Developing survey questions on sexual identity:

Exploratory focus groups

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Acknowledgements

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1 Executive summary and recommendations

1.1 Introduction

There is an increasing requirement for data on sexual orientation, or sexual identity, to meet current and future legislative requirements. ONS initiated a project that aimed to provide best practice with regard to data collection and its administration. This report discusses the findings from the exploratory stage of the research programme, where focus groups (by sex and identity type) were run with the general public. The findings feed into the design and further testing of prototype questioning on sexual identity. The intention is to include the questioning in the ONS Integrated Household Survey, where respondents are interviewed concurrently, both face-to-face and over the telephone.

An understanding of how the questioning is conceptualised, the basis on which answers are given and whether or not an accurate answer is provided (encompassing comprehension and survey administration issues) are investigated. It is important to note that when developing a question on this subject, balance needs to be struck between not offending any particular group and considering comprehension issues for all. Furthermore, that the questioning is appropriate for society at this point in time. However, recommendations are made for reviewing the question design and administration periodically to ensure that changes over time, for example in language and use of terminology, are accounted for.

A summary and recommendations are reported following each chapter and are summarised here across chapters.

Recommendations should be considered alongside findings from quantitative testing and discussions with interviewers as the research was designed to be examined from multiple perspectives. See:
http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project/quest-dev

1.2 Methodology

As part of the exploratory stage of the research process six focus groups were run in London in autumn 2007, homogeneous with respect to sexual identity and sex (heterosexual men, heterosexual women, gay men, gay/lesbian women, bisexual men and bisexual women). A purposive sampling technique was employed.

It is important to note that the findings from this report should be taken into consideration along side findings from future one-to-one interviews with people who were not covered by the focus group sampling and recruitment strategy (see chapter 3).

1.3 Findings and Recommendations

- It is recommended to proceed with further development and testing for two key reasons: i) the question was considered acceptable in a social survey context, providing privacy and data security were assured, and ii) participants in all groups were able to provide an answer to a question about sexual identity on a basis generally consistent with the intended meaning of the question.

- The concept of sexual identity was of differing salience and importance to different groups.

- It is not recommended that the term 'sexual identity' be included in the question stem as it is not a term in common use and its meaning varied somewhat. Participants focussed on the word 'sex' which was embarrassing to some and implied the concept of sexual behaviour. Nor should a definition of sexual identity be included in the wording, or provided for use alongside the question, since this would highlight the question and it would be difficult to provide one sufficiently succinct. Respondents should be able to draw sufficient meaning from the question stem and response categories without specific mention of the measurement concept.

- It is recommended that the phrase 'best describes how you think of yourself' as opposed to 'consider yourself to be' be included in the question stem since it was considered a softer approach, better describing the concept of sexual identity. Bisexuals in particular felt that this phrase indicated that answers could be qualified, fluid in different contexts or over time.

- The question should be treated as an opinion question - that is, its meaning and the basis for answer being subjective rather than prescribed. This means that the question would be administered using standard ONS opinion question guidelines[1] and as such would not be administered by proxy or through a translator. Indeed, from the research, proxy data collection is not recommended on the grounds of acceptability and accuracy. Further research is required into the effect of excluding proxy responses on the national estimate of the size and distribution of the LGB population.

- An introduction as to the purpose of the question is not recommended. The novelty of a sexual identity question on general purpose social surveys to members of the public suggests that it should be given appropriate context. The question should be located with other identity questions, so that respondents can infer meaning from the context and the question is not highlighted. However an explanation of the purpose should be available for interviewers to provide should respondents ask.

- It was considered acceptable to ask the question of all respondents aged 16 or over, although further testing is recommended among the youngest and oldest age-groups not covered at the focus groups to ensure this premise holds true.

- There was agreement that the three substantive categories heterosexual/straight, gay/lesbian and bisexual were all encompassing. Some of the bisexual group who were anti-categorisation said that they could choose the bisexual category in order to be counted. There was no consensus as to a suitable alternative to the term 'bisexual'. It was also thought that transgender people would be able to choose an appropriate category from the list, although it is recommended that further discussion with the transgender community be carried out before finalising the response categories.

- There were no clear recommendations from the focus groups as to the order in which the response categories should be presented, other than that heterosexual/straight should probably be first as it was the majority category.

- Gay and lesbian women felt that both terms should be separated by a slash (/) rather than the word 'or' to demonstrate that either could apply to women.

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[1] Office for National Statistics: Handbook for Face-to-Face Interviewers.

- The term 'homosexual' was cited as being old fashioned with negative connotations and was felt to favour the concept of behaviour due to its use by the medical profession and the media. The term 'gay' was felt to be a better description of identity. Therefore the term 'gay' should be used in preference to the term 'homosexual'.

- Inclusion of an 'other' category was thought appropriate by some of the bisexual focus group participants who were anti-categorisation. However, in the previous quantitative trials only a handful of cases were reported and the option was mainly used by heterosexual people who did not understand the question. Therefore different groups of people who used this category could not be distinguished from each other and would in effect become invisible. Further research is recommended into the use of the 'other' category by sexual minority groups. This is in order to facilitate a decision on whether to include an 'other' or alternatively worded category in the final question design.

- Consideration should be given to including a response option to refuse the question on the basis that some respondents may not wish to state their sexual identity. However as this is likely to increase item non-response it may be sufficient to simply allow for spontaneous 'don't know' and 'refusal' categories in interviewer administered surveys thereby negating the need for a substantive response category.

- Sexual identity, at the individual level, can differ according to context. Therefore answers to a question might not be accurate if privacy is not assured. This may result in an under-count of the LGB population, though to what extent is not known. Efforts to provide privacy should be incorporated into the design of the administration.

- A concurrent CAPI concealed showcard methodology is recommended to ensure inclusivity and privacy as far as possible. Similarly the methodology employed for those interviewed over the phone should also attempt to maintain privacy.

- Interviewer training in the administration of this kind of questioning is paramount. Interviewers should not be perceived to react negatively or hesitantly to the question in any way.

- It was felt that those with strong religious beliefs relating to sexual minority behaviour and those living in less diverse urban environments may be more likely to object to the questioning.

- Consideration should be given to the location of the question in relation to a question on religion, since that forms part of the sequence of identity questions and may influence the answers given to sexual identity.

- Focus group participants highlighted the fact that people from the Afro-Caribbean community use and understand different terms related to describing those from sexual minority groups. Further research is recommended with respect to terminology used.

- Sexual minority groups highlighted the importance of being counted and hoped that over time the questioning would have a normative effect. As it became more commonplace to ask about sexual identity in different contexts the question would therefore become more acceptable.

- No single question will capture the full complexity of sexual orientation. A suite of questions would be necessary to collect data on the different dimensions of sexual

orientation, including attraction, behaviour and identity, and to examine consistency between them at the individual level. However, although participants considered the concepts of attraction and behaviour easier to grasp than sexual identity they were not in favour of asking about sexual behaviour in a social survey context, nor would it be appropriate in general-purpose government surveys.

- The proposed question developed on the basis of the focus group research and other elements of ONS's development project should be tested by means of cognitive interviews, to ensure that the recommendations are sound and that the views of subgroups less well represented in the focus groups are taken into account.

Table 1.1 Summary of recommendations

- Proceed with further development and testing.
- Do not include the term 'sexual identity' in the wording of the question.
- Do not define the term 'sexual identity' in or alongside the question.
- Use the phase 'best describes how you think of yourself' in the question stem.
- The question should have the status of an 'opinion question'.
- Set the question in context alongside other identity questions.
- Ask the question of all respondents aged 16 or over but conduct further research with those in the youngest and oldest age groups.
- Use the 3 main substantive categories of heterosexual/straight, gay/lesbian and bisexual, in that order.
- Separate the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' with a slash rather than the word 'or'.
- Do not include the term 'homosexual'.
- Further research is required as to whether an 'other' or another alternative is appropriate for capturing sexual minority groups who do not identify as LGB.
- Do not have a specific 'prefer not to answer' category but allow for spontaneous 'don't know' or 'refusal' categories in interviewer-administered surveys.
- Specific training on the administration of a question on sexual identity should be given to interviewers along with an explanation of purpose.
- Test a CAPI concealed showcard administration method.
- Continue with planned cognitive question testing of the proposed question including with people from groups not represented, or less fully represented, at the focus groups, including those from the Afro-Caribbean community and particular faith groups.
- Further testing of the order of the sexual identity and religion questions should be carried out.
- To understand further the relationship between different dimensions of sexual orientation and inform analysis of sexual identity data, consider including a module of questions on a suitable survey, with an appropriate mode of administration and explanation of concepts.
- Periodically review the administration and question wording to take into account that acceptability may change over time and similarly conceptualisation of sexual identity and use of language may change.

Table 1.2 Recommended questioning for interviewer-administered social surveys

Recommended question: CAPI administration using concealed showcards

"Which of the options on this card best describes how you think of yourself?
Please just read out the number next to the description "

15 Heterosexual / Straight
10 Gay / Lesbian
17 Bisexual
16 Other

Spontaneous 'don't know' and 'refusal' categories made available to interviewers.

2 Introduction

2.1 Background and purpose

There is an increasing requirement for data on sexual orientation, or sexual identity, in order to meet current and future legislative requirements. The key users of this data will include central government departments; local government and other public service providers; lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) service providers; academia and other research organisations.

A project was initiated within the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that aimed to provide advice on best practice with regard to data collection in this field, and also examine the feasibility of providing benchmark data. The primary outputs from this project will be a question, or suite of questions, asking people to self-categorise to a particular sexual identity, along with advice on administration. Alongside the question(s), a user guide will be produced discussing the conceptual issues, as well as guidance on data collection and the preparation and interpretation of results. Information on the project is available at: http://www.ons.gov.uk/about-statistics/measuring-equality/sexual-identity-project

The questioning is proposed for inclusion in the new Integrated Household Survey (IHS) which combines most of the ONS continuous household surveys into one. All household members aged 16 or over will be interviewed by an ONS interviewer, primarily face-to-face using laptop computer assisted technology (CAPI[2]) with some self-completion modules using the laptop (CASI[3]). Some of the interviews will also be carried out by the ONS telephone unit.

Prior to the project the impact of asking a question on sexual identity on an ONS multi-purpose social survey such as the IHS was unknown. It was thought possible that some respondents may be unhappy about being asked to provide what could be considered very personal and sensitive information, particularly in a concurrent interview where other household members may be present. This may impact on the response to the survey overall or to the individual question. Moreover it may impact on willingness to be contacted for further research which would have implications if the question(s) were to be included in a longitudinal study.

Issues relating to the administration of this question among particular groups in society needed to be explored. For example, people's cultural or religious beliefs may be offended. The age of the respondent may also relate to their ability to answer or their attitudes towards such questioning. Examining personal barriers to response would help to suggest ways in which the administration of the questioning could be improved. Respondents' ability to comprehend the questions and response options has clear implications for the quality of the data. Furthermore, the comprehension and attitudes of the interviewers is important since they are often called upon to justify the inclusion of a particular topic in a survey and the impressions they give to respondents might affect answers given.

2.2 The development and testing programme

Data Collection Methodology for Social Survey (DCM) branch was commissioned by Social and Economic Micro-Analysis and Reporting Division at the ONS to develop, test and evaluate

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[2] Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing

[3] Computer Assisted Self Interviewing

questioning on sexual identity for implementation in a government social survey context, with particular reference to the IHS. The overall methodology is described in Wilmot (2007). The exploratory stage of DCM's programme has included the following work packages, which comprise both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies:

- An examination of the equalities agenda and legislative context in which the project is being conducted (Hand and Betts, 2008).
- Reviews of survey questions on sexual orientation/identity previously conducted in the UK and internationally, including their designs, resulting estimates and feedback from researchers and respondents (Betts, 2007 and Taylor, 2008b).
- Four trials of variant questions and modes of administration on the National Statistics Omnibus Survey, including feedback from interviewers (Taylor 2008a, Taylor and Ralph 2008 and Malalgoda and Traynor 2008).

The subject of this report is the final work package of the exploratory stage: focus groups conducted with members of the public. This was the first element of the research to explore directly and in depth the subjects of interest with the providers of survey data: members of the general public.

The different work packages are intended to provide a comprehensive exploration of all the issues relevant to the development of questioning on sexual identity. Each package complements, builds on and/or informs others. In particular, because of the sampling and recruitment strategy for the focus groups and subsequent one-to-one cognitive/in-depth interviews, the findings from both should be considered together as they have been designed to cover as many relevant subgroups of the population as possible, using whichever is the appropriate research method.

This research approach means the quantitative elements of the research can aid interpretation and generalisability of the qualitative findings.

2.3   Subject matter and structure of report

The focus groups explored four main areas, each of which forms a chapter of this report.

- An examination of the conceptualisation of 'sexual identity'. Theories and models of sexual orientation are discussed and the intended concept to be measured is defined. The importance of understanding how the intention is borne out in reality is considered. The issues covered include the salience and importance of sexual   identity to participants; how they conceptualised it and categorised themselves; the development of an individual's sexual identity; and sexual identity over time and in   different contexts.

- A discussion of the language and terminology related to the concepts which participants use and understand. Issues covered include preferred terminology for a question and response categories and changes in language over time.

- A discussion of the acceptability of asking about sexual identity on social surveys and in other contexts, understanding as to the purpose of such questioning; trust in the collectors and users of the data and the acceptability of the questioning to different groups and in different contexts, with some reference to the Census.

- A discussion of the way in which the questioning should be administered in a social survey context. Issues include: maintaining privacy; mode of administration; interviewer effects; the context and location of questioning; and proxy data collection.

3 Methodology

Focus groups were held in London in autumn 2007. Fifty-two members of the public took part. Focus groups were employed to capture a large quantity of information in a short period of time and to exploit the group dynamic.

3.1 Sample strategy

A purposive sampling technique was employed. Participants were chosen because they had particular characteristics which enabled exploration of the research objectives. It is important to point out that it is not possible, or appropriate, to draw statistical inferences from this kind of sampling method since with a purposive non-random sample the number of people taking part in the research is less important than the criteria used to select them. A phenomenon need only appear once in the data to be of value.

The primary sampling criteria were sexual identity and sex. The groups were homogeneous in respect of these characteristics as people were thought likely to feel more comfortable talking openly and honestly with others of the same sex and sexual identity (albeit that what constitutes 'sexual identity' was one of the topics for discussion). Homogeneous groups also allowed topics to be explored with different groups as appropriate - what may be of relevance or concern to one group may not necessarily be so to another. Thus six groups were convened: heterosexual men, heterosexual women, gay men, gay/lesbian women, bisexual men and bisexual women.

The secondary sampling criteria were age, educational attainment and household type, although effort was made to include people from ethnic minority groups. Each group aimed to include participants aged 18 to 70 and participants of differing educational levels, although they tended towards the more highly educated (A level or above). Three main household types were covered: those living alone or only with children; those living with a spouse/partner, and those living with unrelated adults. Of course, at some point in the past it can be assumed that the majority of participants had lived with parents and could therefore talk from past experience in this respect. (See Appendix A for details of the achieved sample.)

