

Measuring Sexual Orientation Identity and Gender Identity in a Self-Administered Survey: Results from Cognitive Research with Older Adults

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Background

Project Talent was the largest study of high school students ever conducted in the United States. In 1960, over 400,000 students from 1,300 schools across the country participated in a national survey of their aptitudes and abilities in mathematics, reasoning, and language, and shared their aspirations for the future. The study surveyed students from backgrounds as diverse as the country itself: Participants came from small rural towns and inner city neighborhoods, from schools on the verge of desegregation and from private and parochial academies. Fifty years after the original Project Talent study, researchers and historians have become increasingly interested in this unique group of Americans. The American Institutes for Research, which developed and administered the original Project Talent study in conjunction with the United States Office of Education, has launched an initiative to locate and reconnect with the Project Talent participants through new surveys. New information gained from a fifty-year follow up of Project Talent participants could provide information and reveal factors that have real consequences for future health, education and aging policies across many subgroups of older-Americans, including LGBT participants.

The primary purpose of this cognitive research was to test respondent understanding and reaction to a survey item that assesses sexual orientation identity among American adults ages 65 and older. To include the perspectives of those with minority sexual orientation identities (eg. homosexual, gay, lesbian, or bisexual), about half the sample was recruited through gay and lesbian community networks. A secondary purpose of the research was to test respondent understanding and reaction to survey items that assess gender identity and enable the identification of transgender individuals among American adults ages 65 and older. This study did not specifically recruit respondents with minority gender identities (eg. transgender and intersex); future research should include the perspectives of gender minorities.

Lesbian, Gay, Bixsexual, and Transgender (LGBT) elders survey participation

In the last few decades, intense legal, social and political debate about the rights and roles of LGBT people has resulted in expanded visibility and recognition of LGBT individuals and families in American culture. With this increasing visibility, there has been an increasing emphasis on devising measures to identify LGBTs on large surveys. For example, in response to the growing number of states with legal recognition of same-sex couples, the Office of Management and Budget chartered an interagency working group in 2010 to undertake extensive research into how to measure and count same-sex couples through relationship, marital status, and cohabitation items on U.S. Census Bureau surveys (DeMaio & Bates, 2012). Further, the Questionnaire Design Research Laboratory at the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) recently studied and recommended improvements to a sexual orientation identity question for inclusion in the National Health Interview Survey (Miller & Ryan, 2011). While both the Census Bureau and NCHS projects included respondents over the age of 60, neither have specifically addressed comprehension and acceptability of such items with older age cohorts.

The primary purpose of this research was to contribute to closing this gap and specifically address comprehension and acceptability of a sexual orientation identity item with an older age cohort. Broadly, sexual orientation refers to a pattern of experience of sexual or romantic desire for, and relationships with, people of one’s same sex, the other sex, or both sexes (Institute of Medicine (IOM), 2011). Sexual orientation identity is commonly understood to be one of 3 dimensions of sexual orientation, which also includes sexual attraction and sexual behavior (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). Sexual orientation identity refers to a conception of the self based upon a pattern of sexual attraction toward and behavior with people of the same, the other, or both sexes (Institute of Medicine (IOM), 2011). Other measures related to sexual orientation include partnership items that are inclusive of same-sex coupling, such as relationship status, marital status, and cohabitation. This study addressed the measurement of only one dimension of sexual orientation: sexual orientation identity.

A secondary purpose of this study was to examine comprehension and acceptability of a transgender-inclusive gender identity item. Gender identity is a separate construct from both sexual orientation and partnership. Gender identity refers to the basic sense of being a man, a woman, or another gender (eg. transgender or gender queer – a rejection of the binary classification of gender) (Institute of Medicine (IOM), 2011). In transgender individuals, gender identity is incongruent with the sex assigned at birth. Persons of all gender identities (including transgender individuals) have sexual orientation that is distinct from their gender identity. Table 1 outlines the constructs of sexual orientation, partnership and gender identity and provides example items for each.

Table 1: Sexual Orientation, Partnership, and Gender Identity Constructs, Dimensions and Example Items

Construct	Dimension	Example Item
Sexual Orientation	<i>Sexual Identity</i>	How would you describe your sexual orientation? Heterosexual Homosexual Bisexual
	<i>Sexual Attraction</i>	People are different in their sexual attraction to other people. Which best describes your feelings? Are you... Only attracted to males Mostly attracted to males Equally attracted to males and females Mostly attracted to females Only attracted to females

Table 1: Sexual Orientation, Partnership, and Gender Identity Constructs, Dimensions and Example Items (continued)

Construct	Dimension	Example Item
Sexual Orientation	<i>Sexual Behavior</i>	In your entire life, have you had sex with Only males Only females Both males and females Or have you never had sex?
	<i>Relationship Status</i>	Which of the following best describes your current relationship situation? I am in a steady relationship with a woman and we live together I am in a steady relationship with a man and we live together I am in a steady relationship with a woman and we do not live together I am in a steady relationship with a man and we do not live together I am not in a steady relationship right now
What is your current marital status? Married (opposite-sex) Married, civil union, or registered domestic partnership (same-sex) Widowed Divorced Separated Never married		
[Options to include among others on a household roster] How is this person related to you? Opposite-sex husband/wife/spouse Opposite-sex unmarried partner Same-sex husband/wife/spouse Same-sex unmarried partner		
Partnership (Inclusive of Same-sex)	<i>Marital Status</i>	
	<i>Cohabiting Partnership</i>	
Gender Identity (Inclusive of Transgender)	<i>Transgender Identity</i>	Do you consider yourself to be transgender? Yes No
	<i>Gender/birth sex congruence</i>	Do you consider yourself to be male or female? Male Female What was your sex at birth? Male Female

