STUDY SERIES REPORT
(Survey Methodology #2005-06)

Report on Cognitive Testing of Cohabitation Questions

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Report Issued: December 21, 2005

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1 BACKGROUND

Data on marital status are used to produce statistics on marriage and divorce, as well as to provide information on the characteristics of America's families. As cohabitation[1] has become increasingly common and accepted in the United States, statistical agencies face an increased need to gather data on cohabitation as well as marital status in order to get a more complete picture of family structure. Statistics on unwed births often include cases where biological parents are unmarried, but cohabiting and planning to raise the child together. Cohabiting couples with children often function much like families that have married parents, but are often categorized as single parents in statistical analyses. Additionally, gay and lesbian couples with children also often function as family units, without being married. These households may look like single parent families, with no indication that the child has two parents in the household. Many researchers are interested in the impact of cohabitation on children's well-being. In order to study this, we must be able to identify cohabiting couples with children.

The prevalence and incidence of cohabitation has increased rapidly over the last three decades. In Census 2000, unmarried partner households composed nine percent of all couple households according to Simmons and O'Connell (2003). This represents a rise of 2.3 million households from 1990 to 2000. Two-fifth of these households had children and one out of every nine of these couples were same-gender couples. These figures show that cohabitation is a growing trend and there is no reason to believe that it will not continue to be a way of life for many couples.

Fields (2003) identified several current methods to measure cohabitation: 1) the relationship to the reference person; 2) a separate question in relationship history; and 3) a part of the marital status question. In the decennial census and some federal surveys, cohabiting couples are identified through the relationship question with the response option *unmarried partner*. The relationship question in these surveys asks the relationship of everyone in the household to the householder (or person 1). This is currently our best measure of cohabitation on a census or survey with a nationally representative sample. However, if there is a cohabiting couple of which the householder is not a part, then this measure fails to identify that relationship. Some research also suggests that *unmarried partner* is not a term that is used by all respondents. The use of terminology to describe cohabitation was examined in this research.

In other surveys, like the National Survey of Family Growth, non-marital cohabitation is measured through the marital status question. In this method, *living with a partner* is included in the list of response options and is either read to the respondent, or shown on a flashcard. However, *living with a partner* is not a marital state. If data on marital status is desired, a separate follow-up question must be asked of those who report cohabitation. This research also

[1]For the purpose of this report, the term *cohabitation* will refer only to unmarried couples who share a primary residence.

examines the respondents' reactions to adding the category *living with a partner* to the marital status question.

The most direct method to obtain cohabitation status is to ask respondents if they are cohabiting. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the National Survey of Families and Households both have direct questions. The latter survey asks, "Nowadays, many unmarried couples live together. Are you currently living with a partner of the opposite sex?" This question has the benefit of directly asking for the desired information; however, it does limit the cohabitation to opposite sex relationships. Alternative question wording was examined in this research, and suggestions are made for questions that are appropriate for all couples.

2 PURPOSE FOR RESEARCH

The Population Division contacted the Statistical Research Division (SRD) to assist in the development of a direct question to measure cohabitation. This research was built upon research conducted largely by Jason Fields in the Population Division that identified a need for such a question (see Fields, 2003). The purpose of the research by SRD was to develop and cognitively test a direct, gender-neutral, non-offensive, and generally applicable measure of cohabitation.

3 METHOD & RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Between July and October of 2003, SRD staff[2] conducted semi-structured interviews with nineteen respondents interviewed either in the Census Bureau's cognitive interview lab or a location more convenient for the respondent. Interviews ranged in duration from 20 to 50 minutes and were audio-taped after gaining respondents' consent.

All respondents were cohabiting at the time of the interview. Five of the respondents were gay males, four were lesbians, four were heterosexual males and six were heterosexual females. The average age of the heterosexual respondents was 30 years old, and the average age of gay and lesbian respondents was 39. The average time living together was two and a half years for heterosexual couples and six years for gay and lesbian couples. The average reported time in the current relationship was four years for heterosexual couples and eight for gay and lesbian couples. See the table below for information on the ranges of ages and years in the relationships.