The views of other groups not fully represented, such as those in the youngest and oldest age-groups, those with lower educational attainment, from rural areas and other parts of the country and particular religious or ethnic backgrounds, will be sought separately. This will be in one-to-one interviews to be conducted when a proposed prototype question and administration design is tested. Thus the qualitative research programme as a whole will obtain as many different views and experiences as possible.

3.2 Recruitment strategy

Recruitment was conducted by the researchers themselves in order that the composition of the achieved sample could be carefully monitored to match that intended. The following two sample sources were used:

- ONS' qualitative respondent register of respondents to the ONS Omnibus Survey who had given permission for ONS to contact them again for future research (Wilmot, 2005).
- A range of lesbian, gay and bisexual organisations kindly agreed to display or circulate a request to their members. Leaflets were also left at LGB social venues. People interested in participating were asked to contact ONS. (Leaders and administrators of such organisations were not invited to take part so as not to influence the findings.)

In line with common practice people were given £25 in appreciation of their participation and to cover any travelling expenses incurred.

3.3 Moderation, analysis and reporting

The groups were moderated by trained ONS researchers. The sex of the moderator was matched with the sex of the group. A topic guide was designed for use by the moderator to stimulate thinking and ensure that the key research questions were addressed (see Appendix B).

The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using a thematic framework approach[4]. In the report, verbatim quotes from participants are italicised.

Conclusions have been drawn and recommendations have been made on the basis of the evidence from the focus groups, also informed, where relevant, by evidence from other work packages in the development programme thus far.

It is important to note that reliability and validity cannot be measured in the traditional way. For qualitative research such as this reliability can be judged on the basis that similar findings were found throughout the investigation. Validity can be judged by checking credibility and transferability by confirming findings with the respondents.

Almost all of those invited to the heterosexual groups were selected from the qualitative respondent register mentioned above, as were three of those attending the gay male group. These participants had been asked a question on sexual identity in the Omnibus survey using CASI, so were able to talk from experience rather than hypothetically. For the rest, their experience of surveys generally related to postal surveys and interviews conducted by market research companies. Most participants were familiar with the decennial Census. The voluntary nature of surveys and the compulsory nature of the Census was understood.

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[4] Ritchie and Lewis (2003)

4 Conceptualisation

Quantitative data analysis is predicated on understanding what the data do and do not mean. It is important that data users are clear on the concept being measured, but of equal importance is whether that concept is understood and interpreted correctly by those providing the data. That is, those who will be answering the question(s) which operationalise the concept of sexual identity.

4.1 Defining the measurement concept

The term 'sexual identity' and other terms, such as 'sexual orientation' and 'sexuality', are used across academic and research communities, in government, in the media and among the general public. The concepts cross personal, social, cultural, political and medical domains. However, it is important to note that there is sometimes overlap in their use. 'Sexual orientation' is the term often used in discussion of the equalities agenda and related legislation, but is defined only in terms of a person's orientation towards people of the same sex, opposite sex or both sexes, without defining 'orientation' (Hand and Betts 2008). In the literature, sexual orientation is used as an umbrella term encompassing different dimensions, including sexual attraction, sexual behaviour and sexual identity.

Theoretical concepts and models attempting to capture the nature of sexual orientation and its component dimensions have developed over the past sixty years, from Kinsey's continuum to more complex models encompassing several dimensions (for example the Klein Grid and the Sell Assessment[5]; see references listed in Wilmot 2007).

Measuring the proportion of the population defined as lesbian, gay or bisexual is difficult, since sexual orientation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Of greater importance, perhaps, is identifying subgroups about which differences from the majority are of interest. ONS and the users, stakeholders and expert advisors involved in this development project agreed that it was the 'identity' dimension of sexual orientation that was most appropriate for survey questioning. This dimension relates to a person's self identification based on internal feelings and/or because they felt commonality with other people and/or found community with them.

Sexual identity cannot be determined prescriptively in terms of other dimensions of orientation such as attraction or behaviour. There may be overlap between these dimensions, to a greater or lesser degree, for an individual. Not all men who have sex with men will identify as gay. Similarly, people who have sex with both men and women might not identify as bisexual. Indeed, research has shown the prevalence of same-sex attraction to be higher than same-sex behaviour, while those who develop gay, lesbian or bisexual identities, and find community, comprise the smallest subset (Laumann et al 1994).

However, from the review of surveys that have collected data on sexual orientation/identity, both in the UK and internationally (Betts 2008; Taylor 2008b), it was apparent that little or no pre-testing of questions had been carried out. Therefore, little is known about the how the intended measurement concept is understood by respondents and on what basis the questions were answered.

The focus groups were convened to aid this understanding. It transpired that the three sexual identity categories of heterosexual, gay/lesbian and bisexual, were indeed different in key

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[5] http://www.gaydata.org/ms001_Index.html

respects, although there were also differences and parallels within each category by sex and across the groups.

In order to have an indication of the ease and accuracy with which certain groups might be able to answer a question on sexual identity, the groups began by establishing participants' ability to comprehend the measurement concept which would form the basis of their response. This ability is directly informed by the salience or importance[6] of the concept to them, as it might be the first time that they had given thought to, or expressed, their sexual identity.

4.2   Salience and importance of the measurement concept

To provide a comfortable introduction for participants, each focus group began with a discussion about general identity – what made them the people they were? This was because it was thought that people might be hesitant about immediately discussing potentially sensitive matters relating to sexual identity, and also to gain insight into the salience of sexual identity to them.

A number of characteristics were commonly mentioned across the groups including typical demographics such as: gender; age; nationality, ethnicity; religion; family and marital/partnership status; and occupation. Other aspects widely mentioned were beliefs/values and interests.

Across the groups women tended to consider how they perceived themselves, mentioning personal attributes such as being friendly, shy, or intellectual, and thought of things that were a matter of choice, such as moral values, as more important than those that were not, such as gender. They also thought that a person's identity developed over time with life experiences.

Men tended to think about how they were perceived by others and talked more than women about the importance of context. That is, they would mention certain aspects of themselves if meeting someone socially (when opinions and interests would be mentioned) compared with a business context (where qualifications or experience were more important). What was mentioned would also depend on how well the other person was known. Male participants varied in how much they had considered their own identities, ranging from having a ready-made *"neat little phrase"* to sum up several aspects in one (including nationality, religious background, interests and sexual identity), to claiming to have no sense of self-identity at all.

In the opening discussions of general identity whether or not participants spontaneously mentioned their sexuality varied across the groups. This gave some indication of its relative salience among different groups. The subject was then raised with those groups which had not spontaneously mentioned it, and probed further with those groups which had.

Sexual identity was of little salience or importance to heterosexual participants. It was of salience and importance to a greater or lesser degree to gay men and lesbians. To bisexuals it was salient, but the degree of importance that was attached varied, being low to some, high to others, or more of a political issue due to the perception of being different to other groups. Even where sexual identity was either salient or important for the bisexual groups, it was felt that sexual identity alone should not, or did not, define someone.

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[6] Salience refers to how prominent the phenomenon was in participants' minds, while importance refers to the degree of significance they gave the phenomenon. The two are not necessarily congruent.

4.2.1 Heterosexual groups

Neither heterosexual men nor women spontaneously mentioned sexual identity as an aspect of their identity. However, when prompted, all participants felt that they had a sexual identity or orientation. (It should be noted that participants were selected on the basis of having answered a question on sexual identity, either on the ONS Omnibus survey or when they were recruited for the focus groups.) But it was of low salience and not considered important to these groups. It was said that for people in this majority heterosexual group sexual identity was not thought about much, nor was it a *"defining"* aspect of identity. Indeed, some participants volunteered little to the discussion.

However, there was an indication that the salience of sexual identity might relate to age. A young participant said that it was a part of identity and sex was an important part of life, though not something that would be a normal part of conversation unless the other person was known well. In contrast, a participant in the upper age band said he did not think about it, rather:

> *"I was born with it... like I was born with two legs and not three."*
> [Heterosexual man, 55+]

The low salience and importance among heterosexuals means the question may come as a surprise to survey respondents (as was indicated by interviewer feedback to the Omnibus survey trials – see Taylor 2008a). It might be the first time they have given thought to, or expressed, their sexual identity.

4.2.2 Gay and lesbian groups

In the gay and lesbian groups, sexual identity was more salient and seen as important, *"a strong part"* of their identity. The gay and lesbian groups included participants who mentioned sexual identity before any other aspect of identity, often in combination with gender:

> *"I would describe myself as a gay man."* [Gay man, 55+]

> *"Definitely my gender, and definitely being a lesbian.*" [Gay woman/lesbian, 55+]

However, this was not always the case:

> *"It's jut not something that comes to the front straightaway for me..."*
> [Gay man, 25-34]

> *"It doesn't define who I am."* [Gay man, 35-44]

> *"The first thing that would spring to mind would be personality traits rather than my gender or sexuality."* [Gay woman/lesbian, 25-34]

It was said that sexual identity was more important for younger gay people and became less important with age and, for example, settling down with a partner - *"the further you are down the line"* from the coming out process.

> *"Some people ... eat, sleep, brush their teeth and go to bed gay, and everything is gay. But I think as you get older, you get a little bit less likely to sort of see that as a preoccupation I'd say, you're part of the human race first, and gay is a secondary thing really. "* [Gay man, 45-54]

Whether participants would mention sexual identity when talking to other people would vary with context, for example, social, domestic and work environments, or according to the person's gender, age and how well known their attitudes to gay people were. A young gay man distinguished between identifying *"in my head"* and not being 'out' to family.

4.2.3 Bisexual groups

Bisexual participants varied as to how salient or important their sexual identity was. The bisexual men discussed general identity far less and raised sexual identity early on in the discussion, though only one described himself at this point as a bisexual. One woman spontaneously mentioned sexual identity as an aspect of her identity, but in conjunction with other characteristics relating to nationality, ethnicity and life experiences – *"I'm a multifaceted person, a dodecahedron"*.

Sexual identity was of low salience to some: in a similar vein to the heterosexual participant quoted above, one person said,

> *"It's never really been something that I've actually kind of really thought much about. It's just there. It's like I've got brown hair, and I'm short."*
> [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

Aside from its salience, there was a view that sexual identity was of little importance. Sexual identity was not an issue - neither hidden from others nor revealed, unless specifically asked. Indeed, among the men it was even felt to be *"annoying"* and *"tedious"* to have to consider the topic at all. Their views related to bisexual people feeling they were forced into considering the issue of sexual identity only because it was raised by heterosexual and gay people. For some it was this that made sexual identity more salient and important. For example, one man said the issue *"comes up a lot"* because he lived on the *"cusp of these two worlds"* both trying to *"mould me in their likeness"*. From such feelings developed a *"political"* identity as bisexual – see section 4.3.3.

4.3 Conceptualisation as the basis for self-categorisation

There were differences across the groups and between men and women in their understanding and conceptualisation of the term 'sexual identity', and indeed the terms 'sexual orientation' and 'sexuality'. Furthermore, the differences in salience and importance of sexuality among different groups were related to participants' definitions of the concept, how they categorised themselves, and were perceived by others. Similarly the development or emergence of sexuality or sexual identity was, not surprisingly, influential.

4.3.1 Heterosexual men and women: latent identifiers

Heterosexuals placed greater emphasis on the dimensions of sexual attraction and behaviour, than did participants in the sexual minority groups. Societal assumptions of heterosexuality as the 'norm' and lack of a sense of community with other heterosexuals, explained the low salience for heterosexual people described previously. However, leaving aside other issues to do with acceptability and administration of the questioning discussed later in this report, they felt able to identify as heterosexual if asked. For these reasons, heterosexual people can be considered to be 'latent identifiers'.

Although there were participants who based their self-categorisation on their sexual attraction or behaviour, this was due to the weakness of a conscious sense of sexual identity. It was not due to any misconception that self-categorisation should be determined *only* by attraction or behaviour.

However, there were differences in participants' understanding and conceptualisation within the heterosexual groups, particularly between the men and women.

Heterosexual men

Heterosexual men either equated the terms 'sexual identity' with 'sexual orientation', or considered sexual identity, which was the less familiar term to them, to equate to gender. They had little sense of having an internal sexual identity, and no feelings of community with others on the basis of sexual identity, just a weak sense that *"like goes with like"*, for example people are likely to socialise with people of the same sexual identity. Rather, the men based their conceptualisation in the dimensions of sexual behaviour and/or attraction-*"the obvious hormonal reaction"* as expressed by one participant. Sexual behaviour was seen as a *"function"* of attraction; that is, attraction was a prerequisite of behaviour.

This was borne out in their perception of sexual identity as a continuum from straight to gay, because they considered that attraction and behaviour were not necessarily fixed or consistent. When asking a survey question about a person's sexual identity, a scale was therefore thought to be more appropriate than discrete categories. They placed themselves at or near the heterosexual extreme of the scale, although they did not necessarily think it was easy to do so. A person's placement was thought to be subjective, seen in relation to other people and dependent on knowledge and experience. It was thought that occasional or one-off attraction to, or sex with, a man – of which there was experience among the group - moved you along the scale to some degree.

Only after lengthy discussions did a participant, the youngest male, consider anything beyond behaviour and attraction, distinguishing sexual identity from sexual orientation as more *"holistic"*, a *"construct"* of different aspects including *"sexual habits"* and gender roles (masculinity and femininity).

Despite their general preference for a continuum, the men said they would nonetheless answer heterosexual/straight if given discrete categories to choose from. This applied even if same-sex attraction or behaviour had been experienced: answers would not be gay or bisexual, because the majority of an individual's sexual attraction or behaviour had been heterosexual.

Heterosexual women

For heterosexual women, the term sexual orientation was associated with sexuality, in turn associated with behaviour or attraction, thus similar to the men. However, they tended more than men towards an understanding that sexual identity might be different from sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation was seen to imply having a choice, and also how someone presented themselves to others (i.e. as straight, gay etc) which might differ from how they felt internally. Sexual identity, on the other hand, was related to how someone defined themselves within. It did not have to be dependent on sexual attraction or behaviour and was something that may not have been explored. Thus the female group considered that a person's orientation and identity might not be consistent, for example if their identity was gay or bisexual but they were married, their orientation would be seen as heterosexual.

All the women said they would self-categorise as heterosexual, though it was something they said they *"knew"* instinctively rather than gave much thought to. Unlike the men, there were no suggestions by heterosexual women to use a continuum when trying to measure the concept.

