Collaborating Center for Questionnaire Design and Evaluation Research

Cognitive interview Evaluation of Demographic Questions for the US Department of State Global Employee Management System

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INTRODUCTION

Staff of the National Center for Health Statistics' (NCHS) Collaborating Center for Questionnaire Design and Evaluation Research (CCQDER) conducted a cognitive interviewing study to evaluate demographic and identity questions for use in the Global Employee Management System (GEMS) for the US Department of State. This report documents the findings of that study.

Executive Order 14035 on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal Workforce requires that federal agencies recruit, hire, retain, and promote employees in an equitable manner and with a focus on fostering a diverse workforce. [1] To this end, government agencies are interested in adding questions to their personnel systems that would allow employees to voluntarily share demographic and identity information. This information would be anonymized and aggregated to track objectives for equal employment opportunity and DEIA efforts within agencies to identity strengths, areas for improvement, and potential barriers. The questions evaluated for this project include gender identity, national origin, and educational attainment. The questions on national origin and educational attainment have not been previously evaluated. Versions of gender identity responses have been examined by CCQDER in the past, [2,3,4,5] but evaluating how such questions perform in the

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[1] Biden, J. R. (2021, June 25). *Executive order on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce*. The White House. https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/06/25/executive-order-on-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-accessibility-in-the-federal-workforce/

[2] A two-step gender identity question was tested in Miller, K., Willson, S., & Ryan, V. (2021). An Initial Cognitive Evaluation of a 2-Step Gender Identity Measure. National Center for Health Statistics. Hyattsville, MD. Available at https://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBank/Report.aspx?1219

[3] A simplified gender identity question with three response options was tested in Willson, S., & Miller, K. (2022). Cognitive Interview Evaluation of X Gender Marker Definitions for the U.S. Passport Application Form. National Center for Health Statistics. Hyattsville, MD Available at https://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBank/Report.aspx?1225

[4] Miller and Ryan (2011) detail the development and evaluation of a sexual identity question. See Miller, K., Ryan, J. M. (2011). Design, Development and Testing of the NHIS Sexual Identity Question. National Center for Health Statistics. Hyattsville, MD. Available at https://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBank/Report.aspx?1087

[5] Asking race and ethnicity with detailed response categories is reported in Willson, S., & Dunston, S.K. (2017). Cognitive Interview Evaluation of the Revised Race Question, with Special Emphasis on the Newly Proposed Middle Eastern/North

context of employees providing this information to their employer has not been done. As Willson and Miller[6] found when testing definitions of an X gender marker for use on US passport applications, context is key – respondents' preference for a particular definition and willingness to disclose their gender identity depended upon the context of applying for a passport, which serves as both legal identification and a requirement for international travel. This suggests that testing demographic questions within the context of an employee personnel system is essential.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study is consistent with the socio-cultural approach to question evaluation as described by Miller and Willis (2016)[7]. The design adheres to each stage of the research process (including data collection, analysis, and documentation) fully detailed by Miller et al. (2014).[8]

A total of 44 one-on-one cognitive interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom Internet meeting platform. Interviews were no longer than 60 minutes and all respondents were State Department employees. Respondents were first shown a mockup of the GEMS form. In order to simulate a realistic employee experience, respondents were asked to complete the fillable pdf form as though they were supplying information directly to the agency; the interviewer did not interrupt the respondent until the form was complete. The interviewer then asked follow-up questions to explore respondents' experiences, thought processes, and the specific phenomena they considered when formulating their answer.

The qualitative sample was purposive and non-random. Diversity was sought on the basis of characteristics associated with the topics under investigation and the population of State Department employees. For example, gender minorities were recruited, as were people who worked in overseas locations and those not born in the United States. Additionally, a mix of racial and ethnic identities was achieved to account for intersectionality in respondent experiences and perspectives. Table 1 shows the sample composition.

African Response Option. National Center for Health Statistics. Hyattsville, MD. Available at
https://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBank/Report.aspx?1183

[6] Willson, S., & Miller, K. (2022). See footnote 3.

[7] Miller, K., and G.B. Willis. (2016) "Cognitive Models of Answering Processes". In *The Sage Handbook of Survey Methodology*. C. Wolf, D. Joye, T.E.C. Smith, T.W. Smith, Y. Fu (Eds.). Sage.

[8] Miller, K., Willson, S., Chepp, V., and Padilla, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Cognitive Interviewing Methodology: An Interpretive Approach for Survey Question Evaluation*. Wiley and Sons.

Table 1. Demographic Summary of Respondents (N = 44)

	Number
Gender Identity	
Cisgender* Male	11
Cisgender Female	22
Transgender (men and women)	6
Non-binary	2
Another Identity (gender queer/gender fluid/agendered)	3
Race/Ethnicity	
Hispanic	8
Non-Hispanic:	36
Black	5
White	20
Asian	5
Multiracial	6
Birthplace	
Born in US	32
Not Born in US	12
Work Location	
In US (includes headquarters and other locations)	31
Not in US	13

* Cisgender refers to those whose current gender identity corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth

Introduction to Findings

The content of the GEMS test questionnaire consists of an introductory Privacy Act Statement followed by three substantive sections. The first section contains demographic questions, including ethnicity, race, gender identity, and sexual identity. The second section includes questions on national origin, of both the respondent and the respondent's parents. The third section is educational attainment of the respondent and the respondent's parents.

All questions may be found in the question-by-question section, but not all were evaluated as part of this cognitive study. Some questions are considered standard and not subject to change in GEMS at this time (for example, the race and ethnicity questions conform to current OMB standards[9]) but were included in the GEMS testing questionnaire to provide a realistic context for respondents when filling out the questionnaire. The questions that were tested were those that are subject to potential revision, particularly questions related to gender identity. While this study focused on the gender demographic question and contributes to this growing body of knowledge, including the previously mentioned study involving the inclusion of an X marker on US passports, questions on national origin and educational attainment were also systematically evaluated.

Question-by-Question Analysis

GEMS Privacy Act Statement

A privacy statement pertaining to State Department employees' answers to race and ethnicity questions appears at the top of that section. At the time of this study, it was not certain whether the gender section would also include such a privacy statement. Because previous studies have shown the relevance of context (particularly in terms of privacy) in shaping the way respondents choose to answer survey questions,[10] the statement was included. The statement describes the mandate to collect the information, as well as the purpose and how it would be used. Of particular interest for this study is the last sentence of the first paragraph regarding missing information— "in the instance of missing information, your employing agency will attempt to identify your race and ethnicity by visual observation"—since it might directly impact perceptions of privacy. The entire language of the statement included for respondents is:

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[9] Federal Register / Vol. 62, No. 210
[10] Willson, S., & Miller, K. (2022). See footnote 3.

Ethnicity and race information is requested under the authority of 42 U.S.C. Section 2000e-16 and in compliance with the Office of Management and Budget's 1997 Revisions to the Standards for the Classification of Federal Data on Race and Ethnicity. Providing this information is voluntary and has no impact on your employment status, but in the instance of missing information, your employing agency will attempt to identify your race and ethnicity by visual observation.

This information is used as necessary to plan for equal employment opportunity throughout the Federal government. It is also used by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management or employing agency maintaining the records to locate individuals for personnel research or survey response and in the production of summary descriptive statistics and analytical studies in support of the function for which the records are collected and maintained, or for related workforce studies.