	Age	Years living together	Years in current relationship
Heterosexuals			
Average	30.4	2.5	4.2
Minimum	24	0.1	0.9
Maximum	41	5	12
Gays and Lesbians			
Average	38.6	5.9	7.9

[2]Jennifer Hunter and Liz Aaker conducted these interviews. Lorraine Randall was instrumental in recruiting respondents for this project.

Minimum	30	0.3	0.6
Maximum	53	18	20

Table 1. Ages of Respondents, Time Living Together and Time in Current Relationship by Sexual Orientation

All of the gay and lesbian respondents were white. The heterosexual respondents were as follows: three white males, one Asian male, two white females, one Hispanic female and three African American females. Four respondents were interviewed from Virginia, five were from the District of Columbia, nine were from Maryland and one was from West Virginia.

A structured cognitive interview protocol was used to examine how respondents reacted to a question designed to measure cohabitation placed in a demographic questionnaire. After the demographic questions, a series of probes was used to elicit the terminology that respondents naturally used to describe their partner and their reactions to a list of potential terms.

4 LIMITATIONS

Due to the limited resources and time for this study, most respondents were middle to upper socioeconomic status. The gay and lesbian respondents were all white with moderate to high levels of education and income. There was more diversity in the heterosexual group. There were also fewer older than young respondents in general, with the mean age of the entire group being only 34. The interviews were also conducted in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area and suburbs, which could have influenced respondents' reactions to these questions and the terminology that they used. These are limitations to generalizing to all cohabiting couples. In Section 10, I have included some supplemental information from other qualitative studies that were conducted independently. These findings are meant to supplement the work described here.

5 COHABITATION QUESTIONS

Two versions of cohabitation questions were cognitively tested. Version A asked an alternative marital status question, that included *living with a partner* as a response option, and a follow-up question to determine the formal marital status of respondents who report living with a partner.

Version B asked the standard marital status question followed by a question asking about cohabitation. The cohabitation question in the first iteration (B.1) was modeled after the question from the National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 2, which asks "Nowadays many unmarried couples live together. Are you currently living with a partner of the opposite sex?" The question for the current test was revised to be gender-neutral. During the course of the interviews, Version B was revised to alleviate some of the problems that were discovered. Reasons for the revisions are outlined in Section 7.

Below are the versions that were tested. These questions were embedded into a short questionnaire that gathered basic demographic information on the respondent and the other household members.

Version A - Alternative Marital Status - (tested on 4 respondents)

> Are you currently married, living with a partner, widowed, divorced, separated or have you never been married?
>
> What is your formal marital status? That is, are you married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

Version B.1 - Standard Marital Status with Separate Cohabitation Question - (tested on 8 respondents)

> Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated or have you never been married?
>
> Nowadays, many couples live together without being married. Do you have an unmarried partner in this household?

Version B.2 - Standard Marital Status with Separate Cohabitation Question - (tested on 3 respondents)

> Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated or have you never been married?
>
> Many couples live together without being married. Do you have a partner in this household?

Version B.3 - Standard Marital Status with Separate Cohabitation Question -(tested on 4 respondents)

> Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated or have you never been married?
>
> Do you have a boyfriend, girlfriend or life partner in this household?

6 MARITAL STATUS QUESTION

Alternative vs. Standard

Although only four respondents were asked version A, during the debriefing most of the remaining fifteen respondents were asked for their views on the alternative version of the marital status question.

Most respondents, particularly gays, lesbians and older respondents, preferred to indicate they were *living with a partner* in the marital status question (version A). One lesbian respondent said that she had "been in a relationship for 20 years, and to [her], that doesn't feel like never been married." Other respondents made favorable comments about adding this new option. One respondent said that it demonstrates "expanding and recognizing the various layers of a society."

However, when asked the standard marital status question (version B), all respondents were able to choose the appropriate response. No respondents stated that they were living with a partner when that option was not explicitly offered. One respondent, who had been asked the standard marital status question during the interview stated that if also given the option *living with a partner*, he would not know whether to choose *divorced* or *living with a partner*. Similarly, another respondent stated that she was both *living with a partner* and had *never been married*. Several other respondents indicated during the debriefing that both of these options would be accurate and that they might have difficulty choosing one over another.

