal both direct and indirect phrasing that can shape participant's experiences when completing a survey. Common in surveys that included legacy questions with many years, surveys displayed overt priming and phrasing directly and indirectly in questions such as those that asked about social prejudice. Because questions were consistent throughout surveys in their language use, these questions were often considered to be included due to practices of tradition or legacy.

## **Results**

### *Assumptive Language*

Several surveys fell into patterns of assumption when it came to questions included within their surveys. Surveys like the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study area framed entirely around a heteronormative framework, with the survey being divided into a mother and father survey exclusively. Families are framed in the survey as heterosexual, with no other options for those in families outside of the heteronormative experience. Common with almost every other survey, the only options available when answering questions such as "People who currently live in your household" are "male" and "female".

The General Social Survey also featured assumptive language within their survey. Questions like "Were you living with your mother or father when you were 16"? Highlight the

survey's assumptions about what type of family's participants would be living in. There are no options for participants to denote living with same-sex parents.

**SIBS: Long [0 .. 49, 50 .. 99]**

How many brothers and sisters did you have? (Count those born alive, but no longer living, as well as those alive now. Also include stepbrothers and stepsisters, and children adopted by your parents.)

BROTHERS AND SISTERS:

**Figure 1: Sibling Question**

Source: GSS, 2018, Ballot 1

Additionally, questions such as “How many brothers and sisters did you have”? limits participants to recognizing siblings that fall on either side of the gender spectrum exclusively. Participants are not allowed to record siblings that fall outside of the gender binary and who may be identified as a sibling.

The Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID) also displayed this trend in sections of the survey that ask the participants information about their parents. Questions like “Where did (your/her/his) father grow up?” and “Where did (your/her/his) mother grow up?” show that the survey is built around the heteronormative experience of having a father and a mother. Even as participants are given the option of being referred to as “your” rather than “his” or “her”, they are only able to recognize parents that are identified as either “father” or “mother”.

*Omission*

ER70853 "L13 STATE MOTHER GREW UP-RP" NUM(2.0)  
L13. Where did (your/his/her) mother grow up?  
[MOST OF THE YEARS FROM AGES 6 TO 16] (FIPS code)

ER70705 "K3 STATE FATHER GREW UP-SP" NUM(2.0)  
K3. Where did (your/her/his) father grow up?  
[MOST OF THE YEARS FROM AGES 6 TO 16] (FIPS code)

## Figure 2: Father and Mother Question Framing

Source: PSID, 2018

Following a framework of omission by binary gender, surveys can reveal hidden attitudes and language in not including certain questions and language within their surveys for specific genders. In the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCWS), questions such as “Is it better if (a) husband earns the main living and (a) woman cares for (a) family” are not matched with questions that flip gender roles to ask if it is better if a woman earns the main living and a

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-----  
fid3c                                     Is it better if husband earns the main living and woman cares for family?  
-----  
type: numeric (byte)  
label: agree_fw1  
range: [-9,4]                               units: 1  
unique values: 7                             missing : 0/4,898  
  
