

Conducting Honest Surveys on Gender Equality

Honest data is needed for honest debates. However, many surveys on gender equality are of shoddy quality. They are biased and lead to the confirmation of the skewed world-view of their instigators — deliberately, or due to negligence or incompetence. While the biased results might get the instigators influence and funding, they distort reality, misuse science, and are misleading in their implications.

Here are some quality criteria to conduct better surveys and criticize misleading ones.

How To Avoid Being Misguiding

1. Face Your Conflicts of Interest: If you are passionately motivated to change the world, realize that this motivation biases you in your outlook and conduct. Act like a scientist — avoid confirmation bias. Allow for the survey results to disconfirm your assumptions and to change *your* world view. Avoid group-think and get input from different world-views. State your conflicts of interest when you publish the results.

2. Never Do a Survey to Gain Funding/Publicity/Influence: Don't try to misuse science for personal gain or to push your cause. There are quality standards for surveys and while a distorted survey might get you publicity and perhaps even funding, the flaws will be noticed and hurt your effort in the long run. It will also prevent you from having an open and honest discussion about the survey, as the quality of the survey and your interpretation of the results will be directly tied into your professional success.

3. Any Survey on Inequality Must Assess Both Sides of the Equation: Inequality means differences between two groups (here: male and female). No matter how detailed you assess the disadvantages of one group, *the results are completely meaningless unless you also check for disadvantages on the other side.* Looking only at one side of the equation (or at one weight on the scales) tells you nothing whether this group is equal, advantaged, or disadvantaged.

4. Be Intelligent in Checking for Disadvantages of the Other Group: Asserting that the other group has no disadvantages shows an abysmal lack of empathy and understanding. The concrete expressions of Negative Sexual Discrimination (NSD) might vary (men are usually not called a slut), but the categories are the same (they are called a coward, see the table). *So you have to ask the right questions to assess it!*

5. Ask in a Way Boys and Men Are Willing to Answer: One example of NSD against boys/men is that showing any weakness is strongly discouraged. It leads to criticism („boys don't cry") and avoidance — not to assistance. Thus it might look that boys/men do not face NSD while they just do not talk about it. You have to gain their trust and ask intelligently.

Category	Girls/Women	Boys/Men
Judged on	Appearance	Money, Position in the pack, etc.
Suck at	Math	Languages
Occupied with	Gossip, Appearance	Sex („they think with their dicks")
Getting called	a slut, a bitch	a faggot, a coward, a creep, a pussy
Damages Reputation	promiscuity/ enjoying sex	showing any weakness, esp. fear, pain, crying
Desired Figure	slim, curvy	tall, strong

6. Look at the Advantages Too: Sexual discrimination incurs disadvantages and advantages. To get a full picture, you need to check for advantages on both sides. Reducing only the disadvantages on one side while leaving the advantages in place will only lead to higher overall inequality (which is what „equality for girls/women" sounds like — equality on advantages).

7. Differentiate on Advantages and Disadvantages: Given that advantages and disadvantages can vary between issues, be very clear about the concrete issues you have chosen. Don't cherry-pick and generalize from one issue to a general problem.

8. Differentiate within the groups: It's easy to talk about men vs. women, but there is a lot of variation within each group as well. Don't assume that ‚boys' are only the really cool kids — there are nerds and regular kids as well. Don't assume that ‚men' are mashups of Brad Pitt's looks, Rockefeller's money, and Kennedy's influence — there are homeless and wage-slaves as well. In general, be clear about your comparison standard.

9. Look at Ingroup-Discrimination: Don't assume that only boys/men show NSD against women. Girls/women also show NSD against other girls/women mostly via relational violence. When you ask for sexism, ask specifically who makes them feel this way (e.g., *Who* judges women on appearance? *Who* slut-shames?).

10. Provide Clear and Narrow Definitions:

Ambiguity is not a virtue! Terms like sexual harassment can mean a lot of things, from „he looked at my boobs“ to „a stranger raped me“. Be very clear what the terms mean and keep them narrow — meaning only one thing. Otherwise the results are worthless.

11. Provide the Whole Scale: If you ask, e.g., about the chances to get a job on a continuum from „men and women have equal chances“ to „men are advantaged“ you are artificially constraining the answers. Ask for the whole range — which here would go from „women are advantaged“ over to „men and women have equal chances“ to „men are advantaged“.

