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'If you had to write a short diversity statement about yourself, what would you say?': using diversity statements and introductory stories to develop holistic understandings of participants' intersectional identities

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ABSTRACT

There is an increasing focus on collecting more diverse demographic data from research participants but standard methodological approaches still hinder such efforts. This paper addresses the need for methodological improvements by advocating for the inclusion of self-written diversity statements in demographic surveys as a form of epistemic justice. Using examples from a large qualitative research study, I demonstrate the depth and richness of data that can be obtained through self-written diversity statements. In particular, I highlight the benefits of combining open-ended demographic questions and self-written diversity statements into holistic introductory stories to help capture the complexity of participants' intersectional identities. Therefore, I argue that using such an approach gives participants the agency to choose how they are represented in research.

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Introduction

There is an increasing focus on data-driven decisions in education discourse and policy-making. Data collected on the diversity of student and/or staff cohorts are used to inform educational practices and policies (see, e.g. Thomas *et al.* 2017). Collecting demographic data of research participants is also standard research practice. These data are predominantly collected through surveys or publicly available data (e.g. census data) and usually include particular characteristics of participants, such as their age, place of residence, level of education, or socioeconomic status (Fernandez *et al.* 2016). By collecting these data types, researchers aim to make data-driven or evidence-based recommendations to decision-makers by exploring the correlations and interactions between various demographic characteristics (Fernandez *et al.* 2016). In this way, researchers and educational policy-makers hope to democratize education.

However, an often-overlooked aspect of these types of democratizing strategies is that teachers and researchers hold the same inherent biases as other people. As Booker Baker (2005) highlights, 'the decisions that directly and indirectly affect students are made by the dominant culture' (p. 253). For instance, a recent study showed that teachers and non-teachers held similar pro-White explicit and implicit racial biases (Starck *et al.* 2020). Similarly, a study of strategies to

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attract more women of colour to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics departments demonstrated that the category of 'Women of Colour' was often used as a catch-all term, thereby diminishing individual diversity (Miles *et al.* 2022). As an example, Miles *et al.* (2022) highlighted that Black and Latina women's experiences in Engineering may vary significantly, which means that research that only examined their experiences collectively risked exacerbating inequity. This demonstrates the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives into education and, by extension, into education research.

There are three main reasons why it is important to incorporate diverse perspectives into research. Firstly, past research has been biased towards specific populations; consequently, research findings have not represented the population more broadly. For example, the data collected through surveys often still rely on questions that are limited in scope or static regarding their understanding of socially constructed notions such as race, ethnicity, or gender (Fernandez *et al.* 2016). This is the case even in purportedly objective clinical trials, where participants are still predominantly White and/or male (see, e.g. Johnson-Mann *et al.* 2022, National Academies of Sciences Engineering and Medicine 2022). Students' classroom experiences are also affected by how past research was conducted. For example, research studies conducted to develop and evaluate intelligence tests were biased towards White students (Booker Baker 2005). Additionally, some standardized tests did not incorporate different cultural understandings (Booker Baker 2005). This lack of representation within research studies reduced the applicability of research to classroom practices. For instance, where standardized tests are racially and culturally biased, students from minority backgrounds may be unable to use their past experiences to take the tests, which directly affects their performance (Booker Baker 2005). This lack of generalisability hinders educational innovation and student learning.

Secondly, incorporating diverse perspectives encourages equity and social justice by allowing researchers to highlight the voices of those who may otherwise be excluded from research. For example, demographic surveys in the past only offered participants a binary choice for their gender as either male or female. This approach excluded participants who identified as neither, such as those who are transgender (Cameron and Stinson 2019). Additionally, this approach highlights a misunderstanding of the difference between biological sex and gender identity, a problem which remains in current research (see, e.g. Cameron and Stinson 2019, Johnson-Mann *et al.* 2022). This can hinder further research when, for instance, historical data do not reflect more diverse understandings (see, e.g. Spoon *et al.* 2023, who could not measure the attrition of gender-diverse academic faculty due to a lack of nuanced historical data). Approaches that exclude certain groups can also contribute to the perpetuation of marginalization and further compound disadvantage because certain experiences are not accurately represented or are entirely ignored in research.

In educational research specifically, incorporating diverse participants can contribute to greater awareness and sensitivity to diversity issues in the classroom. In this way, educational researchers can gain a more holistic understanding of individuals' lived experiences, helping to break down barriers and foster a more socially just educational environment. For example, Cutler's (2023) autoethnography of experiences as a gay beginning teacher in a rural school highlighted power structures and biases within the school, where explicit and implicit actions by both students and teachers attempted to disempower him as a teacher. By privileging his voice, Cutler (2023) was able to argue for greater respect for the diverse perspectives of LGBTIQ+ teachers in Australian schools.

