

Assessing the Feasibility of Asking about Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in the Current Population Survey

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Background

- Sexual orientation (SO) and gender identity (GI) questions asked in only a few federal surveys
 - None use proxy reporting
 - None are about employment
- Little is known about how these factors may affect respondents' willingness and ability to report SOGI information

Background (cont.)

- U.S. Department of Labor sponsored research to explore feasibility of asking about sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) in the Current Population Survey (CPS)
 - CPS is about labor force status, including employment and unemployment
 - CPS uses proxy reporting (one person answers questions for self and all household members)

Background (cont.)

- Research was conducted by the Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) in 2016-2017
- Two components
 - Cognitive interviews (LGBT and Non-LGBT)
 - Focus groups (transgender only)

Research Questions

■ Difficulty

- Do respondents understand the SOGI questions?
- Are respondents able to answer for themselves? For other household members (proxy)?
- How do SOGI questions compare to select CPS questions on difficulty?

■ Sensitivity

- Do respondents find SOGI questions sensitive when answering for themselves? For other household members?
- How do SOGI questions compare to select CPS questions on sensitivity?

■ Context

- What do respondents think about SOGI questions on a federal employment survey?

Study Design

- 132 cognitive interviews conducted by Census, BLS, and contractor
 - 80 individual interviews
 - 26 paired interviews (52 individuals)- two respondents from same household interviewed separately
 - Four sites: Washington, DC; Portland, OR; Nashville, TN; and Fargo, ND
- Recruitment
 - Washington, DC recruiting by Census and BLS; recruiting for other cities by contractor
 - Traditional cognitive interview recruitment methods and contractor's nationwide LGBT research panel
 - All prospective respondents screened via telephone prior to scheduling

Sample (n = 132)

- Sexual orientation
 - About half (65) of sample was LGBT, other half (67) was non-LGBT
- Gender identity
 - 8 respondents were transgender
 - The rest of the respondents were fairly even split between cisgender male (66) and cisgender female (58)
- Sample was diverse in terms of age, race, education, income, and urbanicity
 - All respondents were from households with at least 2 people

Protocols

1. Interview: administer (a subset of the core module of) the CPS survey
2. General Debriefing: ask for overall reactions to Qs
3. Card Sort: sort questions by difficulty and sensitivity
4. Question Specific Debriefing: reactions to SOGI and select CPS Qs
5. Context Debriefing: reactions to SOGI by proxy in government employment survey

SOGI Question Wordings Tested

	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity: Sex at Birth	Gender Identity: Current Gender Identity
Question stem: Self-response	Which of the following best represents how you think of yourself?	Was your sex recorded as male or female at birth?	Do you describe yourself as male, female, or transgender?
Question stem: Proxy response	To the best of your knowledge, which of the following best represents how [NAME] thinks of themselves?	To the best of your knowledge, was [NAME]’s sex recorded as male or female at birth?	To the best of your knowledge, does [NAME] describe themselves as male, female, or transgender?
Response options	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gay or lesbian • Straight; that is, not gay, lesbian, or bisexual • Bisexual • Something else 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male • Female 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Male • Female • Transgender

Limitations

- Respondents not representative of any given population or population as a whole
 - Only 4 testing sites, other regions of the country may differ
 - Volunteers may be more comfortable with the federal government than actual survey respondents
 - Recruitment methods may have attracted persons more involved in the LBGT community
 - Very small sample of transgender respondents (8)

Results- Overall

- Most respondents understood questions and indicated that questions were acceptable
- Most did not express difficulty or sensitivity
- Item non-response:
 - Self: All respondents answered SO question, 1 answered “Don’t know” on GI
 - Proxy: All respondents answered GI by proxy, 1 answered “Don’t know” on SO for other household members

Results- Difficulty Self

Indications of Difficulty: Self		
	SO	GI
LGBT (n = 65)	13	10
Non-LGBT (n = 67)	1	1

- **LGBT**
 - Had a fluid identity: “Uncertain about where I fit in the choices. I know my identity - it can be fluid, but primarily I am gay.”
 - Were questioning or still deciding on category: “No one has asked me, still figuring out identity.”
 - Existing answer categories did not fit well: “‘Something else’ is what I’d answer, but it also doesn’t give you an identity at all.”
- **Non-LGBT**
 - For SO, a respondent did not understand term “straight”
 - For GI, a respondent was questioning but decided on a cisgender identity

