

Missing identity options on forms can prompt anger, reduce belonging

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Being asked to provide demographic information in official forms such as job applications—but finding one's own identity group missing from demographic options provided—can signal a low likelihood of belonging

in a given setting and trigger anger, according to new Cornell research.

["Devaluation by Omission: Limited Identity Options Elicit Anger and Increase Identification,"](#) by Sean Fath and Devon Proudfoot, assistant professors in the ILR School's Departments of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Studies, respectively, published Jan. 29 in *Psychological Science*, also demonstrates that finding one's identity omitted in demographics forms strengthens one's identification with the missing group.

Identity omission, subtle but likely widespread, can cause individuals to feel unrecognized and devalued, the authors said. They conducted six experiments involving 2,964 people who self-identified as [gender minorities](#) or members of the Liberal Democrats, a political party in the U.K. with a much smaller following than the two major parties. In surveys, individuals rated, on a scale of one to seven, how it felt to see or not see their identity listed as a demographic choice.

For some minority groups, this kind of identity omission may happen frequently. Until 2022, for instance, U.S. passport applications were limited to only "male" or "female" gender options; "nonbinary" was not a choice.

Many organizations offer limited options on their standard [job applications](#), the research found. For instance, in a survey of the 10 largest U.S.-based employers, the researchers found that eight used job application forms that only included "male" and "female" as gender options in demographics (the other two employers' forms do not include gender options).

Low-cost steps such as broadening options to reflect the applicant pool's gender and racial identities can foster a sense of belonging among employees and a positive experience for job applicants, Proudfoot and

Fath said.

For instance, the authors cite other research indicating that people who fall under the broad, pan-ethnic labels Hispanic or Latino report greater positive feelings when they feel their specific ethnic identities, such as "Guatemalan" or "Salvadoran," are recognized. Thus, the authors suggest that organizations recruiting from areas with large Latin American populations might benefit from using more specific ethnic identity options in demographic forms—such as job applications.

They said that adding demographic options to be more inclusive carries little risk, noting that adding a nonbinary gender option to a job application form did not appear to impact individuals who identify as male or female negatively.

Companies can also consider open-ended responses allowing people to self-identify in their own words and may benefit from broadening form formats to allow respondents to select as many racial or ethnic options as fit their identities, rather than a "check one" format, they said.

The authors said that, in many companies, [decision-makers](#) may not recognize the important implications stemming from the response options they select for standard demographics forms, whether in external forms sent to applicants or internal benchmarking surveys.

Applicants to, or existing members of, organizations may begin to question the extent to which they belong—or their group is valued—when they find their [personal identity](#) omitted from response options provided in demographics, Fath and Proudfoot said. However, by erring on the side of inclusivity when constructing demographic forms, organizations can easily address social identity omissions of this nature.

More information: Sean Fath et al, Devaluation by Omission: Limited Identity Options Elicit Anger and Increase Identification, *Psychological Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976231223416](https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976231223416)

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