6 Special Purpose and Sensitive Questions

“Who are you?”

“No one of consequence.”

“I must know.”

“Get used to disappointment.”

—William Goldman, *The Princess Bride*

Sheila B. Robinson & Kimberly Firth Leonard (2019).
Designing quality survey questions.
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

When designing surveys with questions that may feel personal, sensitive, intrusive, or even threatening to respondents, we must return to our respondent-centered, purposeful survey design process and spend plenty of time in the empathizing phase of design thinking. As the chapter-opening quote illustrates, if we come on too strong or ask the wrong questions of our respondents at the wrong time, we risk their refusal to answer and end up learning little, if anything. To ensure questions are appropriate and will net the most useful data possible, researchers must also always keep in mind the specific cultures and contexts in which they are working and in which their desired respondents are living.

Before delving deeply into more common types of sensitive questions (e.g. demographic questions), we explore two types of questions—filter questions and quality control questions—that serve special purposes in surveys and therefore also warrant particular attention.

Two key pieces of advice we have discussed more deeply elsewhere become all the more relevant when working with special purpose and sensitive questions. Therefore, when including these types of questions in a survey, remember to

- let respondents know why the information is needed to encourage honesty and accuracy (see more about this in Chapter 4), and
- engage respondents in question design and testing prior to survey administration (see more about this in Chapter 7).

Questions With Special Purposes

Although all survey questions are designed to measure respondents’ attributes, behaviors, abilities, or thoughts, certain question types also have additional functions as part of a survey instrument and require additional attention.

Filter Questions

Filter questions (also called contingency or screening questions) can be used for a variety of purposes. In Chapter 5, we briefly introduced the use of a filter question to avoid the need for a *don’t know* response option. Here, we explain in greater detail and add additional purposes for filter questions, including to

- screen respondents for eligibility to complete the survey;
- direct respondents to different questions or sets of questions, depending on their answers to the filter question;
- solicit additional information about particular responses; and
- avoid the use of a *don't know* response option.

Screen respondents for eligibility to complete the survey. A survey may be administered to a large group of respondents, some of whom do not meet the criteria the researcher needs for the sample. For example, if a survey needs to reach only homeowners in a neighborhood who own two or more cars, and was sent to all residents of the neighborhood, a filter question about car ownership may be included. The answer to that question would determine if a particular respondent will complete the survey. There are also instances when a researcher needs to fill a certain quota of respondents from particular demographic subcategories, and once the quota is reached in any particular subcategory, no additional respondents from that subcategory are eligible to complete the survey.

Direct respondents to different questions or sets of questions, depending on their answers to the filter question. These questions are used to route respondents through the survey and avoid asking them questions that do not apply to them, effectively keeping the survey as short as possible for a given respondent. For example, a survey might ask if respondents rent or own a home. Depending on the answer to this question, respondents are then directed to one of two different sets of follow-up questions.

Solicit additional information about particular responses. If a researcher is interested in why respondents answer in a particular way, a filter question can be used to solicit follow-up information. This is as close as a survey gets to including the types of probing questions used in more qualitative research methods such as focus groups or interviews. For example, if a question asks respondents' opinions about a particular service and they answer negatively (e.g., *dissatisfied*), and the researcher wants to understand why, respondents can be directed to an additional question asking for detail about their opinions that is either open-ended or provides a list of possible reasons for their opinion.

Avoid the use of a don't know *response option.* By first asking if a respondent knows enough about or is interested in a topic enough to have formed an attitude, we can determine if that respondent should move forward with the survey to the attitude questions. This is sometimes preferable to simply adding a "don't know" option to each question. As we discussed in Chapter 5 when respondents choose "don't know," we often do not know if they indeed have no opinion or if they are in fact refusing to share that opinion.

Filter questions result in branching (also known as conditional branching, branchlogic, or skip logic). Most online survey platforms are equipped to help the researcher program for this, whereas instructions such as "if you answered YES to question 12, please skip to question 17" must be written into a paper survey. A trained telephone surveyor will have these instructions such that a respondent may not even be aware of any branching taking place. Figure 6.1 shows an example of a filter and follow-up question.

Figure 6.1 ○ Example of a Filter and Follow-Up Question

1. Do you enjoy ice cream?

- O YES
- O NO

2. If you answered YES, which flavor do you like best? If you answered NO, please skip to question 3.

- O Chocolate
- O Vanilla
- O Strawberry
- O Butter pecan
- O Rocky road
- O Mint chocolate chip
- O Other (please write in): ______________

Quality Control Questions

Have you ever participated in a survey and encountered a question like the one in Figure 6.2?

This is an example of a quality control question, designed to ensure that respondents are truly reading the questions and to ensure that the survey (usually an online survey) is not being completed by an automated program rather than a human. At times, such as in Figure 6.3, the purpose of a quality control question is explained to respondents.

Figure 6.2 ○ Example of a Quality Control Question

For this question, please choose option 2.

- O 1
- O 2
- O 3
- O 4

Figure 6.3 ○ Real-World Questions: ***Quality Control Question Explained to Respondents***

This question is a little different. While most people carefully read and respond to the questions in our surveys a small number do not. To verify that you have read this question carefully, please select the fourth response from the list below.

- O Extremely important
- O Very important
- O Somewhat important
- O Not at all important
- O Don't know

At other times, the quality control question is designed to attempt to deceive respondents by using a fake word, as in Figure 6.4, a question from an online market research panel. The health problem they ask about, “holdequus syndrome,” does not exist.

In Figure 6.4, the question is being used both for quality control and filtering purposes. The question is used to move the respondent (or not move the respondent) to a survey about health care, and because respondents are compensated for completing surveys, the panel must screen out those who would fabricate answers just to receive the rewards.