Formal Marital Status

Version A included a follow-up question asked of those who reported *living with a partner*. Almost all respondents answered this correctly. However, there were some misunderstandings. One respondent mistakenly heard "former marital status," which happened to coincide with her formal marital status, which was *never been married*. She responded that prior to her current relationship, she had never been married. Another respondent, who was not read the follow-up question (i.e., "That is, are you married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?"), answered the question by discussing being legally bound to her partner. She interpreted the question as asking about the formality of her current relationship, not her marital status. While this misunderstanding may have been avoided by reading the entire question, it is important to note that the alternative marital status question brings to mind the current relationship (i.e., *living with a partner*) and the follow-up question may be seen as asking about formality of that relationship, especially considering instances where long-term cohabiting couples have become legally bound to one another.

7 SEPARATE COHABITATION QUESTIONS

Nowadays, many couples live together without being married. [Do you/does NAME] have an unmarried partner in this household?

Several gay and lesbian respondents noted that using the term *unmarried* points out the fact that they cannot legally get married in the United States. This is a sore point for many of these couples, so it caused a feeling of discomfort. One respondent said that the adjective *unmarried* denigrates the relationship - "it seems to be saying that they are partners, but not really, and it sort of puts a negative spin on it right from the beginning." He reports that he would be married if it were legal and *unmarried* does notfit the way he sees his relationship.

Another gay respondent was confused by the question. He sees himself as married, but feels that he should not formally report being married. When asked this question, he became confused because he sees himself as married, but technically he is unmarried. He talked through the question and decided that he would say "yes," but he was not able to answer the question right away.

One respondent noted that *nowadays* is not a current term and that it gives the question an awkward sound. Since it is not necessary in the question, it was eliminated for further rounds.

In order to eliminate some of these problems with the term *unmarried partner*, the next iteration tested the question that still contained an introductory sentence to introduce the idea of couples and a question that used a more neutral term - *partner*.

Many couples live together without being married. [Do you/does NAME] have a partner in this household?

This question still elicited some discouragement among gay and lesbian respondents because the introductory sentence makes a statement that does not apply to a couple who has no option of getting married. They felt that it still put a negative spin on the idea of living together without being married.

Respondents thought that *partner* would clearly indicate a romantic involvement, at least in the gay community. In the heterosexual population, however, it might not be clearly a term for couples. *Partner* is sometimes used as a purposefully vague term, for heterosexuals as well as gays and lesbians.

The final question was crafted for the remaining interviews because it made no reference to couples getting married, it included terms that apply to heterosexuals, gays and lesbians, and it clearly pointed to someone in a romantic relationship.

Do/does [you/ name] have a boyfriend, girlfriend or life partner in this household?

The only problem that surfaced with this question was that some respondents found it redundant if they had reported an unmarried partner (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend/fiancé) in the relationship question. This could be resolved through a skip pattern in the instrument that did not ask this question of those who reported what would be equivalent to an unmarried partner in the relationship question. Respondents in this study did not mind answering this question, even though it often was redundant.

8 TERMINOLOGY

After the questions on cohabitation, respondents were asked how they introduce their partners. Then, they were asked to describe what several terms meant to them. The terms used in this part of the interview were gathered during the course of the interviews as respondents provided them.

Natural language - Introductions

About half of the heterosexual respondents used the terms *boyfriend* and *girlfriend*. The other common terms were *fiancé* and *significant other*. Most gay and lesbian respondents used the terms *partner* or *domestic partner*.

Occasionally, respondents reported that they would introduce their partner to someone they did not know well as just a friend or a roommate. This had to do with issues of privacy and how much information the respondent wanted to provide to the person. This was true for heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians.

Unmarried Partner

Only one respondent naturally produced the term *unmarried partner*. All of the heterosexual respondents in this study reported that they thought *unmarried partner* would apply to them. About half of the gay and lesbian respondents did not like the term and thought that there would be other, more appropriate terms to describe their relationship. Several of these respondents mentioned that the term brought up negative feelings because marriage is not an option for them.

This term worked for the middle- and high-income heterosexual respondents in this study, but was not as successful for gay and lesbian respondents. See Section 10 for more information on this term in other qualitative studies.