Several large surveys, including the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) have had success including one or more

measures of sexual orientation over multiple waves of data collection. Table 2 overviews sexual orientation identity items and the age ranges that have been included in several large surveys of adults. Very few surveys have included transgender-inclusive measures of gender identity (Institute of Medicine (IOM), 2011).

Both sexual orientation identity and gender identity measures have been viewed as “sensitive questions” and there are several potential challenges in including such measures, including stigma in identifying as a sexual or gender minority, perception of measures as intrusive or offensive, and lack of comprehension of items (Sexual Minority Assessment Research Team (SMART), 2009). If not addressed, such challenges have the potential to result in unacceptable levels of item nonresponse, survey termination, or misclassification. The results of qualitative cognitive research undertaken by the U.S. Census Bureau and NCHS, as well as the successful historical incorporation of sexual orientation measures on surveys like NHANES and NSFG, suggest that these challenges can be addressed with care and consideration in the development of survey instruments.

In addition to qualitative cognitive research on sexual orientation items, a few quantitative research studies have specifically addressed concerns about item nonresponse, survey termination, and misclassification. Nicole VanKim and colleagues (2010) analyzed response patterns on sexual orientation identity questions in New Mexico state-sponsored public health surveillance surveys between 2003-2008 and found that refusal rates for the sexual orientation identity items were relatively low (ranging from 0.80% to 2.60%) and were measurably lower than item refusal rates for income questions (4.23% to 6.11%). Patricia Case and colleagues (2006) pilot tested a sexual orientation identity question in mailed questionnaire to participants in the Nurses’ Health Study II; they found very low levels of nonresponse (0.7%) and reported that the pilot did not appear to result in termination of participation in the cohort. Elisabeth Saewyc and colleagues (2004) found low levels of nonresponse to sexual orientation measures in 8 school-based surveys of adolescents that were similar to nonresponse rates for other sexual questions; they also examined congruency of response across measures of sexual orientation and found low levels of likely misclassification (for example, in one survey approximately 1% of the “100% heterosexual” students reported exclusive same-gender sexual fantasies).

While there has been a significant history measuring sexual orientation identity on large surveys with young and mid-life adult populations, sexual orientation identity has infrequently been measured in older adults, particularly in those over age 65. Several large surveys, such as the NSFG and the Nurses’ Health Study II, include a sexual orientation identity measure but exclude older age cohorts from the study population. A few other studies, including NHANES and the Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System have used skip patterns by age to purposely exclude older age respondents from sexual orientation questions. Large scale studies of older age, such as the Health and Retirement Study and the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project, have not incorporated sexual identity in their questionnaires.

Table 2: Select Large Surveys of Adults Which Have Included a Sexual Orientation Identity Item

Study Name	Survey Years in which SO included	Age Range of Respondents Asked SO	Sexual Orientation Identity Item
General Social Survey (GSS)	2008	18+	Which of the following best describes you? Gay, lesbian, or homosexual Bisexual Heterosexual or straight Don't know
National Epidemiologic Survey of Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC)	2004-2005 ¹	20+	Which of the categories on the card best describes you? Heterosexual (straight) Gay or lesbian Bisexual Not sure
National Health & Nutrition Examination Study (NHANES)	2007-2008 ²	20-59 ³	Do you think of yourself as... Heterosexual or straight (that is, sexually attracted only to MEN/WOMEN) Homosexual or gay (that is, sexually attracted only to WOMEN/MEN) Bisexual (that is, sexually attracted to men and women) Something else Or you're not sure?
National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)	2006-2008 ¹	18-44	Do you think of yourself as. . . Heterosexual or straight Homosexual, gay, or lesbian Bisexual Something else
Midlife Development in the United States II (MIDUS II)	2004-2006 ¹	38-84	How would you describe your sexual orientation? Heterosexual Homosexual Bisexual
Nurses' Health Study II (NHS II)	2009 ¹	47-62	Whether or not you are currently sexually active, what is your sexual orientation or identity? (Please choose one answer). Heterosexual Lesbian, gay or homosexual Bisexual None of these Prefer not to answer

¹Sexual identity was also measured in an earlier wave

²Sexual identity has been measured in this study series since 1999

³Respondents age 60 and older are excluded from the question in this study

In general, sexual orientation and gender identity have been infrequently considered in research on older adults. LGBT older adults tend to be overlooked in both studies of LGBTs and studies of aging. The Institute of Medicine's landmark study of the health of LGBT people specifically calls for research to fill the gaps in our knowledge of LGBT elders. Because so little research has been conducted, basic demographic and descriptive information about LGBT elders was one of the priority research opportunities identified by the IOM committee. In particular, the committee recommended research that contributes to an understanding of the percentage of elders who are LGBT, how the percentage varies by other demographic characteristics, and the general experiences and health status of LGBT older adults. An important first step toward such research is inclusion of comprehensible and acceptable measures that identify LGBTs on large scale surveys of older adults. This study set out to answer five specific research questions about measures of sexual orientation identity on a survey of older adults.