Finally, more diverse perspectives enable researchers to engage in more robust analyses of findings, providing a more nuanced understanding of the topic under investigation. Studies have demonstrated that disparities in how race, ethnicity, sex, and gender are reported remain problematic (Waldron *et al.* 2018, Cameron and Stinson 2019, Johnson-Mann *et al.* 2022, Spoon *et al.* 2023). For example, ethnicity is understood as 'a two-dimensional, context-specific, social construct with an attributional dimension that describes group characteristics (e.g. culture, nativity) and a relational dimension that indexes a group's location within a social hierarchy (e.g. minority vs. majority status)' (Ford and Harawa 2010, p. 251). However, a recent systematic review demonstrated that definitions of race and ethnicity were not uniform, and studies sometimes either reported

race and ethnicity as one concept or did not report these details at all (Johnson-Mann *et al.* 2022). These inconsistencies complicate data interpretation between studies and hinder understanding, innovation, and discovery. Several of these studies also othered individuals who did not fall within a set list of categories for race or gender (Johnson-Mann *et al.* 2022). This othering reinforces societal hierarchies and perceptions of ethnic characteristics, minimizing or silencing those considered different from most research participants. Consequently, there is an urgent need to develop new data collection approaches that better represent society's composition and acknowledge changes in social norms.

It should be acknowledged that there have been some improvements in data collection strategies in recent years, with welcome changes occurring in response to shifting social norms. For example, in response to the changing understanding of gender as being socially constructed (see, e.g. Butler 1990, Lorber 1994), gender-based questions now more frequently either provide multiple choices for gender or ask the question in an open-ended manner so that participants can self-nominate their gender. These approaches reduce the othering that participants from traditionally marginalized communities often experience when trying to fit into a prescribed category in a survey (see, e.g. Cameron and Stinson 2019). Other changes that have become more prevalent in research survey questions include telling participants that they can 'select all that apply' rather than only selecting one option, and providing clearer explanations for participants regarding the differences between sex and gender, race and ethnicity, and other socially constructed notions (Fernandez *et al.* 2016).

However, despite the evident importance of collecting diverse participant demographic data, standard methodological approaches still hinder researchers from doing so. For instance, open-ended questions alone do not provide sufficient space for participants to highlight various aspects of their identity because these questions are not designed to explore the complexity of participants' experiences. In this way, even open-ended questions restrict participants' agency in choosing how they are represented. When I use the term *agency* here, I am referring to the intentional choices participants can make to represent themselves, given the affordances or constraints created by the research survey design (Hoang and Pretorius 2019). This highlights the need for new methodologies that consider the participants more holistically by helping them consider the various aspects of their identities and thereby elicit responses that reflect the intersectionality and complexity of their experiences. In this way, researchers can empower participants by restoring their agency to present themselves to others as whole individuals, rather than trying to make them fit within a particular category or list of categories.

When I use the term *intersectionality* in this study, I draw on Crenshaw's (1989, 1991) work to explain how various aspects of a person's identity are interconnected and how these interconnected identities contribute to compounded disadvantage or privilege. As Collins and Bilge (2016, p. 11) note, 'when it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division [...] but by many axes that work together and influence each other'. I note, though, that intersectionality has a history well before Crenshaw's seminal work (Collins and Bilge 2016, Rangarajan 2023). Furthermore, I use the term *identity* to refer to the stories people tell themselves and others about who they are, who they are not, and who they can or should be within the context they find themselves (Yuval-Davis 2010). This definition highlights the agency of the individual in their identity construction while also acknowledging the influence of politics, norms, and power within the context (Yuval-Davis 2010, Pretorius and Macaulay 2021). It is also important to note that I understand identity as 'complex, multiple, and fluid, constantly being constructed and reconstructed' (Pretorius *et al.* 2022, p. 7). I, therefore, believe that research surveys need to include questions that acknowledge this complexity by allowing participants to explore the various aspects of their identities at that particular moment.

