

## McMaster REB Guidance on Demographic Questions

### Purpose of this Guide

These guidelines are intended to be a resource for researchers who wish to collect demographic data such as age, income, employment status, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, etc. as part of a survey, questionnaire, interview, or other research tool (hereafter simply referred to as “survey”). This guidance will help researchers follow the [Tri-Council Policy Statement \(TCPS\) core principles](#) of respect for persons (e.g., voluntary participation), concern for welfare (e.g., privacy), and justice (e.g., inclusivity).

This document is divided into three sections:

- I. [General guidelines on collecting demographic information](#)
- II. [Specific guidelines for asking about race and ethnicity](#)
- III. [Specific guidelines for asking about sex and gender](#)

### General Guidelines on Collection Demographic Information

#### **1. Is it necessary to collect information concerning this (these) demographic variable(s) to achieve my purpose?**

You should consider the following questions.

- a. Is the collecting of such information used as part of my data analysis? Is it important or useful for me to collect this information?
- b. Is the collecting of such information required by another internal or an external body, such as a journal or granting agency?

If the answer to all these questions is “no,” for one or more of your demographic variables, then do not include questions on those variables. To respect the privacy of participants, only information essential to the research should be collected.

#### **2. Are my questions inclusive?**

The response options should be inclusive of all potential participants. To be as inclusive as possible, the best practice is to provide a blank space or text box for the answer. If that is not possible or is unlikely to produce the data you need, select options that will span your full range of participants’ possible responses.

Avoid terms that may have negative connotations for some.

Example 1 - Older individuals: If your study is specifically targeting older individuals, research indicates that they overwhelmingly prefer to be identified to as “older” or “senior” and do NOT like to be referred to as “elderly” or “aged”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Falconer, Marianne & O'Neill, Desmond. (2007). Out with “the old,” elderly, and aged. BMJ: British medical journal. 334. DOI [10.1136/bmj.39111.694884.94](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.39111.694884.94).

Example 2 - Employment status: Rather than offering a binary choice of “employed” or “unemployed”, consider whether your participants might prefer to identify by other terms such as “retired”, “full-time student”, “part-time student”, etc.

Example 3 - Disability: This term is rather loaded. Some researchers use highly specific language to delineate what they mean, to make it clear to participants whether it should apply to them.

**Do you identify as a person with a disability that was present at birth, caused by an accident, or developed over time;**

- that encompasses any degree of physical disability, mental or developmental disability, sensory disability, learning disability, mental health / psychiatric disability, addiction, and life-threatening allergies,
- that may affect full participation in society (school / work),
- that may have been accommodated in workplace / school because of functional limitation as a result of the disability, or,
- who, as a result of self-perception, perception of others, environmental barriers, inaccessible attitudes, or a any combination of these factors, may experience unequal opportunity to access services by reason of the disability?

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ Prefer to self-identify: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

### **3. Am I asking the questions(s) at the least specific level possible?**

Consider what level of information you need in order to answer your research question, and don't go beyond that level. The more demographic questions you ask, and the greater level of specificity with which you ask them, the greater the risk that any one participant could be identifiable from one or more of their responses.

Example – Age: Date of birth should only be asked if essential for the research, otherwise age in years should be collected instead. If the specific age is not required, only a range, then it is better to ask the latter, e.g., 18 or younger, 25 to 29, older than 50, etc.

### **4. Should I offer a response option such as “prefer not to answer”?**

In keeping with the TCPS focus on voluntary participation, research participants should be free to decline to answer individual questions (excepting special circumstances approved by the REB). This also addresses the TCPS principle of concern for welfare, as participants can choose to not engage with questions that make them feel uncomfortable or if they are concerned about privacy and identifiability (the latter is especially relevant for sensitive demographic questions).

*Therefore, the default should be to allow participants to select an option such as “prefer not to answer”.*

Example – Sexual Orientation: In this example, along with the “prefer not to answer option”, note the use of the open text “prefer to self-identify” option in addition to the provided options (keeping with the guidance in #2 above).