tabulation: Freq.  Numeric  Label  
1,068      -9      -9 Not in wave  
7          -3      -3 Missing  
33         -2      -2 Can't know  
330        1      1 Str/Dia  
1,910      2      2 Disagr  
1,179      3      3 Agree  
371        4      4 StrAgr
```

man cares for the family.

## Figure 3: Husband as Main Earner, Woman as Caretaker

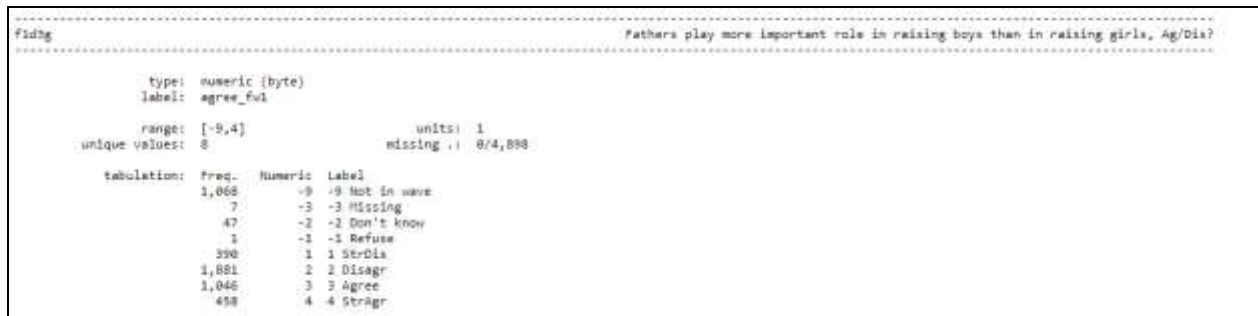
Source: FFCWS, 1998

In revealing certain attitudes about family and childcare, the survey omits responses from an equal gendered perspective. Relying on assumptions that husbands serve as the main income earner for the family and the woman as the family caretaker, the survey fails to acknowledge the reverse reality.

This pattern is continued in the Fragile Families survey with questions such as “Fathers play more important role in raising boys than in raising girls, agree/disagree?” and “Can (a) mother receive welfare if she is married and living with (a) husband?”. These questions are



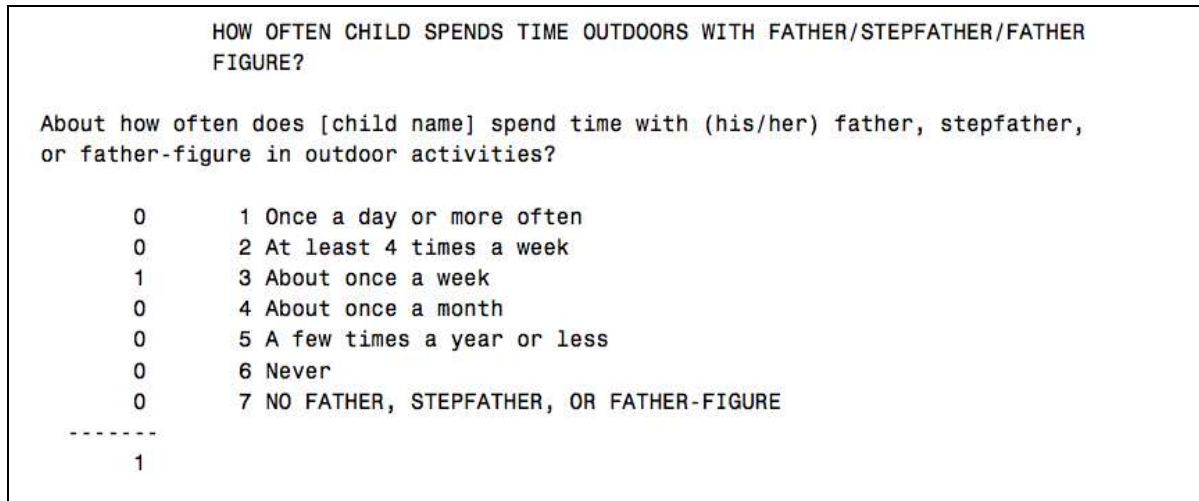
presented with a focus on one gender and are not asked with the gender roles reversed. By omitting participants thoughts on questions from a perspective of both men and women, the surveys present certain gender dynamics (ie. fathers being better for raising boys and women being welfare recipients) as true and expected.



**Figure 4: Father’s Raising Boys**

Source: FFCWS, 1998

The New Immigrant Survey (NIS) continues with practices of omission with questions such as “Does (the) child ever see (a) father, stepfather, father figure?”. The question is not supplemented with an additional question asking the child’s relationship with a mother figure. Additionally, the survey includes questions that asks, “How often child spends time outdoors with father/stepfather/father figure?” The survey does not include a question asking if the mother figure spends her time with the child outdoors, revealing omission in the relationship with the child. The mother figure is not assumed to spend time outdoors with the child, revealing attitudes that limit the activities shared between children and mother figures.



**Figure 5: Fathers and Outdoor Time**

Source: NIS, 2003, Version 1

Supplemented with these questions are ones that ask, “In the past week, how many times have you shown your child physical affection?”. In the survey, the mother is assumed to be the respondent answering questions for the child, given the differences in the way that questions are framed and asked. Questions that ask the respondent directly about their relationship with their child have to do with affection, what the child would do if they talked back had bad grades, etc. Questions regarding the father are not phrased directly and often have to do more with activities and leisure (Figure 5) rather than caretaking and affection.

Looking at the American National Election Studies (ANES), it is revealed how attitudes toward women’s employment are revealed in surveys. Questions such as “What is your occupation” provide responses such as “housewife” without an equal response for men who may work in the home as well. Surveys such as PSID also position questions so that the head is assumed to be employed and given the option to say whether their wife is employed.

(IF MARRIED)

I 9. Did your wife do any work for money last year? V243

YES  NO (TURN TO I 16)

↓

I 10. What kind of work did she do? \_\_\_\_\_ V243

I 11. About how many weeks did she work last year? \_\_\_\_\_ V244

I 12. And about how many hours a week did she work? \_\_\_\_\_ V245

I 13. INTERVIEWER: CHECK BOX

CHILDREN UNDER 12  NO CHILDREN UNDER 12 (TURN TO I 16)

↓

I 14. How were your children taken care of while your wife was working? V242

\_\_\_\_\_

I 15. About how much did that cost you last year? \$ \_\_\_\_\_

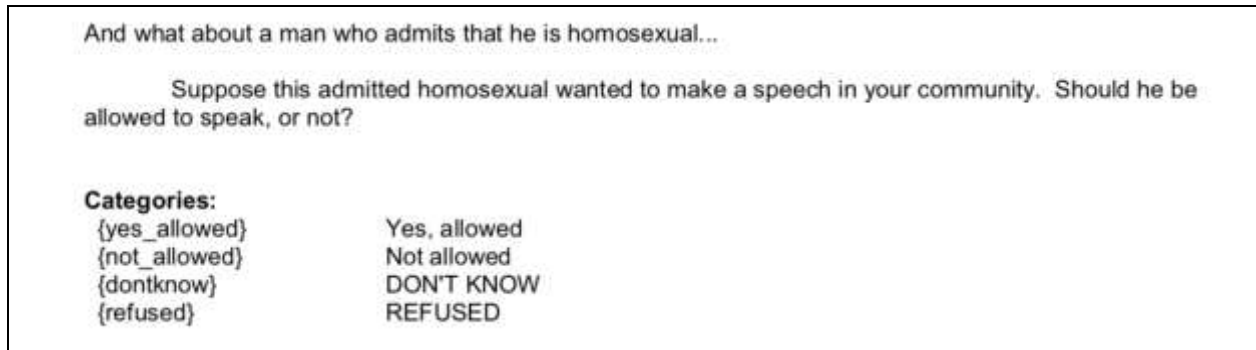
**Figure 6: Wife Income**

Source: PSID, 1968

The survey gives the option to denote the wife as producing income, and even when the answer is yes, the respondent is expected to answer on behalf of their wife. If the family has children, the respondent is expected to tell the survey how the children were taken care of and answer how much childcare cost them in terms of “you”. If the wife is working and has children, the cost of childcare is presented as a cost associated with the head of household rather than the wife and husband as partners.

*Priming*

Surveys also display patterns of overt biased priming and phrasing within the survey. Found in the General Social Survey (GSS), the question “And what about a man who admits that he is a homosexual... Suppose this admitted homosexual wanted to make a speech in your community. Should he be allowed to speak, or not?” reveals attitudes held about social prejudice that the survey is intending to categorize.



### **Figure 7: Homosexual Community Speech**

Source: GSS, 2018, Ballot 1