By neglecting the intersectionality and complexity of participants' identities, demographic surveys remain fixed in a Westernized epistemology where people are classed as situated within particular categories. An example of this fixed categorization is the binary classification of gender

discussed earlier, which marginalizes those who do not identify with either category. Neglecting the intersectionality and complexity of participants' identities not only marginalizes some participants but also excludes data which may reflect non-Western epistemologies. For example, First Nations peoples in Australia have a deep connection to Country (McKnight 2016), with Country being 'a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of [their] ancestral domains.' (Reconciliation NSW 2021, p. 1). This inextricable link between Country and person does not fit neatly into Westernized epistemologies of knowing (see, e.g. McKnight 2016, Gavin 2023, for examples of times when First Nations' epistemologies challenged research practices). Consequently, these experiences and understandings can be excluded from research studies that use more traditional demographic questions to explore culture and ethnicity. Therefore, new strategies for collecting demographic data are needed to provide researchers with the opportunity to better understand the intersectionality and complexity of participants' identities. This is particularly important in qualitative studies that seek to understand the complexity of human experience.

This paper addresses the need for methodological improvements by advocating for the inclusion of self-written diversity statements in demographic surveys as a form of epistemic justice. Using examples from a large qualitative research study, I demonstrate the depth and richness of data that can be obtained through self-written diversity statements. In particular, I highlight the benefits of combining open-ended demographic questions and self-written diversity statements into holistic introductory stories to help capture the complexity of participants' intersectional identities. Consequently, I argue that using such an approach gives participants the agency to choose how they are represented in research.

Methodology

Ethics

Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee approved this project's design, data collection, and analysis procedures (project number 37132). All participants in this project were informed about the nature of the study and provided informed consent through a written consent form. All participants chose pseudonyms for themselves and their institutions to maintain confidentiality in the study.

Participants

This paper presents an analysis of one part of the findings from a large qualitative research study designed to explore the experiences of doctoral students as they navigate the practices of academia. In this study, the term doctoral student describes a person studying any type of doctorate, including a Doctor of Philosophy and other practice-based doctorates (e.g. Doctor of Education). Participants in this study were recruited through purposive snowball sampling. Purposive sampling is a commonly used recruitment strategy in qualitative research designed to identify and select particularly information-rich participants (Patton 2002). Such participants are knowledgeable or experienced and can, therefore, illuminate the topic under investigation (Patton 2002, Palinkas *et al.* 2015). In this study, I purposefully recruited doctoral students and research graduates I knew through my work as a doctoral educator and researcher. I chose these students because they would be representative of the larger cohort of doctoral students; that is, they were typical cases of doctoral students and doctoral research graduates.

Additionally, I wanted to ensure that I also included a diversity of participants and those who may have examples of intense experiences of the topic under investigation. As such, I employed snowballing through social media to increase the number of participants and seek contact with participants who may have had more intense experiences during their academic journey. To achieve

this, I placed advertisements on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, asking for participants willing to tell their stories to help improve academia.

Using these sampling methods, I recruited 40 participants (34 doctoral students and six doctoral research graduates) for the overall study. The participants ranged from 26 to 59 years of age, with the average age being 38.2 years. Most participants studied full-time (32) and had some form of funding (27). The gender identities of the population were skewed towards those who identified as a woman or female (30) but also included participants who identified as a man or male (6), non-binary (2), and agender (2). Participants mainly studied in Australia (36) but also included participants from Italy (1), New Zealand (1), the United Kingdom (1), and the United States of America (USA, 1).

This paper's findings focus on four participants (Anna, Calvin, Chris, and Ray; pseudonyms). The four focus participants I have chosen to include in this paper represent the diverse responses I received in the qualitative online survey and include a range of gender identities, ethnicities, neurodiversities, physical abilities, and religious affiliations. They also represent full-time and part-time students, domestic and international students, as well as students with and without funding. Three participants were known to me (Anna, Calvin, and Ray), and one was recruited through social media advertising (Chris).

Data collection

Data for this study were collected through an online qualitative survey. The online qualitative survey used in this study was designed to gather initial demographic information and provide content which would be the focus of future semi-structured interviews. The survey was long, taking 30-45 minutes to complete. Potential participants were informed about the survey length before returning the consent forms.

The survey consisted of multiple sections. The first section asked participants to nominate a pseudonym for themselves and their university and provide a contextual explanation for their choice (see [Table 1](#)). The second section focused on demographic data, asking participants their age, gender identity, country of birth, the ethnicity with which they identify, the country where they study/studied, which year they began their doctoral studies, and when their studies would be complete/had been completed, whether they are/were a domestic or international student, whether they study/studied full-time or part-time, whether they had funding for their studies, and the languages they can speak (see [Table 1](#)). This section also asked participants to respond to a series of Likert-type statements related to their wellbeing and sense of belonging during their studies. The rest of the survey asked participants open-ended questions regarding their motivations for studying a doctoral degree, reflections on their doctoral journeys, and the support they received. This paper presents an analysis of the data from the demographic section of the survey, focusing both on the survey's design and the depth of detail obtained from participants.

