

Breaking the cycle. A methods reflection on the analytical productivity of challenges in participatory anti-discrimination research

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Abstract: In recent years, there is increasing institutional interest in collecting quantitative anti-discrimination and diversity data (ADDD) as evidence for structural barriers to inclusion. We reflect on the challenges that emerged during the participatory development of a quantitative instrument to collect ADDD in German academia. Theoretically, we ground our reflection in an integration of feminist and intersectional perspectives drawing on internal documentation materials. The results imply that routine ADDD collection stabilizes existent knowledge on marginalization when institutionalized categories are reified as well as when the addressed community members drop out or refuse to participate. To break this self-reinforcing cycle, reflexivity, participation, and care should be embedded into institutional practices as a part of the institutionalization of gender and diversity.

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Breaking the cycle: A methods reflection on the transformative potential of challenges in participatory anti-discrimination research

Introduction

“The world we know is made, in committed projects, to be in the shapes our knowledge shows us; humans are not the only actors in such projects; and the world thrown up by knowledge-making projects *might* (still) be otherwise, but *is* not otherwise.” (Haraway 2004, 204)

Collecting equality data is recognized as an important first step in the effort to implement diversity measures in higher education and to establish a comprehensive protection framework for marginalized university community members. In this, the purpose of equality data is twofold: It should serve as “evidence” for discrimination, exclusion, and injustice, and as a tool to monitor change (Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2020; Rosenstreich et al. 2022). This accounts for the idea that collecting equality data is “not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end” (Rosenstreich et al. 2022, 4) as it is strongly embedded in the realm of social justice (Isopahkala-Bouret 2023) that seeks to catalyze legally grounded social transformation (Jost/Kay 2010, 1122). To achieve this, the application of participatory methods is recommended (Ahyoud et al. 2018; Fine et al. 2021).

Within this normative framework of social justice¹, we will reflect on the participatory development of an instrument designed to collect sociodemographic data for use as part of a broader survey for collecting equality data.

Equality data as a building block for social justice in higher education

The European Commission defines equality data as “any piece of information that is useful for the purposes of describing and analyzing the state of equality” (Makkonen 2016, 15). Equality data, here, serves as an umbrella term, involving

1 Following Richard Rorty, we treat social justice as a contingent normative commitment rather than a universally grounded principle. Rorty’s “liberal ironist” is a person who recognizes the contingency of their most central beliefs and desires yet sticks to them (Rorty 2009, xv).

so-called anti-discrimination and diversity data (ADDD). Whereas these may be considered as distinct but overlapping components, anti-discrimination data focuses on identifying unequal treatment and discriminatory outcomes, while diversity data is primarily concerned with (dis)proportional representation within institutional structures. Both of them are, however, based on sociodemographic questions that analytically refer to underlying dimensions of inequality that are possible to detect (Makkonen 2016, 15).

While equality data can encompass a range of data types, including qualitative material (Bayirti/Oloff 2026, in this issue), in practice, the emphasis is often placed on quantitative, aggregate indicators (Makkonen 2016, 15). The absence of standardized survey instruments, the frequent reliance on imperfect proxies (Huddleston 2017), and the predominance of administrative data limited to a narrow set of identity dimensions have contributed to fragmented and inconsistent equality statistics across Europe (Rosenstreich et al. 2022). To fill this data gap, Nasiha Ahyoud and colleagues (2018) propose seven core principles for the collection of ADDD: 1) self-identification; 2) voluntary participation; 3) information about the purpose and intent of the data collection; 4) anonymity; 5) involvement of representatives of discriminated groups in the process of data collection, analysis, and dissemination; 6) the option to specify multiple identities, grounds for discrimination, and external attributions as well as an intersectional evaluation; 7) the principle of non-harm (data must not be misused) (Ahyoud et al. 2018).

So far, complying with principle 5 in particular has been described as difficult in higher-education settings: Participatory processes – co-designing surveys, running consultations, giving feedback loops – are time-intensive, so they are often deprioritized under institutional constraints of time and resources (Petermann/Bührmann/Marx 2020). However, one underlying reason for these constraints is that data collection is often done for reporting or compliance purposes rather than implemented as part of a transformative effort toward institutional change (Rosenstreich et al. 2022). A key strength of participatory research is that it “can reveal the complex workings of power within institutions and re-member² the bodies of social and political exclusion” (Fine/Torre 2004, 3) through co-construction of knowledge with community members. Further, participatory research within public institutions is also equipped to find ways to overcome these limitations (Boni/Walker 2020).