Another approach to a quality control question is to use negatively worded questions along with a number of positively worded ones to ensure that respondents are not simply answering questions randomly, answering them all exactly the same (e.g., always the third option), or otherwise without reading and considering them. For example, on a college course evaluation form, a series of questions may ask students to rate their instructors, the course material, and course activities with statements that ask students to strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Although the hope is for ratings of “strongly agree,” an additional statement for quality control purposes might be one in which the hope is for a “strongly disagree” response, as in “This course was too difficult for me.” This option is often better than the other quality control questions for at least two reasons. First, some researchers find quality control questions (such as the examples in Figures 6.2 and 6.4) disrespectful to respondents, potentially sending the message that they can’t be trusted, and therefore caution against using them. Second, there is a greater concern about interrupting respondents’ flow of thoughts and ideas around the topic at hand with the other types of quality control questions.

Figure 6.4 ○ Real-World Questions: ***Quality Control Question Designed to Deceive***

Have you, or someone for whom you provide care, been diagnosed with:
Holdequus Syndrome

- ○ I have been diagnosed with
- ○ I provide care for someone diagnosed with
- ○ Not applicable
- ○ Prefer not to answer

Sensitive Questions

Sensitive or threatening questions are those that feel intrusive or invasive to the respondent. They may ask respondents to disclose personal information or whether they have violated social norms or even laws (e.g., when respondents are asked about illicit drug use, criminal activity, or sexual behavior) to a third party (the researcher) (Tourangeau et al., 2000). Whether a question should be considered sensitive depends entirely on the respondents’ perspective(s). A researcher could easily be unaware that a question is sensitive if she isn’t aware of the respondents’ perspective(s), context, or culture. For example, asking a respondent’s age is not considered sensitive or threatening in some populations but is quite taboo with others. Something that seems innocuous at the outset may be a very loaded topic for a given set of respondents, as is illustrated in the preceding story.

Stories From the Field
Sensitive Topics Are Not Always Obvious

As part of an evaluation of the benefits of out-of-school time (e.g., afterschool) programming funded by the Oregon Community Foundation (OCF) and partner The Ford Family Foundation, the research team at OCF set out to survey youth about their experiences and social-emotional development. Fortunately, there are many efforts underway to measure social-emotional learning concepts such as growth mind-set in youth through surveys. This includes well-established tools like the Developmental Assets Profile developed by the Search Institute, as well as newer tools such as the Youth Skills and Beliefs survey developed by the Youth Development Executives of King County and American Institutes for Research. These surveys often include items such as "How smart I am is something I can change" with a rating scale so that respondents can indicate the degree to which they agree with the statement (this is an adaptation of Carol Dweck's well-known growth mind-set measurement framework). At the outset this seems like a relatively answerable question. However, as we learned in discussing survey drafts with our evaluation advisory group, the concept of "smart" is loaded for students with physical, learning, or developmental disabilities—a population with a difficult history of being considered and labeled as less smart than their peers. As a result, we are taking extra care in how we use the results from our first survey effort (having not learned about this sensitivity until the design process was too far along) and will be considering alternatives for future survey efforts.

—Kimberly Firth Leonard

Alreck and Settle (2004) identify 10 categories of questions that respondents may find threatening. These include questions regarding the following:

- Financial matters
- Mental or technical skill or ability
- Self-perceived shortcomings
- Social status
- Sexual identity or sexual behavior
- Alcohol consumption or illegal drug use
- Personal habits
- Emotional or psychological disturbance
- The aging process
- Death or dying (p. 170)

Of particular importance to the researcher is the fact that sensitive questions "tend to produce comparatively higher nonresponse rates or larger measurement error in responses than questions on other topics" (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007, p. 860). This is due to the fact that respondents may fear embarrassment or even repercussions for revealing certain information to researchers. The result is often social desirability bias, discussed in the following section.

Social Desirability Bias

Social desirability bias occurs when respondents edit their answers to questions to portray themselves in the best light, or at least better light to researchers. One of the best examples of questions prone to social desirability bias are those on a doctor's health status survey. How many people are completely truthful when answering questions about exercise habits or caffeine or alcohol consumption on these forms? Even when people *think* they are being completely honest, they tend to overestimate the amount of exercise they do and underestimate the amounts of caffeine and alcohol they consume. Research on social desirability bias has repeatedly found that respondents systematically overreport what are considered socially desirable behaviors and systematically underreport socially undesirable ones. These effects, however, are somewhat lessened with self-administered surveys as compared to in-person or telephone surveys that have respondents in direct contact with researchers (Touragneau et al., 2000). From a psychological perspective, the effects are due to the need for self-preservation, concern about personal risk, and avoidance of embarrassment and feelings of shame.

In some survey research situations, respondents may indicate that programs or specific interventions have resulted in positive changes whether or not this is accurate (as that is what they assume is the desired response). In other situations, respondents may indicate that their attitudes are consistent over time, because it is socially desirable to have consistent attitudes (just check any news outlet to find rampant public criticism of politicians who change their minds on the issues).

Social desirability bias is of greatest concern when survey questions are of a sensitive or threatening nature. Disclosing personal information such as sexual behavior, hygiene habits, criminal behavior, illicit drug or alcohol consumption, and even political preferences can be uncomfortable for many if not most people. Researcher promises of respondent anonymity do not necessarily mitigate social desirability effects. Although some assurances of confidentiality or anonymity can serve to increase responses, "elaborate assurances of confidentiality may defeat their purpose by heightening respondents' perceptions of the sensitivity or threat of the survey" (Singer, Von Thurn, & Miller, 1995). Overassurances may in fact *increase* respondents' suspicion and concern about who may have access to their data. It is also important to note that many of the studies on confidentiality and privacy of survey data were conducted in the 1990s, long before the ubiquity of online surveys and before concerns about personal data and privacy were endemic in the United States.