However, by including the question, participants may be primed to think a certain way about the population of “homosexuals” in question. The question is housed in a section with the heading “There are always some people whose ideas are considered bad or dangerous by other people”, revealing that the survey is gathering data on those socially defined as “bad” or “dangerous”. The question and heading reveal certain stereotypes and ideas surrounding populations that may identify within the participants of the survey. By framing these populations in this way, the survey primes their participants to think about populations in a certain way, risking harmful effects in the way that questions are responded to.

The ANES survey also includes direct questions that reveal overt biased priming and phrasing. Questions such as “Some people find the very idea of homosexuality disgusting, while others don’t have that particular reaction. What about you?” prime participants to see “homosexuality” from a certain perspective before even answering the question. Instead of offering an open-ended question to understand how participants may feel about a certain population, the survey includes language that phrases the topic in a negative sense.

Q.F6. Some people find the very idea of homosexuality disgusting, while others don't have that particular emotional reaction. What about you?  
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256	1.	YES, FEEL DISGUSTED
354	5.	NO, DON'T HAVE THAT REACTION
18	8.	DK
3	9.	NA
1164	0.	INAP, not a Pilot Study respondent; 1994 cross section

**Figure 8: Idea of Homosexuality as Disgusting**  
ANES, 1994

The ANES survey also features questions that reveal overt biased priming in regard to gender. When asked the question, “Which of the two statements do you agree with most?”, respondents are presented with options such as “It’s more natural for men to have the top responsible jobs in a country” or “sex discrimination keeps women from the top jobs”. Given the fact that the survey is trying to gauge attitudes on gender in the workplace, certain language use still may frame participants to think certain ways. Instead of offering sex discrimination as playing a role in achieving “top responsible jobs”, the respondent is offered the idea that it is “natural for men” but not natural for women.

We see this additionally with the question “Would it be good, bad, or neither good nor bad if the United States has a woman President in the next 20 years?”. The survey introduces the idea of a woman president as an option for the respondent and does not couple the question with asking opinions on male presidents. By presenting questions with primed language, the option of a woman president appears hypothetical.

Question:	Would it be good, bad, or neither good nor bad if the United States has a woman President in the next 20 years?
Source:	Respondent

**Figure 9: Woman President**

Source: ANES, 2012

Following more indirect overt priming and phrasing, surveys can explore social prejudices about certain populations without naming the group that may be perceived. Questions such as “Do you support or oppose the following measures to deal with AIDS?” are accompanied with answers such as “Prohibit students with the AIDS virus from attending public school”, “Conduct mandatory testing for the AIDS virus before marriage”, and “Require people with the AIDS virus to wear identification tags that look like those carried by people with allergies of diabetes”.

Y-152. Do you support or oppose the following measures to deal with AIDS?		<u>Support</u>	<u>Oppose</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>	
A.	Conduct mandatory testing for the AIDS virus before marriage	1	2	8	26/
B.	Require the teaching of safe sex practices, such as the use of condoms, in sex education courses in public schools	1	2	8	27/
C.	Require people with the AIDS virus to wear identification tags that look like those carried by people with allergies or diabetes	1	2	8	28/
D.	Make victims of AIDS eligible for disability benefits	1	2	8	29/

**Figure 10: Measures to Deal with AIDS**

Source: GSS, 1988

Taking disease and health into consideration, the survey frames those with AIDS as a possible danger to those around them, including spouses, classmates, and the general public.

Phrasing AIDS as worthy of separation and identification could lead the respondent to develop biases against those with the disease. Considering the timing of the question, both people of color and queer people remained the focus of the AIDS crisis, asking the survey if they were asking about people with AIDS generally or with a finer focus they did not name.

The results of this research revealed that language is included throughout many national surveys that is not neutral when it comes to asking questions regarding sex, gender, and sexual identity. By breaking it down, we discovered there are patterns when it comes to the practices of surveys, all of which use hidden and coded language to reveal social attitudes and biased behaviors. In this, social surveys are seen as not passive collectors of information, but active participants in the perpetuation of inequality.

