

Assessing Open-Ended Self-Reports of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity: Is There Room For Improvement?

David Richards, PhD
Study Director, Beginning Postsecondary
Students Longitudinal Study
National Center for Education Statistics

Elise Christopher, PhD
Study Director, High School
Longitudinal Studies
National Center for Education Statistics

Maura Spiegelman, PhD
Study Director, National Teacher and
Principal Survey
National Center for Education Statistics

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This presentation is intended to promote ideas. The views expressed are part of ongoing research and do not necessarily reflect the position of the U.S. Department of Education.

Agenda for talk

- Background and research questions
- Study introductions
- Sexual orientation and gender identity items used
- Methodology for present research
- Results
- Discussion

Background

- Around 2012, NCES identified a need to introduce measures of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) wherever possible to national education studies
 - A lack of data on educational and labor force outcomes for LGBTQ+ populations
 - Since 2016, several NCES studies have included SOGI items asked of non-minors
- Use and utility of open-ended response options in questions about SOGI have varied across federal surveys
 - About 16% of write-in responses to questions on sexual orientation in the 2020 Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Study (CBAMS) were an unlisted identity (Bates et al. 2019).
 - For the 2020 CBAMS Mindsets Panel Web Survey and 2020 Census Tracking Survey, about 32% to 37% of write-in responses were an unlisted identity. For the 2020 Census Opinion Survey, only 7% provided an unlisted identity. Unlisted identities were more often reported by younger, female, and White respondents (Feurer et al. 2022).
- Presence of an open-ended response option and treatment of respondents for analysis can impact findings (West and McCabe 2021)

Research Questions

Among surveys of postsecondary students and recent graduates:

1. How often did respondents use an open-ended response option when categories were provided?
2. What percentage of open-ended responses were meaningful?
3. What meaningful write-in responses were provided?
4. What percentage of open-ended responses were protest responses?

Study introductions

National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS)

- The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study:
 - Cross-sectional study of students at all levels of postsecondary education
 - Focused on college financing and financial aid
 - Conducted every 3–4 years since 1987
 - Most recent NPSAS covers academic year 2019-20
 - NPSAS years act as alternate base years for Beginning Postsecondary Students (BPS) and Baccalaureate and Beyond (B&B) longitudinal studies
 - Data collected primarily through web surveys with phone interviews as a secondary method

Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study (B&B)

- Focuses on life after completing a bachelor's degree, including labor market outcomes, further education, and family formation
 - Alternating NPSAS collections serve as the base-year collection
 - Follow-up collections 1 year, 4 years, and 10 years following graduation
 - Data collected through mix of web and phone interviews
- Nationally representative sample of students graduating with baccalaureate degrees
- Special emphasis on new teachers, but in 2008 also oversampled STEM majors

Study members included in this analysis

Study name	Eligibility	Collection year	Cases
B&B:08/18	Earned a BA in 2008	2018	<i>n</i> =14,670
B&B:16/20	Earned a BA in 2016	2020	<i>n</i> =17,160
NPSAS:20	Postsecondary student in 2020	2020	<i>n</i> =100,410

Sexual orientation and gender identity items used

Sexual Orientation (SO) and Gender identity (GI) questions in NCES postsecondary surveys

- Initial focus group and expert recommendations suggested that gender identity measure should be “two-step”
 - Sex at birth asked first, then current gender with more than two options
- Reviewed extant measures – not many federal surveys asked GI at time of development, but for SO consulted YRBS, NHIS, NSFG
- Needed to balance ability for sample members to report identities with minimization of measurement error and burden
- SOGI questions were added to the demographics section of the surveys

SOGI questions in B&B and NPSAS

Gender Identity

What sex were you assigned at birth (what the doctor put on your birth certificate)?

- 1=Male
- 2=Female

What is your gender? Your gender is how you feel inside and can be the same or different than your biological or birth sex. 1=Yes, 0=No

- Male
- Female
- Transgender, male-to-female
- Transgender, female-to-male
- Genderqueer or gender nonconforming (please describe)
- You are not sure (please describe)

Sexual Orientation

Do you think of yourself as...

- 1=Lesbian or gay, that is, homosexual
- 2=Straight, that is, heterosexual
- 3=Bisexual
- 4=A different identity (please describe)
- 5=Don't know (please describe)

Methodology for present research

Research Question 1:

How often did respondents use open-ended response options?