Development of heterosexual identity

Heterosexual identity did not develop in an individual in the same way as for other groups, as described later, rather it existed in latent form. A common view in the heterosexual groups was that society *"assumes"* heterosexuality, because it was the *"statistical norm"*. They felt they were part of the majority. They did not generally think about a person's sexual identity or orientation on meeting someone but would assume it to be the same as their own. For example:

> *"It's not such a big deal when you class yourself as heterosexual, because that's the norm and we don't see it as a defining thing..."*
> [Heterosexual woman, 18-24]

A person's culture, upbringing or religion, was seen to be an influence on whether being anything other than the heterosexual norm was even considered: for some, *"it won't even hit the radar"*. It was said that in some religions homosexuality is considered to be *"a sin"* or is not acknowledged. A participant described experience of such teachings.

Indeed it was felt that people made assumptions about others based on various aspects of their own identity, such as beliefs and occupation, not just sexual identity. Due to such assumptions the term 'sexual orientation' was seen to be used euphemistically to mean non-heterosexual:

> *"I'm normal, he has a sexual orientation... that sort of strange way of using it."*
> [Heterosexual man, 45-54]

It was said that, for example, the media might report an attack on a person as being 'due to their sexual orientation' rather than more directly because they were gay.

4.3.2 *Gay men, gay women and lesbians: conscious identifiers*

In contrast to the weak sense of sexual identity felt by heterosexual participants, gay and lesbian participants did feel a sense of sexual identity, to varying degrees, but notably stronger. They can be considered to be 'conscious identifiers'.

Gay and lesbian people's choice of answer to a survey question would be determined by feelings of identity, and not only by attraction or behaviour. There were some differences between gay women/lesbians and gay men in their interpretations of the terms sexual identity, sexual orientation and sexuality, and how clearly identity was distinguished from other dimensions. Gay men were more certain in this respect. Despite these differences, when they were asked if they could categorise themselves and, if so, how, participants in both groups said they would unhesitatingly identify as gay/lesbian, without needing to think about it.

Gay men

Reflecting the heterosexual perspective reported above, gay men were aware of being different to the heterosexual norm in society and how this related to the formation of sexual identity, for example:

> *"It's only when you want to step aside from that path or your nature takes you aside... that you're compelled to think what it means to be a man ... a woman ... to have a relationship,*

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even what sex means ... .We're forced into making an identity statement in a way that the heterosexual bloke doesn't have to."
[Gay man, 55+]

This quote was from the particularly interesting perspective of someone whose story, while different to that of other gay participants, illustrated that 'sexual identity' is more prominent in gay people's consciousness. He had grown up during a period when homosexuality was not a subject generally discussed in society, other than with regard to scandals, and labels were not even considered – he *"just was"* heterosexual, and had married. He had lived though what he described as a *"heterosexual phase"*, then a *"crossover period"* during which his gay identity emerged and then made the *"definite step"* of thinking of himself as gay.

Gay men clearly distinguished sexual identity from other dimensions of sexual orientation such as attraction and behaviour. Sexual identity was seen as being felt internally rather than being determined by others or by traits, for example:

"How you feel about yourself... rather than focusing on purely describing the things you do, or may have done, or would like to do."
[Gay man, 35-44]

Sexual identity was expressed as being in the mind. This was felt to be the relevant dimension for government interest, rather than behaviour:
"What's going on up here [pointing at his head] *as opposed to what people are doing behaviourally, because I would have thought that's the crucial thing."*
[Gay man, 45-54]

It was recognised that a person's sexual orientation could be inconsistent between its different dimensions, for example that there are men who have sex with men (dimension of behaviour) but do not identify as gay. Identity was considered more pertinent than behaviour when looking at disadvantage:

"If you're allocating housing, you know, or equal opportunities at work, then the fact that someone is straight at work and thinks he's straight and has sex [with men] *only at the weekends isn't of any interest, but you want to know if you're excluding people identified as gay from your workplace, so it's the information you want to collect."* [Gay man, 35-44]

While it was said that sexual attraction and behaviour were part of what gay people were they were not necessarily related to identity. It was thought that sexual attraction and behaviour varied *"massively"* among people who identified as gay; indeed it was possible to have more in common behaviourally with someone of a different sexual identity – for example, a gay partnership may have more in common with a straight couple than with a single gay man. Furthermore, a person could be *"celibate and straight [or] celibate and gay"*.

In a further distinction of identity from other dimensions of sexual orientation, it was made clear that for gay male participants sexual identity was as 'gay' rather than 'homosexual'. One described himself as:

"gay ... because it is about identity, whereas homosexuality ... it's about sex."
[Gay man, 35-44]

Participants had a dislike of terminology which connoted the dimensions of attraction and behaviour, rather than identity. They distinguished (and preferred) 'sexual identity' from 'sexual orientation', for this reason, and viewed the word 'homosexual' with distaste, seeing it as

medical, behavioural, imposed by doctors, and loaded with negative connotations - see Chapter 5.

Gay women/lesbians

In comparison with gay men, gay women and lesbians' sexual identity was, overall, less strongly expressed. Regarding the interpretations and preferences for terms such as sexual orientation, sexual identity and sexuality, there was some similarity with the gay men but less agreement across the group. However, unlike gay men, there was also a view that they were being labelled by others and *"stuck"* with it.

It varied whether female participants saw sexual identity and sexual orientation as distinct or interchangeable. For example, one said

> *"There's no …proper clear answer to it. Identity and orientation, where's the difference?"*
> [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-35]

Another participant thought all the terms to be *"like mercury"*, the use and definitions of which moved to *"suit people's purposes"*.

Discomfort was expressed with the term 'sexual orientation', seen as *"text book"* or *"clinical"*, again similar to the gay men. There was an interpretation of sexual orientation as being about attraction:

> *"If you asked me about sexual orientation I would talk about who I fancy."*
> [Gay/lesbian woman, 55+]

Another reason the term 'sexual orientation' was disliked that it implied choice.

There was some awareness that sexual orientation was the term used in legislation, and participants would use it for that reason, though reluctantly.

The term 'sexuality' was seen to be a broader concept than sexual orientation. It was considered natural and *"comfortable"*. But sexuality was clearly distinguished from sexual identity, being seen as referring to sexual activity, e.g. *"I interpret it as who you have sex with"*, and that a choice had been made. There was a *"passionate"* view, that being lesbian, gay or bisexual should not be used to describe sexuality because it was felt to also imply that a person had sexual experience, which was not necessarily the case.

Sexual identity was generally distinguished from attraction and behaviour. It was seen as more *"complex"* than the other terms. Identity was linked to *"lifestyle"* – a woman who had a sexual relationship with a woman but lived in *"straight surroundings"* with *"straight friends"* might identify as straight. Similar to the phenomenon mentioned in the gay male group, it was said that there was a *"sub group"* of women who slept with women, but were married, and *"maybe didn't classify themselves"* as gay/lesbian. Female friends of participants were said to be in long term relationships with women but *"they say they're straight, they just love that woman"*.

However, in some cases the distinction between identity and other dimensions was less clear cut. For example one participant, at different points in the discussions, conceptualised identity on the basis both of behaviour:

> *"I think its like how do you identify yourself, like I guess who you prefer to sleep with maybe…"*

and on identification with others:

> *"How do you identify? You know, what group of people do you go and stand with to identify yourself?"* [Gay/lesbian woman, 45-54]

An aspect of sexual identity specific to the gay women/lesbian group was that it varied whether they identified as 'gay' or as 'lesbian', or had no preference and used the terms interchangeably. There was a view among younger participants that 'lesbian' had a *"negative connotation"* (this was not elaborated on, or necessarily shared by the participant who mentioned it). For an older participant, it was *"generational"*; being able to use the word was related to her *"history"*.

Development of gay/lesbian identity

Something considered important by the gay men about sexual identity, as distinct from other dimensions, was that it was not chosen. One participant said he'd often been asked *"When did you choose to be gay?"* to which he wanted to respond *"When did you choose to be heterosexual?"* He continued:

> *"This is something that other people hold to be true about us and we don't choose it. Well, as far as I'm concerned, I didn't have any choice…"*
> [Gay man, 45-54]

Awareness in childhood or adolescence of sexual feelings towards people of the same sex was common. For example participants in both groups spoke of having a *"sense of my sexuality from an early age"*; *"very early"*; *"fairly young"*; and *"from young age"*. Such ages ranged from five to sixteen. Participants remembered feelings of attraction to television presenters and characters from film. Others were *"late developer[s]"* in later youth/early adulthood.

For some of the older male participants their sexual identity emerged later in life. Married young, being unaware that they were 'non-heterosexual' due to the norms of society at the time, their gay identity had then emerged to them, and they had consequently changed their lives and relationships.

The importance of *"environment"* to the awareness, understanding and acceptance of sexual identity was made clear. While male participants spoke of having been aware of their difference to other boys, it was not necessarily the case that they understood the nature of their identity until years later. In particular, older gay men and those who grew up in rural areas spoke of being unable to label how they felt, because in a conservative environment there was no word for being gay. Despite experiencing feelings of sexual attraction and fantasy, they spoke of their feelings being *"so foreign I couldn't understand"*, or not *"tangible"* as there were no gay role models other than media *"caricatures"*.

Even when a gay identity was understood more clearly in adolescence, it was not easy to live openly. If sexual experience began at all, it was felt to be, for example, *"different and secretive... but good"*. A young gay man said he felt the need to *"suppress"* his identity until leaving home. It was said in the gay women/lesbian group that in more conservative areas - the Outer Hebrides were cited rhetorically – it would be difficult to be open. A gay woman was *"confident"* of her sexual identity but only came out a few years later.

In the gay woman/lesbian group there were accounts of having been less aware of sexual identity, and of difficulty coming to terms with it and being open about it. Participants did not always experience a *"flash of light"*. One mentioned having had no feelings for either sex in youth, then identified as straight, then *"became"* lesbian as a *"conscious choice"*. Other female participants mentioned periods of being *"confused"* and of describing themselves as bisexual

rather than gay or lesbian, thinking it more *"acceptable"*. These examples of women having difficulty coming to terms with sexual identity were reflected in their views of whether sexual identity was fixed or could change, which is considered later.

Development of sexual identity did not always include sexual activity at first, for example one gay woman spoke of being *"asexual"* from age sixteen until coming out at twenty one.

Finding community, or identification with others, even if indirectly, was said to be an important part of the process of development of gay and lesbian sexual identity. It led to self-understanding, self-acceptance and, perhaps later, coming out.

Only on changing their environment and meeting other gay people did participants *"realise it was possible to be gay"* or become *"free to do what I wanted"*. Examples given included: going to university; leaving the family home; moving from a rural to urban environment, and moving from a very conservative country to the UK.

However, it was felt that gay community favoured gay men and was not necessarily all encompassing:

> *"It's a very definite demographic of society, so you're looking at male of a particular age, and it's where are the women? Where are the disabled and gay men, lesbians? Where are the black people? … So it's a very odd place."*
> [Gay man, 35-44]

Community with other gay people became less important for some, particularly men, as they settled into partnerships, or as sexual identity itself became less important to them with age.

As mentioned earlier, societal change has also enabled identity to emerge. Older gay men, who had grown up before society and the media acknowledged the existence of sexual minorities, spoke of the social climate changing for the better. A woman contrasted the suppression of openness during the time of Section 28 in the 1980s with recent television programmes, the internet and gay/lesbian support groups making life easier. There were further comments that due to societal change and more positive media presentation, younger gay people were now more able to become aware of their sexual identity, even if not always 'out' to family/friends.

However, greater tolerance and acceptance was not universally experienced. A gay man, who lived outside London, said he had experienced discrimination in his neighbourhood.

The accounts of early awareness of feelings, but of not understanding them until a change of environment led to self-understanding and to finding community, suggest that some people, particularly the young, might not have determined their sexual identity before being asked on a survey. However, there was also the suggestion that the current generation of younger people might be more aware of their sexual identity and thus would be able to provide an answer.

Gay/lesbian identity in different contexts

Gay and lesbian participants spoke about whether or not they were open about their sexual identity in different contexts or environments. The overall view was that it would depend on who they were with, where they were and why it was relevant to mention it:

> *"I don't feel you have to be out in all contexts…"* [Gay man, 35-44]

Views were expressed that people prefer to feel *"safe"* - not just from physical harm but from other forms of prejudice – before disclosing their sexual identity. One participant admitted to

having the *"fantasy"* that she was out all the time but that in reality it depended on her safety and whether she felt it was worth the effort to mention it and possibly have to enter a discussion. It was seen as acceptable to choose whether to challenge homophobia.

It was felt that straight people did not have to make an announcement so neither should gay or lesbian people. For example, one man said that because they had not mentioned being married and having children, gay people were asked questions in a work environment that would not be asked of straight people. Though not *"in the closet"* himself, he felt it was still a private matter.

Participants varied as to whether they would come out at a new place of work, even though sexual identity was an important aspect of self. It was thought in the gay men's group that whether people knew your sexual identity might depend on how *"naturally camp or obviously gay you are."* While participants were sometimes comfortable to reveal their sexual identity to work colleagues, this might be done indirectly. Even within the same job, different levels of ease could be felt, for example, comfort with immediate colleagues but not in more *"masculine"* environments when with corporate clients.

It varied as to whether participants were out with their families. It was said that some people never tell their parents they are gay.

Among the participants who did not live alone or with a partner, similar variation applied to whether they were out with house or flat mates.

Participants spoke of feeling discomfort in social environments other than *"gay spaces"* such as gay bars. Experiences included watching football in a pub, being inadvertently *"outed"* by a straight friend and receiving comments, and, in the case of a black participant, not being willing to be open at a traditional African function for fear of the response.

The findings about sexual identity in different contexts suggest that responses to a question by gay/lesbian people may not be accurate if respondents have any reservations about revealing their sexual identity which are not overcome by the provision of privacy – see chapter 7.

Gay/lesbian identity: fixed or fluid over time

Gay men and gay women/lesbians differed in their view of sexual identity being fixed or fluid over time.

A rhetorical question was raised by participants about people living *"different sexualities at different times of their lives"* and how they might report their identity or orientation. Examples were cited of well-known gay men who had also lived in straight relationships, or had married and had children. Both groups made reference to a Kinsey-style continuum, and said that some people might change where they were on it over time:

> *"There are people that are 100% homosexual, and 100% heterosexual, and everyone else probably kind of falls on that continuum somewhere at some point in their life."*
> [Gay/Lesbian woman, 55+]

Gay male participants felt that their sexual identity was fixed and would not change over time. In fact, they felt that their sexual orientation, in the dimensions of attraction and behaviour, would not change either. One said *"never say never"* but whenever he thought of a woman as *"cute"* it was due to her personality *"characteristics"* rather than sexual attraction. Another said he would be *"surprised"* if he started finding women sexually attractive.

Gay women and lesbians' sense of their sexual identity as being unchanging was less strongly felt. Participants did identify as gay or lesbian at the present time, however sexual identity was seen by them as being more fluid. They referred to the potential for their own sexual identity to change (unlike the gay men) – falling in love with a man was not always ruled out. There was recognition that answers to a survey question might only be relevant to that point in time, and might not be *"constant"* or apply forever: *"it's not set in stone"*.