I decided to incorporate open-ended reflective questions in this study. It is important to note that incorporating open-ended questions is a common practice in qualitative research. While open-ended responses require more time and effort to analyse, they also enable the researcher to uncover unexpected insights by valuing the knowledges and experiences of participants (Bryman 2016). Reflection is a key part of learning as it allows personal discovery and growth by purposely exploring experiences, beliefs, and values (Pretorius and Ford 2016, Cahusac de Caux *et al.* 2017). The larger study focused on examining doctoral students' experiences of navigating academia, with several questions related to their sense of value and belonging within academia and their experiences of power imbalances and discrimination. As such, it was essential to understand how participants viewed themselves. Consequently, I purposely designed my open-ended questions to encourage participants to specifically reflect on their past experiences and understandings of themselves.

I also intentionally created a question which required participants to reflect on their own multiple and intersecting identities. To do this, I informed participants that I was interested in understanding how diversity affects the PhD journey and asked them what they would say if they had to write a short diversity statement about themselves (see [Table 1](#)). As an educator and researcher, I use my intersectional experiences in my practice. As such, I wanted to ensure that the way I collect my

Table 1. Demographic questions in the online qualitative survey.

| Question | Explanation Provided |
|---|---|
| Throughout this study, and in any publications that arise from this study, I will use a pseudonym (i.e. a fictitious name) to refer to the data you provide. I believe that it is important for research participants to have a say in how they are represented, so I would like you to choose your own pseudonym. Please type your preferred name in the space provided below. | This can be a name you like, a name that you think represents you in some way, a character from your favourite show/ book/movie, or a completely made up name. |
| In this study, I am interested in understanding how students perceive their university. To do this, I would like you to give your university a pseudonym. What pseudonym would you give your university? | Think of a name that you think would represent your experiences at your university. Examples of university pseudonyms include The University of Dreams, Middle-of-the-Road Academy, or The University of Lonely Hearts. |
| Why did you choose these pseudonyms for yourself and/or your university? In this study, I am also interested in understanding the different experiences that diversity brings to the PhD journey. If you had to write a short diversity statement about yourself, what would you say? | This is an example of a short diversity statement: I am a young, white female with a significant amount of education who subscribes to a majority religion. However, I am also an immigrant, English is not my first language, I am culturally different from those around me, and I have experienced crime and violence in my life. I have also had experience being temporarily disabled by injury, and I have a hidden medical condition which affects my daily life. This has given me a particular passion for inclusion and diversity at work and in the broader community. |
| What is your age? What is your gender identity? | Gender identity refers to your internal sense of your own gender and how you show this to others. Your gender identity can be the same or different from your sex assigned at birth. |
| In which country were you born? How would you describe your cultural identity? | The term cultural identity here is used to describe the sense of belonging you feel to a particular group or subgroup made up of people who have a common cultural heritage through things such as shared histories, homelands, languages, religions, rituals, foods, clothing, art, or appearance. |
| What language(s) do you speak at home? Which other languages do you speak? Are you a current PhD student or have you graduated from your PhD? In which country are you studying your PhD? / In which country did you study your PhD? When did you start your PhD? Are you a domestic or international PhD student?/ Were you a domestic or international PhD student? | Here, a domestic student refers to someone who is a citizen or permanent resident of the country in which they are studying. An international student refers to someone who is not a citizen or permanent resident of the country in which they are studying. |
| Are you a full-time or part-time student?/ Were you a full-time or part-time student? | Here, a full-time student refers to someone who studies at least 75% of their course's full time load. A part-time student refers to someone who studies less than 75% of their course's full time load. |
| When do you hope to finish your PhD?/When did you finish your PhD? Do you fund your own studies or do you have a scholarship (or another source of funding) to complete your PhD?/ Did you fund your own studies or did you have a scholarship (or another source of funding) to complete your PhD? If you had to describe your PhD research to a lay person in less than three sentences, how would you explain your topic? | |

data allowed my participants the agency to incorporate all the information they wanted to provide to explain to me who they are and why they think they are that way. As I noted in one of my discussions with my participants,

'What happens in, eh, research quite often, but just in society all the time, is someone who doesn't fit that binary category of whatever you put in the little boxes, automatically gets excluded from the conversation. [...] I don't want my research participants to feel like they are in some way less than my other research participants because they don't fit these arbitrary categories. So instead I create questions that ask them to say, [...] 'You tell me who you are' [...] In that way you can, you know, privilege someone's voice. [...] It's not up to me to tell you what you are, you tell me cause [...] you are the expert in your own experience, right?'