**Do you identify as:**

- ☐ Asexual
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Gay
- ☐ Lesbian
- ☐ Queer
- ☐ Questioning
- ☐ Straight (Heterosexual)
- ☐ Two-Spirit
- ☐ Pansexual
- ☐ Prefer to self-identify: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

Specific Guidelines for Asking about Race and Ethnicity

Ethnic origin refers to a person’s ethnic or cultural origins. Ethnic groups have a common identity, heritage, ancestry, or historical past, often with identifiable cultural, linguistic, and/or religious characteristics. “Race” is a social construct without a biological basis; the traditional view that people can be sorted into races based on their DNA does not hold up to scientific scrutiny.<sup>2</sup> The concept of race was created to categorize people into different groups based on visual traits (e.g., skin colour, facial features, hair type), and has been and is still used to mark certain groups for exclusion, discrimination, and oppression. Therefore, racism, racial categorization and racial discrimination continue to shape the lives and opportunities of those who are categorized as “racialized people”.

When asking about race and/or ethnicity, consider what type of information is most relevant to your research. Ethnicity could refer to their country of origin, or some other sense of the term “origin” that does not refer to a country, for example, Punjabi, Acadian or Jewish. While it is important to be as inclusive as possible in your list of response options, another consideration is that the examples included in the question itself can have a significant prompt effect and induce response bias.<sup>3</sup>

There is no single correct way to collect data on race or ethnicity, as it depends heavily upon the research question and context. Nonetheless, a few examples are provided below, taken from various sources, which may be useful to guide the researcher in considering what type of information is most relevant to their research and inclusive for participants.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/science-genetics-reshaping-race-debate-21st-century/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/ref/98-20-0002/982000022020001-eng.cfm>

### Example 1 – Ethnic Origin

Ethnic origin refers to a person's ethnic or cultural origins. Ethnic groups have a common identity, heritage, ancestry, or historical past, often with identifiable cultural, linguistic, and/or religious characteristics.

**What is your ethnic or cultural origin(s)?** For example, Canadian, Chinese, East Indian, English, Italian, Filipino, Scottish, Irish, Portuguese, German, Polish, Dutch, French, Jamaican, Pakistani, Iranian, Sri Lankan, Korean, Ukrainian, Lebanese, Guyanese, Somali, Colombian, Jewish, etc.

### Example 2 – Race

The following question was used by Public Health Ontario <https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/ncov/he/2021/03/aag-race-ethnicity-income-language-data-collection.pdf?la=en> as part of their COVax interview data collection.

In our society, people are often described by their race or racial background. For example, some people are considered “White” or “Black” or “South Asian.” Which race category best describes you? Select all that apply from the options I will read out.

Race categories	Examples
<b>Black</b>	<b>African, Afro-Caribbean, African-Canadian descent</b>
<b>East Asian</b>	Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Taiwanese descent
<b>Latino</b>	Latin American, Hispanic descent
<b>Middle Eastern</b>	Arab, Persian, West Asian descent, e.g. Afghan, Egyptian, Iranian, etc.
<b>South Asian</b>	South Asian descent, e.g. East Indian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Indo-Caribbean, etc.
<b>Southeast Asian</b>	Filipino, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Thai, other Southeast Asian descent
<b>White</b>	European descent
<b>Another race</b>	Another race

### Example 3 – Race and Ethnicity, within a North American Context

**How do you identify your ‘race’/ethnicity?** *Check all that apply*

- ☐ First Nation or North American Indian
- ☐ Alaskan Native
- ☐ Inuit
- ☐ Métis
- ☐ Other Aboriginal or Indigenous
- ☐ White (Caucasian)
- ☐ Other European origins
- ☐ Black/African American/African Canadian
- ☐ Caribbean origins
- ☐ Latin, Central and South American origins