Domestic Partner

Domestic partner is the preferred term for some gays and lesbians. Some thought it was more formal that *partner*, a term that they would expect to see on a form. This is sometimes a clarifying term that gay and lesbian respondents reported using when *partner* is misunderstood. However, other gay and lesbian respondents did not like the term and would prefer not to see it. One of these respondents said that "it sounds like a maid."

Heterosexual respondents were less likely to know what this term meant, or if they would apply it to themselves. *Domestic partner* was not accepted unanimously by gay and lesbian respondents and it did not apply to heterosexual respondents in this study.

Life Partner

Life partner is a term that is used by gay and lesbian respondents in long-term committed relationships. The commitment in life partner relationships is similar to that of marriage.

According to respondents, this term does not apply to couples who are not very committed to one another.

The heterosexual respondents in this study did not think the term applied to them. Most of the respondents in the current study were planning to get married at some point in the future. This term may be more likely to be used by respondents who do not wish to get married.

This term worked for very committed gay and lesbian respondents, but not for those who were not committed or for heterosexual respondents in this study.

Romantic Partner

This term was generally not accepted. Respondent had a variety of reactions, stating that it was too "awkward," "formal," "temporary," "silly," or even "gushy." Several respondents mentioned that it was somewhat invasive, and that they would need to know why a survey was asking such a question before they would answer it. This is the only term that elicited such feelings of privacy invasion. This term was not successful for any group in the study.

Boyfriend/Girlfriend

Boyfriend and *girlfriend* were the terms most commonly used in introductions for heterosexual respondents. Even those who did not use them as an introduction often said that they do use these terms in some instances. However, they were more often used among younger respondents than older respondents. Older heterosexual respondents in this study used *fiancé* or *friend*. In one case, an older respondent used *fiancé*, but later went on to tell me that she was not yet formally engaged. Several respondents mentioned that *boyfriend* or *girlfriend* sounds silly as you get older.

One gay respondent used the term *boyfriend*. Other gay and lesbian respondents indicated that they had used the terms *boyfriend/girlfriend* at some point during their relationship. Several respondents indicated that when they moved in together, they stopped using *boyfriend/girlfriend* and started using *partner* to indicate the progress in their relationship. One respondent said that his relationship is more committed than the term *boyfriend* suggests.

Two lesbian respondents brought up a problem with using the term *girlfriend*. Sometimes people misinterpret that as a friend, not a romantic partner. Men did not report the same problem with the term *boyfriend*.
This term appears to work for young heterosexuals in this study and gays and lesbians in early stages of their relationships. I currently do not have enough information to generalize to older cohabiting respondents.

Significant Other

Some respondents reported using *significant other*. Other respondents used this term only jokingly. One respondent noted that it was too vague, and could encompass more than a romantic partner. This term was not ideal for any group.

Fiancé

Several heterosexual respondents used *fiancé*. At least one of these respondents was not formally engaged. She had told me her partner was her fiancé, but after he entered the room, he told me that they were not engaged yet because she did not have a ring. This demonstrates some of the discrepancy in using this word even within a couple.

Fiancé has a very specific meaning to most of the respondents in this study. Almost all respondents reported that this term was exclusively for people who intended to get married, had a verbal commitment, and possibly had even set a date. It is the term used during the engagement of a heterosexual couple. It does not seem to apply to gay and lesbian couples.

Spouse

A few gay respondents reported that they would use the term *spouse*, even on an official form. While they would not use *husband/wife*, they reported that they did think *spouse* applied to their situation and they would report that on a form.

Other gay and lesbian respondents reported that they would not use the term because it implies legal marriage. Heterosexual respondents thought that it implied legal marriage and reported that they would not use this term until they were married. However, see Section 10 for contradictory findings from another ethnographic report.

Spouse has a very specific meaning for some respondents, particularly heterosexuals, but some gay and lesbian respondents have a broader definition for this term that does not always include formal marriage.

9 OTHER OBSERVATIONS

Asking about cohabitation duration

During these interviews, we asked respondents how long they had lived with their partners and how long they had been in a relationship together. Several respondents commented that their move-in date is not an anniversary that they celebrate, or a date that they have committed to memory. Instead, they use memory cues to calculate the amount time that they had lived together.

