

How a 25-year-old periodic survey for lesbian, bisexual and queer women responded and adapted to gender diversity: a reflexive analysis.

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Background

For 25 years, the SWASH periodic survey has generated knowledge about the health of lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women in contact with Sydney's LGBTQ communities. In partnership with ACON, SWASH has reflected LBQ women's lives back to them and helped make LBQ women 'knowable' for Australian public policy. But the reality SWASH produced was always partial: as SWASH entered its 12th iteration it became clear the survey was not representing trans and gender diverse people's lives.

Approach

In this case study, we present a reflexive analysis of our thinking around gender, the process of adding inclusive gender indicators and changing survey questions, and the consequences for the resulting data.

Results

We discuss changes to sexual practise questions: 1) Data inconsistencies suggest respondents may not recognise themselves/their partners within a cisgender/transgender framework. 2) By removing gender from some questions, we lost comprehensive data on sexual practises between women that usually generates strong community interest. 3) Decoupling gender and genitals in sexual practice questions produced more precise data on STI risk but we lost some opportunities for comparative analysis across two decades of historical data. 4) While we found it uncomfortable to craft some questions using 'parts and practices' language rather than an identity framing, we saw no push back from respondents.

Conclusion

We hesitated to change periodic survey questions as we feared losing opportunities for comparative analyses. But failing to capture the complexities of the lives SWASH seeks to reflect, puts any knowledge claims in jeopardy. As a periodic survey of sexual practise and relationships, SWASH is not alone in facing such methodological and ethical questions. This reflexive analysis adds to a growing conversation about generating data for queer lives. Making these conversations public encourages accountability to knowledge users and the communities we seek to reflect.

Disclosure of interests:

None