To mitigate the effects of social desirability bias, researchers can use closed-ended questions. "Fixed responses are less onerous to the respondent, who will find it easier simply to choose an appropriate response than to construct one" (Rea & Parker, 2014, p. 52). Further, researchers can intentionally design response options to account for a wider range of responses than might otherwise be constructed for nonsensitive questions. Remember that respondents are often influenced by the set of response options offered, believing that the range of options reflects the "average" or "typical" population. If this range is widened, it "implies that an accurate response is not outside the realm of social acceptability" (Rea & Parker, 2014, p. 51). This may encourage respondents to answer honestly, especially when they find their answer well with, in the limits of the options.

Using "forgiving wording" (Tourangeau et al., 2000, p. 288) can encourage respondents to be forthcoming in their responses to sensitive questions. Figure 6.5 is a question from the American National Election Studies Time Series Post-Election Questionnaire that employs this strategy of using an encouraging message to respondents in the question stem. Ultimately, researchers must weigh the importance of the sensitive information to the survey purpose with the risk of nonresponse. Oftentimes, we may think we need this information when, in fact, we can answer the research question(s) without it.

Demographic Questions

Demographic questions are omnipresent on surveys and may be collected for many reasons from understanding how people in different groups respond to attitude questions, to planning for how resources are allocated across populations, to making key decisions on organizational policies. These questions most typically help the researcher describe the *characteristics* of a population or sample, that is, respondents' attributes such as age, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, occupation, education level, and religion. Demographic questions are also used to identify subgroups for use in the analysis of survey data. Depending on the research question(s), it may be meaningful to a researcher to compare how respondents of different genders, of different ages, or with different educational backgrounds respond to particular questions. Other types of questions can also serve as demographic questions, and these may be specific to the topic of the survey. For example, characteristics such as how long a respondent has been involved in a program, how often someone has used a service, or how many of something a respondent owns can also be used as demographic data.

Figure 6.5 ○ Real-World Questions: ***Using Forgiving Language in a Sensitive Question***

In talking to people about elections, we often find that a lot of people were not able to vote because they weren't registered, they were sick, or they just didn't have time. Which of the following statements best describes you?

- ○ I did not vote [in the election this November].
- ○ I thought about voting this time, but didn't.
- ○ I usually vote, but didn't this time.
- ○ I am sure I voted.

Source: ANES [2016].

Source: ANES (2016).

For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; n.d.) asks demographic questions on its National Health Interview Survey, because "they provide a context for the health data collected in the survey, and because they help to explain interrelated trends in the survey data . . . [including] inequalities in health status and access to care." Polling groups such as Gallup also use demographic questions to understand what certain attributes bring to bear on people's attitudes or behavior. For example, they recently determined that "factors such as age, generation, gender, education level and tenure all relate to a worker's engagement" (Robison, 2015). Knowing this can help managers consider how their leadership styles and behaviors can potentially impact engagement among different groups.

Despite the common urge to capture all possible demographic information, it is important to limit the number and type of demographic questions included in a survey. *All* questions should be designed and included in a survey *only* if they serve a clear purpose and will provide useful information (in other words, if researchers can anticipate how they will be used to answer research questions). This includes demographic questions. Including only those necessary for the given research goals minimizes respondent burden and ensures that researchers aren't sitting on unused, but potentially sensitive, information.

Design Details
Demographic Variables

Alreck and Settle (2004) offer a list of what can potentially be measured with demographic questions.

Commonly Used Demographic Variables

A. Sex of respondent
B. Sex of family members
C. Age of respondent
D. Age of each head of household
E. Age of family members
F. Age of youngest child in the home
G. Education of respondent
H. Education of each head of household
I. Employment of respondent
J. Employment of each head of household
K. Occupation of respondent
L. Occupation of each head of household
M. Annual income of respondent
N. Annual income of each head of household
O. Annual family income
P. Racial or ethnic identity of respondent
Q. Race or ethnicity of each head of household
R. Religious preference of respondent
S. Religion of each head of household
T. Type of family dwelling
U. ZIP code or location of residence
V. Time of residence at present location
W. Self-designated social class membership

(p. 171)

Although this list is fairly comprehensive, a few notes are important: First, Alreck and Settle include "education of respondent" and "education of each head of household" (Items G and H). To be more precise, education is typically measured as *highest level of education*. Second, they include race and ethnicity (Item P) on the same line; however, these variables are distinctly different, as we highlight later. "Annual family income" (Item O) is a variable more appropriately termed "annual *household* income" because family status and household members are not necessarily the same. Third, regarding "religious preference of respondent" and "religion of each head of household" (Items R and S), it is important to note that *religious preference* and *religion* may in fact be quite different. We discuss the nuances of asking about religion later.

Demographic questions can be problematic when misused or misunderstood. They can compromise the anonymity of a survey, especially with smaller populations or samples. They can also make respondents feel uncomfortable about responding honestly and openly to other survey questions (especially if they feel their identity will be compromised through those demographic questions). For example, perhaps there is only one employee in the department of human resources with more than 15 years of service. If survey respondents are asked just two demographic questions—to identify their departments and to identify how many years of service they have had with the organization—a researcher can now easily identify the individual respondent.

Chris Lysy, Fresh Spectrum

Most (if not all) demographic questions carry a certain level of sensitivity or threat for some respondents, especially questions that ask about race or ethnicity, sexual preference, or income. Although some respondents may be perfectly comfortable sharing their age or income with researchers, others are not. Respondents can feel alienated or even offended if they don't find themselves represented in the response options of questions like these. If a "prefer not to answer" option is not offered, respondents may not be truthful or may ultimately give up on the survey if they feel strongly about not wanting to reveal this information. Therefore, any demographic questions can result in significant item nonresponse and survey nonresponse. Additionally, some demographic questions may take respondents a longer time to answer, especially if they must first consider whether to answer at all, thus adding to respondent burden.

Survey researchers must carefully consider not only *if* they need to include demographic questions but also *how* to ask them, where to place them in a survey, and how to create a positive rapport with respondents to encourage them to willingly give answers. Too many demographic questions can contribute to respondent fatigue, especially if placed at the beginning of a survey. That said, some demographic questions are easy to answer, and a few well-placed items can get respondents "warmed up" and ready to tackle other questions that demand more thoughtful attention and effort. In general, we want to get respondents engaged with the survey as quickly as possible; starting with the most relevant and interesting questions is an effective way to do so.