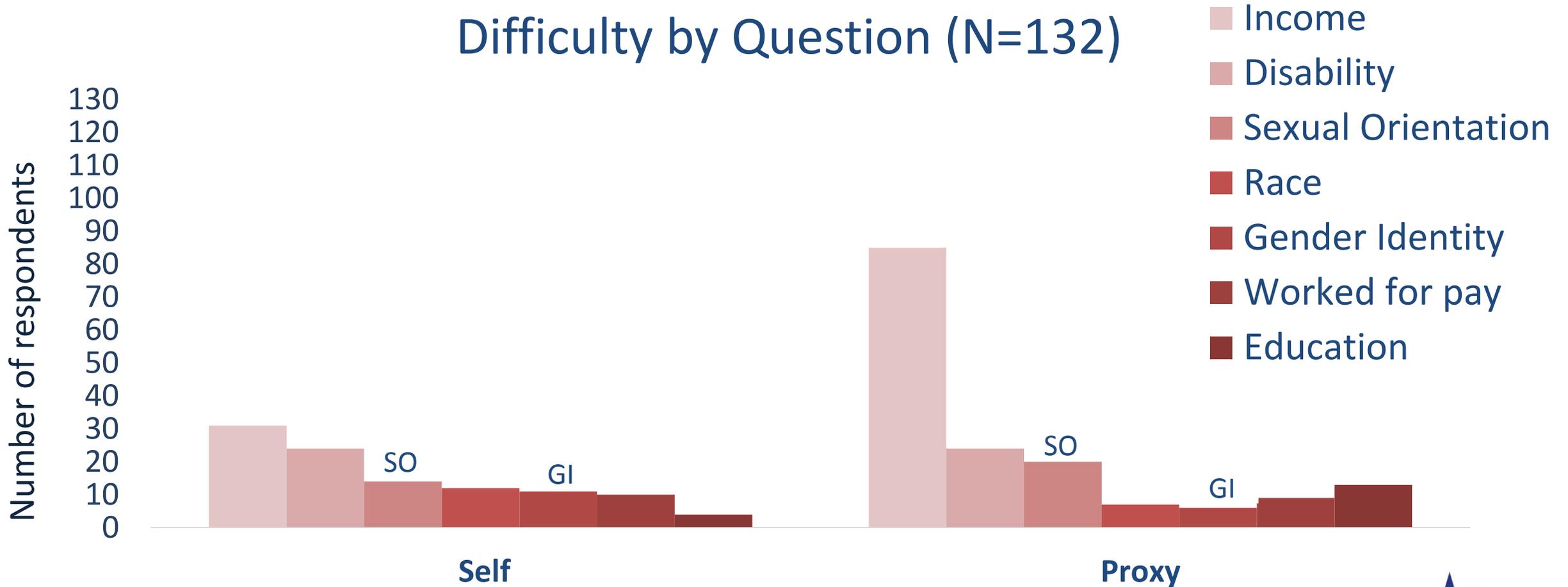
Results- Difficulty Proxy

Indications of Difficulty: Proxy		
	SO	GI
LGBT (n = 65)	15	4
Non-LGBT (n = 67)	5	2

- LGBT respondents had difficulty choosing categories
 - “They see sexuality [as] more fluid. They might answer it ‘lesbian,’ might answer ‘bisexual.’”
 - “They would want to answer the sexual orientation question as ‘queer.’”
- Non-LGBT respondents had difficulty with older/younger HH members or with roommates
 - “My son is still young...it is still possible that my son may be something rather than straight and not told me.”
 - “Think I know the answer but I don’t know the roommates very well.”

Results- Comparison to Select CPS questions

Difficulty by Question (N=132)



Results- Sensitivity Self

Indications of Sensitivity: Self		
	SO	GI
LGBT (n = 65)	23	12
Non-LGBT (n = 67)	19	15

- LGBT respondents said SOGI was personally private and sensitive
 - “As someone who is ‘L’ [lesbian], I grew up in the south. It’s a sensitive topic. [I’m] not nervous you’re going to judge me, but it’s not a totally comfortable topic.”
 - “[There’s a] stigma [where] you don’t know how people would react.”
- Non-LGBT respondents said SOGI was generally sensitive or the questions were unnecessary
 - “A little odd, the question about sexuality...It feels intrusive.”
 - “Too personal. Tired of hearing about that.”