Research Questions

1. Do older Americans understand the language and terms used in the sexual orientation identity and the gender identity items being tested for the National Health Interview Study (NHIS)?
2. Do older Americans understand the purpose of the sexual orientation identity and gender identity items in a short background screener type of survey?
3. Do older Americans believe it is appropriate to ask about sexual orientation identity and gender identity on a survey? For what purposes is it acceptable?
4. What social or behavioral contexts do older Americans associate with sexual orientation identity and gender identity? Where would they expect to see it on a questionnaire?
5. How are the items interpreted by heterosexual and non-heterosexual respondents?

Methods

Twenty-two cognitive interviews were conducted in Boston, MA and Richmond, VA in the fall of 2011 with a sample of 12 straight/heterosexual (5 in Boston; 7 in Richmond) and 10 gay/lesbian (6 in Boston; 4 in Richmond) participants. The average age of the respondents was 70 years. Table 3 shows selected demographic characteristics of the respondents by location. This research did not specifically target transgendered respondents and none of the respondents identified themselves as transgender.

Respondents were recruited from Craigslist, local poster advertisements, personal contacts, and organizations for seniors. Craigslist was successful as a recruitment tool in Boston, but not in Richmond. In Richmond, most of the heterosexual participants were recruited from a local organization for seniors and the LGB participants were recruited through personal contacts. Respondents were given a \$100 Visa or American Express gift card for their participation.

A short 10-page survey that measures demographic characteristics of older adults, including sexual orientation identity, was developed to provide a survey context for the NCHS sexual orientation

identity items. The survey items were taken directly from the Project Talent Pilot study. This type of survey, if used in the future, would serve as a “screener” instrument to target specific subgroups of Project Talent participants, such as LGB participants or veterans, for more detailed follow-up surveys on relevant topics. It should be noted that the sexual identity-related items were the focus of this research. While respondents’ comments on other items were recorded, they were not specifically targeted for probing and follow-up.

Table 3. Number of respondents by selected characteristics and location

Selected characteristic	Location		Total
	Boston	Richmond	
Total	11	11	22
Age			
65-69	6	5	11
70-74	4	4	8
75-79	1	1	2
80 and older	-	1	1
Gender			
Male	5	3	8
Female	6	8	14
Race/Ethnicity			
Black, not Hispanic	4	2	6
White, not Hispanic	7	9	16
Educational attainment			
Less than high school	1	1	2
High school	2	2	4
Some college/Associates	2	2	4
Bachelor's degree	3	3	6
Graduate or professional degree	3	3	6
Sexual identity			
Gay/Lesbian	6	4	10
Straight/Heterosexual	5	7	12

All probing was done retrospectively. Participants were asked to complete the entire questionnaire unless they wanted to comment on an item. If they thought some aspect of an item was unclear or confusing as they were completing the questionnaire, they were asked to stop at that point and discuss what they were thinking. Otherwise, respondents finished the questionnaire and were probed retrospectively on the specific items of interest in the study. See Appendix B for the cognitive interview protocol.

Results

Below are the results of the interviews by questions of interest.

Sexual Orientation Identity Item (Question 21)

- Q21** Do you think of yourself as...
- Lesbian, Gay, or Homosexual
 - Straight or Heterosexual, that is, not gay
 - Bisexual
 - Something Else
 - Don't Know

Respondents had no comprehension issues related to the sexual orientation identity item. When asked what the question was asking in their own words, responses included “how you feel about your own sexuality,” “about my sexual identity,” “how do you see yourself,” and “sexual preference.” Three straight/heterosexual respondents interpreted the question as asking if they were “straight” or “gay or not.” No one had difficulty answering the question. No one found the item offensive and no one said that it did not belong on a survey, although a few people did say that there may be some people who may feel uncomfortable answering it. It is important to note that none of the respondents interviewed indicated that they would not answer the question. One respondent noted that some people would be “insulted that you need to know my sexual preference,” although this respondent noted that she does not find it offensive.

The “something else” category generated a lot of discussion and some confusion among respondents. Many people wondered what would be included in this category. One respondent said, “If I were ‘something else’ ...I guess if you preferred sex with um you know maybe animals or children you may think of yourself as something else.” One respondent said “bestiality.” Another respondent said that some people may prefer the term “queer” and so therefore they may mark the “something else” category, but this respondent thought that the “something else” category was offensive as he thought about it more. This respondent said that the question “has a more offensive slap to it because ...I don’t know what people are trying to get at with this ‘something else’ kind of question.” This respondent suggested leaving the entire question open-ended so that respondents could write in however they identify themselves. Another respondent noted that the something else category does not allow for the respondent to clarify what that something else is, and suggested adding an other-specify line. This respondent said, “The something else ...I don’t know how specific you want to be but if you’re asking if there is something else and I answer it wouldn’t you want to know what I consider myself?” A second respondent also suggested adding an other-specify line.

