

# Relationship Focus Group Protocol

## A. INTRODUCTION (20 MINUTES)

### A1. Individual Completion of Relationship Question (5 minutes)

Prior to the beginning of the discussion, the moderator should tell participants they are about to receive a couple of questions that we would like them to complete. Before the questions are handed out, the following instructions should be offered:

- “Pretend you have received this form in the mail from the Census Bureau
- Your partner is not at home, so you will be filling out the information for your household
  - o First names only
  - o Complete the form for all people currently living or staying at your address
- DO NOT CONFER with your partner – each person should complete this on his/her own
- When you have finished, please hand the completed forms to the moderator.”

Hand out forms, give participants time to complete, and collect all completed forms before moving to the next topic

NOTE: It is important that participants complete the forms **before** they receive any additional information about the purpose of the focus group. The description of the study aims (below) will likely alter their approach to these questions – we’d like their responses to be as “untainted” as possible.

### A2. Welcome and Topic Introduction (2 minutes)

Hello, I’m <MODERATOR>, and I’m the moderator for today’s group discussion. I work for Westat, a private research firm located in Rockville, Maryland. <DESCRIBE OTHERS SEATED IN ROOM AS NECESSARY.>

Tonight’s discussion is one of several focus groups we will be conducting at different sites around the country for the US Census Bureau. What we’ll be talking about is how you think about your relationship with your partner, and how you describe that relationship to other people. You are in this discussion group because you [CHARACTERISTICS SPECIFIC TO EACH GROUP]. These focus groups are the first step being taken by the Census Bureau to learn how they can more accurately enumerate different living situations in the decennial census and other household surveys that they conduct.

I want to thank each of you for coming today and for fitting this session into your schedule.

### **A3. Disclosures and ground rules (5-8 minutes)**

1. [IF APPLICABLE] Facility: Describe overhead mikes, mirrors, observers.
2. As was discussed when you called about participating, the session is being audio- and video-taped. This is so I can write an accurate report about the issues raised in the discussion.
3. In the report, your contributions will be *anonymous* – no names will be associated with anything that is said in tonight’s discussion. The information you share today will be used only for the purposes of this research study and will not be shared with anyone who is not part of the research team. Personally identifiable information about you will be kept confidential.
4. Your participation in the discussion group is voluntary. We do appreciate your taking the time to be here this evening, but if you’re uncomfortable with the discussion at any time, you may choose to leave.
5. There are a few things I’d like to go over to help make our discussion more productive:
  - Please speak one at a time and try not to engage in any side conversations during the discussion. I want to hear what everyone has to say – either today or when I go back to listen to the audio files to write up my summary.
  - I want to hear from everyone, but not every person has to answer every question.
  - I want to hear a range of experiences, so if you have an opinion different from what most in the group are saying, please don’t hesitate to speak up (there are no right or wrong answers).
6. At any time you can excuse yourself to go to the restroom, or to get more food or beverages. I ask that only one person leaves the room at a time so we can keep the discussion going.

### **A4. Participant Introductions and Rapport-building (5 minutes)**

Please introduce yourself to the group by telling us your first name and:

- Your current relationship status [MODERATOR - DO NOT PROBE FOR A SPECIFIC TYPE OF STATUS, NOTE IF THEY USE LEGAL TERMS ON THEIR OWN; KEEP TRACK FOR LATER PROBES]
- The length of time you’ve been in this relationship; and
- Do you have children in your household (Yes/No). If so, let us know if they’re your biological children, adopted, foster, etc.

<Moderator: DO NOT INTRODUCE SELF IN THIS DISCUSSION>

## B. Conceptualization/Terminology (40-50 minutes)

### B 1. Terms Used to Describe Connection to Important Others (Reference Terms) (20-25 minutes)

Let's talk about how you completed the relationship question in that "form" you received from the Census. I'm guessing that not everyone marked the same response category, and that's okay. There isn't a right or wrong answer to this question. We're interested in understanding how the response categories apply to each of you and your situations. With that in mind, let's talk about the answer you marked for this question. [MOVE AROUND ROOM TO GET RESPONSES FROM EVERYONE]

[DIRECT PROBE TO ALL WHO GAVE SAME RESPONSE, AND REPEAT FOR EACH SELECTION MENTIONED IN THE GROUP] Why did you select that particular term? How common is it for you to use that term in everyday situations? FOR ANYONE WHO SELECTED 'OTHER RELATIVE' OR 'OTHER NON-RELATIVE': If a blank, write-in option had been available on the form, what would you have written in? Explain. [MODERATOR - AS APPROPRIATE, ASK SPECIFIC PROBES BASED ON HOW INDIVIDUAL DEFINED HIS/HER RELATIONSHIP AT BEGINNING OF DISCUSSION (e.g., "At the beginning of the group, you said that you and Mary have not formalized your relationship. If you were to obtain a marriage license, how would that change your response to this question? Explain.)]