2 “Re-membering”, here, stands for the active work required to put “members” of different groups back together in the sense of not only recollecting but reconstituting relationships and social structures by making exclusions visible (Fine/Torre 2004).

Participatory instrument design as a project

The present project was embedded within the larger research project “Attitudes towards diversity, objectivity and meritocracy in science. Multiple barriers on the way to academic excellence” (ADOMiS). This third-party-funded project aimed at a broader survey among research faculty (PhD students, postdocs, professors) across four universities in order to assess experiences and barriers of marginalized faculty in academia. The participatory development of the socio-demographic instrument as part of the broader survey served as a sub-project within ADOMiS. The sub-project aimed to develop a survey instrument capable of capturing dimensions of social inequality and discrimination in a way that was both empirically useful and sensitive to the experiences of affected groups, with the added goal of collecting topics relevant to the community members’ experiences in higher education. This participatory process was mainly organized by us, the two authors of this text. In the present text, *ADOMiS team* refers to the broader project team as a whole and *facilitators* designates the two researchers from the ADOMiS team who were responsible for guiding the participatory process of the sub-project.

We want to understand the research process of this sub-project on the grounds of the theoretical assumption of *epistemic contingency* – the idea that what counts as valid knowledge depends on the complex interaction of social positions and institutional structures, an “account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects” (Haraway 1988, 579). We argue that foregrounding the contingency of knowledge as a descriptive theoretical assumption that is often implicitly embedded in research processes can help to argue for an understanding of non-universal knowledge.

The contingency of knowledge production

The concept of contingency has deep philosophical roots, emerging from debates about necessity and chance in ancient philosophy and gaining particular prominence through medieval scholastic discussions of divine will versus natural law. In modern social theory, contingency acquired analytical power as scholars were grappling with the unpredictability of historical change particularly visible in moments of revolutionary upheaval that defied deterministic explanations (Ermakoff 2015; Archer 2024, paragraphs 6, 8; Capoccia/Kelemen 2007, 341pp.; Knöbl 2019). In the late 20th century, “the linguistic turn in analytical philosophy” (Hacker 2013) brought contingency into epistemological discussions, with thinkers such as Richard Rorty arguing that knowledge itself is contin-

gent upon historical and cultural contexts rather than reflecting eternal truths (2009, 5pp.). This philosophical insight migrated into sociology through Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, which positioned contingency as fundamental to understanding how social systems remain open to multiple possibilities while creating temporary stabilizations of meaning (1996). In that sense, Luhmann reminds us on a systemic level that the categories underpinning surveys are themselves contingent products of broader social systems, temporarily stabilized but always open to being otherwise. Thus, we also understand those categories that result from a participatory process not as essential or universal but as contingent and inherently unstable.

From this broad entry point of tracing the contingency of knowledge within a participatory endeavor of knowledge production, its specific relevance within higher-education institutions is situated in the domains of organizational structures and societal integration within contemporary contexts. Organizational structure represents the designed arrangement of roles, processes, and authority that coordinates work and can be mechanistic, that is, rigid and formalized, as well as organic, that is, flexible and adaptive (Donaldson 2001, 34pp.). In organizational studies, contingency theory extends Rorty's argument by showing how the application of institutional norms is structurally contingent, explaining why no single organizational structure works in all contexts: effectiveness depends on the fit between organizational structure and environment.

Historical institutional analysis reveals how "critical junctures" in research design – moments when methodological or methodical choices set projects on particular trajectories – become sites where epistemic structures are either reproduced or challenged (Capoccia/Kelemen 2007). This aligns with the sociological typology for how contingency operates in social life by Ivan Ermakoff (2015). Here, the epistemic type of contingency refers to breaks in social processes that disrupt dominant understandings or expectations, forcing agents to reinterpret situations, redefine interests, and reshape collective outcomes (Ermakoff 2015, 110).

