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In search of a question on sexual identity

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1. Introduction

> "Equality, diversity, and respect for the human rights and dignity of every man, woman and child are core values that define our lives in Britain."
> *(Commission for Equality and Human Rights)*

The past forty years have seen significant developments in the legislation relating to equality and discrimination in the UK in six diversity strands: race and ethnicity; gender; disability; religion and belief; age, and sexual orientation.

The Equality Act 2006 was a step towards extending the legislation on sexual orientation to bring it in line with the other diversity strands. The Act made provision to dissolve the Equal Opportunities Commission, the Commission for Racial Equality and the Disability Rights Commission from October 2007, in favour of the establishment of one Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). As such, the CEHR will also promote equality and tackle discrimination in relation to sexual orientation, age, and religion or belief in Great Britain – areas not covered by the existing Commissions. Indeed, this year (2007) has also been designated the "European Year of Equal Opportunities for All".

The UK, Office for National Statistics (ONS), along side some other members of the European Community, as well as the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales, are investigating ways to collect data on sexual orientation in order to help ensure equal provision of services to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) communities, monitor discrimination and provide figures on the proportion of their citizens who would classify themselves as LGB, against which other data sources could be benchmarked.

In spring 2006 the ONS announced that a question on sexual orientation would be unlikely to be included in the next population Census (2011). There were concerns surrounding the issues of: privacy; acceptability; accuracy; conceptual definitions, and the effect that such a question might have on the overall response to the Census. Despite these concerns, the increasing requirement for information on sexual orientation was clear. Therefore a programme of work was established to determine the most suitable way to meet this need. The first meeting of key interested parties, across government and with non-government organisations took place in April 2006. This meeting covered issues such as defining the concept that needed to be measured, the difficulties in collecting reliable, good quality data, and agreeing a way forward.

A project was initiated 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-identify to a particular sexual orientation, along with advice on administration. Alongside the question(s), a user guide will be produced discussing the conceptual issues as well as the methodological issues, such as context and mode effects. The project is led by a steering group and project board, supplemented by a user group and an expert group comprised of interested parties and those with experience of research with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual groups.

This paper discusses the background to this project, the data collection issues surrounding implementation, and the proposed research methodology employed by the ONS.

2. Background

> *"The world is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are black or all things white. It is a fundamental taxonomy that nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separate pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. The sooner we learn this concerning human sexual behaviour the sooner we shall reach a sound understanding of the realities of sex."* (Kinsey et al 1948)

In order to facilitate statistical analysis, the goal of any quantitative survey of people is to classify and categorise. However, in so doing it is important to avoid imposing pre-determined classifications, which may not be appropriate, on those under investigation. This is particularly true when attempting to ask survey respondents to classify themselves according to a more subjective and fluid concept relating to a perception of their own sexuality or identity. There is a tendency for society to impose preordained concepts of the world according to the majority view, which may not be reflected or even understood by the minority. It should also be recognised that concepts and definitions can change as society itself changes and evolves.

Different classification schemes have been developed to describe sexual orientation. Originally the concept was strongly linked to gender, which is now seen as a distinct phenomenon. Probably one of the most well known studies on the prevalence of homosexuality in the general population was that of Kinsey and colleagues in the 1940s. Kinsey's classification attempted to move away from a dichotomous classification of either homosexual or heterosexual and is based on a continuum that measures sexual orientation according to seven categories from 0 (exclusively heterosexual) to 6 (exclusively homosexual). The classification is based on past sexual behaviour or experience, and what Kinsey referred to as psycho-sexual reaction (such as desire or fantasy).

In the 1970s, Shively and DeCecco proposed two 5-point scales in an attempt to measure heterosexuality and homosexuality independently according to two-dimensions of sexual orientation: physical and affectional preference.

In the 1980s, Klein expanded the scale to a two-dimensional grid. This grid classified the degree of homosexual experience to take into consideration, in more detail, different aspects of sexual orientation in an attempt to measure its complexity and fluidity. The aspects included: attraction; behaviour; fantasy; emotional bonding; social preference; lifestyle preference, and self-identification.