As with every aspect of survey design, a balance is necessary between capturing needed information and minimizing respondent discomfort and burden, and avoiding nonresponse. Before including demographic questions, it is important for researchers to consider whether data will be disaggregated or results otherwise analyzed using the various subgroups captured (e.g., race/ethnicity or gender identification). If not, do we really need that information? We generally advise only including questions that have a clear purpose and are required in order to answer the research questions at hand.

Design Details
Choosing Respectful and Inclusive Language for Demographic Questions

We hope we have made clear the importance of language choices in survey questions and how questions must reflect the specific language, culture, and context of our respondents. When working with sensitive or potentially threatening questions, we must remember that respect and inclusion are of the utmost importance. After all, it’s not just about the *research* but about the *people*.

To support this, here are a few additional important considerations when crafting sensitive questions:

- Terms and concepts related to various demographic attributes (e.g., gender, sexual preference, race, ethnicity) vary across communities and cultures and must be understood within the context of the specific community or culture being studied.
- Myths about people from certain cultures or communities abound, and careful research is needed to discern fact from myth.
- It is important to recognize that not all voices are represented within the very public and visible “movements” of diverse communities such as LBGTQ, African Americans, and Muslims.
- People who live at the intersections of these communities (e.g., Queer Latinx) are often subject to particularly challenging experiences and can be easily forgotten when we oversimplify these communities in our data collection.

Respectful research is designed with an openness to new learning, explicit steps to include respondents, and most importantly, a strong sense of gravitas.

Specific Categories of Demographic Questions

In the sections that follow, we offer the most specific and up-to-date information we have for asking about specific demographic details. Not only are these sensitive topics for which questions could be viewed as threatening to some respondent populations, the nuances of demographics are ever-changing. Although our vast collection of foundational literature on survey design from decades past still contains relevant advice for *other* areas of question design, we look only to the most recent sources for advice on how to ask about demographics, particularly age, race/ethnicity, gender, income, and sexual preference. For each of these areas there is not a single correct way to ask a question. It is critically important to revisit the research questions and survey purpose before making any question design decisions to ensure that questions are necessary and appropriately focused. Finally, we acknowledge the fact that we write from the perspective of researchers in the United States and understand that any advice we offer here with respect to how to design demographic questions may not hold true in other places or with other populations.

Asking about age.

Asking about age is a relatively straightforward proposition, and there are only a few distinct ways researchers can pose a question, as seen in the examples in Figure 6.6. In general, respondents can be asked in an open- or closed-ended format to give their age, the year they were born (or their birthdate), or they can report their age in a range determined by the survey designer.

There is little empirical research that provides solid advice about questions related to age. Although asking about age can be a sensitive question for certain populations, in general, these questions tend to have a low item nonresponse rate and generally high accuracy rate (Healey & Gendall, 2007; Peterson, 1984). Regarding response rate, Healey and Gendall (2007) found that the “format of the age question makes relatively little difference to item non-response in self-completion surveys” (p. 720). Regarding accuracy, they advise asking participants to give their birthdate or year they were born, rather than asking their age (Healey & Gendall, 2007). This shifts the question from a two-step calculation question (What year was I born? How old does that make me?) to a simple retrieval question, thus reducing the cognitive load. It also avoids the problem of age-heaping whereby respondents offer their ages in multiples of 5 and 10 instead of offering their exact age resulting in overrepresentation at these points.

Figure 6.6 ○ Asking About a Respondent’s Age

How old are you? _____

What is your age? _____

Please select your age: (in an online survey, respondent is presented with a dropdown menu of choices)

What age did you reach at your last birthday? _____

In what year were you born? _____

Please select the year you were born: (in an online survey, respondent is presented with a dropdown menu of choices)

What is your date of birth? _____

What is your age range:

- ○ 18–25
- ○ 26–34
- ○ 35–44
- ○ 45–54
- ○ 55–64
- ○ 65 or older

If a researcher anticipates that respondents may be reluctant to report exact age, a series of age ranges can be used as response options (e.g., 26–35). The more creative example shown in Figure 6.7 asks respondents to report their ages in generational groups. It is worth noting that this particular question does not differentiate younger generations. We presume this information is not needed or that the researcher doesn’t anticipate many respondents will be part of younger generations.

Figure 6.7 ○ Real-World Questions: ***Asking About Age in Generational Groups***

Generational Age Group

- Born between 1922 and 1944
- Born between 1945 and 1964
- Born between 1965 and 1980
- Born after 1981

The American Community Survey (ACS) asks respondents to fill in a blank box with their age and also fill in their date of birth. There are several reasons given by the ACS to ask about age, including identifying risk factors for vulnerable populations and to "monitor against age discrimination in government programs and in society" (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-a). Although a large-scale survey like the ACS may need the granularity of knowing each respondent's exact age, often with smaller-scale efforts a question using age ranges is sufficient.

Asking about race/ethnicity.

Asking about race or ethnicity is a particularly sensitive and complex proposition. Although race and ethnicity are often combined in survey questions, they are not interchangeable. Each term is much more complex and has deeper connotations than we have room to address here, but we introduce some of the key considerations and include resources to learn more. Ethnicity refers to a person's ancestry, heritage, or culture, whereas race is a socially constructed category with no evidence of a biological or genetic basis. It is a highly charged concept that carries with it a long and difficult history of oppression and conquest. Consider the American Anthropological Association's Statement on Race:

> "Race" . . . evolved as a worldview, a body of prejudgments that distorts our ideas about human differences and group behavior . . . present-day inequalities between so-called "racial" groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances. (American Anthropological Association, 1998)

Currently, questions in the U.S. Census (n.d.-b) that ask about race and ethnicity do not distinguish between the two and include the following response options:

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian and Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
- Some other race

Definitions for each of these terms and potential response options can be found on the United States Census Bureau website (https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html). The most recent addition to the list came in 2010, when the option for respondents to check "Some other race" was added (U.S. Census, n.d.-b).