To contextualize why community participation in research on marginalization is relevant and challenges academic knowledge production, we integrate feminist and intersectional perspectives: Miranda Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice reveals how *testimonial injustice* (deflated credibility due to prejudice) and *hermeneutical injustice* (lack of interpretive resources) systematically exclude marginalized experiences from academic knowledge production (Fletcher 2024, paragraph 29). In discrimination research, those with direct experience face compounded credibility deficits when attempting to name their experiences within the very institutions where discrimination occurs (Fricker

2007, 17pp.; Janes 2016, 80pp.). Further, Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) intersectionality theory demonstrates how multiple systems of oppression create unique epistemic positions – “outsider-within” (Hill Collins 2000, 11) standpoints – that generate distinctive insights while being systematically excluded (Hill Collins 2000, 246pp.). Standpoint theory reveals how marginalized positions can generate epistemically privileged perspectives on systems of oppression but only under conditions supporting their development and recognition (Harding 2004, 1pp.). This requires what Hill Collins terms “critical consciousness” (2000, 260pp.): analytical frameworks transforming experiential knowledge into systematic understanding – in the case of this project, survey categories. Moreover, taking the intersectional nature of discrimination into account reveals the limitations of simple inclusion strategies as they may privilege some while continuing to exclude others, particularly those at multiple intersections of marginalization. These perspectives converge to illuminate how knowledge production is contingent not on arbitrary random factors but on systematic patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and power (Cooper 2013, 575pp.).

On these grounds, we reflect on the participatory development of a quantitative instrument designed to collect ADDD. The reflection focuses specifically on *how* and *by whom* knowledge about marginalization in academic contexts – knowledge that is subsequently expected to function as evidence for institutional change – is produced.³ In this sense, the participatory development of ADDD survey instruments becomes analytically relevant not merely as a methodological procedure but as a site in which organizational and epistemic mechanisms of exclusion may themselves become visible and transformable. As participatory research on marginalization seeks to incorporate the situated knowledge of “outsiders within” (Hill Collins 2000), thereby addressing epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007), we argue that challenges arising during a participatory research process need not be seen merely as “bumps in the road” but can rather be understood “as productive opportunities for growth” as they reveal structural constraints in regard to the production of more just forms of knowledge and institutional practice in higher education (Call-Cummings/Ní Sheanáin/Buttimer 2022, 88). Our approach is guided by the questions *What challenges emerged during the participatory survey instrument development process?* and *What recommendations can these challenges generate for further ADDD collection?*

3 The demand for ADDD itself emerges from the broader exclusion and marginalization of certain epistemic subjects within academic knowledge production, independent of specific research topics. One example is the extensive body of research that demonstrates how women and underrepresented-minority faculty in STEM fields are systematically underrepresented and marginalized as knowers despite their conducting highly mainstream research that is not necessarily connected to their lived experiences (Blackburn 2017).

Next, we describe the participatory process that will serve as our object of analysis before we move on to introducing the methods we applied to answer our research questions. We then present our findings, demonstrating how participatory processes may risk reproducing the same forms of evidence that they are intended to challenge. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for breaking such cycles and consider what they mean for the collection of ADDD more broadly.

Research object – project team and procedure

While the project proposal itself had not been developed in a participatory manner, the survey-instrument-design phase involved participatory elements, in which researchers who self-identified as marginalized and had experience with German higher education were included. We will now outline the research procedure of the participatory instrument-development process that will then serve as our research object in the reflection.

The facilitators recruited *experts*⁴ using purposive and snowball sampling strategies. Referring to participants as *experts* resists framing them merely as sources of data and instead recognizes them as knowledge holders whose perspectives expand institutionalized forms of knowledge. This terminology acknowledges participants' situated and experiential knowledge as a distinct and valuable epistemic contribution, aligning with Sarah Harding's (1991) concept of *standpoint epistemology* and Miranda Fricker's (2007) notion of *epistemic justice*. In line with an intersectionality perspective (Hill Collins 2000) and principles for creating safer research spaces (Trento et al. 2025, 2), the facilitators sought to avoid imposing external assumptions about which dimensions were relevant to participants' experiences. Instead, relevant dimensions that emerged were articulated by the participants themselves through the research process. Accordingly, the facilitators conceptualized groups not as fixed or pre-given entities but as the contingent outcome of processes of social differentiation.

At the same time, in the context of equality data, self-ascription and external ascription – that is, the categorization of individuals by others – are both consequential for lived experiences yet do not necessarily align. Social and marginalized groups⁵ are constituted within and through interrelated power relations

4 While participatory research often refers to community members as co-researchers, this term is not used here. In the present context, participation occurred only at specific stages rather than throughout the entire research process. True co-research would imply the joint definition of research questions, design, and methods together with participants.

