

Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation

Measuring Sexual Orientation

This issue brief is based on the report *Measuring Sex, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation*, which recommends that the National Institutes of Health adopt new practices for collecting data on sex, gender, and sexual orientation. The report recommends standardized language to be used in survey questions that ask about a respondent's sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. This issue brief discusses the recommendations for the measurement of sexual orientation in the U.S. adult population.

DEFINITIONS

Sexual orientation is a multidimensional construct encompassing emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction, identity, and behavior. In Western cultures, sexual orientation is often defined on the basis of the gender(s) of a person's desired potential or actual sexual or romantic partners relative to the person's own gender. In the United States, the most commonly used sexual orientation identity terms are based on a gender binary and include heterosexual, or straight; homosexual, gay, or lesbian; and bisexual. However, there are other less prevalent terms, such as queer (an umbrella term for belonging to the LGBTQI+ community that can also refer to a nonbinary gender identity, which is also referred to as genderqueer) or pansexual (oriented toward partners of any gender); denote uncertainty (e.g., questioning);

or be used among only specific populations (e.g., same gender loving, used in Black communities, or Two-Spirit, used in Indigenous populations).

MEASURES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Sexual orientation is comprised of three dimensions: identity, attraction, and behavior. A number of commonly used measures of sexual orientation do not clearly distinguish among these three dimensions and incorporate aspects of identity, attraction, and behavior. To improve measurement clarity, the committee excluded measures that included a question stem or response options that did not clearly distinguish among the three dimensions of sexual orientation.

Because of both the complexity of measures of sexual orientation attraction and behavior and the abbreviated timeline for the study, the committee focused on measures of sexual orientation identity. In assessing existing identity measures, the committee prioritized measures that reflect both the cognitive dimension of identity (i.e., how a respondent sees or thinks of themselves) and the social or political dimension of identity (i.e., provides label options that reflect a social status or community). Only the measures asking respondents to select an identity label fit this criterion and were included in the committee's evaluation.

RECOMMENDED QUESTION WORDING

THE COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS THAT THE NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH USE THE FOLLOWING QUESTION FOR ASSESSING SEXUAL ORIENTATION IDENTITY:

Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself? [Select ONE]:

- Lesbian or gay
- Straight, that is, not gay or lesbian
- Bisexual
- [If respondent is American Indian or Alaska Native]
Two-Spirit
- I use a different term [free-text] _____
(Don't know)
(Prefer not to answer)

This measure is best included with other demographic measures, such as race, ethnicity, and age because it has demonstrated a high level of acceptability through low rates of item nonresponse and survey breakoffs. A version of this measure has been extensively tested and included in a number of population surveys, such as the National Health Interview Survey. It has been tested in Spanish and English, within a wide age range (12–85+), within both LGBTQI+ and non-LGBTQI+ populations, within racially and ethnically diverse populations, and within rural and urban areas. It clearly distinguishes between people with different sexual orientation identities and broadly between sexual minority and majority populations. It also allows for the enumeration of populations who do not use commonly listed labels through the use of a free-text option.

Despite its widespread use, this measure also has weaknesses. These include the clarification language used to define the straight category, which defines this category based on what it is not rather than what it is and is not conceptually accurate; and the lack of response options that reflect current cultural trends in terminology or the ability to indicate uncertainty. These limitations and potential improvements to the measures are discussed in greater detail in the issue brief on Research Recommendations.

A NOTE ABOUT THE USE OF “TWO-SPIRIT”

“Two-Spirit” is an intertribal umbrella term that serves as an English-language placeholder for tribally-specific gender and sexual orientation identities that are centered in tribal worldviews, practices, and knowledges. Two-Spirit is a way to reference Indigenous identities, practices, and traditions in the context of Western data collection practices and ensure that Indigenous sexual and gender minorities are represented and counted. Because Two-Spirit is a term by and for Indigenous peoples and is culturally anchored with particular meaning and, potentially, social status, it is not appropriate for use by non-Indigenous populations. For this reason, the committee recommends including “Two-Spirit” as a response option only in automated data collection when information on race is collected prior to the collection of sexual orientation to ensure that it is displayed to only American Indian or Alaska Native respondents. See the issue brief on *Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation in an Indigenous Context* for more information.

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