Several respondents also commented on the don't know category. Respondents generally thought that this was a legitimate response category, noting that some people may not yet have come to understand their sexual orientation. However, some respondents noted that if the survey is intended for older adults, the category may not apply. For example, one respondent asked, "Has anybody ever put don't know? Honestly? Anybody that doesn't know and they're over 65. Put that don't know and too late." Another respondent said, "I think if you are probably over 25 and you don't know you are in trouble." However, one respondent disagreed with this thinking. When speaking about how important it was to include the question on a survey, this respondent said it is important "especially if you are addressing older adults because I can't tell you how many women I have met who are just coming out."

Another area in the response options that generated discussion was the phrase "that is, not gay" in the "straight or heterosexual, that is, not gay" response category. Several respondents questioned why it was there and did not think that it was needed. This sentiment was felt by both straight/heterosexual respondents as well as gay/lesbian respondents. One respondent who identified as straight/heterosexual was confused by the phrase, while another straight/heterosexual respondent said, "I guess that's helpful to some...well, it's also not bisexual, and if you want to be really strict about it you probably should throw lesbian in there too." Another respondent who identified as gay/lesbian said, "it's almost like 'are you straight or heterosexual... *that is, you're not gay*' [emphasis added]...kind of like, you know, I want to make sure you're not gay."

Some respondents who identified as gay/lesbian also felt more strongly about the response options than did straight/heterosexual respondents. For example, when describing the "lesbian, gay, or homosexual" response category, one respondent said that the category "want[s] to know if you identity with the current names of lesbian and gay or if you are using the old fashioned and denigrating word of homosexual." Two other respondents noted the word homosexual, with one saying that it was a more technical term meaning lesbian or gay and another respondent saying that she did not like the use of the word. One of these respondents underlined the word lesbian so the interviewer would know the choice word and said:

Yes I could put gay because gay is the catch-all phrase, however I come from a radical feminist background and to me saying gay rather than lesbian is the same as saying man for the whole race; what happened to woman?...It bothers me when organizations just say gay. I believe they should say lesbian and gay because gay, yes encompasses it all because that's the way we are in this world, but gay really means gay men and lesbians are women...Gay somehow...is more frivolous and more excepting ...but lesbian is a threat, just like feminist was a threat.

Another issue that was discussed predominantly by gay/lesbian respondents was the possibility of including a category for transgendered individuals in the sexual orientation identity item response options. There were eight comments about including a transgender response category, and six of them were from gay/lesbian respondents. These respondents suggested either adding a transgender category to question 21, or thought that transgendered individuals would check the "something else"

box. A couple of respondents who identified as gay/lesbian interpreted questions 17 and 18 as items that would identify transgender people, but also recommended adding a transgender category for question 21. Another gay/lesbian respondent talked about transgender identity and concluded that a transgender category belonged with the gender identity items, and suggested adding transgender as a response option in question 18 (Q18. What was your sex at birth?). However, one respondent challenged this view, talking through the complexity of adding a transgender category to question 21 by saying:

a transgender [person can be] lesbian or gay or straight...[further] the problem with putting transgender in [question 21] is that I would think most people who are transgender are not about to check that because they are happily living a new life as a woman or man.

Gender Identity Items (Questions 17-18)

Q17 Do you consider yourself to be male or female? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Male
- Female

Q18 What was your sex at birth? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Male
- Female
- Intersex/ambiguous

Contrary to the findings for the sexual orientation identity item where respondents were clear about what was being asked, there was more confusion regarding the gender identity items. For example, some respondents thought that question 17 was asking about sexuality. When asked what question 17 was asking in their own words, these respondents said it was asking: 1) “about my sexual identity,” 2) if “[she] has any doubts about her...sexuality,” and 3) “how do you feel about your sexuality.” Other respondents understood the question to be asking about gender. One respondent said that the question was asking if the respondent identifies with being a woman or male and “not biologically, but emotionally and how I express myself in the world.” Despite the differing interpretations regarding what the question was asking, respondents reported no difficulty answering this question.

Some respondents noted that question 17 was worded differently than gender questions typically seen on surveys. For example, one heterosexual respondent said:

[this is a] pretty standard question, but it is worded differently than it usually is. Rather than are you male or female. It’s not asking that. It’s asking what I consider myself...it’s making the assumption that it could be the possibility that it is not as it appears. I might consider

myself as a woman for whatever reason...biologically I am a man...but emotionally I may be a woman.

Another heterosexual respondent said that the question looked weird and focused on the word “considered.” She said:

It’s just the way it’s worded, it’s kinda funny. It doesn’t say are you a male or female. It says, ‘Do you consider yourself to be.’ In other words, are you gay or are you not gay.

This respondent, like several others noted above who were confused by question 17 and 18, conflated the constructs of sexuality and gender in interpreting what question 17 was asking.

Respondents said that question 18 was asking about a person’s sex at birth and there were no problems for respondents answering the question. However, there was some confusion regarding the last response category for question 18-intersex/ambiguous. Straight/heterosexual respondents were less likely to have a sense of what these words meant and more likely to be confused by them. Several straight/heterosexual respondents stated that they did not know what either word meant. Others said that the category meant “either in the middle of an identity change or has already gone through it,” and two others said that it meant “bisexual.” While these respondents did not know what the term “intersex/ambiguous” meant, they knew that it did not apply to them and they appropriately marked male or female.