12. Differentiate Between Life-Time Prevalence and the Scope of the Problem: Asking whether a person ever encountered NSD does not tell you how frequent it is. A person showing NSD to 80/100 people leads to the same results as 80 persons showing NSD to one person each — but with vastly different implications. Ask how many people show NSD, and be clear to include family and friends as well.

13. Avoid Speculative Questions: Ask respondents what they have actually encountered, not how they imagine things to be. A survey should show the reality the representative sample encounters, not how good the PR department has skewed their world-view.

14. Don't Weaken Your Sample: Ask a representative sample what they themselves have encountered — as they represent the population (one person stands for many). Do not ask them whether they know someone who has encountered something. Just imagine you were asking for the prevalence of cancer and you ask each person whether they know someone who has/had cancer — you would get blown-up incident rate of over 90% that does not represent the actual frequency of cancer in the sample nor the population.

15. Don't Require Mind-Reading: Giving an honest assessment of one's own situation is hard enough, don't ask the respondents how other people feel. It's impossible, meaningless (#14), and condescending.

16. Don't Ask Leading Questions: Don't assert ‚facts‘ with a question, e.g., „I worry about the pay gap between men and women“. Anyone would feel stupid negating this question, whether they think the gap exists or not. State your view of the issue, ask whether they agree to it, and if yes, whether they worry.

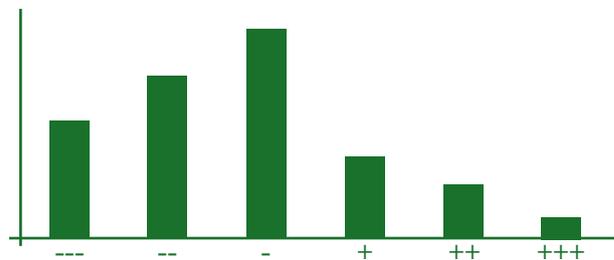
17. Ask Only One Question at a Time: Never ask more than one question at a time — otherwise the answers are meaningless. E.g., „When you read about the high proportion of women who have experienced rape or

sexual assault, it almost makes it seem like a normal occurrence — and that we shouldn't fuss about it“. What is the question here — that it is „a normal occurrence“? Or „that we shouldn't fuss about it“? Again, ambiguity is not a virtue!

18. Offer an „I don't care“ or „I don't think about this issue that way“ option: You can easily force people to take sides by offering them only agree or disagree. Respect that while the issue might be important for you, it might be irrelevant for the respondent and offer them a way to indicate this.

19. Don't Use Cross-Sectional Data for Predictions: If you ask different age groups, don't make predictions from one age group to the other. Just imagine the younger sample has more experience with something than the older sample — it would not make sense to predict a decrease. Likewise you cannot predict an increase if the older sample has more experience with something, as it grew up in different circumstances.

20. Don't Aggregate Interval Data into Dichotomous Data: There is a difference between a 3 on a scale of 1 to 6, and the assertion that when it comes to be for or against something, this person is against it. If you assess degrees of dis-/agreement, provide these degrees of dis-/agreement when you provide the results — and provide a histogram (see Figure). Don't offer the respondents more choice than you are willing to report. If you want to reduce a scale to either for or against, then only ask these two options.



21. Don't Hide the Data on Boys/Men: Even if your focus is only on girls/women without wanting to do a comparison (see #3), provide the data on boys/men if available. Given that they have filled in your survey shows that there is a need and while you are not interested in the data, others might be.

22. Provide the Whole (Anonymous) Data Set: If you conduct a survey, don't just report the results. Provide the data for other researchers to check your interpretations and ask questions of their own. This requires the whole (anonymous) set, not just the aggregated numbers. Only with the whole set can you assess the full picture, e.g., how people who answer one question in one way fare on another question.

„You keep using that survey.
I do not think it means what you think it means.“
Inigo Montoya (modified)

Created by Daniel Wessel, 2013 (Version 1) © CC BY-SA
<http://www.organizingcreativity.com/2013/12/better-surveys>
Design based on the „Singapore Statement on Research Integrity“