

Guidelines for Researchers Using Questionnaires

In order to provide a consistent experience for researchers, particularly for students doing research in the context of a class, the IRB provides these guidelines. These are based on normative practices as seen in the CITI training materials, established by IRBs at other institutions (Columbia and Georgetown in particular), and also espoused by data management best practices sites.

1. Demographic data collected must have a direct relationship to the research question or the hypothesis. This relationship must be articulated in the IRB application.
2. Collection of unrelated demographic material should not be included as an academic exercise or for the mere experience of the student researcher, or the research process.
3. If demographic data not directly related to the research question or hypothesis is being collected so that the results may be logically compared to other published research, this rationale must also be fully explained in the IRB application and must be in conformance with points 1 and 2 above.
4. Questionnaires that contain items asking about illegal or sensitive topics must be approved by the IRB (also note that projects containing such questions can never fall under the Classroom Research Policy). The IRB will ensure that such proposals have adequate protections for the participants in terms of data collection and effective data privacy management. If researchers are students they must complete the CITI Training, like all researchers who submit proposals to the IRB.
5. End product does not matter, as rules must be consistently applied to all researchers in order to provide effective human subject protection. The IRB weighs the potential harm of the participant with regards to the value of the information produced. Proposals asking participants to disclose illegal activities need to clearly show benefit to society and add to generalizable knowledge to be granted IRB approval. Such benefit must be articulated in the proposal.
6. Consents must be separate from any data collected, regardless of the medium of collection (e.g. paper survey, internet, app, or any computer/electronic device).
7. Data management, regardless of the medium (compilation, analysis, storage, disposal), must provide adequate protection for the participants, and be clearly described in the IRB application in conformance with recognized best practices, which should be referenced in the IRB application.
8. Researchers should be allowed the data collection medium of their choice that best serves the needs of their projects.

A note on collecting demographic information

Many studies include questions about basic demographic characteristics of respondents. These questions may be included for classification purposes, in order to describe the sample, or because those characteristics are important to the questions being

asked in the research. Collecting basic demographic characteristics of respondents is important. However, as highlighted in the points above, researchers should *justify* why they have included demographic questions, especially if they are highly detailed, as the inclusion of such questions should not be assumed to be standard practice and could result in de-anonymizing data. That is, collecting highly detailed demographic information could result in the possibility of individual participants being identified based on those characteristics. For example, a study of college students that includes the following demographic information could potentially be used to de-anonymize students: age, sex, sexual orientation, race, nation of origin, major, and whether or not they live on campus. Some majors have very few students. Knowing that a participant is, for instance 35, male, gay, black, from Trinidad, lives off campus, and is a Sociology major may result in identifying the one student who meets all those characteristics.

Additionally, researchers should be aware that demographic categories are changing. For instance, there are a growing number of people who do not identify their sex as male or female, but may choose intersex or other. Likewise, there are people who do not identify their gender as man or woman, but as transgender or queer, among many other options. Below are suggested wordings for some basic demographic questions that are inclusive and recognize our growing awareness of human diversity. As with any item, demographic questions are optional for the participant to answer.

1) Which of the following sex identities best fits you?

- Male
- Female
- Intersex
- Other: Please write your sex identity

2) Which of the following gender identities best fits you?

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender (optional)
- Cisgender (optional)
- Genderqueer (optional)
- Agender (optional)
- Gender Fluid (optional)
- Bigender (optional)
- Androgynous (optional)
- Other: Please write your gender identity

3) What is your race/ethnicity?

- Non-Hispanic: White
- Non-Hispanic: Black
- Hispanic: White
- Hispanic: Black
- Asian
- Other

4) What is your religion, if any?

- Roman Catholic
- None (this includes atheists, agnostics, brights, freethinkers)
- Southern Baptist
- non-denominational Christian
- Jewish
- Methodist (optional)
- Presbyterian (optional)
- Lutheran (optional)
- Muslim
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Protestant (otherwise unspecified)
- Other