Many of the gay/lesbian respondents had a sense of what these words referred to, even if they inferred meanings or were unfamiliar with one of the terms. For example, one respondent said that she did not know what intersex is but said “the baby had some of each genital...and maybe it was clear and maybe it wasn’t.” Another gay/lesbian respondent was unsure of the word ambiguous, but said she thought that intersex meant multiple sexes at one time. Finally, another respondent said that this category refers to “someone who...[has] at least partially two sets of genitalia of both genders or the genitalia is ambiguous enough that the doctors don’t know what it means.”

Regardless of sexual orientation, several respondents linked questions 17 and 18 and noted that these questions were trying to capture some aspect about the respondent’s gender, such as whether they were transgender or if they had gone through a sex change. One gay/lesbian respondent, when speaking about question 18, said:

I thought that was good that you put that [question 18] there because obviously there are transgender people in the world who probably uh get questions, not necessarily this one, that fill out questionnaires that are very confusing as to who they are, who they are now, who they were, how much that has changed, how they look at their life, whether they have done anything about it or whether they are just thinking about it.

One straight/heterosexual respondent said that question 17 is “how you see yourself in [your] mind,” whereas question 18 was a more straightforward question asking sex at birth.

No gay/lesbian respondents in either location indicated that these questions stood out to them. However, one straight/heterosexual respondent who did not think that question 18 belonged on the questionnaire said, “Most people- 99 percent, I would assume- are the same [referring to questions 17 and 18]. And that 1 percent, is that important enough to make it necessary to put the questions” in the questionnaire? Another straight/heterosexual respondent said question 17 was “kind of foolish” and question 18 was “dumb.” Other straight/heterosexual respondents offered more subtle thoughts about whether the items stood out to them. Thoughts from three different straight/heterosexual respondents below describe their reactions:

You hear so much about it now...it just... kind of pricked your thinking because you hear so much about it...to me it's not a problem. I am female and I have a nephew and he told me about...7 years ago that he was gay...but we all knew it [he was gay]...older people don't talk about it...but now it's open and a so we don't love him any less... I just thought about how times have changed.

As far as I'm concerned you don't need them but I don't know what you're trying to get at. If ...you're interviewing old people...they [referring to gender and/or sexual minorities] are not my daily routine; that's not my ballgame.

Well, I thought it was a little funny; I thought it was kind of cute...well it just asked what was my sex at birth and I was like whoa, OK, I was female, but nowadays you, it's a portion I guess you can ask people...we are in the 21st century now so...

Despite some confusion on the part of respondents, no one answered these questions incorrectly, and there was no indication that respondents would not respond to the questionnaire, or not complete the items if they were completing this at home. While asking specifically about the appropriateness of these questions on the survey was not done in Boston, it was asked to some of the respondents in Richmond because of the responses given above. Most respondents who were probed on this in Richmond said that whether these items belong on the survey depends on what the survey is trying to capture. No further information was provided.

Location of items on questionnaire

The sexual orientation identity item (question 21) and the gender identity items (question 17 and 18) were located in the section of the questionnaire entitled, “About You” (see Appendix A for a copy of the screener questionnaire used in the cognitive interviews). The gender identity items were preceded by three questions designed to capture marital status arrangements. Following the gender identity questions were two questions designed to capture Hispanic origin and race/ethnicity. The

sexual orientation item followed the race/ethnicity question. Overall, respondents thought that these items were in a good location in the “About You” section, although there were some differences regarding specific placement. These differences did not seem to vary by sexual orientation, but instead on individual preferences.

When asked where these items would go best on a survey, many respondents- both straight/heterosexual and gay/lesbian- linked items 17, 18, and 21. Some respondents noted the complex relationship between gender identity and sexual orientation. One straight/heterosexual respondent, when discussing 17, 18, and 21, said:

I know a young woman who considers herself a man so he was female when he was born but now considers himself male ...can you make any inference um not really I could be gay or straight and answer the question male and still not know. The more I talk about it the more I see that it is a separate question and if you need to know their sexual orientation the only way to ask it is to ask it straight out.

Because of this, this respondent thought that these three items should be ordered together rather than separating them with the Hispanic and race questions. Another respondent who identified as gay/lesbian was discussing his response to question 17 when he naturally began talking about 21, saying that he wished there was a “label that I felt more clearly represented how I experience myself...I have had great sex with women and great sex with men. I do not feel like I could walk the bisexual line because it would make me nuts...” This respondent went on to say that while he considers himself male, he said “there is more to me than just my male gender.” A straight/heterosexual respondent said,

[Question] 17 is a way to put the responder in either the male or female category and question 21, I mean you could answer female and lesbian or gay or bisexual...I think 17 serves the purpose to put the person into a demographic category...these three questions are closely related and should be closer together.

Some respondents thought that 21 should go with the marital status and registered domestic partnership items. One straight/heterosexual respondent said that the item belongs in between questions 14 and 15 (questions asking about marital status and whether the respondent is in a registered domestic partnership) because “it is a lifestyle...it’s their preference.” Another respondent, who was gay/lesbian, agreed because these questions were all about partners.