- [MODERATOR - WORK OFF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES] Under what circumstances would you use [*Husband/wife, spouse, partner, roommate/housemate, boy/girlfriend, significant other*, OR OTHERS AS OFFERED] to describe a relationship? Why/not? What does that term mean to you?
  - o POSSIBLE SCENARIOS (IF PARTICIPANTS UNABLE TO COME UP WITH ALTERNATE CIRCUMSTANCES):
    - [LGBT GROUPS] You've just taken a job with a Fortune 500 company where no one knows you're gay. You are at a Friday night social with these new colleagues – how do you introduce him/her to your co-workers? [PROBE: Why?]
    - [LGBT GROUPS] You are in a LGBT-only social setting – dance club, supper, couples group. How do you introduce him/her to folks in this setting? [PROBE: Why?]
    - [OPPOSITE SEX UNMARRIED GROUPS] You have just taken a management job with a Fortune 500 company, and are planning to attend a Friday night social with your new colleagues. How do you introduce your partner to your new co-workers? Explain.

- [OPPOSITE SEX UNMARRIED GROUPS] There's a new Methodist church that was built a half mile from your home, and you and your partner decide to join this congregation. The first Sunday you are there, how do you introduce your partner to the Minister? Other congregants? Explain.
- (IF NOT ALREADY COVERED IN DISCUSSION WITH FIRST BULLET) How do you list your relationship on official forms? PROBE WITH THE FOLLOWING AS NEEDED:
  - Health insurance forms?
  - Lease/Mortgage applications?
  - Credit card application?
  - Forms required by school or work?
- What other options, if any, would you like to see included under the Relationship question? Explain.

### FOR GROUPS WHERE AT LEAST 3 OF THE COUPLES HAS KIDS - (10 minutes)

On the relationship question on the form you just completed, how did you describe your relationship to the children in your household?

- PROBES: Mother/father? Co-parent? Aunt/uncle? Explain why you chose [OPTION] rather than [SELECT ANOTHER OPTION].
- [MODERATOR – WORK OFF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES] – Under what circumstances would you use [PICK A TERM NOT USED]? Why/not? What does that term mean to you?
  - POSSIBLE SCENARIOS (IF PARTICIPANTS UNABLE TO COME UP WITH ALTERNATE CIRCUMSTANCES):
    - Your partner is the [Pater/birth-mother] of a 6 year old son from a previous marriage. You're home on a weekday when the phone rings – it's the school nurse, asking to speak to the boy's FATHER [or MOTHER]. How do you respond? Explain.
    - Same scenario but it's the registration office for the boy's basketball league – how do you respond? Explain. [NOTE – goal for these two bullets is to see if potential emergency situation changes response. Might be another point of contrast we could explore, however.]

## **B 2. Terms Used to Describe Relationship Status (20-25 minutes)**

We've just spent some time talking about the terms you use to refer to your "better half" and the situations under which you might choose one term over another. Now let's talk about how you think and talk about the relationship itself. Pretend you received a form from the Census Bureau and you have to fill out this question. Check the box that you feel best describes your status, and continue across the page completing the question for your partner. FOR GROUPS WITH BOTH MEMBERS OF A COUPLE PARTICIPATING - Again please do not confer with your partner as you mark your responses. [GIVE PARTICIPANTS 1-2 MINUTES TO COMPLETE]

There were five options on this form for "marital status":

- Now married
- Widowed
- Divorced
- Separated
- Never married

Which did you choose for yourself and for your partner? [IF DIFFERENT – FIRST ASK "Explain why you selected a different option for your partner."]

MODERATOR NOTE: PAY ATTENTION TO THE NATURAL USE OF TERMS DESCRIBING A "LEGAL STATUS" IN THIS PORTION OF THE DISCUSSION. AS THOSE TERMS COME UP, PROBE FOR THE PARTICIPANTS OWN PERCEPTION OF THE MEANING.

- What (IF ANY – DEPENDS ON GROUP) certificates do you have for your relationship? [PROBES – Registered domestic partnership? Civil union? Marriage?]
- Why did you select [OPTION] to describe your relationship? PROBE: How well do you think [OPTION] describes your relationship?
- Think about occasions when you've completed forms like this, a government survey or some other official forms. In your opinion, do you think "marital status" refers to a legally recognized relationship on these forms, or something else?
- What other options would you have wanted to see included for the Marital Status question? Explain.