Findings: In many instances, respondents did not read (or quickly skimmed) the Privacy Act Statement. When asked by the interviewer if they read the statement, most respondents seemed to answer honestly when they did not. The following are examples of respondents replies to the opening question of whether they read the statement:

"Oh shoot, I was supposed to read that?"

"Um, I did not read it to be perfectly honest."

"To be honest, I'm like most Americans – we do not read the fine print [laugh]. We just kind of skip straight ahead."

"No. I'm so used to answering demographic questions that I do it on autopilot."

"I kind of just passed it by to be honest."

Some respondents said they did not read the Privacy Act Statement because they were already familiar with it. However, upon reading it retrospectively during probing, they realized they were not as knowledgeable as they assumed. For example, one respondent said, "I skimmed through it. Only because my original background is HR [human resources] and I've seen the Privacy Act Statement for a lot of the paperwork that we do. So, I just didn't give it a second thought." However, when asked if she saw the sentence on visual observation she said, "I did not. Hmm. I did not." Another respondent had a similar pattern. When asked if she read it, she said, "No. This isn't my first rodeo. You pretty much know what you're getting yourself into." But when she reviewed the visual observation sentence, she said, "It's very interesting because I wouldn't have even looked that over initially."

Reactions to the visual observation sentence: Even though many respondents did not initially read the Privacy Act Statement, those who did (along with those who read it retrospectively during the follow-up segment of the interview) had a range of reactions to it, particularly the mention of visual observation in the instance of missing information. The practice of visual observation was understood by some as serving to advance DEIA goals. Most other respondents, however, had more negative views of the practice. Some thought visual observation of race or ethnicity would lead to incorrect information, others defined it as an offensive practice, and some pointed out that the practice negates the point of providing voluntary and private information in the first place. Further, in some cases respondents with negative views on the practice indicated a reluctance to provide any demographic information that was potentially sensitive in the context of career advancement. These patterns are discussed more fully next.

Visual observation assists DEIA efforts: Some respondents understood the Privacy Act Statement and the practice of visual observation as part of the Department's efforts to comply with the DEIA executive order. One respondent used the example of women's careers and the need for DEIA initiatives. They said, "It's generally talked about how a mother has a harder time advancing in their career in the Department." Another respondent said, "Yes, I kind of understand it because it's used to make sure all genders are given equal preference, you know?" Other respondents acknowledged the need in general for workplace diversity and agreed with the statement. For example, one respondent said, "I know and understand why we're doing it and I think it's important." Another respondent

explained, "I sort of appreciate why it would be important to do that [use visual observation to fill in missing information on race/ethnicity]. I'm active in the DEIA efforts and I think one of the things that's important in increasing diversity is an honest assessment of our current situation. So, I see this through the eyes of someone who works for government and wants to make government more diverse."

Visual observation likely to be incorrect: Many other respondents, however, did not link the Privacy Act Statement to diversity efforts and, instead, had more negative reactions. Some respondents mentioned that visual observation of race and ethnicity has a high probability of being incorrect and should, therefore, not be used because the data will be a misrepresentation of the Department's workforce composition. The following are examples of respondents' reactions:

"I don't think our agency should be doing that... And if there's some reason why this is required, it should definitely be highlighted... And let's say my agency gets this [race] wrong. Who do I go to complain if I decide I don't like that? Who's responsible for this? Where do I go to ask questions?"

"I mean, visual observation may not be the best way to identify someone's race or ethnicity because I feel like a majority of the time, you'd get it wrong. And, how someone identifies themselves is going to be completely different from how they visibly appear from the outside. Like, visibly from a distance, I look like a Black woman until I open my mouth and I have a bit of an accent. And then someone is going to try and pinpoint where that accent is coming from. But in terms of my identification, I identify as an African woman. So, I don't know if that can be worded a bit differently or taken out altogether."

"Visual observation is never a good way to attempt to identify someone. So that was the first thing that jumped out. I'm not sure why we still do that."

"Most people look at me and don't think that I am what I checked [White, Black, Asian]. Most people would think that I'm of some sort of Hispanic lineage. I've been told I look Hawaiian. People never pick that I'm mixed race. So then to be identified by visual observation would give a completely different, incorrect answer."

"This phrase strikes me as problematic… I'm not sure how reliable anyone's ability to visually identify race and ethnicity might be."

"I don't like that at all...because it's so rife with potential for inaccuracy."

"I laughed when I read that because I thought that could result in some very inaccurate information."

Visual observation is offensive: Other respondents had negative reactions to the visual observation sentence not so much because of the misinformation the practice would generate, but because they found the idea potentially offensive. Some respondents expressed this opinion in general terms:

"I think it would be deeply offensive to some people."

"I would say that this part gives me pause and is incredibly uncomfortable."

"That is absolutely offensive. That is denigrating and outright racism in my opinion."

For other respondents, the offense was deeply personal. One respondent said:

"I see that your employing agency will attempt to identify your race and ethnicity by visual observation. That seems strange. So, I think it's...[laughs]. Oh, my goodness. Being Native American, going back to the Dawes Rolls in the late 1800's when they were deciding that people were or were not Native American based on visuals. And wound-up identifying brothers and sisters as, this one is and that one isn't [Native American]. That's concerning. I don't like that at all."

<u>Visual observation negates privacy</u>: Some respondents pointed out that the visual observation sentence seems to contradict the very notion of privacy itself. One respondent said:

"I guess I've never read it closely before, but I did not realize that if information is missing, my employing agency will attempt to identify my race and ethnicity by visual observation [laughs]. I feel like that's a bad idea. I feel like that's a bad idea for someone to look at someone else and attempt to guess. If someone doesn't want to answer or provide, voluntarily, that information, that's the end of that discussion and it doesn't need to go any further. Nobody should be looking, trying to find photos of the person online in an attempt to figure out what boxes they're supposed to check."

Another respondent also pointed out the lack of privacy associated with visual observation. He said:
"The way I saw it was that if somebody's looking at me and deciding my race or ethnicity, then that means that my answers are not confidential. Because somebody would have to, I guess, look me up and decide, oh, he didn't put his race and ethnicity, so we have to put an answer for him."

<u>Reluctance to provide information</u>: In addition to having negative opinions about the visual observation statement, there was some evidence that negative opinions can translate into a reluctance to fully complete the form, that is, it may increase missing data, an outcome opposite from its intended goal. Some respondents even indicated a lack of comfort in answering *any* question (not just race/ethnicity) that might result in prejudice or discrimination against them. For example, one respondent who identified as lesbian said:

"I took it [the Privacy Act Statement] at face value. But having been in the Federal government since 1984, this raises the question of, they can assume all they want. But don't forget, look at the very first line: ethnicity and race are protected. Nothing else."

When asked if she would have answered all the demographic questions she said:

"Number 4 [sexual identity] would have been something I would have continued to lie about [she marks 'straight']. And same if I was gender non-conforming. I would put what was on my birth certificate to protect myself."

Similarly, a transgender respondent said:

"The hard thing is – and I feel this less now but more so when I was first coming out – I felt uncomfortable putting trans-ness or trans or transgender on any kind of legal form because there is something in the back of my head that says, 'they're going to come for you for this.' Because it's happened before. Because there have been past administrations that have been openly hostile and when we put ourselves on a form in any way, we are opening ourselves up, ultimately, to having someone say, 'Alright, you're fired for this.'"

Even some gender non-minorities recognized the potential hazards of reporting certain demographic information. For example, one respondent explained:

"Honestly, I feel like probably everyone should decline to answer this question [race/ethnicity], but I can't speak for everyone else. I don't want to. But I hesitate to participate in that kind of categorization especially when historically it has been used to harm other people by virtue of characteristics that they can't change."