(Conversation with Kurdi, October 2023)

Most questions were left open-ended, except those asking participants whether they were current students or graduates, domestic or international students, and whether they were full-time or part-time students. These questions were provided as a choice between two options, as a binary choice was either necessary for the navigation of the survey or because only two options were available for the answer. Where required, contextual explanations were provided under each question to explain specific terms or to give examples of the expected type of response (see [Table 1](#)).

Data analysis and presentation

I collected the responses to the various demographic questions for my participants. While I could have presented these findings as a table in my larger study, this would have reverted my study into a study assigning people into certain categories. Instead, I wanted to create a more holistic approach to my data analysis, so I drew on my previous work using narrative methodologies to create a novel data analysis and presentation method: the creation of introductory participant stories. I have chosen to present these findings as stories because I believe that stories and individual experiences matter as they provide windows into the worlds of individuals (Pretorius *et al.* 2022). This aligns with the philosophy of narrative inquiry, which is helpful in understanding and highlighting how humans experience their everyday worlds (Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

I started by reading each participant's responses to the demographic survey questions, looking for the interconnections between different answers. I then transformed these individual answers into an introductory story for each participant, as if this would be the way they would introduce themselves to me at the start of a research interview. Narrative researchers believe that participants are the storytellers in their own stories (Connelly and Clandinin 1990), so I used participants' direct words in the stories wherever possible to convey their authentic voices. Narrative researchers also believe that participants and researchers are characters in each others' stories (Connelly and Clandinin 1990). Consequently, I also co-constructed meaning with my participants by sending their individual introductory stories to them for validation and clarification of any contextual details. Using these contextual details, their responses to other parts of the survey, and my knowledge of the participants I personally knew (i.e. Anna, Calvin, and Ray), I organized the introductory stories in particular ways to reflect each participant's individual lived reality. All four participants affirmed that the final introductory stories accurately represented their understandings of themselves.

I also inductively coded the diversity statements of the participants in the overall study to identify which concepts they highlighted in their statements. These self-written diversity statements were coded in NVivo 12. The results from this coding were used to demonstrate the diverse range of responses received from the wider participant cohort. It is important to note that all responses represented multiple codes, and frequently individual sentences revealed multiple concepts.

Findings

Open-ended reflective questions prompted more nuanced data

When I began to receive the responses from my survey, it was clear that the open-ended reflective demographic questions elicited a wide range of responses. While some participants responded with more traditional answers (e.g. male/female for the gender identity question), many of the answers

also revealed a wide range of unexpected and more nuanced responses. For example, by providing an open-ended question for participants to explain their cultural identity, some participants provided responses which could fall within standardized categories (e.g. Anna described herself as Euro-Australian and Ray described herself as South Asian). Other participants provided more complex answers, which would not have appeared in a survey with more categorized options. Calvin, for example, noted that he considered his cultural identity as conservative Christian, while Chris explained that they descended from a long line of alcoholics. This illustrates that people's perceptions of themselves are often complex and that survey questions should embrace this complexity by allowing participants to explain their individual understanding.

Self-written diversity statements allow a depth of reflection for participants

In particular, the diversity statement question elicited a marked depth of reflection. It also revealed a wide variety of additional information which could be used for a more in-depth analysis of the intersectionality and complexity of participants' lived experiences. By analysing the diversity statements of the overall participant cohort, I found that participants highlighted many concepts, including ableism, abuse or assault, ageism, casteism, classism, crime or violence, cultural backgrounds and expectations, discrimination, educational experiences, ethnicity, gender, linguistic diversity, marginalization, mental health or illness, migration, neurodiversity, parental responsibilities, poverty or economic disadvantage, privilege, race or racism, religion and spirituality, sexism, sexuality, and wealth. An example of the diversity statement coding is shown below.

'I am a Chinese international students who get higher education in a English-speaking country (*difference, educational experiences, ethnicity, migration*). English is not my first language (*linguistic diversity*), and I have a significant cultural difference from the local community (*cultural background and experience; difference*). I have a very introverted personality and suffered from depression sometimes (*self-perceptions; mental health or illness*). I am a self-funded student without financial support from families and scholarships (*funding, poverty or economic disadvantage*).'

Pepsi survey response (coding indicated in italics)

I was also interested in exploring the structure of the diversity statements. As shown in [Table 1](#), I provided a template diversity statement for participants as they would likely not have been asked this type of question before. While participants did indeed use this template as a guide for their responses (see Posie's response below), many of the responses were longer than the one provided (see Auri's response below).