In the 1990s, Sell developed a set of questions designed to assess the frequency and intensity with which someone is attracted to men and women, the frequency of sexual contact with men and women, and sexual identity (similar to the Kinsey continuum). However, Sell himself suggests that his questioning is intended to *"provoke debate"* on the measurement of sexual orientations and not provide a firm measurement of this construct. Indeed, Friedman has developed the Sell measure further and his questioning includes aspects of physical sensations felt when sexually attracted to someone else, as well as thoughts and emotional feelings.

So it is now acknowledged that sexual orientation is a complex and multi-dimensional concept. Furthermore that it is fluid and may change over time, both with respect to the individual and society as a whole.

Human beings do not always conform to a common standard and as a result may interpret any classification used in different ways according to their circumstances, belief system and constraints imposed upon them by society. People with homosexual desire, for example, may engage in heterosexual behaviour or vice versa. Bisexual people with monogamous behaviour might classify themselves differently at different points in time. Those who are abstaining, or ignoring desires, or indeed those who are undecided or not yet 'out', may not be able to classify themselves at all depending on the measure used. Indeed, different measures of sexual orientation may put an individual into different categories. For example, one's desire, behaviour and self-identification may not always match.

The question therefore arises as to whether it is possible to develop one harmonised measure of sexual orientation that can be applied to the general population, across studies, in order to make comparisons. It may be that different conceptions of what constitutes sexual orientation are measured within a single study or it may be that different aspects of sexual orientation are appropriately measured according to different research contexts. For example, a measure of sexual behaviour may be more appropriate for a health related study. So, is it better to attempt to capture the full diversity of the concept or to try and encapsulate the various strands within one variable, or indeed to focus on just one strand?

> *"Many researchers interested in sexual orientation can be separated into two camps: the lumpers, who try to reduce sexual classifications to as small a number of categories as possible, and the splitters, who try to show differences among groups and individuals that make classification schemes increasingly difficult and/or intricate".* (Weinrich, 1993).

McManus (2003) comments that:

> *"Not only is it difficult to compare results of different studies that have used different classification schemes but studies have also shown that much of the research in this area has failed to define the term at all."*

3. Data collection issues

The discussion above shows that the measurement of sexual orientation is clearly a complex issue. Before any research can be carried out it is important to consider more precisely: what concept is being measured from the user's perspective; the purpose of the measurement; what concept is being measured from the respondent's perspective, and the data collection strategy and environment.

The discussion below considers these issues under the following headings:

i) Scope
ii) Confidentiality
iii) Acceptability
iv) Accuracy

3.1. Scope

Defining the concept
As previously discussed clarity is required with regard to the concept being measured. The questioning intends to ask for respondents' self-perceived sexual orientation. That is how respondents would categorise themselves in terms of their sexual orientation, rather than how other people might categorise them. The questioning is not intended to focus on specific aspects of sexual orientation such as sexual behaviour or attraction. Therefore the term 'identity' was proposed as an alternative to 'orientation' as it was felt that this term might be easier for respondents to understand.

A primary focus of this research is to establish what respondents understand by the terminology used and how they formulate their answers in order to ensure that the questioning is interpreted as the users intended. Or, that information about how the question is understood and the definition from the respondents' perspective is relayed to any future data users.

It is not clear whether the terms 'sexual orientation' or 'sexual identity' are widely used and accepted by the general public. The term sexual orientation is the term used in the legislation and may be the term preferred or most recognised by respondents. The term sexual identity may provide more clarity to respondents of the concept being measured.

Respondents' interpretations of what the terms mean may differ. Indeed, using the term 'sexual' in the questioning may well lead respondents to include aspects of sexual attraction or behaviour which is not the intention. Some surveyors have overcome this problem by avoiding defining the concept in the questioning and simply asking respondents to classify themselves according to a series of response options. However, this means that rather than formulating the question itself, respondents are left to work out what is being asked through interpreting what the response options might mean to them. Answers provided may be less reliable than if some kind of definition were presented. This issue will also be investigated as part of the research along with respondents use and understanding of the terms chosen to describe response options.