SECTION 1: DEMOGRAPHICS

1. Are you Hispanic or Latino?
- ☐ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**

<u>Findings</u>: As noted above, this question was not systematically evaluated.

2. What is your race? (Select one or more.)
  ☐ **White**
  ☐ **Black or African American**
  ☐ **Asian**
  ☐ **Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander**
  ☐ **American Indian or Alaskan Native**
  ☐ **Other (please specify: _____)**

<u>Findings</u>: As noted above, this question was not systematically evaluated.

3. What is your sex/gender? (Mark all that apply.)
  ☐ **Male**
  ☐ **Female**
  ☐ **Another gender or sex, minority status, or unspecified**

<u>Findings</u>: Question 3 began with the version presented above but underwent five modifications as testing progressed. Each version of the question is presented in Table 2, but each respondent received only one version.

Table 2: Version of Gender Identity Question Tested				
Version 1	**Version 2**	**Version 3**	**Version 4**	**Version 5**
What is your sex/gender? (Mark all that apply.)	Are you: (Select one or more.)	For this next question, you may select one or more answers. Are you male, female, or another gender or sex, gender minority, or unspecified?	For this next question, you may select one or more answers. Are you male, female, or another gender identity or sex?	Mark all that apply: are you
1. Male 2. Female 3. Another gender or sex, minority status, or unspecified	1. Male 2. Female 3. Another gender or sex, gender minority or unspecified	1. Male 2. Female 3. Another gender or sex, gender minority, or unspecified	1. Male 2. Female 3. Another gender identity or sex (for example, transgender or non-binary) 4. Unspecified	1. Male 2. Female 3. Another gender identity or sex, transgender, or non-binary 4. Unspecified

The primary intent of the question is to identify gender minority employees to track their employment experiences in relation to DEIA goals. It is not intended to produce frequencies for all possible gender identities. To this end, the first two categories, 'Male' and 'Female', were designed primarily to capture cisgender people (those whose current gender identity corresponds to the gender they were assigned at birth). The third category was designed to capture gender minority respondents (a gender-diverse group who may experience prejudice and discrimination). Because some gender minority employees, such as some transgender respondents, may also identify as male or female, the question was designed with a mark-all-that-apply format. Additionally, because terminology and personal experiences are evolving, specific gender identities were not initially included in the response categories (see versions 1, 2, and 3) in an effort to maintain flexibility for the inclusion of future gender minority identities.

Terminology: The term 'minority status,' as it appeared in the first version was not well understood and so was modified to 'gender minority.' However, respondents continued to resist or misunderstand the term. For example,

one respondent said, "I haven't ever used the word 'gender minority' myself…I think I read that and was like, well, I'm not a gender minority. Because I never used that term in my head before. So, I wasn't familiar with those terms." Another respondent who was a transgender male was also hesitant about the third category. He said, "So I guess the word 'gender minority' would qualify [for him]." Even respondents who were generally familiar with the term and could place themselves in the category of a gender minority were sometimes confused by its presence in the response options. For example, a transgender female respondent explained, "And it's really funny because, like, I literally use the term 'gender and sexual minorities' all the time but [laughs] in this case I didn't read 'minority status' as what I think it was intended as." Even cisgender respondents, though they understood that the third category did not apply to them, thought the terms could come across as offensive. For example, one respondent said, "I'm liking the word 'minority' less in everything I do.... Minority has a very specific 'blech.' I'm not crazy about it…. Because minority means 'less than.'"

Because there is not yet a commonly used and understood term representing the entirety of those with gender minority experience (outside of the commonly used phrase 'LGBTQIA'), a response option for this category may need to include specific examples in order to clarify question intent. Otherwise, the category may not only be misunderstood, it may be perceived as othering. For example, one transgender respondent explained, "The fact that there's not a specific 'transgender' [word in the category]. It's just kind of like you have this 'other' box… Because there's not a specific box it makes someone feel like kind of in an 'other' category. You don't really feel seen or counted. You're just kind of the detritus on the side… It almost seems deliberately dismissive." Another transgender respondent also preferred having specific identity examples (such as transgender) in the third category "because first of all it's [having examples] not othering in that I have to pick an 'other' box. It [the word 'transgender'] doesn't diminish my male identity and it allows me to identify myself in the term that I would use— which is transgender." A transgender woman had a similar opinion regarding the othering tendency of a generic category with no examples. She said, "I would prefer to be able to check transgender and female or specifically 'transgender female.' Either one of those I feel like would be better options than just saying 'other' [and] female. That still, to me, is a little odd."

The strategy to include examples in the response option appeared to work well and as intended. When the terms transgender and non-binary were added to the third category of versions 4 and 5, respondents with those identities easily put themselves in that third category. For example, one respondent chose the third category (in version 4) easily because she saw the example, 'transgender.' She said, "It was literally just 'for example, transgender.' Once I saw that one [she chose that answer]."

Missing 'mark all that apply:' One problem with question three was linked specifically to survey mode and formatting. The vast majority of respondents did not see the 'mark all that apply' instruction on the pdf form. This occurred regardless of instruction wording ('mark all that apply' versus 'select more than one') or placement (before or after the question). Examples of respondents' reactions when asked during probing if they noticed the instruction include:

"I don't think I really noticed select one or more."

"Hmm...I didn't actually. I just saw the options."

"I did not notice that."

"I did not...I did not notice that it was mark all that apply."

Reasons for missing the instruction were varied. One explanation is that respondents often focused on the response options and either skimmed the question or failed to read it altogether. For example, one respondent said, "And honestly, when I saw the question, I didn't even read below it. I just clicked the box that applied to me and kept moving." Similarly, another respondent explained that she missed the 'mark all that apply' because she focused primarily on the response categories. She said, "You kinda skim over that part [the instructions] and see 'are you male, female, or another gender identity.' And mostly I think your eyes pretty much go towards, what are the responses."

A related explanation is that people are so accustomed to choosing only one sex or gender on surveys, that they answer the question reflexively and without much thought. This pattern was exhibited by cisgender respondents to some extent because they had no need for the ability to check more than one response. One respondent explained, "I really didn't pay attention because even if there were 30 other options, I'm [still] going to pick female." Another respondent said, "Oh interesting. I did not notice that. But I mean, again, for me, personally, that's an easy question to answer, so I didn't really pay attention to it [the question or the instruction]."

When cisgender respondents missed the 'mark all that apply' instruction, it had no impact on the accuracy of their answers – a single answer of 'male' or 'female' was sufficient. However, the impact on gender minorities was to increase the odds of response error. For example, a transgender woman initially marked only 'female' as her answer. During probing the interviewer asks her why she chose that category. As she answered and looked at the question again, she realized her error. She said, "Because I'm trans, for example, so I chose female because I am female, um, oh mark ALL that apply. Oh shit! The 'mark all that apply'. [laughs] Sorry, that's gonna be fun on the recording. I didn't catch the 'mark all that apply.'" When asked if this instruction would change how she would answer she said, "Yeah if I had realized [it was mark all] I would've checked them both ['female' and 'another gender']." Similarly, a transgender male initially marked only 'male' as his answer. During probing he began to explain to the interviewer how problematic it was that he could not indicate his transgender identity. Marking only 'male' could incorrectly imply that he is a cisgender man. In an effort to clarify his answer, he said, "I am a gender minority but, yeah. I certainly consider myself a gender minority, but I live my life entirely as a man." When asked why he did not also check the third category (version 2), he paused and said, "OH! I didn't even notice that! Oh! [Throws up hands.] All right. Totally escaped me. I had no idea. 'Select one or more,' look at that. So, I could have totally said 'male' [and] 'gender minority.'" A non-binary respondent also had response error because they missed the 'mark all' instruction. They initially chose only the third category but would have also included 'male' had they seen the instructions. They said, "To be honest, I didn't see 'you may select one or more answers.' I may have -- like sometimes I've selected 'male' and 'another gender identity' or something like that. Male and non-binary. Because I use he/they pronouns." While either category alone ('male' or 'another gender') would have been acceptable to him, he felt both categories together were more accurate.