Two respondents appeared to give estimates for total time in a relationship when asked how long they had lived together. They seem to have misunderstood the question. They gave the same answer when asked how long they had been in a relationship together as they reported for time

living together. Both respondents went on to later tell the interviewer that they had been together a few months prior to moving in together. Another respondent thought aloud as she responded to the question about time living together by stating how long they had been in a relationship, then saying they dated a few years before moving in together. She subtracted a few years from the total time together, and gave an answer for years living together. It seems as though it is easier for respondents to recall time in a relationship than time living together. Since an anniversary of the start of the relationship is an event that some couples celebrate, it is a date that is more likely to be remembered. If asked that question first, it may be easier for respondents to calculate the amount of time they have been living together.

The particular date that respondents are using to calculate time living together seems to be the date where they both signed a lease, bought a house together, or when one member gave up a separate residence. Most respondents reported this type of "official" move-in. Most respondents explicitly did not include the time when they stayed nights, or weekends, at each other's apartments, but maintained separate residences.

"Officially" cohabiting

The perception of "officially" living together will also impact the quality of survey data. One respondent told me prior to the interview that he does not "officially" live with his girlfriend. He told me that all his mail comes to his parents' house, which is his official address. However, he told me that he almost always spends the night at his girlfriend's house. He reported that he usually stays with his girlfriend 7 nights a week and over the last month, he stayed there 30 nights. His parents do keep a room for him, and he often goes there during the day when he is not working and his girlfriend is. He said would report that he lives with his parents on a government form because he "hasn't changed anything." He would have to change his address on his car payments and insurance for him to feel like his girlfriend's address was his official address. Because most residence rules would place him in her household, I interviewed him as though he lives there. However, it is important to note that he would not place himself in her household on official forms. This is a problem not only for cohabitation data, but also for other survey concerns, as it deals with the household roster more generally.

Children of Partnerships

A few respondents had children. During the interview, they were probed about terminology used in these families. One lesbian couple had a child through in-vitro fertilization. The non-biological parent adopted the child. The child calls her mothers either Momma, Mom, Mommy Jill[3], or Mommy Judy. On forms, they report Jill as the biological mother and Judy as the adopted mother of this child.

[3]All names were changed to protect the identity of the respondents.

Sometimes, out of convenience, step-terms are used for cohabiting families when a child from a previous relationship is present. For example, Rachel calls her mom's boyfriend her "stepdad" because it is easier for her to explain than telling everyone about "mom's boyfriend." However, the boyfriend does not call Rachel his stepdaughter because he does not yet feel that connection.

In another case, the respondent, Sherry, had three daughters by a previous marriage. Her partner, Lindsey, had twins while they were together. Sherry has not adopted the twins yet, but she plans to. She reported them as her son and daughter in response to the relationship question in the interview without indicating that they were not biologically or legally her children. Later, she told me that they were actually Lindsey's children. She reported that she does not think of them as stepchildren, but she also does not see them as her own biological kids. She said they are like adopted children, but she would not call them that yet because they are not legally adopted. She reported that Lindsey has the bulk of the responsibility with them, and is closer to them as their biological mother. Lindsey does not plan on adopting Sherry's kids, who are older and refer to Lindsey as "Mom's friend" or "Mom's partner," not as a "stepmom."

As family structure changes, we should be aware of differing usage of terms and how respondents in non-nuclear family structures use terminology to describe themselves. This will give us important information on how to interpret survey data. Two mothers of a single child in the household may reflect a lesbian couple, not an error in coding relationship or sex. Similarly, we may find unmarried partners who list stepchildren. Again, this is not an error, but a perception of the respondent.

10 SUPPLEMENTAL DATA

Wendy Manning and Pamela Smock (2003) conducted a qualitative study on cohabitation in Ohio with 115 heterosexual cohabiting respondents, many of whom were working-class and lower middle-class. These respondents also tended to use the terms *girlfriend/boyfriend* and *fiancé*. They reported that the majority of their respondents did not know what the term *unmarried partner* meant, or if it would apply to them. None of their 115 respondents said they would use that term to refer to themselves or their partner. Unfortunately, their sample was also younger, and included few respondents over the age of 35.