> The racial categories included in the census questionnaire generally reflect a social definition of race recognized in this country and not an attempt to define race biologically, anthropologically, or genetically. In addition, it is recognized that the categories of the race item include racial and national origin or sociocultural groups. People may choose to report more than one race to indicate their racial mixture, such as "American Indian" and "White." People who identify their origin as Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish may be of any race. (U.S. Census, n.d.-b)

Reasons for asking about race/ethnicity may vary for any given survey effort. The U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.-b) offers the following reasons for this type of demographic question:

> Information on race is required for many Federal programs and is critical in making policy decisions, particularly for civil rights. States use these data to meet legislative redistricting principles. Race data also are used to promote equal employment opportunities and to assess racial disparities in health and environmental risks.

As of the writing of this text, the Census Bureau is considering changes to the standard set of categories in preparation for the 2020 census, especially as pertains to collecting data about Hispanics. Many Hispanics "do not identify with the current racial categories" (Cohn, 2017). Many Hispanics choose "Some other race" instead of one of the standard options, resulting in a much greater usage of this last unofficial federal race category (Cohn, 2017). After a 2015 Pew research study in which 1.2 million U.S. households were contacted for a test census using separate or combined versions of race/ethnicity questions, the Census Bureau is now considering a combined version for the 2020 census. In this version, people would have the option of checking the box for Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish *and* also the option of checking a box for Mexican or Mexican American, Salvadoran, Puerto Rican, Dominican, Colombian, or Cuban. Other race/ethnicity categories would also feature options for their family's country of origin (Cohn, 2017).

Confusion around terms considered respectful for certain groups (e.g., Hispanic or Latino, White or Caucasian, Native American or First Nations) abounds, and preferences can change rapidly. Researchers must recognize that each term chosen carries with it both history (e.g., colonization, oppression, marginalization) and implicit or explicit assumptions (e.g., stereotypes) about the people identified by these terms. We stop short of making recommendations about which terms to use for which groups for this reason and strongly suggest that survey researchers do their own research for the most up-to-date reliable resources available coupled with asking potential respondents directly how they prefer to be addressed.

An additional consideration for the way in which we ask questions about race and ethnicity is that an increasing number of people in the United States identify as multiracial. The number of multiethnic or multiracial infants nearly tripled from 1980 to 2015 according to a Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census data (Livingston, 2017). Not surprisingly, this has "occurred hand-in-hand with the growth in marriages among spouses of different races or ethnicities" (Livingston, 2017), a number that has more than doubled in the last few decades. As racial and ethnic diversity continues to grow in the United States, survey researchers will have to consider not only *how* to design questions that reflect and respect respondents but also to think deeply about *if* and *why* measuring differences along racial and ethnic lines is important to the research.

Increasingly, we see survey researchers (especially those conducting surveys with large populations) opting to capture race and ethnicity information in a "select all that apply" format, using as many categories as are needed and feasible to ensure that any potential respondent can find one or more appropriate response. This has implications for analysis of the resulting data; those researchers who choose this approach also typically aim to disaggregate survey responses as much as is feasible.

Asking about gender identification and sexual preferences.

If questions about gender or sexual preference are to be used in a survey, they *must* serve a specific purpose, and that purpose should be used to guide the design of the specific questions. There is no "right" way to ask these questions, and the response options offered for each closed-ended question will be informed by the reason for including the question. For example, on college applications (in a broad sense, a type of survey), the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (n.d.) recommends:

> Because a growing number of students are identifying outside of gender and sexual binaries, the questions on gender identity and sexual orientation should include nonbinary identity choices. Specifically, a gender identity question should include "genderqueer" and "agender" among the choices, and a sexual orientation question should include "asexual," "queer," and "pansexual" among the choices.

In general, when questions about gender or sexual orientation are used in a survey, they should be placed at the end of the demographics section and should, if at all possible, be self-administered, even if the rest of the instrument is administered in person or over the phone (The GenIUSS Group, 2014). The demographics section itself may appear at or near the beginning of a survey, or at or near the end, depending on the nature of the instrument. To foster a sense of inclusion and establish positive rapport as well as to mitigate nonresponse, we advise researchers to share with respondents the reasons for asking demographic questions along with an explanation of how resulting data will be used.

Asking about gender identification.

Although it is still extremely common for surveys to ask a question about gender identification by simply offering two choices, woman or man, it is becoming increasingly common to see a "prefer not to answer" option as well. While the terms *gender* and *sex* are easily confused, they refer to who we are and our biological makeup, respectively. The terms *man* and *woman* are gender terms, while *female* and *male* describe sex. The inclusion of this or additional options, such as "transgender," "nonbinary," or "gender nonconforming," though exuding inclusivity, can also compromise anonymity, especially for surveys with a small sample, in which there may be very few individuals who select these options. Some researchers include an "other" option with or without a line for respondents to write on. The word *other* can carry a negative and disrespectful connotation in this instance and make people feel excluded rather than included. As such, we prefer not to use it. One way to allow for individual expression is to offer a "prefer to describe" option with a line for individuals to write on. The *most* inclusive way to ask the question about gender identity is to use an open-ended question, but several variations of closed-ended questions with appropriate response options can be designed as well (see Figure 6.8). Although an open-ended or more complex set of questions can result in more complicated analysis, we believe this is well worth doing so that all respondents are included and respected. One of the best ways to determine which categories to include is to ask members of the respondent population themselves and use the language they prefer. Greytak (2015) offers an example of how one word can carry different connotations for different groups: “For example, with youth populations, the identity label ‘queer’ might be fairly commonplace, whereas with older generations, this might still be predominantly considered a slur and its inclusion could put off respondents.”