In the modified versions, seeing the word transgender (discussed above) along with the ability to mark more than one answer was important to transgender respondents. The two transgender respondents who *did* see the instruction and who received versions 4 or 5 (which contained the word 'transgender') had no response error or confusion with the question, indicating a clear improvement in question design. One transgender man said, "I feel like it's important for people to see that I'm a man and recognize that. And it's also important because I'm trans and will have automatically different experiences [from cisgender men and] that that also be recognized. So, when I see that on a form, I want to put both options, you know? Because they're both relevant, but sometimes forms don't let that happen." Another respondent also thought it important to have the option of both 'female' and 'transgender.' She said, "I don't consider myself a regular female. And I certainly don't consider myself male. And I want to distinguish between what a female is and what a trans female is. We are not the same and I try to respect that boundary. So, whenever I have the ability to identify as transgender, that creates a comfortable middle ground for me."

The distinction between sex and gender: The third category included some version of the phrase, 'another gender identity or sex.' However, it was inconsistently understood whether 'or' was meant to convey equivalence or difference between the two concepts (gender and sex). Experiences of respondents illustrate that both can be true – for many respondents, gender and sex function as similar concepts but for other respondents, gender and sex are different dimensions of their identities.[11]

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[11] Differing conceptions of 'sex' and 'gender' was also a primary theme found in Miller et. al.'s cognitive interviewing study which examined the performance of the 2-step approach (which first asks sex-assigned-at-birth followed by current gender identity) for collecting non-binary gender data. A two-step gender identity question was tested in Miller, K., Willson, S., & Ryan, V. (2021). An Initial Cognitive Evaluation of a 2-Step Gender Identity Measure. National Center for Health Statistics. Hyattsville, MD. Available at https://wwwn.cdc.gov/QBank/Report.aspx?1219

For example, some respondents who identified as cisgender did not recognize any meaningful distinction between sex and gender when answering this question. For them, the 'or' functioned as an equivalence between the concepts. For example, one respondent said, "There's nothing. I was born a woman. I am a woman. That's how I identify. I don't have anything more." Other cisgender respondents saw the 'or' as indicating difference between the concepts, but because those dimensions aligned for them personally, they had no trouble answering the question. One respondent said, "I was assigned female at birth, I identify as a cisgender female, so my gender identity matched my physical identity." Another respondent said, "I'm cisgendered, if that matters. Male. To me, it means you were born and identify as that same gender." Another respondent illustrates how the question requires no thought when personal notions of sex and gender align. He said, "I'm a cis-male, so for me there is never really an issue with this particular question."

However, some gender minorities had difficulty with combining gender and sex in the third category (e.g., 'another gender or sex'). Having perhaps more complex and nuanced identities than their cisgender counterparts, they understood the category as potentially double-barreled – that is, the 'or' was seen as asking two different things about themselves. For example, one agender respondent illustrates the extra burden associated with answering a question that contained (for them) two distinct concepts. Uncertain how to answer, they marked 'male' and the third category (version 1). They explained, "I chose two [answers] because of my confusion of the sex and then the gender. If it was separate, then I would put sex, 'male' and then gender maybe I would put 'unspecified.' Because I view myself as being gender critical or agendered or a gender abolitionist. I believe in male and female as sex categories. For gender I don't think of myself as having a gender."

The phrase 'another gender identity or sex' was also confusing for a transgender respondent who received version 4 (which did not have the word 'transgender' in category 3 to assist with the intent of the question). He said, "The gender and sex questions are strange and I'm not sure how to answer them both to be representative of myself and also, like, trans people or people who are non-binary and more gender-fluid. And, also, how I see myself and how others see me as, basically. So, I was assigned female at birth, so you'll see a word here, AFAB [assigned female at birth], frequently… And so my sex would have been female, but my gender is male."

The inclusion of 'unspecified:' Findings noted above for the Privacy Act Statement suggest that respondents can feel hesitant about reporting potentially sensitive information in the context of employment. This was not altogether surprising. Previous research on gender identity for the US passport application form showed that including the term 'unspecified' for the X gender marker served as an important mechanism by which gender minorities could safely opt out of reporting their gender in the context of international travel to parts of the world that may be less tolerant of gender minorities.[12] Consequently, the term 'unspecified' was included in the GEMS survey response options as a way for respondents to opt out of answering if they felt uncomfortable revealing their gender status to their employer.

While some respondents did, indeed, perceive 'unspecified' as an opt-out option, there were two additional interpretations of this term. It is worth pointing out, as well, that many respondents were not fully convinced about the correct interpretation of the term 'unspecified.' As a result, if the Privacy Act Statement as tested in this study is not included on the GEMS website, there is no need for the word 'unspecified' to be included in the response options.

Opt out/refuse to answer: In some cases the term 'unspecified' was seen as offering respondents the ability to opt out of providing a specific answer. Gender minorities sometimes had this interpretation, and applied it broadly to everyone, including gender non-minorities. For example, one respondent said, "It could also be some people who do not want to disclose their gender. I notice that happens more with cisgender people sometimes. They don't want to say they are male or female." Another respondent said, "It felt like maybe it was an option of 'I don't want to answer this question.'" One respondent specifically noted the risk associated with providing certain information. They said, "Um, I think that's kind of a 'prefer not to answer.' I think it would be nice for people who don't want to out themselves on a form for the government." Another respondent said, "The reason I put unspecified is more like me opting out of the question."

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[12] Willson, S., & Miller, K. (2022). See footnote 3.

Gender minorities were not the only respondents to see 'unspecified' as an opt-out equivalent. Although most admitted to guessing the intent of 'unspecified,' gender non-minorities also had this interpretation. The following are examples of this pattern:

"With the unspecified, maybe somebody doesn't want to be labeled."

"Maybe it's people who don't want to answer. Or maybe feel like why the hell should it matter? I am who I am, I am a human first and that's all. I get my work done, I'm a good person. Isn't that enough? Is my guess."

"I feel like, I mean maybe it's a good option for people who don't want to label themselves."

"Another response option [for unspecified] might be, 'I prefer not to answer.'"

"[Unspecified is for] people who did not want to disclose, maybe."

"I would say maybe if someone was uncomfortable selecting one, that would be an option."

Undecided: Some respondents saw the word 'unspecified' as perhaps available for someone who is unsure or still deciding about their gender identity. However, only gender non-minorities expressed this view. For example, one respondent said, "Unspecified means, I suppose, you haven't come to a conclusion as to what you are." Another said, "I guess [unspecified is for] somebody who has not yet decided on a gender identity, perhaps."

An additional, different identity: Respondents often understood 'unspecified' as a catch-all word to accommodate gender identities that may not be specifically named. For example, some respondents thought people with no gender identity or those who are gender neutral could relate to this option. Gender minorities expressed this view. One respondent said, "It made me think of gender-neutral people – unspecified. There are a lot of people in the nonbinary community or gender neutral, gender fluid community, where it is really important to them that they are seen as 'no gender' or 'agender.' Not one or the other – outside of that – whatever the case may be." Similarly, another respondent said 'unspecified' means, "I'm saying this question is irrelevant. So, I'm going to put 'unspecified' because I do not have a gender."