Use of open-ended responses was coded and percentages were calculated for each of the following responses:

- Gender
 - Genderqueer or gender nonconforming (please describe)
 - You are not sure (please describe)
- Sexual Orientation
 - A different identity (please describe)
 - Don't know (please describe)

Separate percentages for the above four items were calculated for three studies (B&B:08/18, B&B:16/20, NPSAS:20).

Research Question 2:

What percentage of open-ended responses were meaningful?

We developed a rubric for coding whether open-ended responses were meaningful (e.g., substantive, relevant, intelligible, cooperative, novel).

Non-meaningful responses include those categorized as the following:

- PROTEST (IDEOLOGICAL) – Protest of the question, social commentary.
- PROTEST (METHODOLOGICAL) – Protest of the way we're asking, phrasing, terminology.
- DECLINE – Prefers not to answer.
- UNSURE – Does not know answer.
- REDUNDANT – Specified an option already provided.
- UNINTELLIGIBLE – Unclear what the answer means.

Research Question 2:

What percentage of open-ended responses were meaningful?

- Three researchers independently coded the open-ended responses.
- To determine final coding, independent codes for the researchers were reviewed for agreement. A response was determined to be meaningful if at least two researchers coded it so.
- Researchers computed the percentage of meaningful responses out of open-ended responses for each question.

Research Question 3:

What meaningful write-in responses were provided?

- The responses that were identified as meaningful were then coded into new categories not originally provided as response options.
- Separate categories were created for gender identity and sexual orientation.
- The frequency of meaningful and novel open-ended responses was then measured within gender identity and sexual orientation.

Research Question 4:

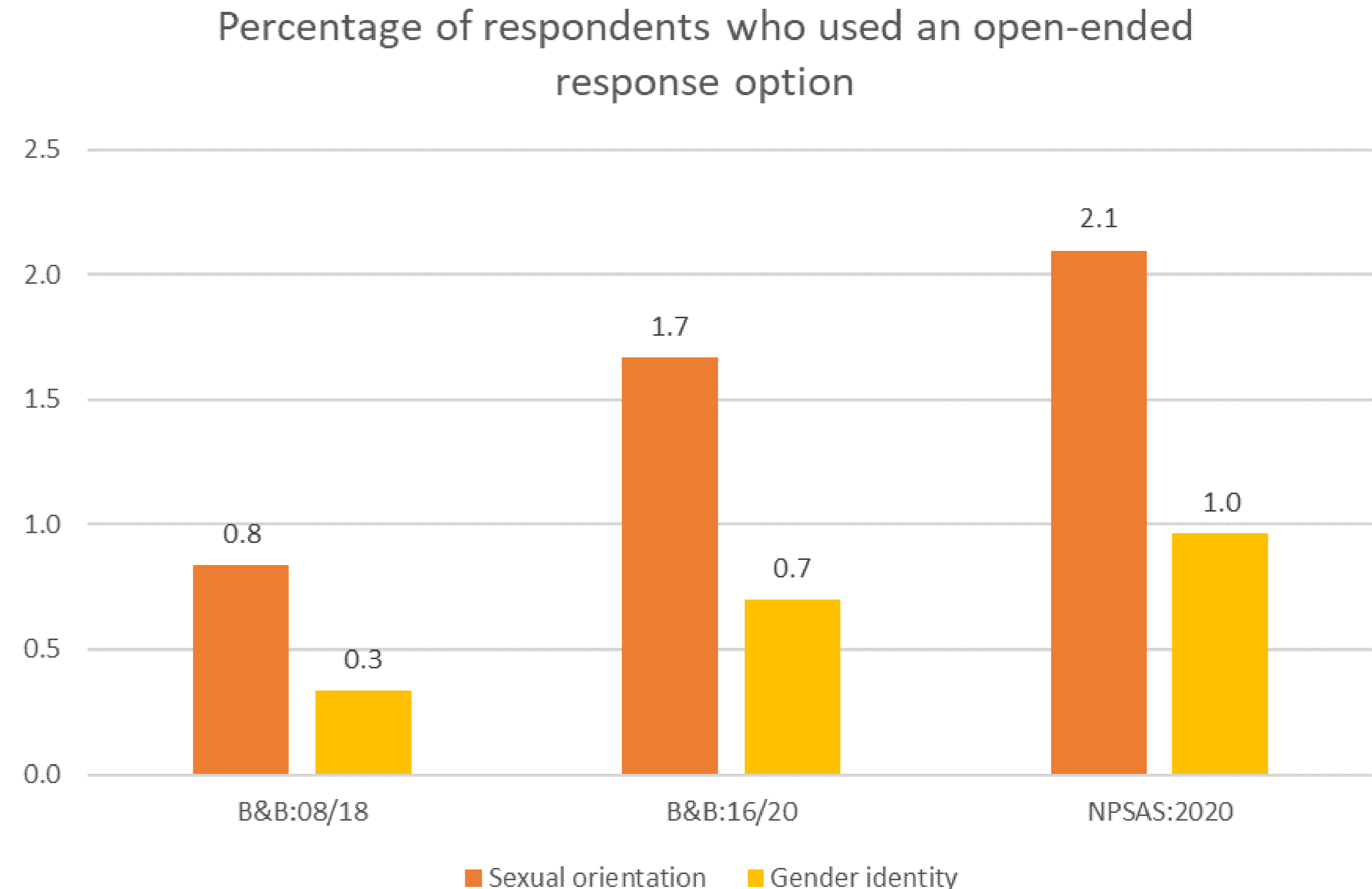
What percentage of open-ended responses were protest responses?