Figure 6.8 ○ Real-World Questions: ***Asking About Gender (Inappropriately)***

What is your sex?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Don't know

A suggested alternative: Allow respondents to self-identify an alternative to male or female or to opt out

What is your gender?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Prefer to describe: ___________
- ○ Prefer not to answer

An additional suggested alternative: Ask an open-ended question

What term would you use to describe your gender identity? ___________

The previous examples illustrate two possibilities for asking a question about gender, depending on the research information needs, but the question can be formatted in other ways as well. For example, if the topic of the survey is health related, and more specificity is needed for data analysis, response options for transgender, or more specifically transgender F2M and transgender M2F, can be added to a closed-ended question.

The Human Rights Campaign (2016) offers specific advice for language that may precede the response options in questions about gender identification or sexual preference: “Our company does not discriminate on the basis of gender identity or expression. In order to track the effectiveness of our recruiting efforts and ensure we consider the needs of all our employees, please consider the following optional question.”

Further, gender identity is increasingly being seen as far more complex than even just a few years ago. According to genderspectrum, a website devoted to helping create “gender sensitive and inclusive environments for all children and teens,” gender identity is composed of three distinct dimensions and their “complex interrelationships”:

- Body: our body, our experience of our own body, how society genders bodies, and how others interact with us based on our body.
- Identity: our deeply held, internal sense of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither; who we internally know ourselves to be.

- Expression: how we present our gender in the world and how society, culture, community, and family perceive, interact with, and try to shape our gender. Gender expression is also related to gender roles and how society uses those roles to try to enforce conformity to current gender norms.

Each of these dimensions can vary greatly across a range of possibilities (“Dimensions of Gender,” n.d.). These dimensions are represented and further described by the Human Rights Campaign in the following Design Details feature.

Asking about sexual orientation or preference.

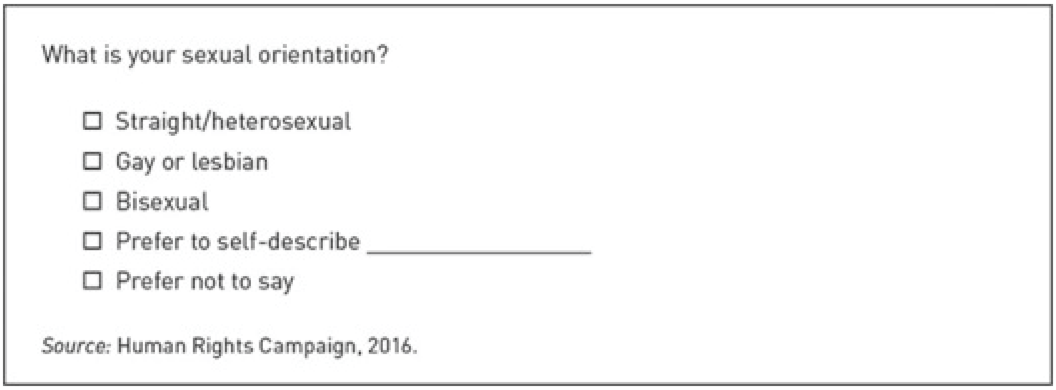
It is critical to understand that gender identity and sexual preference are not the same and that sexual orientations or preferences are not limited to hetero- or homosexuality. It is far less common to need to ask about sexual preference than gender identity. If it is deemed necessary to know respondents’ sexual orientation, the Human Rights Campaign recommends asking in the format offered in Figure 6.9.

Design Details
Understanding Options for Asking About Gender

Here, we offer definitions and clarity for some key terms and potentially unfamiliar terms.

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other people.
Gender identity: One’s innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither—how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.
Gender expression: External appearance of one’s gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, haircut, or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine.
Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc. Other identities considered to fall under this umbrella can include non-binary, gender fluid, and genderqueer—as well as many more.
Gender transition: The process by which some people strive to more closely align their internal knowledge of gender with its outward appearance. Some people socially transition, whereby they might begin dressing, using names and pronouns, and/or be socially recognized as another gender. Others undergo physical transitions in which they modify their bodies through medical interventions. (Human Rights Campaign, 2017)

Figure 6.9 ○ *Question About Sexual Orientation*


What is your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Straight/heterosexual
- ☐ Gay or lesbian
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe ___________
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Source: Human Rights Campaign, 2016.

Source: Human Rights Campaign, 2016.

If it is necessary to collect data on sexual orientation in greater detail, it is important to understand that this attribute, much like gender identity, is not as simple as it seems. It too is composed of three distinct dimensions, which could be asked about in separate questions if needed.

Design Details
Recognition of Nonbinary Gender Identification in the United States and Abroad

The United States is only recently beginning to recognize gender identifications beyond female and male in formal and legal ways. In 2016, Oregon allowed a resident to legally identify as nonbinary. Subsequently, Oregon's Department of Motor Vehicles, which initially refused the individual's request (Foden-Vencil, 2016), in 2017 added an option for residents who can now select gender options of M, F, or X (Wamsley, 2017). The District of Columbia also started offering nonbinary driver's licenses and identification cards in 2017 (Stein, 2017). The province of Ontario, Canada, offered its residents the same options earlier that year as well (Wamsley, 2017). Other countries including India, Pakistan, Australia, and Germany have also formally recognized a third gender (Foden-Vencil, 2016). And the United Kingdom now allows residents to use the "Mx" title on government and bank documents (Guy-Ryan, 2016). The notion of gender fluidity or gender as nonbinary is hardly new, however. In Indonesia, the concept is ancient, with some traditions dating from the 13th century, and some cultures identifying up to five gender categories (Guy-Ryan, 2016).

- Self-identification: how one identifies one's sexual orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or heterosexual)
- Sexual behavior: the sex of sex partners (i.e., individuals of the same sex, different sex, or both sexes)
- Sexual attraction: the sex or gender of individuals that someone feels attracted to (Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team [SMART], 2009).