'I am a young, white female with a significant amount of education who does not subscribe to any main religion. I grew up in a socially disadvantaged environment, with a single mother and unstable home life, and education became a way of escaping my circumstances. I am therefore committed to inclusive practices to provide a platform to others and create safe spaces where everyone feels welcome, regardless of their background.'

Posie survey response

'I am a brown woman in my early 30s, with a strong education background. I am an immigrant. While English is not my first language, I now use English more than I have the opportunity to use my first language. I am culturally different from those around me, and I don't subscribe to any religion (although I was born into a global minority religion, but the majority religion in my country). I am of the majority ethnicity in my home country, but am very much a minority now, and my ethnic group is among the smallest in the world. I have mental health struggles, and have been learning coping mechanisms. I have experienced intimate partner violence (in a past relationship). I am passionate about diversity and equity, and have been working towards these goals at all academic institutions I have been a part of.'

Auri survey response

The concepts included in the statements also touched on various intersectional experiences (e.g. the connections Auri made between her culture, ethnicity, and the religions in her home context), many

of which were not in the original example statement. This illustrates that while the template statement may have prompted participants to think about particular concepts, it did not hinder them from incorporating additional details they felt were relevant to their own experiences.

The responses to these open-ended reflective questions and the self-written diversity statement have provided me with opportunities for more in-depth data collection during the semi-structured interview stage of the larger project. While I had developed a series of interview prompts related to my research questions before sending out the survey, I reframed some of the questions to reflect the participants' responses. For example, it was important for Chris to highlight their family's relationship with alcohol and their passion for fighting White supremacy. This is despite the fact that their PhD research topic was not related to these concepts at all. This highlights that these two concepts played an important role in Chris' identity development. As the researcher, therefore, it was crucial for me to further explore the intersections between these parts of Chris' identity and how they influence their journey in academia. This underscores the importance of developing a more holistic understanding of each participant before any follow-up interview, as it will not only encourage better rapport between the interviewer and participant but also allow for more in-depth data collection.

Introductory stories as an analytical tool to develop a more holistic understanding of participants

As highlighted in the cohort analysis, I realized that the diversity statement question gave me a real depth of detail about my participants' complex and intersectional identities. I wanted to explore how researchers could better understand their participants holistically, so I combined the data from the various demographic questions to create introductory stories for each of the four focus participants. I purposely chose two focus participants who provided longer statements for the diversity statement question (Anna and Ray) and two participants whose responses to this question were short (Calvin and Chris). In this way, I wanted to demonstrate that my technique of creating introductory stories could be useful, regardless of the response length.

To illustrate the effectiveness of my approach, I present the demographic information of my four participants first in table format (see [Table 2](#)) and then as introductory stories. The table represents an example of how this type of data would typically be presented in research papers. As can be seen in the table, general details about all four participants can be gleaned. For example, Anna and Ray were recent graduates, while Calvin and Chris were current students. Participants could speak various languages, studied predominantly in Australia (Anna, Ray, and Calvin), and had different levels of financial support.

The introductory stories for my four focus participants are presented below. These introductory stories represent a deeper understanding of the participants. As highlighted in Anna's introductory story, for example, experiences of marginalization can be seen, which are not represented in the table. Indeed, readers may even assume from the table that Anna would not experience marginalization at all because she is an English-speaking Australian student studying in her home country with full financial support.

Anna's introductory story

Hi. I am Anna, and I am 33 years old. I chose the name Anna for this study as it was the name I gave my alter-ego when I was a kid. This name connects me to my cultural heritage and my love of dance and literature. I am a White, non-Indigenous Euro-Australian, with cultural ties to the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, and England. I usually speak English, but I can also speak German. Despite my Australian upbringing, I have experienced marginalisation, with people asking me where I come from. I believe this highlights that there are clear divides between who belongs and who does not belong in Australia. I consider myself privileged, as I am cis-gendered, straight, and able-bodied. I have reasonably good mental health, which I cherish, as I have previously experienced violence and aggression due to mental illness. I started my PhD in Teacher Education in 2019 and

Table 2. Participant demographic data in table format.