- As noted previously, researchers coded non-meaningful responses as
 - **PROTEST (IDEOLOGICAL)** – Protest of the question, social commentary.
 - **PROTEST (METHODOLOGICAL)** – Protest of the way we're asking, phrasing, terminology.
 - **DECLINE** – Prefer not to answer.
 - **UNSURE** – Does not know answer.
 - **REDUNDANT** – Specified an option already provided.
 - **UNINTELLIGIBLE** – Unclear what the answer means.
- As with meaningfulness, a response was determined to be an ideological protest if at least of the researchers coded it as such.
- Researchers computed the percentage of cases that responded with an ideological protest.

Results

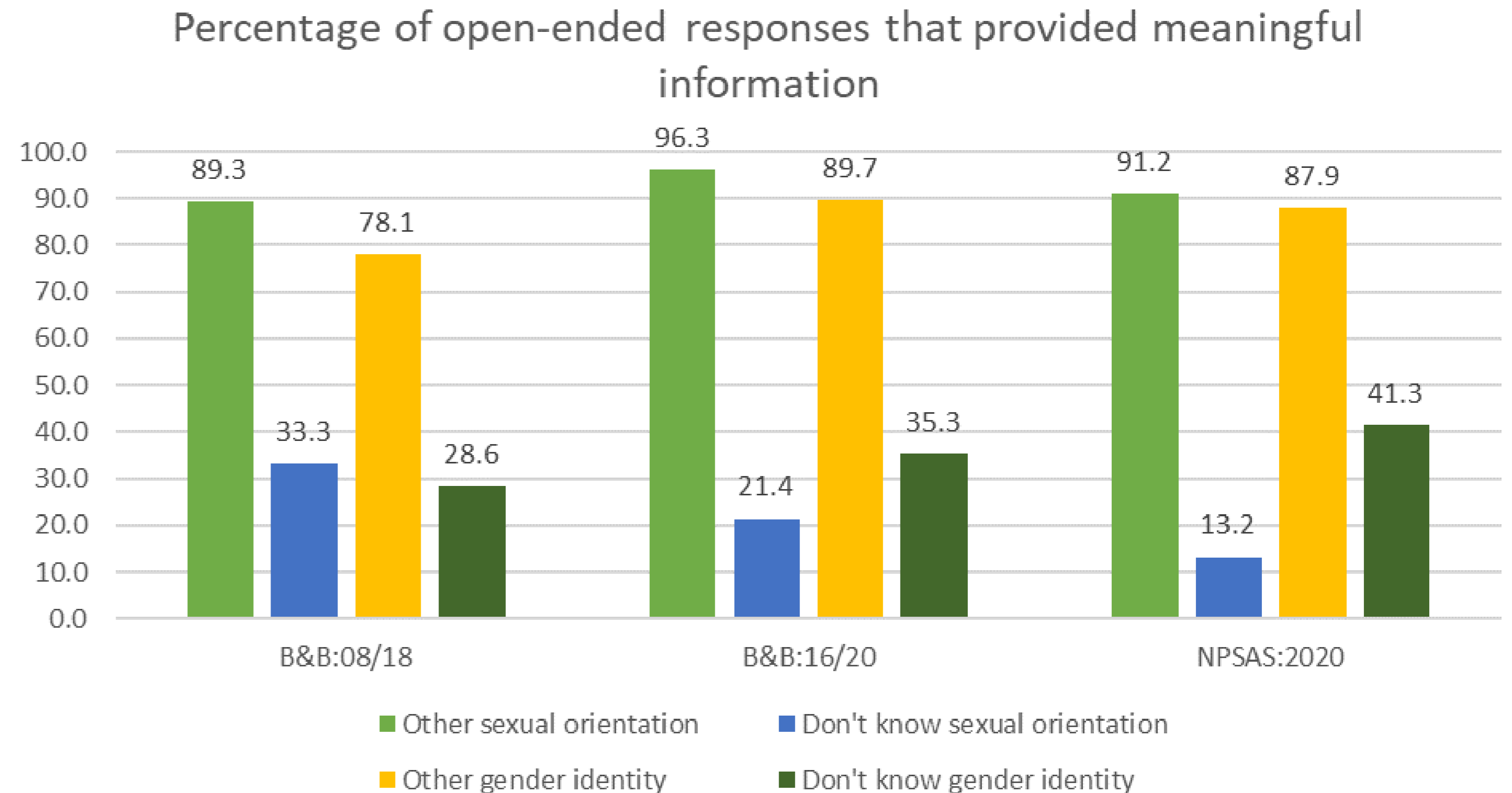
How often did respondents use open-ended response options?

