

Revisiting the *Generations and Gender Survey*: Has time improved the reliability for studying same-sex couples?

Introduction

In recent decades, demographic studies on LGBTQ+ populations have gained momentum, yet representative data on queer families remain scarce. Most large-scale surveys either lack questions on sexual orientation and gender identity or suffer from limitations in how relationships are coded and identified. These gaps make it difficult to track the diversity of queer family forms and household arrangements across countries and time. The *Generations and Gender Survey* (GGS) offers a promising resource in this context, with detailed data on partnership formation, family aspirations, and intergenerational support. However, concerns about miscoding and small sample sizes have cast doubt on its suitability for research on same-sex couples.

Against this background, recent social and legal transformations invite a re-evaluation of these concerns and of the GGS's reliability for studying LGBTQ+ populations. Over the past decade, both the social and legal environments for same-sex couples have changed dramatically. Unlike the early 2000s, many participating countries now provide legal recognition and greater social visibility for same-sex couples. These contextual changes may have affected respondents' reports on their same-sex partnerships, which may have increased the number of reported partnerships. This study revisits earlier methods and introduces new strategies to evaluate whether Round II offers more reliable identification of same-sex couples and LGBTQ populations.

First, we replicate approaches used with Round I—relying on sex and kinship variables, marital status, and number of children (Régnier-Loilier, 2018). Second, because having children is often more difficult for same-sex couples (Boertien et al., 2024), previous studies have found implausibly high numbers of children in identified same-sex couples, suggesting possible misclassification. However, these studies have not examined the relationship between the respondent and the child, which could clarify such inconsistencies (e.g., they could be stepchildren from previous relationships). We therefore examine whether these children are biological, adopted, or stepchildren. Finally, we analyze data from those countries that fielded Round II (Wave 2) and included a question on sexual orientation to assess whether this measure reduces classification error and improves reliability. Together, these steps contribute to more nuanced, inclusive, and context-aware methods for identifying and analyzing same-sex couples in the GGS.

Generations and Gender Survey

In this study, we analyze GGS Round II Wave 1 data from twelve countries (Argentina, Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Uruguay). We also use the most recent Wave 2 data from Norway and Estonia, which include questions on sexual orientation. We use information on the gender of the respondent and partner, their legal marital status, year of marriage, registered partnership, and year of registration. We also consider the

number of children by type of couple and whether they are biological, adopted, or stepchildren.

Initial results

Table 1 – Legal marriage and registered partnership of same-sex couples GGS II, wave

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Source: Elaborated by authors using the Generations and gender survey, Round II wave 1. Note: Years of registered partnership and equal marriage obtained through <https://database.ilga.org/same-sex-marriage-civil-unions>.

False SSC (b): Couples that answered “Yes” to being legally married, whose reported year of marriage occurred before marriage equality in that country (if applicable).

False SSC (c): Couples that answered “Yes” to being legally married, whose reported year of marriage occurred before registered partnerships became available in that country (if applicable). *In these countries, the legalization occurred in 2024, after the survey was conducted.

Table 1 shows that countries without legal recognition of same-sex marriage have the highest shares of cases that legality-based rules classify as “false” same-sex couples—about 73% on average—while those with marriage equality have far fewer potentially miscoded cases, averaging around 21%. Nations with a longer history of recognition generally exhibit lower misclassification, though Sweden stands out as an exception. This anomaly prompted an examination of years of registered partnership, as the high share of doubtful cases could reflect measurement issues rather than actual misreporting. In the GGS, respondents are first asked whether they are legally married and only afterward about registered partnership, which may lead some to interpret “married” as including partnerships that confer similar—and often identical—rights. When validation relies only on the reported year of marriage compared to the timing of same-sex marriage legalization, couples who entered registered partnerships before legalization may be wrongly flagged as miscoded same-sex unions. We see evidence for this claim because when registered partnership years are also incorporated into the validation process, misclassifications decline notably in countries such as Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and the United Kingdom.

We next turn to a second, longstanding validation criterion: children in the household. Régnier-Loilier (2018) questioned cases where same-sex couples reported two or more children. We revisit this in a way that is sensitive to diverse pathways to parenthood. We analyze the distribution of children by country and couple type, disaggregated into biological, adopted, and stepchildren, to assess whether concentrations of same-sex couples with two or more children reflect probable misclassification.

We also analyze the Norwegian and Estonian GGS Round II Wave 2 data. First, we identify respondents who reported an LGB+ sexual orientation, then identify the couples among them and compare this classification with that based on kinship and partner gender. We observe a relatively higher proportion of respondents identifying as bisexual, highlighting the importance of sexual orientation to identify couples beyond a binary approach. Finally, we analyze the number of children in the household. We argue that including sexual orientation is an important identification variable, not only for its robustness but also because it captures bisexual individuals who are otherwise excluded when focusing solely on same-sex couples.

Initial findings

This research note examines the most recent rounds of the Generations and Gender Survey to assess their reliability for studying same-sex couples, given earlier claims that the survey was unsuitable for this purpose. By replicating and extending previous analyses, and by situating them in a context where time, legal reforms, and social acceptance have advanced considerably, we find evidence that countries that have legalized same-sex marriage or registered partnerships tend to yield more consistent datasets. This suggests that both societal visibility and institutional recognition contribute to data quality. However, we caution against dismissing couples who report being married prior to legalization as “false” cases, since evolving interpretations of what it means to be “married” can complicate such assumptions (Compton & Kaufman, 2024). We therefore conclude that while no single validation method

provides a definitive safeguard against miscoding, the available checks demonstrate that the GGS can be used with confidence to study most same-sex couples in its database.

Our analysis also highlights a key recommendation for survey design. The current GGS questionnaire asks respondents first whether they are legally married and only then, if they answer “no,” whether they are in a registered partnership. This order may lead to misclassification, as respondents in countries where partnerships and marriages are legally or socially equivalent might select “married” and never reach the second question. Such miscoding can affect both same-sex and different-sex couples. To reduce this risk, we recommend reversing the question order—asking about registered partnership before legal marriage—or explicitly clarifying in the wording that the marriage question excludes registered partnerships. Adjusting this flow would likely improve the accuracy and comparability of relationship status data across countries and waves.

References

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