| | Anna | Calvin | Chris | Ray |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|--|--|
| Institution | Little Boxes University | Ivory Tower Academy | Hustle University | Breezy University |
| Current Student or Graduate | Graduate (2019–2023) | Current Student (2021–2026) | Current Student (2017–2024) | Graduate (2018–2023) |
| Research Field | Teacher Education | Religion and Theology | Adult Learning and Leadership | Inclusive Education |
| Age | 33 | 37 | 41 | 32 |
| Gender Identity | Female | Male | Agender | Female |
| Country of Birth | Australia | South Africa | USA | India |
| Cultural Identity | Euro-Australian | Conservative Christianity | Descended from a long line of alcoholics | South Asian |
| Languages | English and German | English, Afrikaans, and limited Dutch, Greek, and Hebrew | English | English, French, Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil |
| Country of Study | Australia | Australia | USA | Australia |
| Domestic or International Student | Domestic Student | Domestic Student | Domestic Student | International Student |
| Full-time or Part-time | Full-time | Part-time | Full-time | Full-time |
| Funding | Scholarship/ Stipend | Government loan | Self-funded | Scholarship/ Stipend |

completed it in 2023. I was lucky enough to be able to study as a full-time, domestic student with a scholarship. It may be a bit cynical, but I would call my university Little Boxes University because I see my university as having a tension between how people are put into particular boxes and how these people strive to break free from these categories and build connections. While technically areligious, I hold an abiding interest in spiritual beliefs. I grew up in a rural town as part of a working-class family and attended a disadvantaged country school. My family has a strong focus on education. I moved to the city for my university studies and found it a difficult transition, particularly because my university seemed to be full of private-school kids. At that time, I experienced a lot of culture shock, but I have adapted and now consider myself more mobile middle-class. I believe, though, that my experiences have put me in a fortunate position, as it has taught me a lot about things my more privileged friends cannot understand. I am passionate about recognising that fortune and working to make other peoples' lives more fortunate.

Calvin's introductory story

Hi. I am Calvin and I am a 37-year-old man. I chose the name Calvin for this study because I think it reflects my personality. I am currently studying my PhD in Religion and Theology as a part-time, domestic student with a government loan. I started my PhD in 2021 and hope to be finished by 2026. I have chosen to call my university the Ivory Tower Academy because I think it reflects the personality of my institution. I consider myself as someone who has significant privilege. I grew up as a White male in a wealthy family and have had a significant amount of education. I usually speak English at home, but I can also speak Afrikaans and some limited Dutch, Greek, and Hebrew. I was born in South Africa, but I actually only feel very loosely connected to my birth country. Instead, I would probably classify my cultural heritage as conservative Christianity. I am an influential person in this majority religion. However, I am an immigrant to Australia and English is my second language. This means that I had to relearn how society functioned after moving here.

Chris' introductory story

Hi. I am Chris, a 41-year-old agender person who is currently studying their PhD in Adult Learning and Leadership. I also identify as White and bisexual. I did not want to choose a name for my university that sounded too terrible, so I have chosen to call my institution Hustle University. I think this name represents an essential part of my university's culture. I was born in the USA and am also studying here, but I want to note that I have spent a significant amount of my time living outside the USA. I am studying my degree full-time as a domestic student and I self-fund my studies. I speak English at home and do not know any other languages. I have a chronic illness and self-diagnosed autism. I would consider my cultural identity as a descendant of a long line of alcoholics. One important thing to know about me is that I am passionate about fighting white supremacy.

Ray's introductory story

Hi. I am Ray, a 32-year-old coloured and neurodivergent woman with a chronic health condition. I chose the name Ray for this study as it reflects my actual name, which means rays of the sun. I recently completed my PhD in Inclusive Education. I studied at Breezy University in Australia. I chose the name Breezy University for two reasons. Firstly, the campus is literally very breezy as a lot of wind blows during both Summer and Winter. Secondly, I think my institution actually has a very breezy personality; it seems like something or someone who is cool. I was a full-time international student in Australia. I received two university-managed scholarships from the time of enrolment until the submission of my thesis. I am an Indian citizen and I would classify my cultural identity as South Asian. I consider myself an immigrant both in the overseas countries where I lived and back in India. I speak five different languages, including three regional Indian languages (Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil), English, and French. I am in a heterosexual relationship, and I think I have a lot of privilege, as I come from an oppressor (upper)-caste and upper-middle-class background in India. I was also educated in foreign countries. It is in recognition of these privileges, experiences, and disadvantages that I am passionate about engaging in research, practice, and advocacy of inclusive and equitable education.

Discussion

In this paper, I argue that the dominant ways of meaning-making, demonstrated by the way demographic data are collected and presented, reduce participants' agency and can lead to a form of epistemic injustice. As Hutton and Cappellini (2022) note, 'epistemic injustice occurs when dominant structures in knowledge production result in [...] exclusion and silencing, invisibility, inaudibility and having one's contributions distorted, misheard and/or having diminished status in communicative practices' (p. 156). Dominant ways of knowing, conducting research, and communicating knowledge through language can influence what is considered valuable (Hutton and Cappellini 2022). Researchers of human experience, however, have an obligation to consider complexity in their research, particularly the intersections between different aspects of individuals' identities (Collins and Bilge 2016, Rangarajan 2023). Despite this obligation, researchers still neglect the complex and intersecting aspects of participants' identities by structuring research surveys to categorize participants into particular groups. Furthermore, these practices minoritise and/or silence some participants, with their words sometimes devalued, misrepresented or entirely ignored, while the credibility of their lived experiences is also questioned (Hutton and Cappellini 2022). Therefore, there is a clear need to design research practices that privilege othered knowledge and do not perpetuate silencing or ignorance.