Several gender non-minorities thought the word 'unspecified' related to non-binary people. One respondent said, "To me, non-binary is kind of unspecified. They could be synonyms." Another respondent expressed the same view. She said, "I don't see what the difference is between nonbinary and unspecified. I don't get it."

Finally, both gender minorities and non-minorities sometimes understood 'unspecified' as a way of saying 'none of the above' or 'something else.' The following are examples of respondents with this interpretation:

"[Unspecified is] saying there's these two boxes and I'm not either one of them. I'm this other, third box."

"With the 'unspecified,' maybe somebody doesn't want to be labeled. Or they don't identify with any of the genders named."

"I viewed it as 'yet something different.'"

"[People may] pick 'unspecified' because it [their identity] is not there."

"I guess people who don't want to be forced to choose a category but don't feel like one of those headings accurately identifies them."

Version 6 recommendation: Given the findings outlined above, further modifications were suggested for the final version of Question 3, specifically, 1) omitting 'sex' from the third category and adding examples, 2) dropping the

'unspecified' category, and 3) moving 'mark all that apply' to a more prominent position for the reader. The final and recommended version of the question is as follows:

Are you:

Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Transgender, non-binary, or another gender

The simplified question stem allows the response categories to define question intent (since respondents were not focusing on the question stem to begin with), while allowing the important 'mark all that apply' instruction to stand out in a self-administered format.

In addition, the third category is improved in several ways. First, eliminating the word 'sex' simplifies the question. The phrase 'another gender identity *or* sex' may imply that different concepts should be considered, which confused some respondents. Second, including specific examples of diverse gender identities in the third category clarifies the intent. The examples of transgender and non-binary, along with 'another gender,' may help respondents understand that the third category is meant to capture a variety of gender minority identities without relying on a single term (such as 'gender minority') that may not be universally understood. Third, including examples reduces the potential for othering by specifically naming and acknowledging additional gender identities.

Finally, a category for 'unspecified' was eliminated as unnecessary, given clarification from the sponsor that the Privacy Act Statement is unlikely to be included going forward in the GEMS survey.

A note about questions on sex assigned at birth (SAAB): Although SAAB was not included as a survey question on this test questionnaire, many surveys and data systems continue to use some version of it.[13] As a result, interviewers took the opportunity to explore with gender minorities their interpretations of and feelings about being asked questions on this topic on surveys generally. No gender minority respondents were in favor of asking SAAB. The following quotes demonstrate the disfavor respondents have for this type of question:

"It is triggering language…It's kind of like calling a gay person a homosexual. It's a little bit like dead-naming a transgender person....it just is usually associated with a conservative agenda, that question. I would definitely not answer that question. Even though I openly admit I'm transgender, I would not answer that question."

"I think I would be, like, not super excited to answer it. Kind of maybe a little annoyed that I was being asked because I would feel like that doesn't really apply to me anymore. That was me when I was a little baby and now I'm an adult…Kind of like trying to figure out what genitalia you have. Which doesn't really seem work-appropriate to me."

"That, to me, is a hard do-not-do-that! I think that's especially problematic for an employer to phrase a question like that…Because it's not how I define myself. In fact, [it's] the opposite of how I define myself. And two, because it's triggering to have to -- it's sort of like one of those things when surveys prime you in a way, right? And so you're thinking about your salient identity and then the question is what was your identity given at birth. Suddenly it puts you in a totally different mental state. So that's a problem. And also, this is my legal identity -- my passport, my driver's license -- all do not have that sex on them. So how is it relevant to my employer what my history was?"

"Ugh. I hate it…The journey of a transgender person is extraordinarily difficult. There is a period of great difficulty in understanding their gender. And it runs in contrast and contrary to the assigned gender at birth. You're doing everything in your power to get away from this. And undergoing some rather painful procedures in order to get

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[13] Some data collections are currently using a two-part question that includes a question about sex assigned at birth to compare against current self-reported gender.

away from who you were. And so a question like that completely obliterates any of the work and effort and challenges you're overcoming in order to just simply fill out demographic information. And they don't understand what that does to a person...you don't want to think about those things. I'm a veteran, too. I don't want to think about certain things [like being in a war zone]. So, for all of the effort that I have made to move forward in my life, that is a question that almost seems to take a step back. Like, we don't care who you are now."

Although gender minority respondents generally did not like the prospect of the SAAB question being asked by an employer, they did see the relevance of it under certain circumstances. It was seen as most appropriate in a medical context, as the following examples illustrate:

"That question should only be asked when necessary. Like, I think it is appropriate for medical forms...but since this is more about where you currently are in your gender identity, I don't think it's really necessary [on GEMS]. Or appropriate."

"I would definitely be more comfortable saying it to a doctor because I would assume the doctor is examining me and trying to keep me healthy. So, they would have a good reason of asking that question just to have the context of how can we best treat this person's health? So, I wouldn't have an issue answering that question in that context."

"Unless it's something specifically medical, I would hope that just asking me what my gender is -- transgender -- would suffice to let you know that this person is different. But do you need to understand what their genitals are to work with them? [The transgender community is] one of the few communities where it's acceptable to ask about our genitals."

4. Do you think of yourself as:
- ☐ **Lesbian or Gay**
- ☐ **Straight, that is not Lesbian or Gay**
- ☐ **Bisexual**
- ☐ **Something else: _____**

Findings: As noted above, this question was not systematically evaluated.

SECTION 2: NATIONAL ORIGIN

5. In what country were you and your parents born? (Please select no more than three.)

_____
_____
_____

Findings: This question and the next were formatted for the pdf file with fill-in-the-blank responses for the cognitive interview; however, in the actual online GEMS survey, response options will be offered as a drop-down menu consisting of an exhaustive list of countries.[14] Respondents were made aware of this formatting difference during the follow-up questioning.

Only two difficulties arose with this question. First, it was unclear to some respondents whether stepparents should be included in their answers. Some who were close to their stepparents included them without giving it thought. However, other respondents were unsure and brought up the idea that the word 'parents' could be clarified. For example, as one respondent was reading the question they said, "I'm just realizing that number five is interesting because it's confined to your parents. And I'm wondering if it should be biological parents?" Another respondent said, "There was another question that mentioned 'parent or guardian' – so if there is an option to put in parents or guardians [that should be done]."

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[14] The entire list of countries planned for GEMS inclusion is shown in the appendix.

A second difficulty respondents had was in recognizing that they should include themselves in their answer. Some respondents answered only for their parents. For example, during probing one respondent explained their answer by saying, "That's both my parents." When the interviewer asked about the respondent, they said, "Oh. Oh! Those are supposed to be – oh got you. Yes. I didn't realize that I was supposed to put down like, yeah, I didn't realize that." Another respondent pointed out the confusing nature of the wording. They said, "The way the question is phrased implies that I was born in the same place [as parents]. Implies, but it's not necessarily that way. To me it makes more sense to separate them out [into two questions]." A third respondent explained her confusion. She said, "When I saw it, I just assumed, me being a United States citizen, being in this position or being a federal employee, predominantly that's generally the only way you can be a federal employee. So, 'both' would be indicating both my parents. My mother and my father."

In discussion of these findings, it was decided that the program would forgo the wording of this question and work to identify other options. For example, the following questions might be considered:

5a. In what country were you born?