Mini-Interview With Jara Dean-Coffey
Reflecting the Language of Young People

Jara Dean-Coffey is a leading consultant in equitable evaluation who talked with us about her experience working with a nonprofit organization as it adapts a survey tool to reflect the language of the young people it serves.

First, tell us more about the organization and its work. What context is helpful in understanding its survey needs?

JDC: The RYSE Youth Center in Richmond, California, was developed in response to a request from young people who wanted and needed a safe place in their community following a series of violent incidents in the early 2000s, including a shooting death right outside the local high school. Richmond itself is an urban center without typical economic drivers of urban communities; it has all of the challenges and none of the money to address them. But adults responded to youth needs, and after several years of community forums and an extensive needs assessment, RYSE opened in 2008.

The mission of RYSE is to "create safe spaces grounded in social justice that build youth power for young people to love, learn, educate, heal and transform lives and communities." Staff are largely from the community, and youth have always been involved in shaping the center; the organization has a deep commitment to young people and being responsive to their needs. The center now serves a diverse group of youth as young as 13, and young adults up to age 25, and provides programming in community health and wellness, education and career development, media arts and culture, youth justice and youth organizing, and leadership.

How was the youth survey initially developed?

JDC: Early on, a youth member survey was developed to attempt to understand the ways in which the values that RYSE lives to execute are showing up in programming, as well as changes in young people's sense of awareness, future orientation, connectedness to community, ability to negotiate relationships with peers—all relatively traditional measures of youth development and wellness. Most survey questions were initially carefully culled from preexisting reliable and valid instrument(s).

What challenges has RYSE experienced with the survey? How are you adapting the survey in response to those challenges, and to changing needs?

JDC: The survey is too long. We have done some intentional things to encourage response, including shifting to an online format (using tablets), incentivizing youth with $5 gift cards, and creating a sense of competition among staff to get students to respond. But we also hope to shorten the survey after completing strategic planning, which should help us to narrow the focus of the survey to those concepts in which RYSE is most interested.

It is also problematic that the tools that the original survey questions were drawn from were not likely tested for reliability and validity with this population, young people of diverse demographics, in an economically challenged community. This is something we're still working to address; we hope to work on operationalizing the concepts in a way more relevant to this particular community in the future.

One of the most noticeable and ongoing challenges is in capturing demographics. First we had to decide whether to put the demographic questions at the beginning or the end. And we quickly realized that we would need to approach questions as "check all that apply," particularly for race/ethnicity. We have also used "none apply" as a response option that gives young people space to note that they don't fit into provided categories, but without having to check "other," which is problematic because it implies that there are ways to be worth naming and those that are not.

How did you know that you needed to make changes to the survey questions?

JDC: The connection between leadership at RYSE and the young people they serve is robust and authentic. Leaders were paying attention to how young people talked about themselves and could tell us when something was missing or not relevant any longer. I see our job in collecting data like this as being as responsive as possible, in as real-time as possible. We also looked at the data. We are careful to review responses and contextualize them with staff, not making assumptions about why responses look a particular way (or not).

Take gender identify as an example: it is especially challenging to capture in an authentic way. During a recent survey administration, staff noticed that more than half of students didn't identify with a particular gender or sex (they checked "none apply"). While an obvious challenge for data collection and analysis, RYSE views this positively for young people's identities—young people are less confined by traditional (biased) conceptions of gender identity. Changing these questions to ensure we're capturing how young people see themselves, with the current best language, is difficult. It may be we don't even have the right language for the way that young people view gender now. We strive to collect information in a way that honors who they are, and shift the burden to analysis, to prioritize getting the options right over how complicated it may make analysis later.

How have you engaged young people to help ensure the survey language remains relevant?

JDC: Fortunately, youth are deeply enough involved at RYSE, and staff are relatively young—not that far removed from the peer group served (some are former members)—that it is easy to ask young people to check on the survey to make sure questions still make sense. This is largely done informally but is done very intentionally, both as part of the preadministration process and again when results are being reviewed, as part of the sense-making process.

For more on Jara's work, see The Luminare Group (https://www.theluminaregroup.com/) and Equitable Evaluation (https://www.equitableeval.org/project).

Asking about income.

Although not always necessary, income data are especially important in certain areas of study such as "social stratification, inequality, and poverty" (Jansen, Verhoeven, Robert, & Dessens, 2013, p. 1358). Research in health, well-being, and even behaviors, such as volunteering and donating money, also relies on income data, especially as a predictor variable (Jansen et al., 2013). The American Community Survey asks questions about income to

> create statistics about income, assistance, earnings, and poverty status. Local, state, tribal, and federal agencies use our published income data to plan and fund programs that provide economic assistance for populations in need. Income data measure the economic well-being of the nation. In conjunction with poverty estimates, these data are often part of funding formulas that determine the distribution of food, health care, job training, housing, and other assistance. (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-b)

The ACS asks about income in the most detailed way, asking respondents to report income from individual sources separately, including the following:

- Wages, salary, commissions, bonuses, or tips from all jobs
- Self-employment income

- Interest, dividends, net rental income, royalty income, income from estates and trusts
- Social security or railroad retirement
- Supplemental Security income (SSI)
- Public assistance or welfare payments
- Retirement, survivor, or disability pensions
- Any other sources of income received regularly such as Veteran's Payments (VA), unemployment compensation, child support or alimony (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.-b).

Respondents must then add up all individual sources of income to arrive at a total figure.

Most survey researchers will not need this degree of detail, if income data are needed at all, but this is a helpful reminder of potential sources of income. At times, all that is needed is an understanding of the *sufficiency* of income—whether it is a source of worry or stress for an individual or household—as opposed to needing to know the level of income. Being as specific as possible about what is needed will help ensure that survey responses can be properly analyzed. Here again lies a level of complexity that requires a researcher to revisit and carefully examine the research question(s) and articulated survey purpose. Income may be the appropriate variable for a survey question, but it is also closely related to issues of social class and socioeconomic status, and can be a source of confusion.