Discussion

Given the lack of knowledge researchers have regarding how older respondents understand gender identity and sexual orientation identity, the current study used the three items being tested for the National Health Interview Study (NHIS) to explore the feasibility of asking these questions in a short background screener being developed for a follow-up study of American high school students

from the 1960s. The research questions focused on whether older adults understood the meaning- both the questions and response categories- of the items, whether these respondents thought that the questions were appropriate to ask, and where the questions should be located. Comparisons between straight/heterosexual and gay/lesbian respondents were also made to investigate differences.

For sexual orientation identity, respondents- both straight/heterosexual as well as gay/lesbian- understood the meaning of the question. Generally, both groups thought that the question was appropriate to ask, and there were few differences in how the two groups reacted to the item. However, the results showed that some terms, specifically in the response categories, were either considered offensive or unnecessary. For example, several gay/lesbian respondents thought that the word “homosexual” in the response category was offensive. Both straight/heterosexual respondents and gay/lesbian respondents thought that the word “that is, not gay” was unnecessary. Respondents of both groups also had questions about the “something else” response option and wondered who would check that box. Because of these findings, it is recommended that the word “homosexual” and “that is, not gay” be removed from the response options and the revised item go through additional testing to ensure that meaning and comprehension are not lost. In addition, it is recommended that the something else category be changed to “other-please specify” with an option for respondents to write in a word or phrase that best describes their sexual orientation identity.

The focus in this study was on the sexual orientation identity item. The study secondarily tested comprehension and acceptability of gender identity items that would allow for the identification of transgender respondents. Future research should specifically focus upon gender identity items and should include transgender respondents in cognitive testing. Items that are designed to identify transgender people on surveys should include their perspectives to ensure that items will effectively and respectfully capture them. Further, because the gender identity series in this research included an intersex option on the birth sex item, intersex respondents should also be included in future cognitive research studies. The findings related to the gender identity items suggest the need for further testing of the items.

A few heterosexual respondents placed the gender identity items in the context of greater recognition of non-traditional sexuality and gender identity in the contemporary US. Two of these respondents seemed to have some difficulty and perhaps some discomfort articulating how they felt about such social changes. Notably, the sexual orientation identity item did not prompt these kinds of responses. Further, both heterosexual and gay/lesbian respondents were confused by what the gender identity items were asking. In their explanations of what they believed we were asking with the gender identity items, many conflated them with the construct of sexual orientation, perceiving the items as related to sexuality or “being gay or not”. Respondent confusion regarding what was meant by the gender identity series did not result in any misclassifications, suggesting that the items may be sound. However, more research is required to more fully understand respondent comprehension and potential problems in classification that might result from confusion over the

gender identity items. A few respondents suggested providing a transgender response option. Future research might investigate comprehension and acceptability of a straightforward question that asks if respondents are transgender/transsexual outright.

While this study makes an important contribution towards our understanding of comprehension and acceptability of sexual orientation identity and gender identity items among older age cohorts, further research in this area is required. Future research should address the limitations of the sample diversity included in this study. In particular, we suggest testing these items with a more geographically diverse sample that includes respondents who live in rural areas. For a number of reasons, including that LGBT people are less likely to live in rural areas, people who live in such contexts may be less familiar with sexual orientation identity terms and less comfortable answering questions related to minority sexual orientation identity. We also suggest testing these items with a more racially and ethnically diverse sample that includes respondents for whom English is not a first language. It is particularly important in future research to include Hispanic respondents who have demonstrated a pattern of comprehension problems related to sexual orientation identity items in previous studies (Miller & Ryan, 2011).

This research tested one sexual orientation identity item as part of a short survey whose purpose is not solely to identify LGBT older adults. Future research on measuring sexual orientation among older adults should test a more comprehensive range of questions that measure other dimensions of sexual orientation (including attraction and behavior) and that potentially include same-sex options in marital status, relationship status, and cohabiting partnership status items. We included cohabitation and marital status items on the short survey that was tested here, and included an item designed to capture people living in registered domestic partnerships and civil unions. Same-sex partnership options were not explicit in these items. Respondent reaction to these items was not comprehensively probed in this study, however one gay/lesbian respondent indicated that she was not sure how to answer the marital status question since she was not legally divorced, but felt like divorced best described her. (She was separated from a long-term same sex partner that she would have been married to and then would have divorced from had she had the legal option.) Other gay/lesbian respondents also noted issues with these marital status items. The U.S. Census Bureau recently conducted comprehensive testing on several relationship, marital status, and cohabiting partnership questions that included same-sex options (DeMaio & Bates, 2012). However, the reactions of older cohorts were not specifically included in this research. Our preliminary findings suggest that further testing on such items should be conducted with older age cohorts.