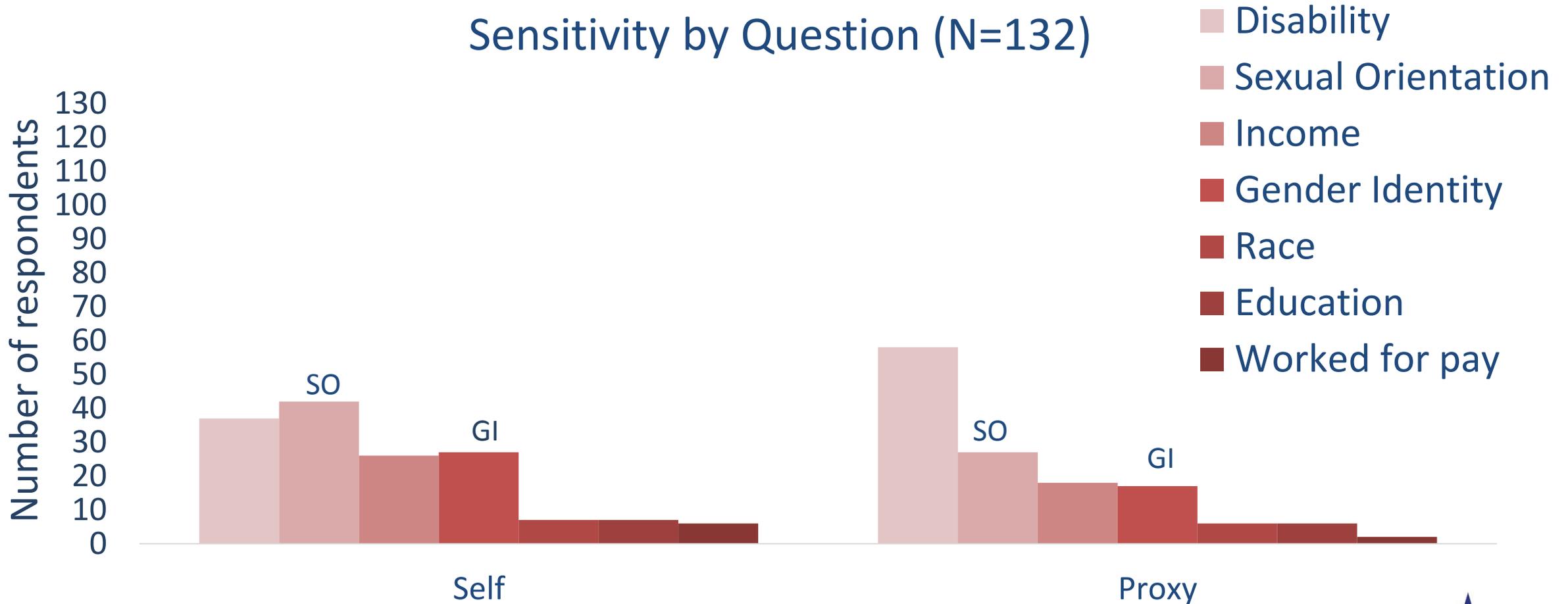
Results- Sensitivity Proxy

Indications of Sensitivity: Proxy		
	SO	GI
LGBT (n = 65)	16	10
Non-LGBT (n = 67)	11	7

- Similar to sensitivity for self
- LGBT respondents said it was a personally private matter
 - “Gender questions for brother is ‘kind of sensitive,’ because I feel like, I don’t like to speak for him on behalf of his gender identity.... I’d rather him be able to explain it for himself.”
- Non-LGBT respondents said SOGI was a generally sensitive topic
 - “[My husband] would find [SOGI] sensitive.... He was raised in Alabama as a Baptist.”

Results- Comparison to Select CPS questions

Sensitivity by Question (N=132)



Results- SOGI on a Government Employment Survey

- Most respondents were generally supportive of SOGI questions on a federal survey or found them routine
 - “This sort of question is becoming more prevalent in society.”
 - “I think it would probably be useful. I think that’s relevant in employment issues.”
- 23 of 132 respondents expressed concern, mostly about confidentiality and risk of disclosure
 - LGBT (11) respondents mentioned the current climate
 - “I think it’s a good idea, but in the current political climate, how honest or accurate people would be?”
 - Non-LGBT (12) respondents did not find context appropriate
 - “I don’t see why. What does that have to do with employment statistics?”

Summary of Results

- Overall, most respondents did not indicate difficulty or sensitivity
 - Respondents generally understood SOGI questions, were able to answer them for themselves and others
 - LGBT respondents had more difficulty and sensitivity than non-LGBT respondents, and their reasons for difficulty/sensitivity also differed
- Respondents were generally supportive of SOGI questions on federal employment surveys and found the questions appropriate

Conclusions

- Cognitive interviews did not identify any significant issues that suggest collection of SOGI information in the CPS is infeasible
- Many outstanding issues to be addressed related to proxy collection of SOGI information on a federal survey

Suggestions for Future Research

- Cognitive testing
 - With more subgroups (geographic, demographic, transgender)
 - With LGBT respondents, focused on response categories and question wording
- Field test for larger, more representative sample
- Translation and cultural issues in languages other than English
- Optimal question placement
- Appropriate age cutoff for questions and procedures for obtaining consent
- Impact of survey administration mode

Reports

Overall executive summary:

<https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2018/adrm/rsm2018-02.html>

Cognitive interview report:

<https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2018/adrm/rsm2018-06.html>

Focus group report:

<https://www.census.gov/library/working-papers/2018/adrm/rsm2018-05.html>

You can also find the reports by going to the Census website and searching for “Same sex”. Click on the same sex couples link. Reports will be listed under the working paper tab.

Thank you

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Sample (n = 132)

	Total
Age	
15-19	4
20-25	24
26-35	33
36-50	39
Over 50	32
Sex	
Male	66
Female	58
Transgender	8

	Total
Race/Ethnicity	
White, non-Hisp.	79
Black, non-Hisp.	20
Other, non-Hisp.	21
Hispanic	12
Education	
< Bachelor's	77
Bachelor's	33
> Bachelor's	22

	Total
Sexual orientation	
LGB	65
Non-LGB	67
Geographic area	
Urban	74
Rural	58
Household income	
Under \$50,000	52
\$50,000-\$99,999	52
\$100,000 or more	27