5b. In what country were your birth parents born? (Please select no more than two.)

6. Besides the United States, what countries and non-state foreign territories do you identify with because of familial or cultural reasons? (List up to four.)

_____
_____
_____
_____

Findings: There were both interpretive difficulties and privacy concerns associated with this question.

Interpretive difficulties: Overall, the intent of question six was not entirely clear to all respondents. As a result, this created confusion over how to accurately answer the question. For example, one respondent said:

"I could've put Russia. I could've put Syria. I could've put Iraq. I could've put Switzerland. In the end I only chose Israel because I have some extended family there. It's more of me thinking, what is this question getting at? And, honestly, if I was doing it again... I might put nothing at all."

Another respondent said, "I didn't really understand it, the way it was worded. I think the part that I didn't really understand was 'for cultural reasons' so that's why I was hesitant – not really hesitant but I read it twice to make sure I fully understood it." Similarly, another respondent pointed out that different groups can have different interpretations. She said, "Yeah, as someone who is Black and descended from those who were enslaved from Africa, I considered putting Africa. But I didn't because I think it's reserved for people who immigrated or who are second generation from the continent."

Three factors were responsible for creating interpretive difficulties: the phrase 'familial or cultural reasons,' the term 'identify with,' and the causal connection between the two ('identify with *because of* familial or cultural reasons'). These patterns are discussed next.

Definition of 'familial or cultural': Some respondents had unquestioned interpretations of the phrase 'familial or cultural' and were able to easily answer the question. These were respondents who were thinking the question was asking primarily about family ties. The following are examples of respondents with this interpretation:

"I think it [means] it's a salient part of people's identity, whether it's second or third generation and their cultural heritage."

"For me it was like, do you have close and continuous contact, like an affinity for this country that goes beyond my great-great-grandfather was or my ancestry DNA test tells me that I'm Irish."

"Familial would mean family ties. Maybe like a distant uncle, grandparents. That's how I took that."

"It's definitely a country that I know very well where I still have a lot of friends and family members, and [language] is still my first language so for the rest of my life I will have certain ties to the country that are stronger than to a random country."

On the other hand, not all respondents interpreted 'familial or cultural' as having family ties. For example, one respondent interpreted 'familial or cultural' as simply having a personal interest in a country and its culture. He included countries he felt connected to because of time spent abroad even though he had no familial connections. He said:

"For me it was cultural reasons, having lived in Thailand for a long period of time and having lots of friends in Thailand. And I speak Thai. So, I put that as the first one that came to mind. And then for France, kind of similar reasons. I haven't lived there but I speak some French -- learned that in high school. And I've travelled there. And enjoy French culture and French music."

Other respondents were less certain about how to interpret 'familial or cultural.' Some specifically asked the interviewer what the question meant. For example, one respondent asked, "Familial or cultural reasons. Does that include places where parents and grandparents and stuff were from originally?" Another respondent provides a good example of the confusion that some respondents had with this question:

"Cultural or familial ties was an interesting question. I didn't quite know how – like, what you were looking for there? What level of connection? And even though I also know what you're getting at, kind of, I think you're getting at, um, like if you were born in the US but then raised in another country so you have significant experiences in that country. I think that's what you were getting at. But I think, yeah, I just wasn't sure about what that one was."

Causality and the meaning of 'identify with': Some respondents expressed uncertainty with the term 'identify with.' The uncertainty stemmed from the causal criteria associated with being able to claim that one 'identifies' with another country. In other words, when 'identifying with' a country did not necessarily arise from familial or cultural reasons, respondents made independent judgments on what to include or exclude.

Some respondents wondered if they should include countries they identify with because of experiences that originated outside of family or cultural connections. To some extent this was an outcome of the kinds of experiences prevalent among State Department employees who travel to, live for extended periods of time in, and develop connections to different countries either for work or school. For example, one respondent said, "The phrase 'identify with' doesn't make a lot of sense. I mean, I could think of countries that I've traveled to or spent a long period of time in, but I wouldn't say I identify with those countries. And I'm not sure that that has anything to do with national origin [the topic of this section]." Similarly, another respondent said, "Because when I read this my first reaction was kind of like, oh well, I kind of identify with West Africa because I did my study abroad there and have a bunch of adopted family there. But then I thought about it more and I was like, I think they're getting at something more significant than that."

Conversely, the opposite question also arose: should respondents include countries to which they have familial or cultural connections but do not necessarily identify with? For example, one respondent wondered if the question was asking:

"If we have a connection or allegiance to another country or territory? My stepdad's Israeli, my husband's Chinese, but I don't identify with any other countries or territories. So should I focus on my personal identification?... I feel like I'm caught up on identifying with another place because of 'familial or cultural reasons.' It just doesn't seem like a logical question. But I'm connected to those two places for familial or cultural reasons, but I don't identify with them. But I don't know what is meant in this case by identify."

Privacy concerns: Another problem with question six was driven by privacy concerns associated with security clearances and the potential for limited career assignments. When question intent was in doubt, respondents sometimes wondered if the question related to security issues. For example, one respondent said, "So what's the purpose of this question? And the reason I ask that is, quite often questions like this are asked in the security clearance process…So what is the purpose of this question? Because when I see that question, I think security clearance." Another example is a respondent who explained:

"For many federal agencies you have to pass a background check and formal affiliation could be construed as a potential security risk. I haven't been to Russia since 1988 so that's not a concern. But I have family there. I talk to them. They come to visit. Because of recent world's events people may be a little more cautious."

Another respondent had a similar interpretation and said:

"Because I have security clearance this question might trigger people to rethink, because we're asking about ties. And people might get worried about their security clearance if they start putting other countries down here...would it trigger some sort of investigation? I think people might be a little wary of this question."

Other respondents specifically pointed out that security concerns may cause some employees to leave this item blank. One respondent noted how many State Department employees may have this concern due to the impact it may have on work assignments. She said:

"If I was from China or Russia, I may hesitate to list these if it would put me under scrutiny. In the foreign service, Chinese people already feel like they're unfairly targeted for restrictions on where they can serve. There's a lot of restrictions based on family background. There are restrictions placed on your security clearance even if you've grown up in the States. And that limits your prospects for where you can go in the world, whereas those with a European background can go anywhere."

Other respondents confirmed the legitimacy of this concern by suggesting that they, personally, would not answer the question. One respondent said, "Yeah, I don't want to answer that…They [the questions] start out pretty generic and then that one [question six] I skipped. It just sort of feels like a very strange question. If I saw that I would know why they wanted that information." When asked what the concern was, the respondent said:

"That feels like a weird thing to put on a government form especially since, I don't know, I have to do an SF 86 for the clearance and there's a whole section on, like, foreign allegiances and that's kind of what this feels like. Which would be a weird thing to ask for [on the GEMS survey]."

Another respondent also raised the possibility of not answering the question due to security concerns. He said:

"I do want to say I think I would leave this blank if this was on an actual demographic form. Because I want my employer to know that I consider myself to be part of the Russian Diaspora…But I do not want to tell the State Department that I identify with Russia, in its current form. Here [in the interview] I'm comfortable saying it because I knew I would have this opportunity to explain it. If this is on an anonymous form that I click a box and it goes away, like, I'm not putting Russia. Despite the fact that that's important to me."