- ☐ African origins
- ☐ West Central Asian and Middle Eastern origins (e.g., Turkish, Iranian)
- ☐ South Asian origins (e.g., Indian, Sri Lankan)
- ☐ East and Southeast Asian origins (e.g., Chinese, Filipino)
- ☐ Other Asian origins
- ☐ Oceania origins (e.g., Hawaiian, Samoan)
- ☐ Other (option to specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

#### Example 4 – Indigenous Identity, within a Canadian Context

##### **Do you identify as Indigenous?**

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes. Please self-identify:
  - ☐ First Nations (status/non-status)
  - ☐ Métis
  - ☐ Inuit
- ☐ Prefer to self-identify: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

#### Example 5 – Race and Ethnicity, within a Canadian Context

##### **How do you identify your ‘race’/ethnicity? Check all that apply**

- ☐ African/Black (including African-American, African-Canadian, Caribbean)
- ☐ East Asian (e.g., Chinese, Taiwanese, Japanese, Korean, etc.)
- ☐ European/White
- ☐ Indo-Caribbean, Indo-African, Indo-Fijian, West-Indian
- ☐ Latin, South or Central American
- ☐ Polynesian (e.g., Samoans, Tongan, Niuean, Cook Island Māori, Tahitian Mā’ohi, Hawaiian Mā’oli, Marquesan, New Zealand Māori)
- ☐ South Asian (e.g., Afghan, Nepali, Tamil, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Sri Lankan, Punjabi)
- ☐ Southeast Asian (e.g., Vietnamese, Thai, Cambodian, Malaysian, Filipino/a, Laotian, Signaporean, Indonesian)
- ☐ West Asian (e.g., Iraqi, Jordanian, Palestinian, Saudi, Syrian, Yemeni, Armenian, Iranian, Israeli, Turkish)
- ☐ Indigenous within Canada (e.g., First Nation, Métis, Inuit)
- ☐ Prefer to self-identify: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

#### Example 6 – Racialized Identity

##### **Do you identify as a member of a racialized group in Canada?**

*The term “racialized” is more appropriate than and preferred as a replacement to the term “visible minority”, which is defined by the government of Canada in the Employment Equity Act as persons, other than Indigenous peoples, who do not identify as Caucasian, European, and/or White in race, ethnicity, origin, and/or colour, regardless of birthplace or citizenship.*

- ☐ No

- Y Yes
- Y Prefer not to answer

### Specific Guidelines for Asking about Sex and Gender

These guidelines are intended to be a resource for researchers who wish to collect data pertaining to sex and/or gender as part of an interview, survey, or other research tool. They are adapted from Queen's University's guidelines on collecting information about sex and gender<sup>4</sup> and the University of British Columbia's "Inclusive forms".<sup>5</sup>

#### **1. Is it necessary to collect information concerning sex, gender, or both, to achieve my purpose?**

If information on a participant's sex or gender is not required for data analysis or as part of reporting requirements from a journal or granting agency, then do not include questions on sex or gender.

#### **2. Is the information to be collected related to an individual's sex, gender, or both?**

While recognizing that there are different perspectives on the use and definitions of the terms "sex" and "gender", in the Canadian research context the Canadian Institutes of Health Research defines "sex" as a set of biological attributes in humans and animals, primarily associated with physical and physiological features (e.g., chromosomes, hormone level and function, anatomy). Whereas "gender" refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviours, expressions and identities of girls, women, boys, men, and gender diverse people.<sup>6</sup> These social characteristics may vary dependent on cultural context, and in Ontario human rights law recognizes the primacy of the individual's self-identification as to gender.<sup>7</sup>

Since the terms "sex" and "gender" denote different things, avoid using them interchangeably. These will not be the same for some individuals<sup>8</sup>, so it is important when developing forms to consider what kind of data you require.

