Inclusive Language for Collecting Demographic Data

Purpose

This guide aims to provide the MIT community with several best practices for collecting demographic data and using inclusive language for race, gender identity (GI), sexual orientation (SO), and disability status in survey research.

Guiding Principles

We uphold the ethical principles and guidelines of research for the protection of human subjects outlined in the [Belmont Report](). The three ethical principles include 1) respect for persons (acknowledgment of all individuals' autonomy and protection of those with diminished autonomy), 2) beneficence (protection from harm, and maximizing benefits and minimizing harm), and 3) justice (fair distribution of burdens and benefits). MIT [requires]() everyone directly involved in human subjects research to complete [CITI Human Subjects Protection Training]().

Recommended Practices

Inclusive options should be provided when asking demographic questions in a survey. Consider the following recommended practices:

- Inclusion of demographic questions in a survey should be well thought out when designing the study. Researchers must first evaluate whether asking about participants' race, GI, SO, and disability status is pertinent to the research objective and how the data will be utilized and protected.
- GI and SO are two separate concepts of identity. Depending on the research topic, it may be necessary to ask about one, the other, both, or neither.
- Per the Committee on the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects ([COUHES]()) guidelines, all research is voluntary. That is interpreted to mean that all survey questions must be optional, including demographics, and participants should be able to skip them if they choose to do so. When following this guideline, a "prefer not to answer" response option is not necessary.
- Transgender identity should be asked separately from gender, rather than as an option in the gender identity question.
- If surveying a small group, consider the risks associated with small sample sizes, such as the potential for inadvertent identification of individual survey respondents in reporting on small groups and the limited utility of statistical tests with small sample sizes.

- Including more response options may ensure that a broader array of respondents will be able to select a response that matches their identity. However, this must be balanced with the considerations for privacy, small group size, and complexity in data analysis and reporting. Because identity is fluid and evolving, be thoughtful about the response options provided. Include a response option that allows text entry for identities not captured by response options.
- A best practice for race, GI, and SO questions is to construct them as check-all-that-apply questions.
- Answer choices should be in alphabetical order to avoid bias, with the exception of any self-described identity text box, as that should appear last.
- The inclusion of any disability status questions should be focused on how data can help and support someone with disabilities.

Example of demographic questions Used by IR, as formulated in consultation with IPEDS, the Gender Inclusive Initiative group, and LGBTQ+ Services.

Your race or ethnicity (mark all that apply):

- American Indian or Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- White

What is your Gender?

- Agender
- Genderqueer/Gender Fluid/Non-Binary
- Man
- Unsure/Questioning
- Woman
- My gender is: ____

Are you transgender?

- Yes
- No
- Unsure/Questioning

What is your sexual orientation?

- Bisexual/Pansexual
- Gay/Lesbian
- Straight

- Queer
- Unsure/Questioning
- I identify as: _____

Do you identify as someone with a disability?

- Yes
- No

Training:

COUHES, Office of the Vice President for Research: [Research Involving Human Subjects](#) (CITI Program, Touchstone required).

[LBGTQ+ 101: You Are Welcome Here](#). Course code: BSK34080c.

MIT Resources:

Institutional Research: [Survey Guidelines](#)

Registrar's Office: [The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA)](#)

MIT Policies: [11.0 Privacy and Disclosure of Personal Information](#)

Gender Identity Initiative (GII): [Gender Data at MIT: A Guide for Departments, Labs + Centers](#)

Human Resources: [Updating Staff Personal Information in MIT Systems](#)

Definitions:

Human Rights Campaign: [Glossary of Terms](#)

PGLAG: [LGBTQ+ Glossary](#)

Other Related Resources:

Office of Human Research Protection: [the Belmont Report](#)

Human Rights Campaign: [Self-Identification of LGBTQ+ Employees](#)

American Psychological Association, Bias-Free Language: [Gender](#) and [General Principles for Reducing Bias](#)

Measuring Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI): [Recommendations on the Best Practices for the Collection of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Data on Federal Statistical Surveys](#)

The White House: [How Improved Data Will Support the LGBTQI+ Community](#)