However, there was a view that identity did not change just on the basis of a partner's gender, implying that identity could be stable and independent of other dimensions of orientation. In the female group the view was expressed that the gender of a partner was less important than other personal qualities. This was a view was also shared by bisexual participants.

4.3.3 Bisexual men and women: reluctant, political and fluid identifiers

Differences in conceptual thinking between men and women in the bisexual groups were not as apparent as for the heterosexual or gay/lesbian groups. However, it was clear from the discussions that the category of 'bisexual' was considered inadequate and a compromise. It was a category imposed by others on people who did not consider themselves to be either heterosexual/straight or gay/lesbian, or who were anti-categorisation. 'Bisexual' was thought to be used to describe what they were not rather than what they were. Indeed, there were some who were reluctant to even consider the concept of sexual identity and for whom the premise of labelling was false. Distaste for having to consider the topic at all led one man to say *"flip a coin I don't care"*. So there was little sense of the term 'bisexual' as being a description of someone's sexual identity. The main difference between the male and females groups was that some of the women floated between the gay/lesbian category and the bisexual category depending on context or over time. As a result the bisexual focus groups could be said to comprise 'reluctant identifiers', 'political identifiers' and 'fluid identifiers'. (It should be noted that these descriptors were not necessarily mutually exclusive in all cases.)

Though bisexual participants included those who felt little sense of sexual identity, and had reservations about being categorised, they said they would choose 'bisexual' if none of the other options were appropriate.

Key to understanding why bisexual focus group participants had difficulty associating with the term bisexual is the apparent lack of a bisexual community.

The bisexual groups displayed more complexity and variety, in terms of people's conceptualisation of sexual identity, than the heterosexual and gay/lesbian groups. One participant summed this up by saying:

> *"This group's been really like interesting for me, because I just think that we're just debunking these labels, it's so interesting, I'm just loving hearing this diversity of experience, and I think for each individual it's so different, it's a work-in-progress for everybody, and I think it's very difficult just to pin it down to what is bisexual, I think that's a very difficult thing to do."* [Bisexual woman, 35-44]

As in the gay/lesbian groups a preference was given for the concept of 'sexual identity' as it was said to be more open and *"more about who I am …than what I do"* whereas 'sexual orientation' *"sounds like it's fixed…always pointing in that direction"*.

However, bisexual participants' definitions of 'sexual identity' conflicted. Some saw 'bisexual' as a distinct identity, others thought of it as being about attraction to and/or sexual relationships with both sexes: *"who you want to sleep with"*.

Reluctant identifiers

Bisexual participants who disliked having to consider the topic and being labelled can be thought of as 'reluctant identifiers'. For them the label 'bisexual' was considered a compromise.

Similar to the discussion previously about the term 'homosexual', the word 'bisexual' was disliked as being scientific, for example:

> *"I hate the term bisexual, it's just such a, sort of drab, pseudo medical term, like you can apply sort of percentages to."* [Bisexual male, 25-34]

There was a common dislike of labelling and categorisation on the basis of who someone slept with or was attracted to. Gender was considered unimportant:

> *"It seems to me faintly ridiculous to base your attraction to somebody on their genitalia."* [Bisexual male, 45-54]

More important was emotional attachment:

> *"I don't really care about what gender they are ... if I like someone, I like them."* [Bisexual male, 18-24]

Furthermore, there was a dislike of any attempt to quantify the proportion of relationships with each sex, as for example:

> *"People want to prove, decide on what percentage you are, don't they, when they ask? … what kind of proportion, how many men have you slept with, how many women have you slept with, it seems to be really important…I try to avoid all that."* [Bisexual man, 35-44]

The issue of measuring bisexuality on a scale or continuum was discussed, but men in particular also spoke of the inadequacy of a continuum for categorising themselves. They said this would also not adequately reflect the nature of bisexuality. One man said that the term 'bisexual' implied being *"right dab in the middle"* but thought it more changeable than that in reality. Similarly another said he did not stay at one point, rather *"I ricochet backwards and forwards"* and *"I can spend months being really gay and months being really straight"*. It was thought that there were people who claimed to be bisexual but were actually predominantly at one end of the scale. Indeed one woman said if she were presented with a continuum she would identify as bisexual but tend more towards the gay/lesbian end.

A view expressed in both the bisexual focus groups was that the gay and straight communities had negative views of bisexual people, and wanted them to choose to be one or the other. Men spoke of other people finding it hard to get *"their heads round ... throwing something else into the mix"*. People asked them *"what do you mean you're bisexual?"* 'Bisexual' was said to be used as a *"derogatory"* term by people who *"don't accept it"*. Bisexual people were said to be thought of as *"weird"* and people did not know how to relate to them. They said they were considered to be sexually promiscuous or potentially predatory, for example, people did not feel they or their partner were *"safe"*.

While negative attitudes towards them were regretted, some of the bisexuals did not feel they had to choose either a gay or straight, culture or identity. They were determined to be themselves. That meant not wanting to consider identity and be categorised at all.

It was said to take a lot of self-acceptance to use the term bisexual, and that it was difficult to pin down what it meant - it was different for everyone and *"specific to every individual"*, and a *"work in progress"*:

> *"You want to fit in but know inside that you don't. You don't feel entirely comfortable with giving that label to yourself... you have to get to that point where you just accept that you have many aspects to yourself and that you are never going to put yourself neatly into one box."*
> [Bisexual woman, 35-44]

Despite their reservations about being categorised, 'bisexual' was a label participants were familiar with and could use about themselves. When shown an example sexual identity question, they said they would, if there were no suitable alternative, answer 'bisexual'.

A few alternative self-descriptions were applied (see chapter 5) but none were appropriate to the measurement concept as they related to sexual attraction/behaviour.

However preference for an 'other' or 'none of these 'category was also expressed spontaneously (it was not included in the sample questions shown to the group concerned), for people who were anti-categorisation – see chapter 5.

Political identifiers

Some bisexuals who did not want to be claimed by other sexual identity groups but felt themselves to be distinct, did identify as 'bisexual' for political reasons, in order to be counted and visible.

One woman said she was bisexual as a *"political point"* to be distinct from lesbian.

A man who politically identified as bisexual explained that it was because gay people wanted him to be gay and straight people wanted him to be straight:

> *"It's what other people thought of me that ... made me make a political choice to say I'm bisexual, because everybody was saying to me, oh well, you've got to choose, you can't like men and women, you've got to choose. Well who says?"* [Bisexual man, 45-54]

He wanted to *"try and start creating a bi culture, in a sense"* and spoke of *"fighting"* for bisexuality to be recognised by a prominent gay organisation. He only considered his sexual identity in a political context: *"only in a political sense ...is it something to do with my identity."* These feelings were also expressed by the female group who said that the bisexual perspective was easily overlooked and, as a consequence, they were invisible.

Fluid identifiers

Some women had difficulty choosing bisexual identity over gay/lesbian. They desired to belong to the gay/lesbian community, given the lack of bisexual equivalent (see below), but they feared losing that community. This was due to the negative views they said were expressed by the gay/lesbian community towards bisexuals. Bisexual women said that gay women/lesbians showed *"hostility"* towards them, questioning *"their commitment to women"*. Participants spoke

of experiences including: being more welcome on the gay male scene than the lesbian scene; not wanting to mention a boyfriend in a lesbian club; being told by a lesbian friend that as a bisexual she was *"invisible"*; and hearing a lesbian referring to someone's bisexuality in derogatory terms. The result was that these women would have different identities in different contexts, between gay/lesbian and bisexual. For example, a woman who had formerly identified as lesbian but now identified as bisexual kept that quiet in certain circumstances. She spoke of her fear of being *"ostracised"* hence she identified as gay when in gay women/lesbian circles, whilst in straight circles which showed *"homophobia"* she would not mention her sexual identity. Another example was of not identifying as bisexual with lesbian flatmates due to their attitudes to bisexuals.

Identification 'with' and identification 'as' may elicit different responses. One bisexual participant said she *"would identify with gay"* and considered herself a member of the gay community, but she would identify variously as gay, bisexual, bicurious and polyamorous, depending on the situation. She considered it *"insulting"* to her *"very serious relationships with men…if I were to say I'm a lesbian because those men are still very important to me."* But she also had a fear of being shunned by the gay community:

> *"If you identify as lesbian and then you find yourself finding a man attractive ... you lose your identity."* [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

Unsurprisingly, she used the word *"torn"* to describe how she'd feel if asked to choose between the gay/lesbian and bisexual identities.

Furthermore there was an indication that a person's sexual identity can change over time in the course of their relationships as they get older. For example, one woman had identified as lesbian for twenty years until starting a relationship with a man and coming out as bisexual. However, it was also said that it was easier to *"switch"* or *"shift"* between the sexes more easily when a person is young. That becomes harder as longer-term relationships develop. These thoughts led to a conclusion that the answer a person gave to a question on sexual identity could change periodically over the course of their life.

Development of bisexual identity

Accounts of participants' awareness of their bisexual nature at an early age and development of identity were discussed, but to a lesser extent than in the gay/lesbian groups. Similar to the gay/lesbian groups feelings were sometimes suppressed or participants had not had the language to describe their feelings.

A participant spoke of having an early sense of being bisexual, in respect of sexual attraction:

> *"Even before I knew what it meant, and had the vocabulary to describe it, I knew I was bisexual."*[Bisexual man, 45-54]

Growing up in a religious environment which said it was *"wrong to consider sex with a person of the same sex"*, he kept his feelings secret: *"I would have automatically described myself as straight"*. He had an early sense of other people defining him, from which developed *"a political stance"* of wanting to be distinct from both straight and gay worlds.

One woman spoke of having grown up knowing she was gay (not yet bisexual), having a *"crush"* on a girl, but of having to conceal her feelings from her parents and trying to be *"normal"* by having sexual relationships with men. In a way similar to the gay men and gay women/lesbians, only on leaving the family home and finding *"like-minded"* people had she been able to be *"true"* to herself.

Another reason for having difficulty identifying as bisexual was that of not yet having decided on a sexual identity. A young female participant had thought herself to be *"unsure"* of her sexual identity. She had had relationships with men but now felt confused and had not yet *"made up my mind"* :

> *"I don't know what's going to happen in the future".* [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

She did not identify as gay or heterosexual, and felt bisexual to be a compromise. Rather she thought of herself as "*bicurious*" – see chapter 5.

Lack of bisexual community and culture

As described in a previous section, an important part of the development of gay/lesbian identity was finding community in which emergent feelings could be made more tangible and identification found with others. In contrast, bisexual participants spoke of there being little or no such equivalent community or culture. Although it was said that similar people could be found more in large cities than in provincial areas, and that it was possible to be less inhibited in a *"bohemian world"* than in a Northern *"coal mining town"*, they did not constitute a community.

> *"There kind of isn't really a bisexual culture, you know, to latch onto* [apart from an] *old fashioned* [one, characterised satirically as] *wearing velvet and dousing yourself in patchouli and stuff, and writing poetry and going 'I'm bisexual'."* (Bisexual male, 25-34)

> *"The problem I have with bisexual as a term is that there's no such thing as a bisexual club."* [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

Another participant spoke of living in both gay and straight worlds, but as a bisexual of feeling *"in no place"*. While mentions were made of bisexual meetings and festivals, participants said they did not attend them, or their views of them were qualified.

For women this lack of a sense of bisexual culture was a contributory factor to identification as both gay/lesbian and bisexual:

> *"I'm a lesbian-identified bisexual woman ...There isn't a bisexual community that is as obvious as the gay community and I belong to the gay community."*
> [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

The lack of bisexual culture was ascribed to there not being a *"lot of room within society ... for a mixture"*, that is, a person having sexual relations with both sexes.

One woman said the gay community thought sexual identity should be known and can not change, but she had come to accept her own distinct identity. It was felt possible to have a bisexual identity without being part of a community:

> *"My identity has nothing to do with who I hang around with, it's how I am in my own skin ... I accept it now that I just do not belong anywhere except with me ... bisexual is what I am, it's what I feel, it's how I identify, it's what I'm attracted to."*
> [Bisexual woman, 35-44]

4.4   Summary and recommendations

Measuring the proportion of the population defined as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual is difficult since sexual orientation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. Of greater importance perhaps is identifying subgroups of the population about which differences from the majority are of interest. In this respect the dimension of sexual identity is considered the most appropriate for social survey, relating to a person's own opinion of their sexual identity.

Whether or not the concept of sexual identity is understood and interpreted correctly by those being surveyed is key to establishing whether such questioning can be administered in a social survey context.

Participants varied as to whether their sexual identity was of either salience or importance to them. The basis of participants' conceptualisation of sexual identity differed across and, to a certain extent, within groups.

Heterosexual participants based their conceptualisation more on the dimensions of attraction and behaviour, although women were more able to grasp the concept of identity as being different. However, the questioning did come as a surprise to both men and women and they sometimes struggled to verbalise a response initially, having not really considered their sexual identity prior to being asked the question. In this respect heterosexuals are described as 'latent identifiers'.

Sexual minority groups were more likely to have considered the concept of identity in their lives and found it easier to respond to the question, although bisexual participants were sometimes reluctant to categories themselves. Gay and lesbian participants can be considered as 'conscious identifiers', while the bisexual groups comprised 'reluctant' and 'political' identifiers, and, among the women, 'fluid identifiers', since their identity would change depending on context or over time.

Though bisexual participants included those who felt little sense of sexual identity, and had reservations about being categorised, some expressing a preference for an 'other' category, they said they would choose 'bisexual' if none of the other options was appropriate, in order to be counted.

The guidance on the question design and analysis of the data should make clear that the bisexual category is to some extent a compromise for people who do not wish to be categorised or for whom it does not reflect the complexity of their feelings.

Participants' familiarity with the terms sexual identity, sexual orientation and sexuality varied. Across all the groups, definitions were sometimes erroneous (in respect of ONS's intended meaning), contradictory or overlapping. It is therefore considered at this stage in time not to include the term 'sexual identity' in the question stem.

Although different groups conceptualised sexual identity in different ways and based their self-categorisation on different dimensions of sexual orientation, participants were, on the whole, able to identify with a category in a way appropriate to the intended data requirement – see summary table below.

However, whether those in the sexual minority groups would answer accurately in a survey context would vary depending on whether they were 'out' in their home environment. This was strongly related to age and whether or not they had found community which helped them

express their identity and gave them confidence. Furthermore, younger respondents might not have developed or decided on a sexual identity. Participants indicated that they might respond as heterosexual in such circumstances.