7. Did you immigrate to the United States?
☐ **Yes**
☐ **No**

Findings: For most respondents this was a question that was well understood and easy to answer. However, there was some interpretive variation in how respondents defined immigration. Respondents had different ideas about whether they 'immigrated' when the process was prompted by marriage versus the desire to begin a new life in the US in particular. For example, one respondent said, "Yes, I am a US citizen. I became a US citizen through

marriage, I married an American citizen…So yeah, so in that way, because of marriage, I naturalized, I got a green card and then I became a citizen." However, another respondent with the same experience answered 'no.' She said:

"I didn't immigrate to the U.S. I met my husband. And the only reason I came to the US is to visit my husband. And we got married. So, it wasn't my intent to immigrate to the US. So, I always say when people ask are you naturalized? Did you immigrate here? I say I didn't intend to immigrate here. I came here because of my husband. [Thinks.] So, I guess in a way it is immigration through marriage. But it's a little nuanced, I think. I didn't actively move to the US. I didn't intend on living here."

When asked what she thought the question was asking, she said, "The question, for me, is saying, did I make a conscious decision to leave where I was living with the intent of leaving everything behind and moving to start a completely different life because I wanted to move to the US."

8. Did at least one of your parents immigrate to the United States?
- ☐ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**

Findings: This question was also well understood and easy to answer for most respondents. The only point of possible confusion stems, again, from to whom to include as parents. Respondents noted that it was unclear whether stepparents should be counted. One respondent who had a close relationship to her stepfather ultimately did not include him in her answer, but only because he and her mother never officially married. She said, "Again, I questioned. Because he's not legally my stepdad. And he did immigrate. And so, I was like, I'm not sure what I should answer for here." Another respondent expressed uncertainty with adoptive parents: "I'm just thinking. That would be one where I wouldn't put biological [parents] because maybe your adopted parents, that would influence your upbringing. So I don't know."

In discussion of the findings, it was determined that the program would consider use of the following:

8. Did at least one of your birth parents immigrate to the United States?

9. Do you consider English to be your first language?
- ☐ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**

Findings: A fair amount of confusion existed with this question. First, the term 'first language' was not consistently understood. There were three fundamental understandings. 'First' was defined as either chronological, dominant, or that which was spoken at home.

First = chronological: Some respondents took the word 'first' quite literally to mean the language in which they spoke their first words. The following are examples of this pattern:

"What language were your first words that your family tells you you spoke? What language were those in? In what language did you go to preschool and kindergarten and learn your ABC's and 1-2-3's?"

"The first language that I learned. And that was Spanish."

"I would define it for me chronologically, what I came to speak first."

"I read it as when you were a kid growing up, what language did you speak before any other language."

First = Dominant: Other respondents interpreted the word 'first' language to mean dominant language irrespective of whether it was chronologically first. One respondent explained:

"The one I feel comfortable and natural speaking. Also, in times of crisis you're always gonna go back to what your first language is. Right? You don't even realize it, but you will start speaking in the language you're most comfortable in. And that would be English for me."

Another respondent, when asked, defined 'first language' in a similar manner:

"I would imagine that to be the language that you think in. Whatever your internal monologue is. Or is somebody startles you or creates some emotional response, [snaps fingers] that's the one that you go straight to."

First = Spoken at home: Yet another definition of 'first language' was the language a person spoke at home, in their family of origin. For example, one respondent said, "Yeah, we spoke English specifically in the home and my grandparents spoke English. And I learned another language, my parents' mother tongue on my own, but it's not what I've ever spoken with my parents with." Other respondents had similar views. One respondent said, "English is my first language because that's what we spoke at home." Another respondent echoed that perspective, "Yeah. Just the language that you initially speak in your family as they are raising you."

The previous examples are of respondents who did not question their own interpretations of the question. However, other respondents recognized the potential for different definitions of the word 'first' and had difficulty answering the question as a result. They were unsure on what to base their answer. For example, one respondent said, "[English is] my dominant language. I don't speak Russian well. I make a distinction. English is my dominant language. But chronologically, when you say first, it's not my first." Another respondent answered 'yes' but said:

"That was a tough one. Because I did grow up learning some Spanish first. But it was very child-like. Just basic needs. And then one day my parents realized, okay, he needs to get ready for pre-school. They switched it. And eventually I ended up losing my Spanish. And English was my primary language at home and at school. So that's why it was tough. Because a lot of my first words were in Spanish. But then I had to develop English and that quickly overtook my Spanish."

Another respondent also admitted confusion and said:

"Without a definition there, there are different ways to answer that question. Yeah, I'm a native English speaker. Is it the first language I learned out of the womb? No. But I don't speak that other language nearly as well as English. I was never educated in that language. Right? So, I don't know how to answer it."

Several other respondents expressed similar reactions:

"This is a really difficult question. Like, because I definitely use English more than any other language. Yeah, and I have for the past twenty years. But it's not like the language I was born with. And it's not like the first language I received education in. So I still consider Chinese to be my first language. But I'm not sure…I'm not sure what first meant here."

"This is tricky because it was not the first language I learned to speak. I learned it when I was five [years old]. I speak it better than I speak my mother tongue. And so I consider English to be a mother tongue. All my schooling was in English. I speak a mix of English and Urdu with my family. English is *a* first language but it's not the only."

"So, I started speaking English when I was little and then when I was in Puerto Rico from three to six [years old]. I went to kindergarten in Puerto Rico, so the first language that I started reading and writing was Spanish. But when we moved back to the states, I didn't really use Spanish…So definitely English is my stronger language. It's the one I started speaking, though there is some overlap because Spanish is the first language I was formally trained in [in Kindergarten]."

Bi-/multi-lingual Respondents: The previous examples include respondents who speak more than one language and illustrate that this may be the group most likely to experience confusion over how to answer this question. Some bilingual respondents directly pointed out the difficulty with answering question nine. For example, one respondent

specifically asked, "If you're dual, do you have to consider one or the other to be your first language?" Another bilingual respondent with similar experiences also expressed the need for response options that are more nuanced than simply 'yes' or 'no.' She said, "Yes…there is no 'maybe?'" To explain her struggle she said,

"If I'm around my mom and siblings, it's my native language and it's like a dash of English. And, of course in a professional setting, or if I'm with my friends who are non-Ghanian, who do not speak the dialect, then it's English…I feel like it's a toss-up 50-50."

One respondent chose to answer 'yes' but explained why that is misleading:

"Was English my first language? Yeah…but it wasn't my only first language because I was raised bilingual. I spoke both at home from day one. How can I say it's not my first language? It is – but it's not my only. I feel strongly about that."

In discussion of these findings with the sponsor, it was determined that the following language would be considered:

9. Did you grow up in a multilingual family?
   ☐ Yes
   ☐ No

SECTION 3: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

10. Were you the first in your immediate family to receive a degree from a four-year college or university?
   ☐ **Yes**
   ☐ **No**
   ☐ **Not applicable – I did not receive a degree from a four year-college or university**

<u>Findings</u>: Respondents had no difficulty or confusion answering this question. The term 'immediate family' was understood by most respondents as including parents and siblings. The following are examples:

"My parents and my siblings. That's what I would consider my immediate family."

"In my immediate family, my mom, my dad, and I have an older brother."

"Parents...because I generally, what I think they're getting at."

"Hearing 'immediate family' makes me think my mom, my dad, and my brother."

"I was just thinking of me and my parents and siblings. And since both of my parents have college degrees, I just put 'no' for that one."