In ethnographic research summarized by Hunter (in press), nine respondents were identified as being in cohabiting relationships[4]. Three of these respondents were over 60 years of age, two

[4]Seven of these were self-identified romantically involved couples. The other two demonstrated many characteristics of being a couple and were known in the community as a couple. However, they did not report being part of a couple in response to questions on the census form, or to questions about family and terminology during the ethnographic

were in their forties and four were in their mid- to late-thirties. The partnerships ranged in time together from less than a year to 30 years. All cohabitors in this study had previously been married and were separated, divorced or widowed. The categories they marked on the mock census form varied greatly. Only four respondents chose *unmarried partner*. One chose *other relative* and wrote in *girlfriend*, one marked *wife,* two marked *other nonrelative* and one marked *roomer/boarder* (because he paid rent to her). These respondents also had broader interpretations of the terms *husband, wife* and *spouse* than respondents in the current study. They sometimes used these terms to describe their cohabiting partners. This study presents an interesting look at the lack of consistency in how older cohabitors report cohabitation using the current relationship categories, but does not give any information on how they would answer a direct cohabitation question.

Future research should investigate older cohabiting couples and whether the same terminology is used. A wider geographical range of interviews should also be conducted in case there are regional differences in terminology or willingness to report cohabitation. Similarly, it would be useful to conduct more interviews with respondents of differing ethnic groups. Schwede (2003) presented evidence that the concept of what it means to be married versus cohabiting differs among cultural groups inside the United States. Schwede reported that among the Navajo, the terms *husband* and *wife* refer to "the one you are living with" without the necessity of marriage. She also reported that unmarried partnerships are not admitted by some Korean respondents because of the lingering stigma about cohabitation in their culture. The current research did not examine the effects of such cultural or language differences on the understanding of the cohabitation questions.

11 RECOMMENDATIONS

At this point, the recommendations must be tentative until further testing can be conducted with older respondents, in a larger geographic area, and with respondents of different ethnic backgrounds, as described above.

Measuring cohabitation

While *living with a partner* is a relationship status, it is not a marital status. Adding it to the marital status question presents a problem to respondents because the categories are not mutually exclusive. The person who is living with a partner has a marital status, which may be never married, divorced, or even married. If the desired piece of information is relationship status, then

living with a partner may be an appropriate response option. However, if the desired piece of information is marital status, it may not be an appropriate response option.

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interview. It is important to note that they were not directly asked if they were romantically involved or cohabiting during these interviews.

The preferred method, in my opinion, would be to ask a separate question for cohabitation status. My current recommendation for this question, given the limitations that I have previously stated is as follows:

> **Are you currently married, widowed, divorced, separated or have you never been married?**
>
> FOR RESPONDENTS WHO ARE NOT MARRIED, SPOUSE PRESENT
> **Do you have a boyfriend, girlfriend or life partner in this household?**

This question makes no reference to couples getting married (which is found insulting to some gay and lesbian respondents), it includes terms that apply to heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians, and it clearly points to someone in a romantic relationship. This question still needs to be tested among older respondents and respondents in more diverse ethnic groups.

Depending on the sophistication of the survey, this question could be tailored to the universe of people to whom it could potentially apply. If this question follows the roster and the marital status question for all household members, then it could be asked only of residents over the age of 15 who are not married, spouse present when there is a potential partner in the household (i.e., an unrelated person aged 15 or above who is also not married, spouse present). This would reduce respondent burden and reduce the potential number of situations where a respondent could misunderstand the question and give a false affirmative response. Similarly, if the respondent reported an unmarried partner, or the equivalent (e.g., boyfriend, girlfriend, fiancé), to the relationship question, then this question could be automatically filled without burdening the respondent with a redundant question.

This question should not be asked of respondents who are married, spouse present because it could be insulting or confusing to the respondent. If a person has just reported that he or she is married to a member of the household, asking if he or she has an unmarried partner in the household could be taken as asking if the person has both a spouse and a lover in the household. Needless to say, this could be confusing and/or insulting. If a question is needed to ask if a person who states that he/she is married is indeed married, and not simply cohabiting and "living as married," then a separate question should be crafted and cognitively tested with the appropriate population.