Table 4.1 Summary of findings relating to conceptualisation of sexual identity

Sexual identity group	Type of Identifier		Salience	Importance	Basis for self-identification & development of sexual identity	Identity over time/ different contexts	Able to answer question consistent with intended meaning?
Heterosexual /Straight	Latent		Low	Low	• Little sense of internal sexual identity or community • Based largely on sexual attraction and behaviour • Aware of being the 'statistical norm'	• Fixed	• Yes
Gay/Lesbian	Conscious		High	Variable	• Sexual identity distinct from attraction/ behaviour – 'what I am, not what I do' • Identity felt, not chosen • Early awareness of feelings & difference to norm • Importance of community and social environment to emergence of identity	• Men: fixed once emerged • Women: potential for change over time • Being out dependent on context	• Yes
Bisexual	Reluctant	Not necessarily mutually exclusive	High	Low	• Dislike of having to consider subject • Dislike of categorisation. • Little sense of bisexual identity community or culture • Based largely on sexual attraction/ behaviour	• Potential for change over time – short and long term	• Qualified
	Political		High	High	• Wish to stand apart from gay and straight communities.	• Fixed	
	Fluid		High	High	• Difficulty among women choosing between bisexual and gay/lesbian identities • Fear of prejudice and losing place in gay/lesbian community	• Women identify differently over time/by context	

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5   Language, Terminology and Question Design

This chapter discusses respondents understanding and use of language or terminology in the context of questioning on sexual identity. To stimulate discussion, during the course of the focus groups, participants were shown different examples of questions that could be used to ask about sexual identity, and proffered their opinions. Participants were asked to talk about their understanding and views on the question stem (the part of the question up to the start of response options) and possible response options. The moderators explained that these examples were presented in order to stimulate discussion and were not necessarily what ONS planned to use. These sample questions were:

> Which of the following best describes how you think of yourself?
> - Heterosexual or straight
> - Gay or lesbian
> - Bisexual

> Do you consider yourself to be…
> - Heterosexual or straight
> - Gay or lesbian
> - Bisexual

5.1   Terminology used in question stem

Neither of the sample questions included the term 'sexual identity'. It became clear, either through spontaneous comments or probing, that, on the whole, participants had a preference for omitting this term. This was due to the issues of conceptualisation discussed in Chapter 4 and because the inclusion of the word 'sexual' was considered too direct and could inhibit survey respondents. It was felt that respondents might focus on the word 'sex' which would favour the dimensions of attraction or behaviour rather than identity. Its omission was considered more *"friendly"*.

> *"…there would be men nervous perhaps, and women equally perhaps, if the word sex was introduced."* [Gay man, 35-44)

There were some interesting discussions regarding the question stem which highlighted the subtle inferences that participants made of the terminology. Asking 'do you consider yourself to be' was again considered too direct. Participants preferred '…best describes how you think of yourself' because they said it was *"softer"* (gay, man) and reflected better the concept of identity. This form of words demonstrated recognition that answers were qualified, fluid or would be different in different contexts, *"you could actually be all three on a good day"* (bisexual man), so did not appear to be trying to label people in the same way as the more direct wording, which implied mutual exclusivity.

> *"Best describes, it doesn't ultimately describe."* [Gay male, 55+]

"It doesn't discount the other ones does it when you're best describing yourself…whereas consider yourself to be…its like you're one of those three and that's it." [Bisexual man, 35-44]

"Because you're not saying which one you definitely fit into you are saying which one…do you fit into the most, it's that part. For me I'd be a lot happier on that one to say bisexual." [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

"Yeah, because it makes it less definite so I think people would feel more comfortable with that." [Bisexual woman, 18-24]

Furthermore, this softer, less direct approach gave respondents more thinking time as it came as less of a surprise. Participants felt that the word 'yourself' was important in the stem because it demonstrated that the question was person-centred and about *"who you are"* rather than about the perceptions of others.

There was a view among gay/lesbian participants that it would be helpful to include the word 'currently' in the stem in recognition of the fact that an individual's sexual identity may change over time.

A self-identified gay man, who was married to a woman, felt that neither of the sample questions sufficiently described his own situation.

In general however, participants felt that despite subtle differences between the questions they would still respond similarly to either.

The response options were said to clarify what the questions were about. Indeed, participants did not always read the question stem but rather focused on the response options and inferred the meaning of the question from these.

"Well we totally ignored the first half of the question, we totally concentrated on the categories." [Bisexual man, 45-54]

5.2 Terminology used for response categories

5.2.1 'Formal' and 'colloquial' terminology

Participants viewed the terms 'heterosexual', 'homosexual' and 'bisexual' as formal terms whereas alternatives, such as 'gay', 'lesbian' and 'straight' were seen as colloquial and perhaps less appropriate for a Government survey. Participants differed as to which style they preferred. For example, there were those who believed that formal terminology was more appropriate for government surveys. Others saw it as inaccessible, medicalised, or the type of language used by *"outsiders"* which carried a moral or discriminatory tone. One suggestion was to include the formal term in brackets after the colloquial one.

5.2.2 Heterosexual/straight

The term 'heterosexual' was considered acceptable by participants in all focus groups although there were concerns that not everyone would understand its meaning. These concerns were supported by evidence from previous quantitative trials and feedback from interviewers working in the field.

Although it was thought to be a more medical or scientific term than the other words in the list, 'heterosexual' was the term of choice for one of the older participants, who believed that most people his age would feel the same on this issue.

Some gay and heterosexual participants raised concerns about the term 'straight'. They said that some people might understand the opposite of this term to be 'bent' or 'corrupt' and therefore anyone who did not identify as straight might be offended by it. Others disagreed:

> "*You don't say 'bent or straight' and you don't say 'gay or heterosexual...'*" [Gay woman/lesbian, 25-34]

However, even those who were not entirely comfortable with the term 'straight', nevertheless recommended including it. They conceded that although the term might have negative connotations for some, it was acceptable because it was commonplace and perhaps more widely understood than 'heterosexual'. Including both terms was recognised as a useful option because this would aid comprehension for everyone. A suggestion was to put the term 'straight' in inverted commas or in brackets alongside the term heterosexual because it *"sends the message we're not necessarily comfortable with this"*.

The only alternative term suggested, in the heterosexual groups only, was 'normal', although there were objections on the grounds that it was too colloquial, and that the opposite term would be 'abnormal', which was considered offensive.

5.2.3 Gay/Lesbian/Homosexual

As mentioned in chapter 4, the term 'homosexual' was widely disliked, across all groups, particularly gay men who thought it carried derogatory and even criminal connotations. For example, it was a term heard in the news to describe people who *"frequent Hampstead Heath"* [gay man, 45-54] or who are *"aberrant"* [gay man, 45-54]. This may be because participants in the gay male group were from a narrower age-range - none over the age of 60. It is therefore important that older people are recruited for one-to-one interviews in a later stage of research as they may have different opinions on the terminology.

'Homosexual' was also considered inappropriate in this context because it was felt to describe behaviour, as opposed to 'gay' which was considered a better description of identity.

Apart from those few who preferred the more formal terminology, everyone accepted the use of the term 'gay' for men. No alternatives were suggested, although it was acknowledged that terms come in and go out of use and that whatever was chosen for the survey would have to be reviewed in the future.

For women there was a choice between gay and lesbian.

> *"...some gay women have a real, are very specific about referring to themselves as lesbian...I'm not saying this is right or wrong, I'm just saying that some women who are gay, just don't want to be called gay, they want to be called lesbian."*
> [Gay woman/lesbian, 25-34]

There were clear age differences in gay/lesbian women's choice of language. Younger women tended to prefer 'gay' and older women, 'lesbian'.

The sample questions included the category 'gay or lesbian', and women in the gay/lesbian group picked up on the word 'or' as problematic. Its presence implied that one could not be both

gay and lesbian and that a distinction on gender lines was implied, which was not shared by some gay/lesbian women. One suggestion was to replace the 'or' with a forward slash ('/'). This would be possible when response options are presented visually.

During the gay male focus group it was suggested that the term 'lesbian' should precede 'gay' because:

> *"Lesbians are doubly oppressed as women, as gay people, and therefore they should be indicated by going first in the sentence, because that's an important part of our struggle."*
> [Gay man, 35-44]

Another pointed out that 'gay' comes before 'lesbian' in the alphabet and therefore should precede it here. When this issue was put to the gay women/lesbian focus group, held at a later date, the participants did not feel that the order mattered. They believed that this was only an issue for the men because gay men did not recognise that 'gay' was also a word used to describe women.

Although the terminology used would not affect how they answered the questions, respondents did feel that the use of inappropriate terminology would have an impact on the reputation of the research organisation. However, different participants had different ideas of what types of terminology would be inappropriate - for some it meant colloquial terms such as 'straight' and for others it meant formal terms such as 'homosexual':

> *"I wouldn't answer differently to gay, lesbian or homosexual, but it would give me a slightly different impression about who had written that survey."*
> [Gay/lesbian woman, 35-44]

5.2.4 Bisexual

Although 'bisexual' was considered "*medical*" or "*scientific*", there was no consensus as to a suitable alternative (see chapter 4). The term 'bicurious' was suggested by participants in the gay and bisexual groups, even though they recognised that it is not synonymous with bisexual. Bicurious was said to be a term used by people who are in "*transition*" or not "*committal*" and giving a sense of there being an "*option*". The gay male group said it was used by people not yet sure of their sexual identity and was thought of as a "*frivolous*" term usually used by teenagers:

> *"I think it's an easy way of describing what you are without being very committal about it at that point, when you're in that sort of transition period of, I think it was used in the same way as bisexual was used in the '70s and '80s."* [Gay man, 45-54]

The gay women/lesbian group also raised bicurious, as a term used by some heterosexuals who had not had same-sex relationships but *"would not rule it out"*.

It is doubtful whether bicurious is a distinct sexual identity and should be given a category in a survey question. It can be used to indicate not yet having fixed on a particular sexual identity. It would seem to be related to the process of developing a sexual identity for some people, but with reference to sexual attraction and behaviour.

Other suggestions included 'gender-apathetic' or 'open'. These reflected the dislike for categorisation described previously. However they are not appropriate since they are likely to mean little to the majority or to be interpreted wrongly.

An 'other' or 'none of these' option was suggested by bisexuals who were anti-categorisation, to allow those who disagreed with the premise of categorisation to respond in that way. However, this option might also be selected by people who objected to being asked the question on other grounds or by those who did not comprehend one or more of the other response categories. This was born out in the initial quantitative trials where an 'other (please specify)' category was included – see Taylor (2008a).

5.2.5 Other response categories

Participants were asked if they thought it was necessary to include any categories in addition to those in the sample questions. The suggestions were:

Queer

There was much discussion around whether to include the term 'queer'. The discussion was on two levels: firstly, whether it was acceptable or offensive and secondly, whether it had a clear definition and could exist as a discrete category.

Heterosexual participants rejected the term as offensive on the basis that it meant "*odd*" or "*strange*", but LGB participants expressed more mixed views. The arguments regarding its acceptability centred on the fact that it was once a derogatory term but that now some gay groups had reclaimed it:

> "… *it's a derogatory comment that's often aimed at you, and therefore if you use it yourself, to describe yourself, it takes the power out of the insult to a certain degree.*"[Gay man, 45-54]

However, even among those who would readily use the term to describe themselves there were those who would not use it in front of straight people, and would object to a straight person using the term. It was also suggested that only younger people, for example those under the age of 25, considered the term acceptable. Furthermore, some remarked that it was an academic term and not in everyday use.

Another difficulty with including 'queer' as a category was that participants could not agree on a definition. Some considered it synonymous with 'gay' or 'lesbian'. Others pointed out that it encompasses a variety of 'non-straight' identities including polyamorous. It was also recognised as being a term used by people who are transgendered.

Due to the controversial nature of 'queer' and its unclear definition, even those who were personally comfortable with the term felt that it should not be included in an official survey of the whole population.

Transgender/ transsexual

There were participants who felt there was a need for a separate category for those who were transgender or transsexual. However, as others pointed out, gender identity is a different concept to sexual identity. It was said that those who were transgender or transsexual should be able to select one of the sexual identity terms on the list on the same basis as the rest of the population. However, in order to check that this assumption is true, transgender people will be included in the later cognitive testing stage of the project.

Other response options

Other response options suggested were:

- 'still looking',
- 'trying to work it out',
- 'unsure'
- 'undecided'
- 'questioning'
- 'nothing'
- 'asexual'
- 'polyamorous'
- 'pansexual'

Further thought as to whether there are people who identify as 'asexual' – having no sexual feelings or sense of sexual identity- might be necessary as there is emerging discussion of this phenomenon[7]. However, this term could be confused with abstinence for those not currently in a sexual relationship but who do have a sexual identity.

'Unsure', 'undecided' and 'questioning' (or similar) would cater for people who were not yet settled on their sexual identity. However, again the terms could be misconstrued as referring to miscomprehension of the question or other response options.

In the bisexual groups preferences were expressed for being considered or described as *"open"* or *"gender apathetic"* (by men); and *"pansexual"*, *"polysexual"* or *"polyamorous"* (by women). However, these terms tended to relate to the dimensions of attraction and behaviour, describing the nature of relationships rather than being related to gender. Pansexual was described as meaning having relationships with anyone, regardless of gender, including transsexuals and transvestites, and there was concern that terms like 'polyamorous' might give a false impression of promiscuity, of loving more than one person at a time, and that their meanings might not be widely understood.
On the whole, participants recognised that it was impractical to list all these options and that perhaps it was sufficient to simply include an 'other' category with, perhaps, space to describe themselves in their own terms. Indeed, one participant pointed out that this could be a means to discover emerging terminology - a *"trendy bisexual word"*. However, it was thought that this might encourage respondents to list inappropriate concepts out of the scope of the research.

There was a suggestion that first generation Afro-Caribbean people used very different slang terms to describe sexual minority groups and may not have an understanding of the more conventional terms. This should be investigated at the cognitive/in-depth interviewing stage of the research.

5.3   The changing meaning of words over time

There was a general recognition that terms come into and go out of fashion. The example already mentioned is that queer was once universally derogatory but is now becoming more acceptable, although not yet to everyone. 'Gay' was seen as another term particularly vulnerable to change. Participants recognised that although it is currently the most acceptable term to them this may well not be the case in the future. All groups remarked on how people, particularly school-age children, are beginning to misuse the word as an insult. It was said to be used by the

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[7] See, for example article by S. P. Westphal in New Scientist, October 2004, 'Glad to be asexual':
http://space.newscientist.com/article/dn6533-feature-glad-to-be-asexual.html ; and letter to The Psychologist, Volume 19, Part 1, January 2006, 'No Sex Please, We're Asexual':
http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk/archive/archive_home.cfm?volumeID=19&editionID=142&ArticleID=972

younger generation to describe people, or music, as *"uncool"*, or to insult those who do well at school. It was believed that many children who use it in such a manner do not understand the background to the term and have just picked up this way of speaking from older children or media figures, who are really the ones to blame. It is important that younger people are recruited for one-to-one interviews in a later stage of research as they may have different opinions on the terminology.

5.4   Order of response categories

Few participants commented on the optimum order for presenting the categories, and those who did were in the heterosexual male group. The two suggestions were: i) in order of prevalence, and ii) in the order 'straight', 'bisexual', 'gay/lesbian' to reflect the continuum of attraction/behaviour. Since the data in the available literature differ as to whether there is a higher prevalence of bisexuals or gays/lesbians, these two suggestions may represent the same format and may implicitly suggest favouring attraction or behaviour over identity. In one of the previous quantitative trials (Taylor and Ralph 2008) the order of the response categories was tested in a split sample experiment where the non-heterosexual categories were listed before and after the heterosexual category, but no statistically significant difference in the results was found.