## **Discussion**

Understanding national surveys as an essential tool for representative data puts into question their practices of exclusion. Through practicing and executing assumptive language, omission by binary language, and overt biased priming and phrasing, surveys risk altering participant responses with exclusionary language and methods. Critiquing surveys for their practices in questions regarding sex, gender, and sexual identity is a critique of their practices of inclusion, and how their practices may not reflect including marginalized identities.

Understanding best practices when it comes to gathering data and counting sexual and gender minorities can become difficult. While some research has proposed more fluid gender models that involve dynamic models that break down constructs of assigned sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation (Jourian 2015), surveys do not often include expansive and representative options to represent a respondent's gender and sexual identity. Fear of

confusion for cisgender participants has been shown to not occur as more complex models of sex/gender have been used (Bauer et al. 2017), questioning why surveys maintain certain uses of measurement and language in their surveys.

Surveys continuation of limiting options and exclusionary language can be seen from several different perspectives. When thinking of simplicity, surveys may choose to remain demographics and language consistent out of fear of confusion for participants or because the survey is worried about breaking down information and constructs too much. Additionally, surveys may use language, especially that which may elicit primed responses through biased phrasing, as a way to obtain information on attitudes or biases over time. Surveys may also follow practices of exclusionary language simply out of tradition, or a lack of recognition into the impacts of not including certain populations or including biased language.

With changing structures in families and the rise of same-sex parented families (Goldberg and Conron 2018) along with developing understanding around gender and sexual identities, surveys should be expected to develop with changing social structures and realities. While previous research has called into question surveys practices surrounding inclusion of gender and sexual minorities as well as use of assumptive language practices (Westbrook and Saperstein 2015; Magliozzi et al. 2016; etc.), research has not looked into the impact of exclusionary language even as demographic models of sex, gender, and sexuality has changed. By maintaining language that limits respondents, surveys risk providing data that is biased and unrepresentative.

From not being able to represent outside of a heteronormative family structure (Figure 1 and 2) to being presented with homosexuality as “bad” and “dangerous” (GSS 2018), respondents are not passively participating, but reflect social constructs that maintain gender and



sexual inequality. Surveys exist not as a neutral tool for representation in this way, but risk gathering data and producing surveys that maintain practices of inequality.

## **Conclusion**

Recognition of national surveys as relying and supporting upon social constructs is essential in understanding their production and use on a national scale. This research hopes to discuss how national surveys use these social constructs, and their accompanying structures of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, to maintain gender and sexual inequality. Language found within surveys is not neutral but carries with it a social understanding of what sex, gender, and sexual identity should look like. As a result, surveys can include language that limits those that fit outside of the traditional male/female, cisgender, heterosexual model.

Understanding this process as a result of language takes into critique surveys as a whole, understanding that throughout them language unintentionally shapes respondents' answers and experiences. Using assumptive language maintains respondents around a heteronormative standard and limits those who fall outside of binary to settle for incorrect responses. Surveys can omit responses due to binary gender when certain respondents are asked questions while others are not. Lastly, surveys may prime their respondents to think about certain populations from a certain perspective, risking entire sections of skewed responses. These practices create and maintain inequality through language, revealing that checking a box may have more of an impact than a respondent and survey could realize.

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