- About 1% to 2% of respondents provided an open-ended response instead of selecting an offered category for their sexual orientation, and about 0.3% to 1% for their gender identity
- When respondents provided an open-ended response, this was typically because they had a response that was different than those offered (an “other” response), rather than because they "didn't know"
- Open-ended responses were provided more frequently for surveys with a more recent sample. (Though this was not tested with inferential statistical analysis.)



What percentage of open-ended responses were meaningful?

- Most write-in responses for "other" sexual orientations and gender identities were considered meaningful
- Relatively fewer explanations where respondents "didn't know" their sexual orientation or gender identity were coded as meaningful
- The meaningful rates for "don't know" respondents varied by study. (Though this was not tested with inferential statistical analysis.)

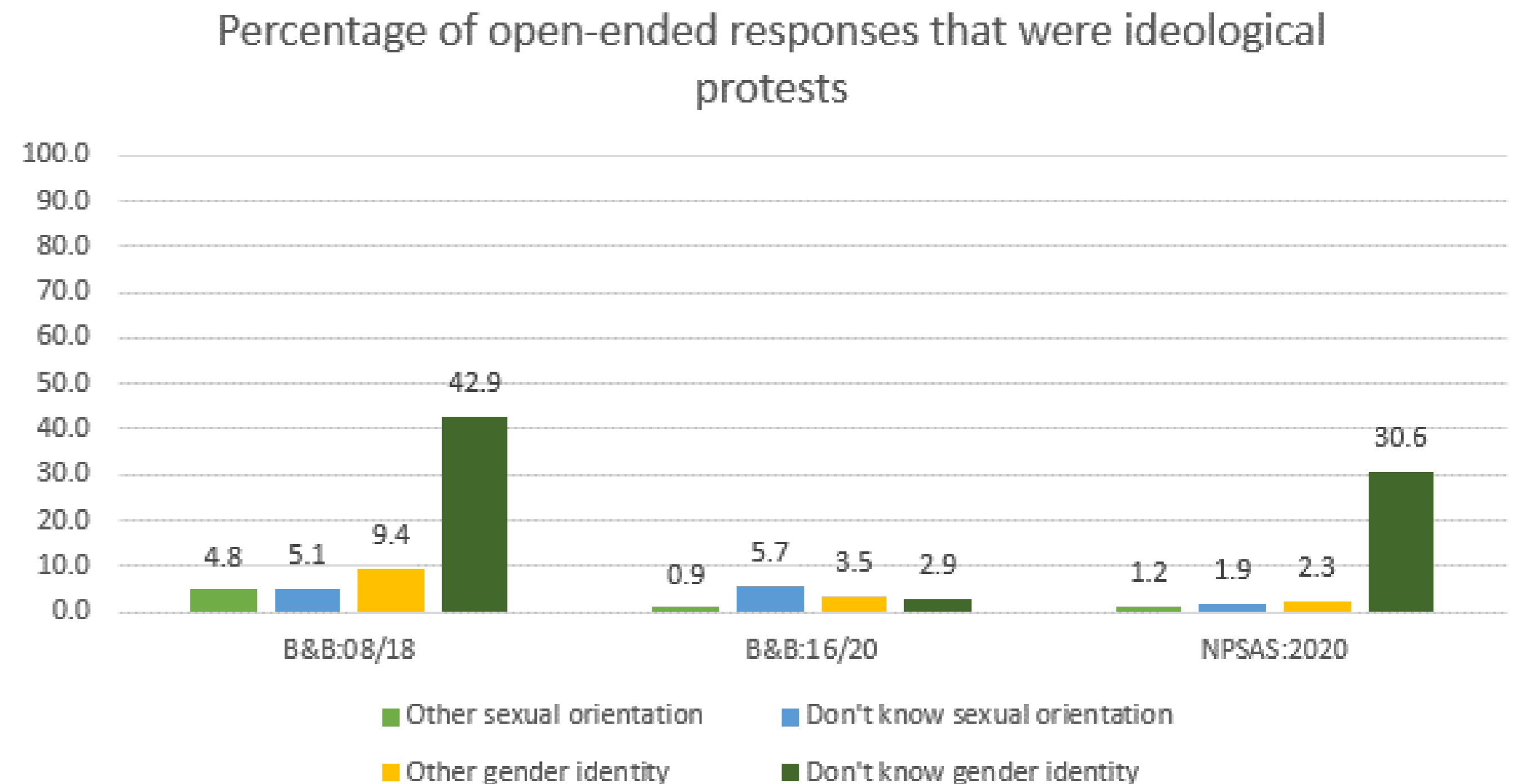


What meaningful write-in responses were provided?

- For sexual orientation, text answers were most frequently categorized as **pansexual** (23% to 32%), **asexual** (17% to 23%), or **queer** (8% to 20%).
- For gender identity, text answers were most frequently categorized as **nonbinary** (14% to 41%).
- Some respondents reported terms that were sub-constructs within the larger sexual orientation construct.
 - Sexual behavior: "polyamorous"
 - Romantic orientation: "aromantic," "panromantic"
- Some respondents reported terms that were sub-constructs within the larger gender identity construct.
 - Gender expression/presentation: "present as femme"
 - Gendered pronouns: "they/them pronouns," "use she/they pronouns"