> Socioeconomic status (SES) encompasses not just income but also educational attainment, financial security, and subjective perceptions of social status and social class. Socioeconomic status can encompass quality of life attributes as well as the opportunities and privileges afforded to people within society. Poverty, specifically, is not a single factor but rather is characterized by multiple physical and psychosocial stressors. Further, SES is a consistent and reliable predictor of a vast array of outcomes across the life span, including physical and psychological health. Thus, SES is relevant to all realms of behavioral and social science, including research, practice, education and advocacy. (American Psychological Association, n.d.)

Income alone cannot serve as a proxy variable for social class or socioeconomic status. Revisit Stories From the Field: Asking About Economic Status in a Survey: An Odyssey from Chapter 2 for a "real world" scenario in which researchers had to determine the best way to understand their respondents' income levels for a specific purpose.

Finally, at times researchers may want to use a proxy variable, something that may at least loosely correlate with the variable of interest—in this case, income—to substitute for a more sensitive question. Education level, though not nearly a perfect proxy, can potentially be used in this way for income, because it is most likely a less sensitive topic than income and will likely feel less like an invasion of privacy to respondents.

Asking about religion.

Religion may not always have been a sensitive topic. Sudman and Bradburn (1982) claim "nongovernment survey organizations have uniformly found that religion is not a sensitive topic and that reports of religious behavior are easy to obtain" (p. 25). They repeat this claim in their 2004 book (Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004), but nearly two decades later, this has changed and we're certain that religion belongs in a discussion of potentially sensitive or threatening survey topics.

Recent research-based advice specific to designing questions around religion (i.e., whether they should be open- or closed-ended, and which specific response options should be offered) is limited; hence, for this topic, we return to our earlier emphasis on purpose and operationalizing constructs. Articulating the purpose for needing to know something about respondents' religion is critical. Will data be disaggregated by this variable, and if so, why? What research or evaluation questions will be answered by this?

Religion and religiosity are deceptively complex. McAndrew and Voas (2011) contend:

> For some people, religious affiliation is purely nominal or used as an identifier to distinguish themselves from members of other religious groups. By contrast, others have a serious personal commitment. Therefore surveys often seek to capture both religious adherence (also called religious identity or religious affiliation) and degree of religious commitment, or "religiosity." Religiosity is bound up with attitudes, behaviour and values, while religious affiliation is more like ethnicity, something that for most is part of their family, community or cultural heritage, rather than being chosen by them.
>
> While quantification of religiosity is possible . . . there are no clear standards regarding what aspects should be measured. A number are relevant: belief, practice, formal membership, informal affiliation, ritual initiation, doctrinal knowledge, moral sense, core values, or how you are regarded by others. Further, different aspects may relate to fundamentally different types of religiosity. (p. 2)

To operationalize religion for the purpose of a survey, researchers must carefully consider information needs. Is it important to know affiliation, such as if a respondent identifies as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim? Is it important to understand whether or how often a respondent engages in religious *worship*, *practice*, or *observance*? If a respondent believes in a god (or multiple gods) or higher power?

The 2014 General Social Survey, a telephone-administered survey, asked a number of questions around religion including the following open-ended questions:

- What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion or no religion?
- Would you call yourself a strong [religious preference] or a not very strong [religious preference]?
- In what religion were you raised? (Association of Religion Data Archives, n.d.)

Probes were administered after each question, such as "What specific denomination is that, if any?" after the question on religious preference.

According to McAndrew and Voas (2011), "It has become conventional to focus on three aspects of religious involvement: belief, practice and affiliation" (p. 3). That said, for any given survey purpose, it may be sufficient to focus one or more questions on just one of these aspects.

Discussion Questions

- What topics or subjects might a researcher have to consider as potentially sensitive or threatening to people in your organization? Your culture?
- When it is necessary to ask about gender identification or sexual orientation or preference, what resources might you use to inform your question design process?

Design Drills

1. Suppose you are designing a survey to measure attitudes toward new housing initiatives in your community and you expect that age, gender identity, and religion may be significant determining factors in respondents' attitudes. Knowing what you know about potential respondents in your community, how might you design demographic questions for this survey? What considerations will be important given potentially sensitive topics?
2. Research Scenario, Part 6 (additional parts are found in other chapters): You are developing a survey that will ask low-income senior citizens about their behaviors and thoughts related to a program delivered at local libraries. The program is intended to help senior citizens feel more engaged with their communities and to be more social, given concerns about seniors becoming too isolated.
    a. What quality control or filtering questions might be useful for your survey, if at all? Draft a few, complete with instructions needed for any resulting branching.
    b. Which types of demographic questions are needed for your survey? Draft these and consider where they will appear in the survey.

Extended Learning

- Aday, L. A., & Cornelius, L. J. (2006). *Designing and conducting health surveys: A comprehensive guide* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Offers detailed advice on sensitive questions on health-related topics and specifically for hard-to-reach populations.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2016). *Collecting transgender-inclusive gender data in workplace and other surveys.* Available at http://www.hrc.org/resources/collecting-transgender-inclusive-gender-data-in-workplace-and-other-surveys.
- Human Rights Campaign. (2017). *Sexual orientation and gender identity definitions.* Available at http://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions.
- LGBT TIG Week: Emily A. Greytak on So . . . you want to identify LGBTQ people in your evaluation? Ask these 4 questions first. AEA365: A Tip-a-Day by and for Evaluators. Available at http://aea365.org/blog/lgbt-tig-week-emily-a-greytak-on-so-you-want-to-include-identify-lgbtq-people-in-your-evaluation-ask-these-4-questions-first.
- The Williams Institute. (2009). *Best practices for asking questions about sexual orientation on surveys.* Available at http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/SMART-FINAL-Nov-2009.pdf.
- Tourangeau, R., Rips, L. J., & Rasinski, K. (2000). *The psychology of survey response*. New York: Cambridge University Press. Offers a more thorough treatment of how survey respondents edit their answers in the face of sensitive or threatening questions.