We're also interested in your opinion about some other, possible scenarios. In the following situations, what would be the best response option for the marital status question? Explain. [DEPENDING UPON AVAILABLE TIME, SELECT 2-3 SITUATIONS THAT HAVE NOT ALREADY COME UP IN THE COURSE OF THE DISCUSSION ABOVE]

- (LGBT GROUPS ONLY) Couple that had a legal marriage performed in Iowa, but live in DC [these illustrative locations will vary, depending upon where we are running the groups]
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: What do you consider "legal marriage" to mean?
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: In your opinion, do you consider people who are legally married to be **related** or **unrelated** to each other?
  - FOR GROUPS WITH AT LEAST 3 COUPLES WITH KIDS: How about when children live with a legally married couple? In that situation do you consider the couple to be related or unrelated?
- (OPPOSITE SEX GROUPS) Common law marriage partners living in the same state of the common law marriage.
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: What do you consider "common-law marriage" to mean?
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: In your opinion, do you consider people in a common law marriage to be **related** or **unrelated** to each other?
  - FOR GROUPS WITH AT LEAST 3 COUPLES WITH KIDS: How about when children live in the household? In that situation do you consider the couple to be related or unrelated?
- (OPPOSITE SEX GROUPS) Same situation, but the couple no longer resides in the same state in which the common law marriage was recognized.
- (ALL GROUPS, BUT IF TIME IS SHORT WILL DROP FOR OPPOSITE SEX GROUPS) A couple that are registered domestic partners [May need to explore in some detail - registration may be county-based for benefits purposes, but have no other legal status otherwise]
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: What do you consider "registered domestic partners" to mean?
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: In your opinion, do you consider registered domestic partners to be **related** or **unrelated** to each other?

- FOR GROUPS WITH AT LEAST 3 COUPLES WITH KIDS: How about when children live in the household? In that situation do you consider the couple to be related or unrelated?
- (ALL GROUPS, BUT IF TIME IS SHORT WILL DROP FOR OPPOSITE SEX GROUPS) Couple that had a civil union performed in [Vermont, but live in DC](#)
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: What do you consider “a civil union” to mean?
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: In your opinion, do you consider a couple with a civil union to be **related** or **unrelated** to each other?
  - FOR GROUPS WITH AT LEAST 3 COUPLES WITH KIDS: How about when children live in the household? In that situation do you consider the couple to be related or unrelated?
- (LGBT GROUPS) Couple that had a commitment ceremony performed by a lay minister
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: What do you consider “a commitment ceremony” to mean?
  - AS NEEDED, PROBE WITH: In your opinion, do you consider a couple that had a commitment ceremony to be **related** or **unrelated** to each other?
  - FOR GROUPS WITH AT LEAST 3 COUPLES WITH KIDS: How about when children live in the household? In that situation do you consider the couple to be related or unrelated?
- (ALL GROUPS) Couple that is not married, but has lived together for 12 years; 3 years; 6 months

### **B 3. Alternate Versions of Marital Status Question (10-15 minutes)**

So now, I'd like you to take a couple minutes and answer a few different versions of relationship and marital status questions used on other surveys. FOR GROUPS WITH BOTH MEMBERS OF A COUPLE PARTICIPATING - As with the Census Bureau form, each of you should answer the questions independently, do not confer with your 'better half' when answering.

UK: [\[INSERT UK CENSUS RELATIONSHIP AND MARITAL STATUS QUESTIONS\]](#)

Canada: [INSERT MODIFIED CANADIAN CENSUS RELATIONSHIP AND MARITAL STATUS]

New Zealand: [INSERT NEW ZEALAND CENSUS RELATIONSHIP AND MARITAL STATUS]

Which, if any, of these questions do you feel best describes your relationship with your partner? Why? [IF MORE THAN ONE IS DISCUSSED: Is there one that stands out more than the others? If so, explain.]

Are there options here that you don't like at all? Why?

### B 3. Vignettes [OPTION ONLY IF TIME PERMITS (10 minutes)]

How would you answer the relationship and marital status questions for these hypothetical situations:

- Same sex couple that was married in 2002 in Belgium (where same-sex marriage is legal). The couple currently resides in a US state where same-sex marriage is not legally recognized but domestic partnership is. They are not registered as domestic partners in the state where they reside.
- Same sex couple has been together for 10 years. They live together and reside in a state where no same-sex unions are recognized. They have never participated in any type of commitment ceremony (legal or otherwise). They have one adopted child that they are raising together.
- Opposite sex couple living together for 5 years who have never participated in any type of commitment ceremony (legal or otherwise). They reside in a state that recognizes common law marriage.

### C. Close (5 minutes)

#### C 1. Observer Questions

We are at the end of the questions I have this evening. Let me check with my colleagues who have been observing and see if they have any additional questions for you. [ASK AS APPROPRIATE]

Opposite-sex husband or wife of Person 1

Opposite-sex common-law partner of Person 1

Same-sex married spouse of Person 1

Same-sex common-law partner of Person 1

Son or daughter of Person 1 only

Son-in-law or daughter-in-law of Person 1

Grandchild of Person 1

Father or mother of Person 1

Father-in-law or mother-in-law of Person 1

Brother or sister of Person 1

Foster child

Room-mate, lodger or boarder

Other — *Specify*




## **C 2. Participant Questions**

Are there any additional comments you would like to make this evening about what we have discussed in the group? [TAKE AS APPROPRIATE]

Thank you again for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences with us this evening!