What percentage of write-in responses were protest responses?

- A minority of write-in responses for "other" sexual orientations and gender identities were considered **ideological protest** responses (e.g., "there are only 2 genders"), though the proportion varied by study
 - 1% to 6% for sexual orientation – these are of the 0.8% to 2.1% of respondents who wrote in responses
 - 3% to 43% for gender identity – these are of the 0.3% to 1.0% of respondents who wrote in responses



Discussion

Discussion

- Additional terminology to consider: asexual, pansexual, nonbinary, queer
- Protest responses – were they an issue?
 - Relatively tiny when considering how many wrote protest responses compared to total number of respondents
- More testing should investigate whether adding new terms confuses people who are not writing in terms
 - Cognitive testing is always a good idea!
- More testing should investigate the sub-constructs that people think of when they are considering whether to use the write-in box

Thank you!!!

David Richards, PhD

Study Director, Beginning

Postsecondary Students Longitudinal
Study (BPS)

National Center for Education
Statistics, Institute of Education
Sciences

David.Richards@ed.gov

<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/bps>

Elise Christopher, PhD

Study Director, High School

Longitudinal Studies

National Center for Education
Statistics, Institute of Education
Sciences

Elise.Christopher@ed.gov

<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/hsls09>

Maura Spiegelman, PhD

Study Director, National Teacher
and Principal Survey

National Center for Education
Statistics, Institute of Education
Sciences

Maura.Spiegelman@ed.gov

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