Along with questions about National Identity and Ethnic Identity one might suppose that by using the term 'identity' we will be, in effect, asking respondents which category they most closely identify with i.e. *"which of the following groups do you identify with…?"* A person may be heterosexual in terms of their sexual behaviour or indeed attraction, yet identify more strongly with LGB groups. Furthermore, respondents may prefer to select more than one response option.

Data collection method

The mode of administration can impact on response and data quality. The primary focus of this work is social surveys with a view to implementation in a government social survey context, with particular reference to the new Integrated Household Survey (IHS). The IHS, and most other government social surveys, use CAPI[1] technology as their main method of data collection, with telephone being a secondary option. The IHS will use a single-stage sample of addresses and attempts to achieve around 220,000 household interviews per annum.

A secondary focus is to develop a question that can be used for equality monitoring and service provision purposes under the forthcoming legislation, with results matching those above. The main method of data collection in this context is again self-completion. However, the remit of this project will not involve testing the question for administrative data collection.

Population coverage

The population under investigation should be defined.

The questioning is intended of all adults aged 16 or over, living in private households, in the United Kingdom. An answer will not be required for children.

We do not intend to measure gender identity, although we will need to ensure that those who are transgender or transsexual are able to provide answers to any questioning.

It is important to understand that the questioning can only be a measure of respondents' willingness or ability to provide a response. For example, there may be a proportion of the LGB community who are not 'out' or who are undecided. Furthermore, some people may be 'out' in certain circumstances and not others. This could imply that in a survey context, what is being measured is sexual identity within a household environment.

The IHS is a household survey. Any measure of the LGB community would therefore be based on the general household population and would not include people living in institutions, such as hospitals or prisons. The Census would of course provide information on those populations. If a question were to be developed with the Census in mind consideration should be given as to the quality of information collected in an institutional environment and more importantly by proxy. The issue of providing proxy information in a household environment will be considered, although it is likely that proxy responses would in fact provide a different measure of sexual identity and

[1] Computer Assisted Personal Interview

would not comply with the user's definition of self-perceived identity. The issue of collecting information within an institutional environment will not be addressed.

For the purposes of this project, testing will only take place in relation to those living in England, Wales and Scotland (GB), with the focus on England and Wales. Separate research is already being conducted by the Scottish Executive and is recommended for Northern Ireland.

3.2 Confidentiality

Trust and data security
This issue of trust is particularly relevant for government funded surveys and is particularly relevant for a government data collection agency such as the ONS. Whether or not respondents are happy to provide such information to a government agency, and the potential negative effect on response to the questioning and the survey as a whole should be explored, along with an understanding of respondents' concerns over the confidential nature of the data collection and whether there are other circumstances in which they would be more or less likely to respond.

Further to trust in the agency collecting the data and the use to which the data will be put is the issue of how securely respondents feel the data will be held and whether any data linkage will take place.

Voluntary nature of questioning
Surveys are voluntary in nature whilst the Census is mandatory. Some questions on the Census can be voluntary but nevertheless this is an issue that should be explored and an option to refuse the questioning provided, should respondents object to the questioning, and because respondents may not know how to classify their sexual identity. The characteristics of those who would rather not provide an answer along with their reasons for providing this answer will be explored.

Privacy
In the majority of ONS household surveys, and certainly as part of the IHS, respondents are interviewed concurrently, so there may be other household members or other people in the vicinity. The presence of the interviewer in a face-to-face or telephone survey may also have an effect on the answers given or whether people feel comfortable providing an answer at all. It is therefore important to ensure privacy, and confidentiality, during the interview process. This may be achieved by administering the question through self-completion rather than through interviewers, although the presence of an interviewer and/or others in the household may still have an effect. With regard to paper self-completion the issue may be more difficult to overcome in a household environment as there may be further suspicion over who will have access or view the information and how the data are stored.

3.3 Acceptability

Effect on response
The impact of asking a question on sexual identity on one of the ONS social surveys is unknown. It is possible that some respondents may be unhappy about being asked

for what could be considered very personal and sensitive information. This may well impact on response to the survey overall or to the individual question.