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Appendix A – Questionnaire

**American Institutes for Research (AIR)
Older Adults Survey**

November/December 2011

HOW TO FILL OUT THIS QUESTIONNAIRE:

Please answer the questions by:

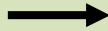
Marking boxes like this:



Or writing a number in a box like this:

2	8
---	---

Sometimes you will find an instruction telling you which questions to answer next, like this:

- Yes  *Skip to Question 10*
- No *(Continue to Q9)*

SECTION I. YOUR HEALTH AND ACTIVITIES

Q1 These first questions are about the activities in your life NOW. Please tell us HOW OFTEN YOU DO EACH ACTIVITY. (Mark (X) one box for each line.)

	Daily	Several times a week	Once a week	Several times a month	At least once a month	Less than once a month	Never/ Not Relevant
Do activities with grandchildren, nieces/nephews, or neighborhood children?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attend an educational or training course?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Go to a sport, social, or other club?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attend meetings of political, community, or other interest groups?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Attend religious services?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Play sports or exercise?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use the Internet for any purpose, such as email, making purchases, or searching for information?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2 Do you own a computer? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes
 No

Q3 In general, would you say your health is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Excellent Very good Good Fair Poor
-

Q4 Because of any physical, mental, or emotional condition, how much difficulty do you have with each of the following? (Mark (X) one box for each line.)

	A great deal of difficulty	Some difficulty	A little difficulty	No difficulty at all
Concentrating, remembering, or making decisions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Walking or climbing stairs?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dressing or bathing?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor's office or shopping?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

SECTION II. YOUR WORK AND MILITARY SERVICE

Q5 The next questions are about your work. Are you currently working for pay or profit? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes → Skip to Question 7
- No

Q6 How long ago did you last work for pay or profit, including self-employment and the Armed Forces? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Never worked for pay → Skip to Question 8
- Less than one year ago
- 1 - 2 years ago
- 3 - 5 years ago
- 6 - 10 years ago
- More than 10 years ago

Q7 Have you ever served on ACTIVE DUTY in the U.S. Armed Forces, military Reserves, or National Guard? (Mark (X) one box.)

Active duty does not include training for the Reserves or National Guard, but DOES include activation, for example, for the Persian Gulf War.

- Yes, on active duty

- No, training for Reserves or National Guard only
- No, never served in the military

Q8 Since turning 40, have you ever experienced any of the following because of your age? (Mark (X) one box for each line.)

	Yes	No
Been laid off, fired, or forced out of a job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not been hired for a job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Been encouraged to retire before you were ready?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q9 At this time, do you consider yourself completely retired, partly retired, or not at all retired? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Completely retired
- Partly retired
- Not at all retired

SECTION III. YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Q10 Are you still in contact with ANYONE you attended high school with? *Contact can be any personal visits, chance meetings, phone calls, letters, emails, or online communications such as Facebook posts.* (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes
- No **➔** Skip to Question 12

Q11 On average, how often are you in contact with ANYONE you attended high school with? *Include any personal visits, chance meetings, phone calls, letters, emails, Facebook posts, or any other forms of contact.* (Mark (X) one box.)

Almost every day	At least once a week	A few times a month	A few times a year	Less than once a year
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q12 Were you born a twin, triplet, quadruplet, or other multiple? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes, a twin
- Yes, a triplet
- Yes, a quadruplet or higher multiple
- No

Q13 Have you ever **IN YOUR LIFETIME** been a parent to any biological, step, and/or adopted children? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes
- No

Q14 Which of the following best describes your current living situation? (Mark (X) one box.)

- I live with my spouse. **—————>** *Skip to Question 17*
- I live with my partner, but we are not married.
- I am not living with a partner or spouse.

Q15 Are you currently living in a registered domestic partnership or civil union? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes **—————>** *Skip to Question 17*
- No

Q16 Which of the following best describes your current marital status? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Married
- Divorced
- Separated
- Widowed
- Never married

SECTION IV. ABOUT YOU

Q17 Do you consider yourself to be male or female? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Male
- Female

Q18 What was your sex at birth? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Male
- Female
- Intersex/ambiguous

Q19 Are you of Spanish, Hispanic, or Latino origin? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Yes
- No

Q20 What is your race? (Mark (X) all boxes that apply.)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White or Caucasian
- Other, please specify: _____

Q21 Do you think of yourself as...

- Lesbian, Gay, or Homosexual
- Straight or Heterosexual, that is, not gay
- Bisexual
- Something Else
- Don't Know

Q22 What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed? (Mark (X) one box.)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Some high school | <input type="checkbox"/> Associate's degree -- technical or vocational school |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High School diploma | <input type="checkbox"/> Associate's degree -- academic |
| <input type="checkbox"/> GED or equivalent | <input type="checkbox"/> Bachelor's degree |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Some college, no degree | <input type="checkbox"/> Master's degree |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Professional school degree or PhD |

Q23 Do you own or rent your home? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Own with a mortgage or loan (including home equity loans)
- Own free and clear
- Rent
- Occupy without having to pay rent

Q24 Think about the city or town in which you currently live or stay. Altogether, about how many years have you lived in or around this city or town? (Please write a number in the box.)

Write a zero in the box if you have lived in this city or town for less than one year.

--	--

Years in or around current residence

Q25 What is your religious preference? (Mark (X) all boxes that apply.)

- Protestant
- Catholic
- Jewish
- Other religion, please specify: _____
- Not religious

Q26 We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. Where would you place yourself on this scale? (Mark (X) one box.)