Forms often include a question that looks like this: *Gender: M F*. It is unclear from such a question whether the intention is to gather data concerning the assignment of biological "sex" made at birth or data concerning "gender," i.e., how the individual answering the question identifies as to gender. For further information on how to ask a question related to gender, please see section four in this guideline.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/policies/administration-and-operations/guidelines-collecting-information-about-sex-and-gender>

<sup>5</sup> <https://equity.ubc.ca/resources/gender-diversity/inclusive-forms/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/47830.html>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/gender-identity-and-gender-expression-brochure>

<sup>8</sup> When answering a question related to biological sex assigned at birth, for example, a trans-identified individual might respond by answering "male", but when asked a question related to gender identity, that same individual might respond by answering "woman" (or "gender-fluid", or another term denoting an identity outside the gender binary).

Regardless of whether the information being collected is related to sex, gender, or both, it is imperative that the responses to these questions come directly from the individual being asked the question, or that individual's representative, not a third party. Respondents should always understand what information is being sought and why. In addition, respondents should be made aware of who will have access to the information being provided and whether or not this information will be kept confidential. As discussed in #4 in the General Guidelines section above, a "prefer not to answer option" should be provided.

**3. If the goal is to collect information concerning biological sex characteristics at birth, you may want to simply ask, "What biological sex were you assigned at birth?"**

The best practice, and default, should be to use an open text option. If that is not possible in the context of your study, the provide at least these options. The intersex option is for individuals who may have been assigned as male or female at birth, but who identify as intersex.<sup>9</sup>

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Intersex
- ☐ I prefer not to disclose information concerning my sex

**4. If the goal is to collect information concerning how the individual identifies in terms of gender:**

- a. Avoid the use of the gender binary (male and female), where only two options are provided, and the requirement is to choose one or the other.
- b. If the reason for collecting information concerning gender identity is that services are to be available only to, or social progress is being tracked only for, a specified gender, make that clear and then ask only whether the individual identifies as that gender.
  - Example 1: The Student Centre provides services to mature women students. Do you identify as a woman? Yes/No
  - Example 2: The government tracks information on program enrollment of individuals who identify as transgender. Do you identify as transgender? Yes/No
- c. When asking for gender, generally, the best practice is to use a question such as "How do you self-identify in terms of gender?"<sup>10</sup> and provide an open text box for the response.

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<sup>9</sup> According to the Ontario Human Rights Commission [glossary](#), "Intersex" is a term used to describe a person born with reproductive systems, chromosomes and/or hormones that are not easily characterized as male or female. This might include a woman with XY chromosomes or a man with ovaries instead of testes. Intersex characteristics occur in one out of every 1,500 births. Typically, intersex people are assigned one sex, male or female, at birth. Some intersex people identify with their assigned sex, while others do not. Some choose to identify as intersex. Intersex people do not typically identify as transgender or transsexual.

<sup>10</sup> While some express concern that "self-identify" suggests there might be some other way to identify someone's gender, we rely on interpretations of the Ontario Human Rights Code that suggest that an individual's self-identification as to gender is determinative.

- d. If providing options, then, at a minimum, the options below should be provided. Based on the study context, researchers will choose to add to this list to include options such as transgender (or trans-man, trans-women), Two-Spirit, non-binary, etc. Keep in mind that language used to describe one's gender identity is continually evolving and extensive. It can feel exclusionary to be offered a long list of possible responses, none of which is the response the individual wishes to make.

- ☐ Man
- ☐ Women
- ☐ Self-identify as: \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Prefer not to answer

## 5. Summary

Keep in mind the following principles when designing a survey question about gender or sex, and when designing surveys/interviews generally:

- a. Think about why you are collecting data about gender or sex:
  - If you do not need to collect this information, avoid asking for it.
  - If you do need to collect this information, be specific about the information you ask for: biological sex or self-identified gender?
- b. Use gender-inclusive language throughout all survey questions.
- c. Use questions that allow people to self-identify their gender.
- d. Do not require honorifics (Mr., Ms., etc.), or at least provide inclusive options as well (Mx., NA, etc.).
- e. Allow people to indicate their personal pronouns, if applicable.