However, as with previous questions that involve parents, a few respondents were unsure about the inclusion of stepparents. One respondent said, "My biological mother, father, brother, and sister. If I had a stepparent, I think I would include them as well." Another respondent paused and began to read the question aloud, "First in your immediate family, oh shoot. For immediate family do you include stepparents?" The interviewer asked if the respondent thought stepparents are meant to be included, to which the respondent said, "I mean, I do. But I don't know if that's the intent of the question, I guess."

Finally, another respondent included close family members in addition to stepparents. They said, "For me, immediate family is my parents, my stepparents, my half-sister, half-brother, grandparents, all of the above. They pretty much all had a role in raising me, so I consider them immediate." It seems the crux of the argument (for those who expressed uncertainty) centered around whether 'immediate family' refers to all those who played a role in a person's upbringing or only to those who are biological parents.

11. If you answered "yes" to question 10, what is the highest level of education you obtained?
- ☐ **Master's degree**
- ☐ **Professional degree (JD, MD, etc.)**
- ☐ **Some post-graduate studies but did not receive degree**
- ☐ **Ph.D.**
- ☐ **Post-doctoral studies**

<u>Findings</u>:   There were no conceptual misunderstandings or confusion associated with this question. The only problem observed was respondents missing the skip instruction. Many answered the question regardless of whether their answer to question 10 was 'yes' or 'no.' However, this problem will not exist in a web-administered format – the survey can be programmed to skip respondents as appropriate.

Also, it became clear during testing that a category was missing for those with a Bachelor's degree. As one respondent remarked, "I was looking for bachelor's degree."

12. What is the highest level of education that one or more of your parents or guardian(s) have earned?
- ☐ **Less than high school**
- ☐ **High school diploma or GED**
- ☐ **Some college but no degree**
- ☐ **Associate's degree**
- ☐ **Bachelor's degree or higher**

<u>Findings</u>: Most respondents answered question 12 with no difficulty, but the issue of whether to include stepparents arose again in this question. As one respondent commented, "I reverted back to biological parents again. And when I think of my stepdad, I actually don't know." Her last statement suggests that a 'don't know' option should be considered, and, in fact, another respondent further illustrates the need, particularly for those whose education was obtained overseas. He said, "I have no idea. I know my mother was an RN, but I don't know what the requirements were in Argentina when she got it back in the early 60's. So I don't know the answer to that." Another respondent, while able to answer, also understood the potential for difficulties when degrees are not obtained in the US. He said:

"That one was easy to check [but] I would've been more confused if there was a master's [category]. Because my mom is a lawyer but, in the Soviet Union, law school was part of your Bachelor's. So that would've confused me. For her it's a Bachelor's degree, but it's the equivalent of a master's degree here."

In order to clarify who respondents should consider, the question could be modified to:

12. What is the highest level of education that one or more of your birth parents, stepparents, or guardian(s) have earned?

13.Did you receive a U.S. Pell Grant while attending a four-year college or university?
- ☐ **Yes**
- ☐ **No**

<u>Findings</u>:   This question asks respondents for information that most could not remember. Many respondents guessed at an answer even if they were unsure. Some respondents who were uncertain chose to answer 'no.' For example, one respondent said, "I do know what it is, but I don't really remember if I had a Pell Grant, so I just selected 'no' for that one. I definitely had loans and grants, but I can't really remember." Similarly, another respondent said, "I don't remember [laughs]. I don't remember which one." She decided to answer 'no,' as did another respondent who explained:

"I said 'no' just because I don't really know what it is. What is – a Pell Grant is the – what – yeah, I'm not sure. It's been a while since college. I'm positive if I had received it, I would have remembered it. So, I'm guessing I did not receive it. But I can't remember what a Pell Grant was."

Other respondents who received assistance answered 'yes' if Pell Grant was their best guess. One respondent said:

"I am pretty sure it was a Pell Grant. I remember filling out the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] thing and I'm pretty sure that's what it was called. It's like the government grant or something. But, yeah, the specifying [of] Pell Grant is hard to think back."

Using a similar rationale in answering 'yes,' another respondent said, "I'm pretty sure I received at least a few as an undergraduate. I have a vague memory that it was based on my parents' salary. That was my vague memory of why I received those."

However, some respondents may leave this field blank rather than guess. For example, one respondent did not answer the question and explained:

"I cannot remember. I've been out of college for 20 years. I know I had financial aid. I just cannot remember the Pell Grant part. That's way too specific...I remember filling out the FAFSA form. I remember my college giving me scholarships. I remember my parents paying monthly. But I also know some money was given to me. You know what? Having this conversation, I do not think I got a Pell Grant. And I could be wrong."

It was only after extended discussion with the interviewer that the respondent leaned toward thinking the answer was 'no.' But initially she left the question blank.

In discussion of the findings, the program decided to drop the question.

APPENDIX: LIST OF COUNTRIES FOR GEMS ON-LINE DROP-DOWN MENU

Afghanistan
Albania
Algeria
Andorra
Angola
Antigua and Barbuda
Argentina
Armenia
Australia
Austria
Azerbaijan
Bahamas
Bahrain
Bangladesh
Barbados
Belarus
Belgium
Belize
Benin
Bhutan
Bolivia
Bosnia and Herzegovina
Botswana
Brazil
Brunei
Bulgaria
Burkina Faso
Burma
Burundi
Cabo Verde
Cambodia
Cameroon
Canada
Cayman Islands
Central African Republic
Chad
Chile
China
Colombia
Comoros
Congo
Costa Rica
Croatia
Cuba
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Denmark
Djibouti
Dominica
Dominican Republic
Ecuador
Egypt

El Salvador
Equatorial Guinea
Eritrea
Estonia
Eswatini
Ethiopia
Fiji
Finland
France
Gabon
Gambia
Georgia
Germany
Ghana
Greece
Grenada
Guatemala
Guinea
Guinea-Bissau
Guyana
Haiti
Holy See
Honduras
Hong Kong (non-state)
Hungary
Iceland
India
Indonesia
Iran
Iraq
Ireland
Israel
Italy
Ivory Coast
Jamaica
Japan
Jordan
Kazakhstan
Kenya
Kiribati
Kosovo
Kuwait
Kyrgyzstan
Laos
Latvia
Lebanon
Lesotho
Liberia
Libya
Liechtenstein
Lithuania
Luxembourg
Madagascar
Malawi

Malaysia
Maldives
Mali
Malta
Marshall Islands
Mauritania
Mauritius
Mexico
Micronesia
Moldova
Monaco
Mongolia
Montenegro
Morocco
Mozambique
Namibia
Nauru
Nepal
Netherlands
New Zealand
Nicaragua
Niger
Nigeria
North Korea
North Macedonia
Norway
Oman
Pakistan
Palau
Palestinian Territories (non-state)
Panama
Papua New Guinea
Paraguay
Peru
Philippines
Poland
Portugal
Qatar
Romania
Russia
Rwanda
Saint Kitts and Nevis
Saint Lucia
Saint Vincent/ the Grenadines
Samoa
San Marino
Sao Tome and Principe
Saudi Arabia
Senegal
Serbia
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Singapore
Slovakia

Slovenia
Solomon Islands
Somalia
South Africa
South Korea
South Sudan
Spain
Sri Lanka
Sudan
Suriname
Sweden
Switzerland
Syria
Taiwan (non-state)
Tajikistan
Tanzania
Thailand
Timor-Leste
Togo
Tonga
Trinidad and Tobago
Tunisia
Turkey
Turkmenistan
Tuvalu
Uganda
Ukraine
United Arab Emirates
United Kingdom
United States
Uruguay
Uzbekistan
Vanuatu
Venezuela
Vietnam
Yemen
Zambia
Zimbabwe