5 When referring to groups, we relate to social groups rather than naming axes of power in order to foreground lived experience while remaining attentive to the structural conditions through which these groups are produced.

such as racism, (hetero)sexism, classism, and ableism, that are themselves contingent, which ADDD aims to make visible and contest. Individuals thus occupy multiple intersecting social positions that are shaped by these relations (Hill Collins 2000).

Prior to the start of participation, the ADOMiS team had drafted a sociodemographic survey instrument based on existing literature and recommendations. At the same time, one of the facilitators developed a semi-structured-interview guideline based on literature about barriers in German higher education (Helfferich 2011, 182pp.). The participatory refinement of the survey instrument draft then consisted of multiple steps: First, the facilitators interviewed (Kaiser 2021) the experts about their experiences in higher education, exploring barriers and resources across recruitment, socialization, and advancement (Griffin 2020) as well as perspectives on the collection of ADDD.

Based on recommendations from the interviews, the facilitators and ADOMiS team members refined the survey instrument draft in a digital Delphi-feedback-loop process (Brady 2015). The facilitators then sent the draft back to the experts, who commented on questions and answer options and rated the quality of each item on a 10-point Likert scale ("How satisfied are you with the item?"; 1 = not at all satisfied; 10 = completely satisfied). After the first feedback loop, the facilitators organized an online workshop to further discuss challenging items and to exchange ideas on how the research process could generate value for, and be accountable to, the experts and their communities. Based on their comments and ratings, the facilitators and ADOMiS team members revised the survey instrument again and then played it back to the experts until consensus was achieved for all items. Before entering the Delphi process, the facilitators had defined consensus as an average rating of seven or higher. The ADOMiS team remunerated participation⁶ in the Delphi process with € 500.

Methods for the reflection of challenges

We have outlined the procedure of the participatory instrument development to clarify the object of our reflection. We will now move on to explain how we grounded and structured our reflection.

⁶ Due to bureaucratic constraints, remuneration could not be provided for three individuals. As a compromise and because they still wished to contribute to the research process, they participated only in the interview phase.

Material collection and analytical basis

As a materialization of the research process outlined in the previous chapter, we draw on a variety of written records. These include notes from internal meetings and reflections by the two responsible facilitators, primarily collected and organized in Notion; e-mail correspondence; individual conceptual notes by the facilitators; team meeting minutes; and notes from the interviews, the workshop, and expert meetings.

Analytical framework and codes

As a framework to trace challenges in our material, we draw on the participatory-research model by Sabine Tiefenthaler, Kristina Schmidt, and Marilena von Köppen (2023) that conceptualizes the research process not as iterative steps but rather as interlocking components that influence each other throughout the research process. The core of the model is “[c]reating a safe[r] space”⁷ that is “characterized by openness and trust” (Tiefenthaler/Schmidt/von Köppen 2023, 175). The other interconnected elements of the research process build on this: “access to vulnerable groups”, “problem determination”, “data gathering”, “data analysis”, and “presentation of findings”. A meta-reflection of the roles, research steps, and institution is the basis for the model’s understanding of participatory research (Tiefenthaler/Schmidt/von Köppen 2023, 175). Using the model’s stages as analytical categories, we structured the material using MAXQDA to identify challenges regarding the translation of lived experience to survey-instrument items as well as the participation of experts in the process.

Challenges encountered along interlocking research steps

In the following, we outline the challenges we identified in the material. Our analysis follows the steps of Tiefenthaler, Schmidt and von Köppen’s (2023) model.

Core: Creating a safer space

“Then, of course, the question would be to what extent one wants to create access to minority groups. And there, I would say that it’s more

7 The original model uses the term “safe space”. We use the comparative form as one that is “emphasizing the infeasibility” of an entirely safe space (The Roestone Collective 2014; Trento et al. 2025, 2).

about the relationship of trust between self-organizations. [...] In other words, it is completely independent of how the question is phrased in terms of sentence structure or wording but has a lot to do with who is asking, what happens with it, what role I play, and how it will ultimately be presented.” (Dragan⁸, authors’ translation)