5.5   Alternative question format

Some participants from all groups suggested presenting a scale rather than discrete categories (see also Chapter 4). This was because it was said to be *"less confrontational"* than having to choose a label, or *"put oneself in a box"*. It would permit the collection of richer, more-complete data than can be collected when using discrete categories. If the intention was to collect data at several points in time, then scales were considered to be more sensitive at picking up small changes in identity. Not all those who suggested the use of a scale went on to describe a possible format. Those who did, suggested a *"Kinsey-type"* scale consisting of seven to ten points running from completely heterosexual at one end to completely gay at the other, with the mid-point representing bisexuals.

Those who disagreed with the use of a scale did so on the basis that: it would make analysis more difficult and would require greater consideration on the part of the respondent:

> *"I think if I was presented with a scale of one to ten I'd almost resent it, god I've got to think about this, whereas if somebody just put me in a box, in a multiple choice, I'd whip through it far more happily... If I had to think, well, god, did I ever look at a man once, well, could I be nine or nine and a half. Oh, Christ, tick box one and move on."*
> [Heterosexual man, 45-54]

Furthermore the use of a scale is more pertinent to measuring the concepts of attraction or behaviour, rather than identity which is discrete.

5.6   Summary and recommendations

The recommendations for the design of the question stem and response options reflect the meaning derived by participants from the words and terms used. The term 'sexual identity' should be excluded from the question stem on the basis that some participants focused on the word 'sex' which favours the concept of behaviour. They preferred the phrase 'best describes how you think of yourself' over 'consider yourself to be' on the basis that it was a softer

approach and better conveyed the concept of sexual identity. Bisexuals in particular thought that it indicated that answers could be qualified, fluid or different in different contexts. Certainly the word 'yourself' was felt an important part of the stem as it indicated that the answer should be about oneself rather than other people's perception.

However, participants tended to infer meaning from the response options provided and therefore it is the response options that question designers should focus on. The more formal, rather than colloquial, terminology was seen by some as being more appropriate for government survey but others thought that not everyone would understand the formal terms.

The term 'straight' was the only alternative term apart from 'normal' that participants could think of to describe heterosexual identity.

The term 'homosexual' in particular was cited as being old fashioned and in some cases was considered offensive because of the connotations associated with it. Furthermore, it was felt to describe behaviour – the term gay was felt to be a better description of identity. Gay/ lesbian women felt that the both terms 'gay' and 'lesbian' should be made available to women and should be separated by a slash rather than the word 'or' which implied a distinction.

There was no consensus as to a suitable alternative to the term 'bisexual'. An 'other' or 'none of these' category was suggested by bisexuals who were anti-categorisation. However, this option may then be used by those who did not understand the question at all and whether or not to include an 'other specify' category would in part depend on the mode of administration. For example, only though self completion would it be possible to maintain privacy to a specified category.

With respect to the 'other' category further consideration should be given to those who may not identify as heterosexual, or LGB.

There were no clear recommendations from the focus group discussions as to the order in which the response categories should be presented other than that heterosexual/straight should probably be first because it was the majority category.

Focus group participants agreed that a separate category for transgendered people would not be required as they would still have a sexual identity covered by the list presented. However, it would be necessary to consult with the transgender community before making a final decision.

Also, further research with respect to terminology used should involve those from the Afro-Caribbean community.

Certainly it is necessary to allow respondents not to provide an answer to the question since all survey questions are asked on a voluntary basis. But it is unclear from this research whether it would be necessary to provide a 'prefer not to say' option explicitly, or whether it would be sufficient to allow for a spontaneous-only refusal. The findings did suggest that this option would not always be used by those wishing to hide their sexual identity, who would prefer to select one of the substantive categories, depending on the home situation. ONS interviewers make it clear to respondents at the start of the interview that all questions are voluntary and therefore spontaneous-only refusal in a CAPI interview may be sufficient; this however would not be possible in a CASI situation where all options must be presented to the respondent.

Based on the discussions and good question design practice it is recommended that any terminology used should be reviewed periodically to take into account that language changes use and meaning over time.

6 Acceptability and Trust

This chapter discusses factors affecting the acceptability of asking about sexual identity as well as trust in the data collection agency, and hence propensity to respond accurately. Although two separate concepts, they are considered here together because a lack of either could have similar consequences, namely:

- Failure to respond to the particular question, the whole interview, or subsequent follow-ups.
- A decision to respond incorrectly resulting in misleading data.
- A negative impact on the reputation of the data collection agency.

Acceptability and trust are assumed to provide a proxy for willingness to respond but it should be noted that the two do not necessarily equate. Participants, particularly those in the LGB groups, sometimes considered it acceptable to ask about sexual identity on a survey but stated that they would not respond in certain circumstances, for example if confidentiality were not absolutely assured (see Chapter 7).

6.1 The purpose of the question

One factor likely to affect the acceptability of a question on sexual identity is whether respondents have a clear and correct understanding of the purpose of such a question, and a belief that it is valid and important. With this in mind, focus group participants were encouraged to discuss their understanding of the purpose and how this related to acceptability and their willingness to respond.

6.1.1 Understanding the purpose

Participants' understanding of the purpose of the question and knowledge of the equal opportunities agenda varied across and within all groups. Only a few participants ventured ideas, which were not always positive. This negativity stemmed from a fear of homophobia, sometimes based on direct experience.

Positive purposes

Participants recognised the need to ensure that everyone had equal access to services such as healthcare and employment, regardless of their sexual identity:

> *"You might find that … there's no bisexuals or gays working in railways or something like that, I don't know."* [Bisexual man, 35-44]

Those in the sexual minority groups recognised the importance of being counted to enable the Government to allocate funding and services appropriately:

> *"I think it's very important that it is acknowledged that different communities have different needs, and that the research and the statistics are there to back that up, because it is all, I mean in the end, the Government is there to basically take your money and spend it in different ways."* [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

The gay men's group hoped that accurate information on the size of the LGB community would mean that they would no longer be regarded as *"abnormal"* by parts of society. Reference was made to the controversy over Catholic adoption agencies wanting exemption from having to consider gay adoptive parents:

> *"Bigots and things try and paint us as 0.01% of the population who are just weirdoes and freaks, and there's no way they should be allowed in terms of children and things like that, or that services should be provided for them. And so I think it's very important actually that this information is still gathered, it might be sad, but I think it's important."* [Gay man, 35-44]

The actual presence of the question was considered to have an important purpose in its own right. It was thought that as the questioning became more commonplace it would demonstrate to the wider public that non-heterosexuality was unremarkable.

> *"It's having it on there, it's beginning to usualise the question, it's a cultural shift, it's enabling people to gradually recognise it's no bloody big deal. But if we don't have it there, we are setting up this whole process of we must be quiet about these people and all the rest of it."* [Gay/lesbian woman, 55+]

Negative purposes

Other participants voiced concerns that the data could be used for inappropriate purposes, either as an a priori intention, or after inadvertently *'falling into the wrong hands'*. Such concerns included that:

Homophobes may attack areas known to have a large LGB population:

> *"If you could, say, classify one area as predominantly gay, if that information became widely available then people living in that neighbourhood could become a target."* [Heterosexual man, 18-24]

Admission of a gay identity could jeopardise insurance and medical policies:

> *"It's only that I have had the experience of an insurance policy being annulled for me, life assurance, because I was honest on a survey,... I had a piece of paper in the post the next day saying, 'Do you identify yourself as being homosexual, if so, how many times have you had sex in the last six months?', and so on. And I answered these things honestly, and the life policy was immediately cancelled. So I mean there is a part of me that is hugely, and I think a lot of people, especially of my sort of age, would not answer that question in a million years."* [Gay man, aged 55+]

It would be used to predict behaviour:

> *"So if somebody's going to answer 'heterosexual' they're more likely to do one thing than they are the other. If they answer 'homosexual' they're more likely to do one thing than the other. So it can be used commercially or it can be used statistically to predict behaviour ... but I'm just not sure whether I'm comfortable with it being used in that way."* [Heterosexual man, 18-24]

And, that people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual may be enticed to live in areas known to have a large LGB community, and this would *"ghettoise"* parts of the country.

Some gay and lesbian participants were sceptical about whether the collection of such data would really lead to improvements. For example, they believed that councils did not have policies in place to deal with any issues that arose, such as homophobic crime:

> *"I want some proof that the people who are asking these questions do something constructive with it, because there are plenty of places that have been collecting gender,*

ethnicity, age, disability and all the rest of it, because they legally have to do it, but how has it changed the service that they give us?" [Gay/lesbian woman, 55+]

"I live in a borough where they ask you questions along these lines, and it's taken me three years to discover they don't even have a ... policy for lesbian and gay services users. So when somebody is attacked in their home and they've received homophobic abuse, the person that answers the phone at the other end when it's reported hasn't got a clue how to deal with it. If they haven't got a policy... then what is the point in asking the question in the first place?" [Gay man, 45-54]

Furthermore, it was observed that the necessity of including a question on sexual identity is in itself evidence that inequalities do exist:

"When the council sends you questionnaires at the end of your whatever little letter you get that says what ethnic origin are you, I answer, 'if you truly operate an equal opportunities borough, you wouldn't need to ask this stupid question" [Gay man, 45-54]

6.1.2 Providing respondents with a rationale for the question

The previous section demonstrates that some people were unclear as to why the questioning was necessary and how the data would be used. However, it should not be assumed that providing respondents with a rationale would increase acceptability and improve response. Discussion showed that views varied as to whether a rationale for the question should be given to respondents.

Some participants in all groups believed that it was important to explain why the question was being asked to encourage response:

"…what the pre-amble is…to enable us to feel that we're giving this very important information to people who are going to use it for our good, and carefully." [Gay/lesbian woman, 55+).

"I would say, well, why on earth would you want to ask me that, what possible use can that be to you? And if I felt that the answer was persuasive to me, I might consider it. I wouldn't just answer it as a group of, you know, questions about what my life is." [Bisexual woman, 35-44]

Others, also from a range of groups, believed that giving an explanation, especially a lengthy one, could be detrimental as it would draw attention to the sensitivity of the question. They suggested that if it was deemed necessary to give an explanation then it could be given generally for all identity questions (including disability, ethnicity, religion) rather than before the sexual identity question specifically.

"I certainly think it would encourage them to answer it but you don't have to put it in front of that question, you could put it in front of all the classification questions just saying, these are classification questions, we're asking them because we want to know whether people of all these different groups are being provided for properly." [Heterosexual man, 18-24]

An alternative suggestion was that if an individual explanation had to be given, the same should be done for every question on the survey.

Whilst some believed that it was simply unnecessary to provide a rationale at all, as respondents would be willing to answer this question without one. As suggested in the previous section, people would be more willing to respond once they were used to seeing the question:

> *"I think as it becomes more the norm to see questions like that on forms, then, it's just a standard part of what you're asked isn't it?"* [Bisexual man, 35-44]

6.2 Context

The acceptability of being asked about sexual identity may depend on the context in which it is asked. There are two aspects to context: the type of data collection exercise (including social survey, census, equality monitoring); and whether the question is asked along with other similar questions so that it appears relevant.

6.2.1 Type of data collection exercise

Participants discussed the acceptability of asking about sexual identity on different types of data collection instruments.

Social survey

Most of those in the heterosexual groups had already been asked a question on sexual identity in the Omnibus survey, and could therefore talk from experience, whereas very few of those in the other groups had. None of those who had been asked the question on the Omnibus survey had objected to it although one heterosexual respondent recalled having been *"very slightly taken aback"*. However, if there were respondents who had been offended by the question on the Omnibus survey they would have been unlikely to agree to participate in a focus group on the same topic.

Participants who felt uncomfortable with answering in other circumstances, for example on job applications (see section on equality monitoring), did not mind on social surveys because these were seen as being anonymous and there were no perceived negative personal consequences to their responses.

Census

The UK population Census is conducted every 10 years, with the next one due in 2011. Because of the high profile of the Census and the fact that it is relevant to everyone, participants were asked how they would feel about the inclusion of a question on sexual identity in the next Census. Participants who were not aware of the methodology were told that the information is collected on a paper form which is delivered to each address. There are separate sections for each member of the household, but fewer questions for those aged under 16. The householder is told to check that all sections of the questionnaire are completed for all household members.

Participants generally accepted in principal the idea of including a sexual identity question on the Census. Heterosexual participants used phrases such as *"it wouldn't bother me"* and *"I'd be more than happy to answer it"*, whereas those in the LGB focus groups tended to be much more enthusiastic with comments such as: *"passionate about it being there in the Census, absolutely passionate"* and *"in the last census, we're asked all manner of questions, except this... and it felt quite a lack... a glaring omission"*. It was important to some of the LGB participants that they be counted in society and they perceived the Census to be the best vehicle for achieving this.

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Despite the enthusiasm for including sexual identity on the Census in principle, many had reservations due to practical considerations. The mode of response (pen and paper) would mean that all household members could easily view everyone else's responses. This lack of privacy would be a particular concern to those LGB participants who were not 'out' in their household environment and therefore may not answer truthfully or may be placed in a vulnerable position, for example lodgers or teenage children:

> *"That's going to be deeply problematic, especially for teenagers that haven't even decided what they think their sexual orientation is, and people that just don't live in houses, you know, families that are not tolerant or, you know, that's going to be really difficult if other people can see the form."* [Gay/lesbian woman, age 25-34, living with other adults]

> *"The last form, if I remember rightly, it was just all one big form, … and at the time I lived with four other people, I lived in a mixed household with, I mean one guy was very homophobic, he was very sexist, and I didn't feel comfortable putting a lot of things down because he could have looked through and seen some quite personal details, which I don't mind telling someone anonymously, you know."*
> [Bisexual woman, 25-34, living with other adults]

> *"Let's say it's quite a large family living in one property and let's say there's several children, grandmother, an aunt or something and somebody else staying, it's a bit of a public document that, so in fact it could cause problems."*
> [Heterosexual man, 45-54, living with spouse/partner]

> *"…my mum would fill the answer for everyone, I don't think she would sit down and ask me…okay, here's a question about if you're heterosexual or homosexual, what do you think I should put, she wouldn't ask, she'd fill it in.* [Heterosexual woman, 18-24, living with other adults]

Since the Census covers the whole population and collects information on names and address, it was believed that individuals could become targets for discrimination or persecution if a homophobic government came into power. This was despite assurances that Census data are carefully protected.

> *"… it's very much a worst case scenario, but say some government came into power that was very unsympathetic to gays and lesbians, then they have all the data and your name."*
> [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

Equality monitoring

Participants discussed how they would feel about being asked to state their sexual identity on an equality monitoring form, most commonly mentioning those which accompany job application forms.