Extremely Liberal Slightly Moderate, middle of Slightly Conservative Extremely

liberal

liberal

the road

conservative

conservative

Q27

Thinking of all income sources for your household, what was your total household income in 2011? (Mark (X) one box.)

- Less than \$10,000
- \$10,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$149,999
- \$150,000 or more

Thank you for your participation in this important study!

Appendix B – Interview Protocol



AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH®

Interview Protocol General Introduction

Hello. I would like to begin by thanking you for coming in today. We're scheduled to be here for 60 minutes, and I won't keep you any longer. The reason that we have asked you to come in is because the American Institutes for Research is beginning a study that is attempting to follow up with high school students from the early 1960s. As part of this study, a questionnaire is being developed that will ask a variety of background questions. Today I am going to ask you to fill out a draft of the questionnaire and I will ask you to provide feedback so that we can help make sure that the questions will be understood by everyone. I did not write the questions that make up this questionnaire, so please feel free to be honest and candid with your comments and feedback. My role is to find out from you how YOU interpret the questions.

- Because it would be hard to keep track of everything you say today, we're going to tape-record this session.
- And I'll also be taking notes, so you might notice me writing as we are talking.
- This is my colleague _____ who is working on the project as well. She will be sitting in on the interview and may have some additional questions at the end.
- Finally, I want you to know that your responses are voluntary and confidential. If you decide not to participate, there will be no negative effects on your present or future relationship with AIR or the Fenway Institute. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to answer.

I'm about to hand you the questionnaire. When I hand you the questionnaire, please read it and fill it out as if you were actually responding to the survey. As you go through the survey, if any question sticks out to you in any way (maybe you think a question is hard to answer, hard to understand, in a strange place, or you just don't like it)—anything at all that you would like to say about an item, please tell me so that we can discuss it. If you don't want to answer a question, you can just skip it.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin? Great.

(GIVE QUESTIONNAIRE TO RESPONDENT)

GENDER AND SEXUAL IDENTITY PROBES	
Q.14	<p>Which of the following best describes your current living situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Let's take a look at these 3 questions. Were these difficult for you to answer at all?</i> • <i>Did these response categories capture your current living situation?</i>
Q.15	<p>Are you currently living in a registered domestic partnership or civil union?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Can you tell me what a "registered domestic partnership" and "civil union" mean to you?</i> • <i>Were there any skip problems?</i>
Q.16	<p>Which of the following best describes your current marital status?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Were there any skip problems?</i>
Q.17	<p>Do you consider yourself to be male or female?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Did this question stick-out to you for any reason?</i> • <i>What is this question asking, in your own words?</i> • <i>Where do you think that this question best belongs on a survey?</i>
Q. 18	<p>What was your sex at birth?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is this question asking, in your own words?</i> • <i>What does "Intersex/ambiguous" mean to you?</i> • <i>Where do you think this question best belongs on a survey?</i>
Q. 21	<p>Do you think of yourself as...</p> <p>-Lesbian, Gay, or Homosexual -Straight or Heterosexual, that is, not gay -Bisexual -Something Else -Don't Know</p>
	<p>using retrospective probing for both groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What is this question asking, in your own words?</i> • <i>What do the words "Lesbian, Gay, or Homosexual" mean in your own words?</i> • <i>How about "Straight or Heterosexual, that is, not gay." What does that mean in your own words?</i> • <i>"Bisexual?" What does that mean in your own words?</i> • <i>How easy or difficult was it for you to answer this question?</i> • <i>Do you think that this item is appropriate to ask on a survey?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>If yes, how come?</i> ○ <i>If no, why not?</i> • <i>Where would this question best go on a survey?(Use the current</i>

	<p><i>screeners and ask if it is fine where it currently is or if it should go under another heading (existing or new)).</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What about the response categories? Do you think that the question is missing anything or do you think that it covers all categories?</i>
ADDITIONAL PROJECT TALENT PROBES	
Q10	<p>Are you in contact with ANYONE you attended high school with? Contact can be personal visits, chance meetings, phone calls, letters, emails, or online communications such as Facebook posts.</p> <p><i>Yes/No</i></p>
	<p><i>Tell me about any friends that you are in contact with from high school. What are the different ways that you communicate with them? Are these contacts people that you have always stayed in contact with, or have you reconnected? (if reconnected, how and why did you reconnect, can you tell me more about that...?)</i></p>
Q11	<p>On average, how often are you in contact with ANYONE you attended high school with? Include any personal visits, chance meetings, phone calls, letters, emails, Facebook posts, or any other forms of contact.</p> <p><i>Almost every day, At least once a week, A few times a month...</i></p>
	<p><i>What were you thinking when you answered this question?</i></p> <p><i>Was it difficult or easy to answer?</i></p> <p><i>What about the response categories?</i></p> <p><i>Tell me about the last time you were in contact with someone. When was that and how did you communicate?</i></p>
FINAL OBSERVATIONS	
	<p><i>Do you have anything else you would like to tell me about this questionnaire that you haven't had a chance to mention?</i></p>
	<p><i>There may be things that my colleague would like me to ask you about....</i></p>
	<p><i>Thank you...</i></p>