As highlighted in this quote, a central challenge of the research process turned out to be distrust, both in our research process in particular as well as in ADDD collection in general. This is consistent with previous research highlighting the central role of trust in participatory research (for example, Christopher et al. 2008). Experts in our study outlined that the occurrence of this distrust is two-fold: First, it exists due to historical reasons in the sense of exploitation and extractive ways of doing research in the past. Second, it is reinforced through continuous survey-based data collection that does not represent the communities that should actually be addressed, resulting in misrepresentation and fear of misuse of the collected data. This distrust has thus grown out of experiences of continuous *epistemic injustice* (Fricker 2007). Many of the experts pointed out how ADDD surveys are themselves a mirror of the society that reproduce the norms they aim to challenge. This can lead to marginalized participants dropping out of surveys, exacerbating the very invisibility these surveys sought to address. This became tangible in our participatory process as two potential experts withdrew from participation because they perceived our epistemological framing as unclear and doubted our commitment to transformative goals.

Trust issues also emerged within the research team. The ADOMiS team feared that the experts might veto all items in the Delphi process, prompting suggestions to introduce equal voting rights – an approach that re-centers academic knowledge. These concerns relate to institutional responsibilities, such as ensuring methodological rigor and publishable results. However, they also reflect entrenched hierarchies of knowledge in which community-based perspectives are more readily questioned or devalued as insufficiently “objective” or methodologically sound. Researcher skepticism both functioned as a form of risk management and reasserted epistemic authority. The facilitators addressed this tension through discussions with the ADOMiS team that made interests transparent, enabling negotiation toward a shared goal. Ultimately, the ADOMiS team agreed not to be part of the feedback loop, leaving the voting rights to the experts.

Building mutual trust was key to the collaboration’s success despite asymmetries. It was, however, limited by what Luhmann (1996) called “stabilized

⁸ Experts could choose a pseudonym for themselves freely. That chosen pseudonym will be indicated in brackets after quotes. Some people chose numbers, others words.

meanings", for example, using the university's official forms for contracting and paying experts meant that some experts were misgendered and that English-speaking participants ran into language-based issues. At the same time, efforts to create trust and safety through double anonymization of interview transcripts, follow-up calls, and individualized care complicated the university procedures, extending the research timeline and foregrounding care practices that are often rendered invisible and undervalued in academia. Participation introduced irritations. Yet, these disruptions point to where institutional transformation might begin, that is, in recognizing that in researching discrimination within hierarchical systems, care work is not an obstacle but both an ethical and practical necessity. Sensitive subjects such as discrimination, potential distrust, and diverse experiences further necessitate an organic structure in Lex Donaldson's (2001) sense, since imposing a rigid, top-down survey risks low validity, poor participation, and reinforcing distrust.

Access to vulnerable groups

A core challenge lay in the question of who to recruit as experts. In this, the objective was not to employ the interviews themselves as a "catalog of identities" (Crenshaw 2016). Instead, recruitment was designed to construct a survey capable of revealing specific intersectional inequalities (Hill Collins 2000) and to acknowledge inequality and power in quantitative research (Else-Quest/Hyde 2016a).

The challenge was balancing the recognition of objective structures of discrimination with participants' self-identification. Due to time constraints, it was most efficient to recruit through academic and community organizations, drawing on prior knowledge of inequality. Thus, valuable perspectives of those entirely outside institutional structures (Harding 2004) were excluded. Moreover, recruitment was conducted in German and English. Only upon later reflection did the team recognize that including additional languages could have made the process more inclusive and allowed for a broader range of perspectives. This assumption that because German and English are the primary operating languages of German academia and that therefore, other languages did not need to be considered demonstrates how structural norms and unexamined presuppositions can shape the inclusivity of participatory processes.

Notably, the majority of respondents highlighted various social dimensions in their applications, which underlines that avoiding rigid external prescriptions and centering lived experience can enable power-critical, intersectional recruitment (Hill Collins 2000). However, after the first recruitment phase, no experts

represented perspectives from Jewish or Sinti and Roma communities. In the German context, it is particularly important to include these dimensions, given the historical subjection of both groups to state persecution and their ongoing experience of structural and symbolic forms of discrimination. In a second phase, the facilitators adjusted the call to emphasize the relevance of these perspectives, still recruiting via organizations rather than targeting individuals. This strategy highlights the fact that while intersectional recruitment can indeed broaden perspectives, it is not necessarily capable of capturing all dimensions that are relevant to the specific context.