Participants, from all groups, had concerns about answering a question on sexual identity or orientation on job application forms, and some said they would refuse to answer it because they thought the responses would be associated directly with the individual concerned. The applicant may later meet the people who read the form, either at an interview or in the course of their work, and it would be disconcerting to know that they have access to such personal information. Furthermore, the presence of the question might lead candidates to think that they would be selected on the basis of their responses.

"On an application form, you're going to meet somebody on a one-to-one basis, and they're going to identify you as the person who's filled that in. Whereas on a survey that you fill in anonymously, then it's a group of people isn't it?" [Heterosexual woman, 55+]

"In terms of putting it down on a job application, it kind of lends itself to assumptions as well, because people who don't know you are reading that form, people with preconceived ideas, people who perhaps aren't open minded or have their own judgements or whatever." [Bisexual woman, 35-44]

"What has my sexuality got to do with anybody?" [Heterosexual woman, 35-44]

"I saw it in an application form … but to be honest, I never answer it, I just think it's far too personal. I just see like a legal requirement that I'm not sure how it's going to benefit me…or benefit people in general" [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

"I wouldn't be happy about it, as long as employers can still discriminate." [Bisexual woman, 31-50]

"To be honest, sometimes I think, oh maybe it'll be like I'm a woman, I'm gay, well that's like two diversity boxes ticked, you know. If I was going for a bank job, like that would be great, because they're looking for anything other than men, so." [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

On the other hand, there were participants who could identify benefits to including this question on equality monitoring forms. One LGB participant felt strongly enough to say *"if it's not on there I get upset"*.

Participants felt the question important in this context to ensure that all types of employment were accessible to everyone regardless of their sexual identity.

"Because, for example, if you are a gay man, and you want to work on the Underground, for example, and you put that on your form, … and they think, well hold on, we've got twenty million heterosexual people working on the Underground, why have we only got one million gay people, … what does that mean, what can we do, do they not want to work on the underground, are we rejecting them, loads of different things. So I think that certain groups in society are not heard or are not seen, and I think it's important that, as a democracy, everyone's voice is heard." [Heterosexual woman, 18-24]

6.2.2 Question location

It was considered important to ask the question in context - that is alongside similar or related questions – see also chapter 7, section 5. For some this meant asking it with other socio-demographic questions, and for others it meant asking on a health-related survey. This relates back to what was said earlier on the purpose of the question, as respondents often extrapolate the purpose based on the surrounding questions.

When the question was first trialled on the NS Omnibus Survey it was asked at the end of the interview after a section on computer and internet use. A respondent who had been interviewed during this trial recalled that they had not understood the relevance of sexual identity in this context.

"They were asking me about my use of computers and my perception and I don't see what my sexual orientation would actually have to do with something like that." [Heterosexual man, 35-44]

Others remarked that people would answer without hesitation if it was asked alongside socio-demographic questions:

> *"I don't think it should be a separate question in its own right. I think it should form part of the demographics. If you've got a lot of general questions people will probably answer it quite spontaneously".* [Heterosexual man, 45-54]

6.3 Acceptability of asking related questions on attraction and behaviour

In relation to the conceptualisation of sexual identity and whether it is possible to isolate from other dimensions of sexual orientation such as attraction or behaviour – as discussed in chapter 4 - participants were asked for their views on such questioning in a social survey context.

There were participants who were in favour of including a question on attraction, for example a gay/lesbian woman suggested, *"Are you sexually attracted to men, women or both?"* in addition to, or instead of, a question on identity. They saw this as *"simpler"* than asking about identity, attraction being more concrete and therefore easier to access without much consideration. It was considered a means of describing people rather than attaching a fixed label or putting them in 'box'.

> *"Yes, you're not being labelled are you, you're not giving yourself a label either".*
> [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

Participants who weren't necessarily against including a question on attraction did suggest that the term 'attraction' would need to be clearly defined as it would be possible to be attracted to someone and enjoy their company without the attraction being of a sexual nature. They also acknowledged that different responses might be given to attraction than identity.

Attitudes to asking about sexual behaviour were less favourable. It was almost universally agreed that such a question would be intrusive and irrelevant on a general purpose social survey, and participants said they would *"be annoyed"* and refuse to answer it:

> *"It's one thing to ask somebody about whether they're homosexual, heterosexual and so forth, it's another thing to ask them about past experiences, that's really quite personal. I think even if it was a Government survey, I don't think anyone could really say why you would need to know about past experiences and so forth"* [Heterosexual woman, 18-24].

Participants did suggest a few circumstances in which questions about behaviour would be relevant, and therefore acceptable. These were:
- when donating blood;
- on a health-related study;
- on a survey exploring sexuality in detail, for example the type of survey conducted by Kinsey[8] ;
- on a survey conducted by a relevant organisation, such as the Terence Higgins Trust.

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[8] Kinsey, A. C, Pomeroy, W. B., and Martin, C. E., 'Sexual Behavior in the Human Male', W. B. Saunders, Philadelphia, PA, 1948;
Kinsey, A. C., Pomeroy, W. B., Martin. C. E., and Gebhard, P. H. 'Sexual Behavior in the Human Female', W. B. Saunders, Philadelphia, PA, 1953.

6.4 Other factors affecting acceptability and trust

Participants identified other respondent and situational characteristics which may have an impact on the acceptability of the question, and respondents' trust.

6.4.1 Familiarity with the question over time

Participants believed that respondents would be more willing to answer the sexual identity question once it became commonplace. It was the fact that it had not been seen before that made it somewhat surprising:

> [With reference to completing a form] *"It jarred because I hadn't seen it before, but I answered it, and I thought long and hard, wasn't sure about it, but the main thing was I wasn't used to seeing it .... But people may get more used to seeing it."*
> [(Gay man, 35-44]

> *"People are now more ready, are happier to say what their sexual orientation is publicly than they have been. So it might be a degree of time that you've actually come to a point where you can slip the question in. Of course, there's going to be an argument about it but then it becomes the norm. I think it's part of actually how we identify ourselves in society now, as we didn't in the past."* [Heterosexual man,45-54]

It was recognised that data quality may be poor initially because people may be surprised by the question and wary of responding for fear of data misuse. However, it was believed that familiarisation would lead to acceptability and people would be more prepared to answer honestly.

6.4.2 Age of respondent

Discussion of the minimum age at which respondents could be asked about sexual identity focused on acceptability, whereas the discussion on the maximum age focussed both on acceptability and trust.

Participants considered that it was acceptable to ask sexual identity if the respondent was aged 16 or over as this is the age of consent. Participants did however consider that asking 16 and 17 year olds could be a problem as many still live with their parents who may object to this sort of questioning. The identification of 16 as the minimum age was also based on validity in that those under this age would be unlikely to have developed a stable sexual identity.

Participants generally believed that it was appropriate to ask even the most elderly respondents the question, although some referred to what they knew of their own parents or grandparents and concluded that this oldest age group may find it difficult to understand. Some believed that older people would object to it stemming from the fact that it was still illegal to be gay for part of their lifetime. Because of this it was thought that older heterosexuals may still harbour prejudices and the older gay population may not trust the motive behind this type of question.

> *"I'm not sure if my grandparents, if they were still alive, would be happy to answer. I'm not sure younger people would be able to answer it because they weren't sure where they actually stood. There is that situation."* [Heterosexual man, 45-54]

6.4.3 Religiosity

There was a view that some religions held strong anti-gay views. It was thought that strongly religious people may find the questioning offensive and LGB people who were brought up in a religious environment may still be wary of disclosing their sexual identity.

> *"From a religious point of view it has a bearing as well. Some religions don't accept any, homosexuality is wrong ... end of story. It's the thing that doesn't speak its name or whatever."*[Heterosexual man, 35-44]

On the other hand, a bisexual woman did point out though that some religions are inclusive, and that she had attended a gay-led church congregation.

One self-identified heterosexual respondent said that despite the fact that his religion did not accept homosexuality he did not object to the questioning as he was *"proud"* to have the opportunity to say he was heterosexual.

6.4.4 Type of organisation conducting the survey

Regardless of issues of context and purpose, participants generally considered it more acceptable for a government or other public sector organisation to ask them about their sexual identity than for a private sector organisation. This was because they trusted the public sector body would use the information for public benefit rather than for commercial purposes.

> *"No, in the Government one ... I appreciate why they do the statistics and so forth, but with local marketing things, you do kind of get wary because even though they give you a reason, you're not really believing that reason..."*
> [Heterosexual woman, 18-24]

> *"The only reason I responded to the phone questionnaire, as soon as I heard the words Office of National Statistics, I said yes, this has a point, it will benefit all of us in the end, they're not just, I wouldn't feel the same way about marketing,...."* [Heterosexual woman, 45-54]

Participants believed that the Government was subject to tighter control over what was done with the data, and that they could trust claims of data protection more than they could trust such claims made by private organisations:

> *"I think there's less control, perhaps in the private sector, the idea of giving that information to a private sector company, they'll do what they want with it then they'll collate it and sell it to somebody. Whereas there's more, you know, if it's carried out by the Government, then there's more follow up, if you like, if there was any problems, I would feel like I could challenge that institution, quite legitimately, you know."* [Gay man, 25-34]

Personal experiences had given other participants a more negative view of Government intentions. For example, a bisexual woman said her impressions of the Government had been influenced by the fact that funding to bisexual organisations had been removed.

Some participants identified particular types of organisations which they were least likely to trust. For example, one referred to his experience of having a life insurance policy annulled as mentioned in section 6.1.1. A bisexual man identified a particular religious organisation.

6.4.5 Social environment

Those who had lived in other areas of the UK, or outside of the UK, believed it was far easier to be open about their sexuality in London. People living in London were felt to be more tolerant than those living elsewhere due to the multicultural nature of the city. It was likely that London was mentioned particularly because the focus groups were held in London and that the same would apply to other cities with a large LGB community, for example Manchester and Brighton.

> *"I think it depends quite a lot on the way you live and how old you are. For example, I was born down* [South West county]*, and my parents being extremely religious, have very definite views on sexuality, and… I think they view this very differently to how, say, the average person who's maybe been born and grown up in London with lots of different cultures and backgrounds."* [Heterosexual woman, aged 35-44]

> *"I've lived in* [Muslim country]*, nobody would ever admit that* [being gay]*, so they all choose to be heterosexual. Somebody's not been here that long, it's even more of an issue."* [Heterosexual woman, aged 35-44]

> *"The liberation that you all express, now, I don't experience in* [Home County] *at all."* [Gay man, aged 55+]

6.5 Summary and recommendations

Understanding of the purpose of the questioning on sexual identity was limited to a general idea that it was related to monitoring equality and service provision. Indeed, some participants in the sexual minority groups expressed concern over the use of such information. However, others highlighted the importance of being counted and hoped that over time the fact that the question was asked at all would have a normative effect, becoming more commonplace and therefore more familiar and acceptable to the heterosexual population.

It was agreed that the question should not be treated any differently to other survey questions and therefore a specific explanation would only serve to highlight the question unnecessarily.

Acceptability was associated with context with respect to the type of data collection exercise and perceived anonymity, as well as question relevance. Participants felt more comfortable with the questioning in a social survey context where they did not think that the data would be linked to them personally, as opposed to a Census or equality monitoring form. Nevertheless, within survey context was also important in order to ensure that the question did not stand out and appeared relevant.

Sexual attraction and behaviour were considered easier concepts to grasp than sexual identity, although clear definitions would need to be provided. However, participants were not in favour of asking questions about sexual behaviour in a social survey context due to its intrusive and personal nature.

Participants considered it acceptable to ask sexual identity of those aged 16 or over, acknowledging that it could cause problems where young people still lived at with their parents.

There was an opinion that those with strong religious views, may find the questioning offensive and therefore should be included in the cognitive/in-depth stage of the research.

Similarly that those living in less urban areas should also be included at later stages of the research due to the fact that they were perceived to be less tolerant towards sexual minority groups.

There was greater trust in public sector data collectors than private sector where participants did not trust data security in the same way and where the data be used for commercial purposes.

7 Administration of a question on sexual identity in social survey

This chapter discusses the issues surrounding the administration of a question on sexual identity in a social survey context where all household members are interviewed.

It is important to reiterate, particularly in relation to the section on maintaining privacy, that none of the participants lived at home with parents; they all lived with spouse/partner, alone (with or without children), or with other unrelated adults. Of course, at some point in the past it can be assumed that the majority of participants had lived with parents and could therefore talk from experience in this respect.

7.1 Maintaining privacy

7.1.1 Within household

The issue of maintaining privacy and confidentiality within the household environment, irrespective of whether the question was asked of one person or all household members, was of paramount importance to participants who were not 'out' to other household members. This was the case even where LGB participants lived with non-heterosexual people, for example, where a bisexual participant was not 'out' as bisexual to gay flatmates and where a gay man did not know his flatmate well: *"I wouldn't like to out myself"*. There was concern from all groups about the accuracy of the data in these situations because it was felt that respondents would not be able to answer honestly if privacy could not be assured. For some, placing them in that position was a concern because they said it could jeopardise their current living arrangements where they were not 'out' to the people they lived with.

For heterosexuals, who acknowledged that there was no stigma attached to being heterosexual in society, privacy within household was not an issue for them personally: *"I should have no hesitation answering this question",* even if children were present. For LGB participants, who were open about their sexuality at home, this was also the case: *"If you're out then its fine",* although some of the gay/lesbian group still thought the question was *"far too personal"* to be asked directly in front of other people. Indeed, privacy was of most concern to the gay/lesbian group and more time was spent on discussing privacy in this particular focus group.

Bisexual and gay men discussed how they would have felt earlier in their lives when still developing their sexual identity, although they recognised that attitudes in society were changing:

> *"It's partly social climate…these things are much more openly discussed now than 25 years ago … also personally, I'm more comfortable in my own skin about it."*
> [Gay man, 55+]

7.1.2 Between respondent and interviewer

Even where other household members would not be present there was some hesitation expressed in providing the information directly to an interviewer, irrespective of whether the response categories were read out by an interviewer or shown on a card for the respondent to provide a corresponding letter or number. This was particularly so among the gay/lesbian group who felt more vulnerable. All participants agreed that it was important for the interviewer to convey the

fact that he/she took the issue of privacy seriously, even where the question was administered in CASI:

> *"I did actually like that part of the survey, the way they did that, found that quite good, because…he said that he didn't want to help me because he just really wanted to keep it very private, so I quite liked that."*
> [Heterosexual woman, 25-34]

One participant from the gay/lesbian group said she would be unhappy about the interviewer knowing this personal information about her in case she met him/her in the street.

7.1.3 Location of interview

A concern expressed was that the location of the interview was important. Participants said that they would not want to be asked the question in a public place. This would be relevant for those interviewed by mobile phone if they were not at home at the time.

7.2 Mode of administration

Participants suggested a number of ways in which the question could be administered by the interviewer in order to try and protect privacy, including the use of show cards, self-completion using the interviewer's laptop (acknowledging that some people may not feel comfortable using a keyboard or may have a physical impediment to doing so), paper and sealed envelope handed to an interviewer or separately posted back.