The main contribution of this study is the development of a novel analytical method which combines data from various survey questions into holistic introductory participant stories. It is important to note that the introductory stories presented in this paper are more than simply a collection of individual answers into an easy-to-read summary of a participant. Instead, these stories represent the intersections of participants' understandings of themselves. As Bell (2002) noted, stories are how individuals make sense of their worlds. People's stories are (re)constructed through personal and societal narratives, so researchers can use these stories to better understand people's consciously told stories and the deeper narratives often unconsciously embedded within these stories (Bell 2002). By examining my participants' stories, I have been able to better represent how their experiences, cultures, assumptions, and beliefs have shaped the identities they share with others.

Due to word restrictions, I have only presented the in-depth data of four participants from the broader study. Readers may consequently consider this paper as less statistically generalizable. However, it is important to note that qualitative researchers do not seek to provide statistically generalizable details as this does not suit the interpretative nature of researching complex human experiences (Smith 2018). Instead, this study demonstrates transferability and analytical generalisability by proposing new creative data collection and analysis tools (i.e. self-written diversity statements and introductory participant stories) that can be applied to many qualitative research projects.

If we, as researchers, are to embed epistemic justice in our practices, we need to transition to 'modes of research which are diverse, unfamiliar, shifting and incomplete of knowing' (Hutton

and Cappellini 2022, p. 165). The open-ended reflective questions aimed to provide a more democratized platform for participants to voice their lived experiences, which Hutton and Cappellini (2022) highlight can help researchers privilege othered knowledges. Furthermore, the introductory stories in this study are a more artistic way of knowing which, as Hutton and Cappellini (2022) argue, 'can transmit multiply faceted meanings across registers of experience [...] helping to de-commodify knowledge, decrease ignorance and mitigate practices of silencing' (p. 168).

It is important to note that my analytical approach has focused on the participants' written expression of their experiences and social identities. As such, more creative approaches should be incorporated into my future research to further encourage epistemic justice because more creative approaches allow a better understanding of different ways of knowing (cf. Hutton and Cappellini 2022). Furthermore, traditionally marginalized or silenced people may not engage with traditional written data representations in research papers. As the researcher, it will also be incumbent upon me to make my research more easily accessible through more creative forms of media and engagement in the future.

Conclusion

In this paper, I demonstrate a new analytical research tool (creating holistic introductory participant stories) as a valuable strategy to help capture the complexity of participants' intersectional identities. Incorporating this more holistic data into data reporting in academic manuscripts will also contribute to making research more representative of the population, encouraging equity and social justice for those who may otherwise be marginalized or entirely excluded from research. Consequently, I encourage future researchers to incorporate this more creative methodology to foster epistemic justice in research practice.

Author Biographical Note.

Dr Lynette Pretorius is an award-winning educator and researcher in the fields of academic language, literacy, research skills, and research methodologies. She has experience teaching undergraduate, postgraduate, and graduate research students, including supervising PhD students. Lynette is the author of multiple journal articles and two academic books focused on the experiences of graduate research students in academia. She has qualifications in Medicine, Science, Education, as well as Counselling, and her research interests include doctoral education, academic identity, student wellbeing, reflection, and qualitative research methods. Lynette is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy – an international honour awarded to educators who demonstrate a thorough understanding of, and a strong commitment to, teaching and learning approaches which foster high-quality student learning.

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Declarations

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The raw data from the project described in this paper are protected by confidentiality due to the identifiability of potentially sensitive personal information. Consequently, the entire dataset is not available publicly. Any queries regarding de-identified data or research methods employed to examine the data should be addressed to the researcher.

I acknowledge that I used ChatGPT (OpenAI, <https://chat.openai.com/>) to generate an initial draft outline of the introduction of this manuscript. The prompt provided for this outline was 'Act as a social science researcher and write an outline for a paper advocating for change to survey design to collect more diverse participant information'. I adapted the outline it produced for the introduction to reflect my own argument, style, and voice. This section was also significantly adapted through the peer review process. As such, the final version of the manuscript does not include any unmodified content generated by ChatGPT.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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