Alternative marital status

If the alternative marital status question is to be used, despite the problems described previously, it should be worded as follows:

> **Are you currently married, living with a partner, widowed, divorced, separated or have you never been married?**

FOR RESPONDENTS WHO REPORT LIVING WITH A PARTNER
What is your marital status? That is, are you married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?

Unmarried Partner

The final recommendation deals with the term *unmarried partner* in the relationship question. The current research and the other work mentioned indicate a need to consider altering this category label. While it is currently the best term that we have, it does lack acceptance among all respondents, particularly among the lower income and the gay and lesbian respondents. While gay and lesbian respondents are a minority of the cohabiting population, Bumpass and colleagues (Bumpass and Sweet, 1989; Bumpass and Lu, 2000) indicate that the highest rates of cohabitation are found in the lower strata of socioeconomic status. Using this term may lead to underestimation of cohabitation in less-educated groups. The goal of this research was not to assess the term *unmarried partner* per se. For this reason, I am not prepared to recommend an alternative. However, I will put forth some of the ideas that came out of this research. Those who are living together, but are not committed for life often use terms like *boyfriend/girlfriend*. Those who are engaged use the term *fiancé*. Gay and lesbian respondents often use the terms *partner* and *life partner*, depending on their level of commitment. There are some clear differences between the level of commitment expressed by *boyfriend/girlfriend* and *life partner* among all respondents, regardless of sexual orientation. Finding a single term that encompasses all of these groups will be a difficult task.

12 RESOLUTION

After discussing the current work with Jason Fields from POP, we decided on a slightly modified cohabitation question wording that will be tested in a split panel field test, along with both versions of the marital status question as presented above. The cohabitation was modified as follows:

FOR RESPONDENTS WHO ARE NOT MARRIED, SPOUSE PRESENT
Do you have a boyfriend, girlfriend or partner in this household?

This modification was made to take the emphasis away from same sex couples, under the assumption that *life partner* refers to primarily to same sex couples. Additionally, this question is closer in structure to the alternative marital status question, which will also be tested in the field test. A debriefing question will be added to the end of the field test interview for all respondents who answer this question affirmatively to ensure that they are not friends or business partners who live together. This question will be worded as follows:

Before we end the interview, I would like to make sure that I have the relationships in the household correct. Are [you/name] and [you/name] a couple? How about [you/name] and [you/name], (are you/they a couple)?

This question will only be used for testing purposes. It would not appear on a regular survey.

No change will be made at this time to the category *Unmarried partner* from the relationship question.

13 OTHER ISSUES AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Other issues to consider when measuring cohabitation are common law marriages, domestic partnerships, and gay and lesbian marriages outside of the United States. The Census Bureau does permit reporting common law marriages as married couples; however, only 11 states in the United States and the District of Columbia currently recognize common law marriages (Legal Information Institute, n.d.). To be considered married by common law in most states a couple must be heterosexual, have cohabited for a significant period of time, present themselves as a married couple (e.g., use the same last name, refer to one another as husband and wife, and file joint tax returns), and intend to be married. It is not clear how common law couples would reply to the new questions on cohabitation. Presumably, they would respond as married, not cohabiting, by nature of the definition of common law marriages (i.e., they present themselves as married).

At the present time, several states have passed or are contemplating legislation that creates legal domestic partnerships that recognize certain rights of cohabiting couples. In California, for example, heterosexual couples over the age of 62 and gay and lesbian couples can register as domestic partners. This presents an interesting problem for gathering data on marital and cohabitation status. Legal domestic partnerships represent a mid-ground between marriage and cohabitation. Future research will need to take this new situation into account when studying perceptions of marriage and terminology. Do domestic partners still answer *never been married*, to the marital status question? Do they use the same terminology (e.g., *boyfriend/girlfriend, partner*) as respondents who do not have this legal arrangement? How do they respond to our current marital status and relationship response options?

Similarly, if gay and lesbian couples go to another country (such as Canada) to get married, then return to the U.S., how does that affect their responses to the marital status question, and to the cohabitation question? How does this impact our data?

This line of research has brought to the surface many unresolved issues that will likely continue to change as society evolves. Continued research will be the key to maintaining adequate measurement tools throughout these changes.

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