Self-completion was the preferred option. This was supported by the fact that those who had taken part in the Omnibus interview had had positive experiences with the CASI administration. The self-completion option was suggested not just in relation to the question on sexual identity but also other personal demographic data:

> *"You don't need to be asked those questions* [out loud] *do you?"*
> [Gay man, 35-44]

Indeed, slowing the administration of the question down through self-completion was said to give people time to think and consider their answer.

When the way in which show cards are used in social survey was explained, that is respondents are asked to read out the relevant response option or a number or letter associated with it, participants said that the method would be acceptable, but only if other questions around the sexual identity question also used them. This was because it was important that the question was not perceived as being treated differently to other questions, thereby drawing attention to it.

However, asking respondents to read a number or letter associated with the relevant response option was also perceived by some as affording a different treatment to the topic: *"the love that dare not speak its name is writ large"* [gay man, 56, lives alone]. An initial reaction from another gay man was *"ludicrous",* as answering with a number or letter *"dramatises the effect so much more".* However, in contrast, others in the group said they would feel uncomfortable with being asked to read out the actual response option. Again among the gay/lesbian group there was some concern that the interviewer would still know what answer had been given.

Ultimately however, the groups did not think that any method could provide total privacy from other people, including the interviewer. Those from the gay/lesbian group all preferred to write the answer on paper and post the information back to the office separately.

"I think the only way that you can get better indication of the information you want is to post it out and to have people post to back to you, because they can fill it in in their own time, in their own space." [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

This suggested methodology perhaps reflects participant understanding of the administration of social survey through traditional postal paper and pencil methods and their attempts to suggest a way of maintaining privacy in that particular environment.

As alluded to earlier, the heterosexual groups and some of the gay male group were happy with being asked the question directly by an interviewer without the use of a show card. Even those in the gay male group who preferred not to verbalise their response nevertheless said they recognised the importance of being counted and said: *"if it meant someone having to ask me then that's fine as well."*

Some of the former Omnibus participants had been asked the question over the telephone. Again this was perfectly acceptable to those identifying as heterosexual and some of the LGB participants, although they would need assurance that the telephone interviewer was bone fide. However one gay man commented on the fact that it was not possible to *"strike up the same relationship"* with someone on the phone compared with face-to-face. Furthermore, that a chance remark by the interviewer or office noise in the background would affect whether he would answer the question over the phone:

"… more difficult because you don't know who you are talking to. Chance remarks either way are very easy to knock you off course."
[Gay man, 55+]

7.3   Interviewer effect

Respondents were asked whether the presence of an interviewer or particular interviewer characteristics had or would influence how they felt about being asked a question on sexual identity or their response.

In general, it was the rapport established with the interviewer that was important to participants, irrespective of particular interviewer characteristics and the way the interviewer administered the question. It was important that interviewers are not perceived to react in a negative way. LGB participants were concerned that a remark or a sign that the interviewer found the question amusing would influence their response. In this situation they would be more likely to provide a more socially desirable 'heterosexual' response, or whether they gave a response at all. Even facial expressions and body language that gave an impression of nervousness or awkwardness on the part of the interviewer would have the same effect.

"How do they extract the information from you…do they make inappropriate remarks… do they know how to handle sensitive issues or topics? I think based on their management of the situation you might respond differently."
[Bisexual woman, 35-44]

"If somebody came round to my flat to ask a question…with a computer and they seemed a little bit possibly homophobic, then I might just go, yes, I'm straight." [Bisexual man, 25-34]

"You need very very open minded people to do this kind of thing" [Gay man, 25-34]

With reference to a different survey he had taken part in one of the gay male group described how he felt when asked the question:

> *"There was a moment where I thought, you know, what if she reacts negatively?...If she had presented herself in a slightly different way, I may actually not have chosen to answer"* [Gay man, 45-54]

A younger bisexual female felt that she would feel more comfortable if the interviewer was also younger, as she felt that younger people in general were more accepting of bisexuality or *"being gay"*.

During analysis of data from the previous Omnibus trials it was evident that the sex of the interviewer (opposite sex) had in a minority of cases influenced the responses given, albeit amongst the heterosexual population, who through embarrassment chose not to answer the question at all. However, the sex of the interviewer was not thought to be an issue for those attending the focus groups, as one woman said: *"I didn't even think about it"*.

7.4   Option to refuse the question

The option to refuse the question was not raised by either of the heterosexual groups. Although all of the gay male group would identify themselves because they felt strongly that only by doing so would they be represented in society, it was said that a 'rather not say' option should be made available in the questioning because some people, particularly the younger generation, are unhappy about being asked to define their sexuality at all.

> *"I think there are, I mean I've had conversations with people who I would call gay, who actually refuse to define themselves...'well I fall in love with people and actually therefore I don't feel the need to define my sexuality'...certainly among the younger generation, some people feel quite strongly about that"* [Gay man, 45-54]

Some of those in the gay/lesbian group thought that an option to refuse the question should be included simply because of the personal nature of the questioning.

> *"I think it's such a personal question, that I think you should have an option not answering it."* [Gay/lesbian female, 25-34]

Although others agreed that they would not answer the question if privacy was not assured, they said that they would probably give an incorrect answer of 'heterosexual', rather than in effect, highlight the fact that they were not heterosexual by choosing a refusal option. This was also the case among some of the bisexual participants where it was thought that not answering *"has connotations"*.

7.5   Location of question within the questionnaire

As discussed in chapter 6 on acceptability of the subject matter, all of the groups felt that the questioning should not *'stand out'* and should be asked in context along side other identity questions such as ethnicity, religion or disability. By so doing the question would not be highlighted as a potential issue. Such context would help to demonstrate implicitly to respondents the reason for the questioning without requiring an introductory explanation, which it was felt would also draw attention to the question unnecessarily. Furthermore, there was a feeling of suspicion around the need to collect data on sexual identity if the question was not set in context:

"... devious buggers...they snuck that one in at the end didn't they, that was obviously their real question and why did they sneak it in at the end?" [Heterosexual man, 55+]

However, there was some discussion around whether the question should be asked before or after a question on religion, which could influence answers:

"Of course you have a problem if somebody actually puts down their religious orientation, and because of that it qualifies the next question abut sexual orientation and skews your statistics because there will be a non admittance of a particular fact about themselves. How would you actually put that through a statistical, how do you find the best way to describe that, maybe not?"
[Heterosexual man, 45-54]

The questioning was seen as unacceptable in a survey where the rest of the subject matter was perceived to be unrelated and where the question was not located with other similar questions.

7.6   Proxy data collection

It is standard practice for most ONS social surveys that in situations where interviewers are able to make contact with some but not all household members, information is collected, with permission, by proxy for those not interviewed directly.

Participants were asked how they would feel about being asked to answer a question on sexual identity on behalf of other household members and about other household members providing an answer on their behalf.

In general, participants were not in favour of either approach on grounds of: i) acceptability; and ii) accuracy. They said it was an individual's right to provide this information for themselves, and since it was obvious that the quality of the data would be affected by asking for proxy information they said it would affect how they thought about the quality of the organisation collecting the data. This was the case in all of the groups convened.

"I don't think it's right basically...it's not my call." [Heterosexual man, 45-54]

"I would never do it, if I get surveys where I'm asked about other people in the household, I just don't continue." [Heterosexual woman, 35-44]

"I just think it wasn't a particularly good survey because it could be inaccurate, because it's based on somebody else's assumption. For example, mothers assuming their sons are heterosexual could give a very distorted set of figures."
[Heterosexual woman, 45-54]

"I'm saying that I could and I would but I wouldn't think that it was very professional."
[Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

"Perhaps I'd want to speak for myself...the other person, with the best will in the world might not represent the thing as I'd like it represented."
[Gay man, 35-44]

The younger LGB participants expressed concern about their parents being asked for this information on their behalf. Asking people to consider their own sexual identity was different from asking them to consider their children's sexual identity which could cause unnecessary

distress or lead to inaccurate reporting even where the parents were aware of their children's sexuality.

> *"If you asked my mum I'd be really annoyed. It's not that she doesn't know, but I just, I don't know, I wouldn't feel comfortable with my parents having to answer these questions on my behalf, because sometimes I don't think my mum is very comfortable with it, and I don't know, I think she'd be quite awkward if you asked her that question."* [Gay/lesbian woman, 18-24]

> *"I think my parents would probably just tick heterosexual, because that's what they want."* [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

> *"A father who refuses to accept his teenage son's sexual orientation…how would he answer it?"* [Bisexual man, 45-54]

Indeed, despite general agreement that the question could be administered directly to all adults aged 16 years or older, parents at the groups also said they would not be keen to answer this question on behalf of their teenage children. For example, one member of the heterosexual female group said that she would answer *"not applicable"* on behalf of hers.

Some members of the heterosexual female, gay and lesbian groups said they would provide the information for a spouse or partner, particularly where they had been together for many years. However, this was not always the case.

> *"But how would you know, if your partner had told you they identified as lesbian, but really they identified as bisexual how would you know?"* [Gay/lesbian woman, 25-34]

> *"No way, no, until I become a mind reader, absolutely no way…"* [Bisexual woman, 35-44]

The heterosexual male group were in agreement that they would not provide an answer on behalf of their wives or partners due to the personal nature of the questioning.

Where participants lived in shared households, being able to provide an accurate answer on behalf of other people was also said to depend on how well those living together knew each other. This issue was of particular concern to those in the bisexual female group.

> *"I'm not entirely sure what label they'd stick on me. [Friend's name] would probably go with bisexual but the others might stick me in lesbian, but who knows?"* [Bisexual woman, 25-34]

> *"If it's your flatmate you've been living with them for about a month it's a bit of a joke. If it's your partner or your parents I personally wouldn't mind, I think it depends on who it is that's answering the question.* [Heterosexual woman, 18-24]

Furthermore there was a suggestion from the heterosexual male group that people might be tempted to provide facetious or mischievous responses. An example given was a student household of heterosexual young men who might find it amusing to provide an incorrect answer 'gay' on behalf of another flatmate.

Confidentiality and data security continued to influence people's decisions where respondents were not public about their sexual identity. One of the gay male group said that despite his friend

being in a long term relationship, his friend's partner was not 'out' outside of the relationship and *"he would be petrified if somebody had filled out a survey saying he was gay."*

7.7   Summary and recommendations

Privacy in the administration and data confidentiality were important issues for participants. It is assumed that data confidentiality and the voluntary nature of social survey are explained to respondents by the interviewer before the interview begins. The methodology behind the question administration should reflect attempts to maintain privacy as far as is possible within a household environment. That is, acknowledging that interviewers cannot completely assure or control privacy in someone else's home.

With this in mind, computer assisted self-completion would appear to be the most appropriate mode of administration. However, not all respondents are able to use a laptop computer. In a concurrent interview, where more than one household member may be interviewed together, and where only one laptop computer is available for use, maintaining the speed of the administration is also an important consideration so that respondents focus on their own answers and not those of other household members. Therefore a concurrent CAPI concealed show card methodology is recommended where each household member responds at the same time, reading out a number associated with the correct response option, with each card using a unique set of numbers. Privacy for those interviewed over the telephone should also be considered in a concurrent environment.

Interviewer training in the administration of this kind of questioning is paramount. Interviewers should not treat a question about sexual identity any differently to other questions asked during the interview as this was said to highlight the fact that the question was different in some way. Interviewers should not be perceived to react negatively to the questioning or make any chance remarks that might suggest they feel awkward about the questioning as this will affect respondents' answers.

The question should be in context with questions on other equality strands, for example national identity and ethnic group. This would negate the need for an introduction to the question which would only serve to further highlight it as an issue. The administration of those other identity strands should also be similar. That is, if a show card is used for sexual identity then show cards should also be used for other surrounding questions. If self-completion is used for sexual identity then self-completion should also be used for the other surrounding questions. Consideration should be given to the location of the question in relation to the question on religion where further testing is recommended.

Consideration should be given to including a response option to refuse the questioning on the basis that some respondents may not wish to disclose their sexuality. However, LGB participants may well not choose this option for fear of highlighting the fact that they are not heterosexual and may choose to provide an incorrect answer instead. Indeed, as discussed in the report on the quantitative Omnibus trials 1 and 2 (see Taylor (2008a)) it is more likely that heterosexual respondents would use such an option, sometimes because of comprehension problems rather than because they necessarily objected to the questioning.

Proxy data collection is not recommended on the grounds of acceptability and accuracy. This was the finding from all of the groups convened. Although some participants said that they could and would provide information on behalf of a spouse or partner, their ability to do so would depend on how long the couple had been together. Women and gay men were more likely to

provide an answer on behalf of their spouse/partner than heterosexual men or those identifying as bisexual.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Sample Composition

Primary criteria

Sex	
Male	23
Female	29
Total	52

Sexual Identity	
Heterosexual female	7
Heterosexual male	7
Gay/lesbian female	13
Gay male	11
Bisexual female	9
Bisexual male[9]	5
Total	52

Secondary criteria

Age[10]	
18-24	8
25-34	15
35-44	15
45-54	9
55+	5
Total	52

Education	
Above A-level	35
Up to and including A-level	14
No formal qualifications	3
Total	52

Household composition	
Living alone	14
Living with spouse/partner	17
Living with other unrelated adults	21
Total	52

Though not a primary or secondary sampling criteria, ethnicity was monitored to ensure representation of BME groups in the sample.

Ethnicity	
White	40
Mixed	1
Asian	3
Black	5
Other	3
Total	52

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[9] One bisexual man later identified as gay during the focus group discussion.
[10] Age ranges from 19-72

Appendix B: Summary Focus Group Topic guide

Introduction
- Welcome
- Moderator
- ONS
- Domestics
- Background and aims of project in brief
- Conduct of focus group and confidentiality
- Consent to record

Warm up/ice breaker
- Introductions: first name, what you do? who live with?

Conceptualisation, understanding and language
- General identity - what makes you <u>you?</u>
- Sexual orientation / identity
- How decide/understanding of concept(s)?
- Attraction/behaviour (same sex/opposite sex)
- Development of sexual orientation/identity
- Identification with others
- Changes over time/context

Show flipchart. Possible question formats.

- First impression/reaction/feelings
- Ability to respond
- Question meaning
- Question stem
- Comprehension of terminology/common use/offensive
- Completeness of response options

Explain about administration and content of government social surveys.

Acceptability
- Willingness to respond/context
- Experience of those who took part in Omnibus survey
- Other experiences
- Location in interview
- Purpose of question/use
- Ask of anyone? 16-17 yr olds, elderly
- Experiences of treated unfairly because of sexuality / more favourably
- Trust in data security / anonymity
- Trust in data collector

Administration
- Privacy within household
- Mode of administration
- Sex of interviewer
- Proxy responses
- Views on being asked on Census/equal opps. forms/local authority etc

Adjourning
- Anything else?
- More information about project - website
- Reminder of confidentiality
- Thank you