Problem determination

Determining the problem to analyze and tackle as such was a striking challenge in itself. The ADOMiS team had already determined that the problem lay in the non-existence of ADDD. While agreeing on the significance of data collection to address representational inequality, the experts located the problem primarily in the lack of recognition of existing knowledge regarding inequality as legitimate grounds for transformation. In that sense, the mere call for the collection of anti-discrimination data itself can be understood to stem from the phenomenon of testimonial injustice (Fricker 2007). This becomes evident in the following interview quote:

“I would do this [participating] but maybe not in the academic setting if there were no remuneration. That means a lot to me in terms of my knowledge, my free work, politically, my struggles that throughout all these years [...] that they are worth something and it is a knowledge that I’m sharing, that’s like, yeah, it was not all for nothing” (6).

The issue does not lie in the absence of knowledge but in its epistemic recognition (Haraway 1988). As Fricker (2007) asserts, knowledge generated within community organizations where lived experience is prioritized is often not regarded as adequate evidence for institutional or policy modifications as it lacks *testimonial justice*. In that sense, while the collection of ADDD is undoubtedly important, the challenges encountered during the participatory survey-design process point to a deeper issue: if genuine change in universities is desired and the goal is to make them more just, then a fundamental shift in *testimonial justice* is required.

While involving experts in line with standpoint epistemology, the facilitators faced a challenge in centering their lived experiences due to the study’s prior framing. The study, as well as most ADDD work, focuses on detecting experien-

ces of discrimination. However, as one expert articulated, this was not necessarily in the interest of the experts:

“I don’t think it’s necessary at all to ask about the difficulty of an experience, I think it’s important to focus on people’s strategies to focus on what people are already doing.” (6)

In that sense, a more resource-oriented focus in the collection of ADDD as well as participatory data interpretation are crucial in order to draw a more comprehensive picture of marginalization in academia, stepping away from stereotypical deficit narratives. This inversion not only exposes the structural and relational nature of discrimination but also prevents the reproduction of *epistemological violence* (Teo 2010) through deficit-oriented framings that locate problems within marginalized groups instead of within the systems that marginalize them. Furthermore, while there was an understanding that complying with standards of quantitative-data gathering can be useful, the experts preferred taking social injustice as a starting point of inquiry. This could have led to an entirely different trajectory, for example, by focusing on the investigation of biases aiming for the development of mentoring programs for majority group members to address them.

The project’s iterative and participatory nature enabled a certain degree of adjustment. While the survey was originally designed to center barriers and experiences, more resource-oriented questions were subsequently implemented. However, with respect to the project’s research focus, this remained bound by structural constraints.

Data gathering and data analysis

In participatory survey-design processes, experiential knowledge must be “translated” into academically legible formats. This process of turning lived experience into survey items or analytical categories inevitably involves loss and distortion. Who controls this translation determines what knowledge survives (Fletcher 2024, paragraph 3; Godrie et al. 2020, paragraph 6; Mooney et al. 2023, paragraph 7). By attempting to translate lived experience – emerging between identity and processes of *Othering* – into structured items, researchers oscillated between deconstructing categories and relying on them to make inequalities visible. Although the co-translation through feedback loops helped with enabling knowledge retention, the research process was ultimately limited by the inherent paradox of relying on an institutional anti-discrimination survey to effect change from within academic structures. Striving to represent lived experience

faithfully thus inevitably introduced complexity into the survey itself. Or, as one facilitator put it in mutual correspondence:

“I think this stumbling illustrates quite well how social construction works. Namely, it is inherently incoherent and, to a certain extent, simply illogical. Conceptualizing all these facets always leads sooner or later to a point where it seems pointless.” (e-mail exchange between facilitators, authors’ translation)

Another challenge encountered was that of *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker 2007). When discussing which of the changes suggested by the experts to implement, members of the ADOMiS team often contemplated the majority population, who might not be accustomed to answering certain questions or might not be familiar with certain terminology. In fact, some experts were unfamiliar with specific terms such as “BIPOC”⁹, and such unfamiliarity risked dropout.

Simultaneously, one expert reported that they had realized they were a first-generation academic only when asked by a survey, helping them recognize their experience as part of a collective pattern. Clear explanations of concepts, questions, and historical context are therefore crucial in survey design for epistemically broadening the scope of questions that can be asked. In that, ADDD surveys can themselves serve as tools of *hermeneutical justice*. This potential for ADDD surveys is further illustrated by another expert:

“For example, there are no or only very recent surveys [...] on disabled academics [...]. This leads many people to believe that we live in a fair world where access to education is independent of disability.” (R.F.; authors’ translation)

This statement highlights a direct link between quantitative survey data and perceptions of justice, showing how carefully designed ADDD surveys can make structural inequalities visible while challenging misconceptions about justice in academia.

Presentation of findings

The presentation of findings was closely entangled with the ways in which the ADOMiS team had determined the problem and planned to gather and analyze data, which the facilitators could not entirely solve within the scope of the participatory sub-project. The final survey was supposed to rely on categorical answer options to align with existing ADDD for the sake of comparability. Yet, for many identity dimensions, such baseline data simply does not exist in Germany – there

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are no reliable reference points for race, for members of the Sinti and Roma communities, for disabled people, for queer individuals, and so on. Consequently, claims of representativeness or generalizability are untenable. If such standards are demanded, evidence of discrimination can never be “sufficient” and will ultimately be subjected to *testimonial injustice*. Developing instruments to measure structural phenomena that have been systematically concealed thereby reveals that positivist expectations of comparison to a non-existent baseline are epistemologically flawed.

Challenges in translating expert insights into survey items further highlighted institutional concerns around anonymity. As experts provided detailed accounts of identity dimensions, allowing for nuanced assessment, the risk of participants’ becoming identifiable emerged, which can be an issue also in regard to existing hierarchies, power, and dependencies in academia. This became evident during interviews, where some experts chose not to disclose certain identity aspects for fear of identifiability. When certain positions are underrepresented, the “evidence” provided on these positions can mean easy and full identifiability. Additionally, the statistical evidence required cannot be obtained with such small cell sizes. However, there are different recommendations, including a shift in knowledge recognition and alternative ways of representation, such as word clouds (Fine/Torre 2019), and statistical methods (Else-Quest/Hyde 2016b) or the use of descriptive statistics (Spierings 2023). ADDD surveys must thus combine descriptive statistics with alternative data-presentation strategies, balancing the visibility of inequalities with ethical safeguards.

Meta-reflection on roles, research steps, and institution

Located within academia, discrimination research poses particular challenges, since academic structures have historically privileged certain, mostly white Western and androcentric perspectives (Davies/Neustifter 2023). Cultivating critical consciousness (Hill Collins 2000, 260pp.) is paradoxical, as it depends on academic resources while challenging entrenched epistemic hierarchies. In the co-design of the survey with experts, this dynamic was evident: the participatory process not only made survey items more inclusive but also brought to the surface implicit biases and structural inequities within both the academic system and the research team. Therefore, avoiding the reproduction of the very institutional structures the survey sought to address proved to be another key challenge.

For instance, given that the ADOMiS team was predominantly white and German-speaking, internal reflections considered how the contribution of the one facilitator of Color might have affected community members’ perceptions

of the team's diversity and the creation of a safer space. Additionally, survey revisions concerning specific identity dimensions were often assigned to team members who personally occupied these positions, highlighting the risk of tokenization (Ross et al. 2023) and of placing a disproportionate advocacy burden (Cleveland et al. 2018) on marginalized team members.

Further, the roles of the ADOMiS team members shaped the research outcomes via decisions on which items to give into the feedback loop. In addition to this constraint, to reduce respondent burden, only topics that at least one team member thought worthy of investigation were included in the final survey. Thus, who is already present in the university determines what is investigated. These structural power dynamics interact with institutional constraints that create path dependencies where initial choices heavily influence outcomes, not through deliberate exclusion but through the persistence of academic structures in the participatory process.

Funding cycles and publication deadlines create pressure that works against genuine participation: When you need results by a grant deadline, the slowness required for genuine co-creation is sacrificed. These requirements create conditions where even well-intentioned approaches can reproduce hierarchies in every step of the research process (Wallerstein et al. 2019, 25; Boni/Walker 2020, 243pp.).

Whereas the tight project timeline shaped an efficiency-centered design for the participatory process, limited financial and human resources constrained the recruitment to ten experts because ensuring fair compensation for experts was prioritized. Consequently, the number of expert interviews conducted was determined by what seemed feasible to analyze and could be fairly compensated. This decision is the outcome of both structural constraints and ethical considerations within real-world research conditions.

These reflections highlight that even in participatory contexts, survey instruments are never neutral; they are shaped by historical and institutional epistemologies that determine which experiences are rendered visible and which remain excluded. The tools, timelines, and formats deemed necessary for "rigorous" research carry embedded biases that privilege certain ways of knowing and require others to adapt or translate their knowledge to fit these constraints.

Conclusion: The stabilization of knowledge on marginalization

In this paper, we reflected on the questions *What challenges emerged during the participatory survey development process?* and *What recommendations can these challenges generate for further ADDD collection?*

Challenges in participatory instrument development

A key challenge lies in the growing institutional demand for quantitative data collection. This pressure itself signals a misconception – namely, the assumption that justice can be achieved through numerical representation alone. Our reflecting on the challenges encountered suggests that a key issue in ADDD projects is that existing knowledge about marginalization in German higher education is frequently not recognized as valid. The perceived lack of validity of experiential knowledge results in the fact that “[t]he important practice of credible witnessing is still at stake” (Haraway 2004, 233), and, in turn, calls for a more systematic collection of quantitative ADDD. Further, such data collection operates in contradictory ways: it aims for data that both can be compared to existing sources and is capable of expanding current understandings.

Consequently, existing bodies of knowledge on marginalization are stabilized for two main reasons. First, knowledge continues to be produced within preexisting institutional categories, reinforcing stabilized meanings. Second, members of marginalized communities often disengage from research projects such as survey studies either because they are not represented in the data assessment or because small sample sizes heighten the risk of identifiability. As a result, datasets remain selective and partial, offering little transformative value. Yet, they serve as reference points for future surveys, reinforcing a cycle of existent data that reproduces the status quo instead of unveiling underlying inequalities beyond already institutionalized categories.

Recommendations for ADDD collection

To disrupt the mechanisms through which the cycle stabilizes meaning in the collection of ADDD, several strategies can be pursued. One strategy lies in rethinking what counts as “valid knowledge” and consequently as evidence for discrimination, or put in other words: rethinking *testimonial justice*. This means the transformation of epistemic structures that determine *whose* and *what kind* of knowledge counts. Second, participatory endeavors building on lived expe-

periences can lead to contingent survey data that is more representative, both by improving data quality and by reducing dropout of community members. Third, alternative ways of data gathering that focus on oppressive structures rather than on those marginalized are needed. Fourth, prevailing standards must be adjusted; without any baseline data, it is unreasonable to presume presence of such data for the sake of comparability or as a precondition for action, at least not without reproducing existing logics of exclusion.

Participatory collaboration and involving affected communities are central to anti-discrimination work and must not be compromised. Ultimately, even within the limited scope of a single research process, the kinds of transformative orders for change (Haraway 2004) that are required on the institutional level can be implemented by a power-critical conduct of participatory research and by valuing knowledge that is already there as a reference point for future data practices (Yamaguchi 2025). Stakeholders must understand that demanding comprehensive ADDED within short timeframes is counterproductive; meaningful change requires time, trust, and participation. In that sense, universities should start building long-term collaborations with community organizations so that this work is no longer dependent on short project timelines.

From this, several further recommendations for the design of ADDED surveys can be drawn. The core principle of participatory research to create safer spaces must also inform quantitative design. This can be achieved through disclaimers, participatory interpretation, and transparent explanations of language, intent, and goals. Further, exploratory tracing of identity dimensions or nuances relevant for lived experiences should be implemented by asking an open-ended question at the end of the sociodemographic section of whether there are further dimensions relevant for the person. And, to break the epistemic cycle, it must also be asked and made transparent *why* this data is collected, *by whom*, and *for what purposes*.

It has been pointed out how diversity strategies of universities are more of a shallow performative act rather than actual change-making policies (Ahmed 2012; Çağlar et al. 2025). This present reflection on a participatory development of an ADDED survey reaffirmed that institutionalizing gender and diversity policies cannot rely solely on representational metrics, as such approaches risk reducing their transformative ambitions to empty performativity (Ahmed 2012). Instead, institutionalizing gender and diversity measurement practices is about making implicit power structures explicit, embedding reflexivity, participation, and power critique into institutional practices so that all university members regardless of positionality can critically engage with questions of social justice in order to break the self-reinforcing cycle of (epistemic) injustice.

Data-availability statement

For reasons of research ethics, data protection, and other considerations, the research material in the form of interview transcripts will not be published. The transcripts may be requested on condition that the data is evaluated in a participatory manner with the involvement of communities relevant to the research question. This requires a written proposal including a data-protection concept.

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