However, we do know that questions on sexual identity/orientation and on sexual behaviour are currently asked on large scale government surveys, not administered by the ONS, such as the British Social Attitudes Survey and Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey. However, the context in which these surveys operate is a consideration, as an attitudinal or health survey context may be very different from a multi-purpose survey such as the IHS.

Therefore it will be important to establish where and when such questioning has been operationalised in a quantitative environment in order to learn from the experience of other survey researchers both in the UK and internationally.

Awareness

Awareness is key to acceptability. That the general public is made aware of the reasons why these data are being collected is beyond the current remit of this part of the project. However the issue is important in that an introduction to the questioning might require some explanation as to the purpose and importance of the benchmarking or monitoring process.

Particular respondent characteristics

There may be issues relating to the administration of this question amongst particular groups in society. For example, people's cultural, religious or political beliefs may be offended.

The age of the respondent, in particular the very young or very old, may also be a significant factor relating to their ability to answer or their attitudes towards such questioning.

A respondent's living environment and access to services and support, e.g. urban or rural location, may also influence their responses.

3.4 Accuracy

Effects on the data provided

As mentioned earlier, respondents may provide what might be considered a more socially desirable answer when an interviewer or other people are present. They may provide an answer which they consider to be concurrent with the beliefs of the person interviewing, others in the household or the norms of society in general.

The context in which the questions are asked may also influence data quality. Certain data collection sources may elicit different or more 'accurate' responses. For example, the Census or a multi-purpose survey such as the IHS may appear more neutral and therefore more appropriate than say a survey of health where respondents may have a different perception on how the data will be used.

The order in which questions are presented can also influence the answers. Questions which precede a question on sexual identity may affect willingness to respond or the answers given.

The issue of mode effect is becoming an area of concern for survey practitioners when data are collected in different ways e.g. face-to-face, telephone, paper, Internet. The use of visual and aural communication strategies, question formatting etc. can all have an effect on the quality of the data collected (Dewar and Wilmot, 2006) and different modes can produce different results (Nicolaas and Tipping, 2006). In designing the questioning consideration as to potential mode effects will be required, for example in a self-completion form the effect of the non-verbal visual communication channel used.

Respondents' ability to complete the questionnaire will also impact on data quality. For example, people with language or learning difficulties and those who are, for one reason or another, simply not able to use a laptop computer, may mean that they are excluded from the questioning if consideration has not been given to these groups.

As mentioned earlier some respondents may 'prefer not to answer' the question(s). We therefore need to understand their reasons, to be able to address any concerns that this group have and by so doing attempt to reduce the proportion who do not self identify. Furthermore, a proportion of respondents may place themselves in the 'other' category, and an understanding of why they respond in this way is important to the study.

Again, as mentioned earlier, the issue of providing proxy information in relation to accuracy should also be explored.

4. Methodology

> *"Appropriate and good quality methods are necessary if quantitative research is to be representative, reliable and valid, if qualitative research is to have depth, represent diversity, and be able to map associations. Without these, there is no way of asserting that research findings reflect the real need of LGBT communities, are able to inform complex policy funding decisions, and should be taken seriously by potential funders."* (McManus 2003).

The purpose of the proposed methodology described is to demonstrate that all of the issues discussed thus far have been considered and addressed by the Office and to provide evidence on which recommendations and guidance on the use of the questioning can be based.

The research is divided into two phases: i) an exploratory development phase; and, ii) a main stage testing and evaluation phase. Each phase will comprise both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies in a series of work packages, each complimenting and informing the other, thereby triangulating the research.

4.1 Exploratory phase

A period of exploration will inform the main testing and evaluation phase.

A considerable amount of research has been carried out with the LGB community particularly in relation to health and equality issues. This current research does not intend to repeat work that has already been undertaken but attempts to add to and enhance the research carried out thus far. Furthermore, it intends to consolidate the current research findings with respect to sexual identity. Although of course the ONS should conduct research itself with respect to a government social survey data collection environment.

With respect to specific research on sexual orientation or sexual identity, of particular relevance are the reports produced by the National Centre for Social Research on behalf of the Scottish Executive. Furthermore, research in relation to sexual orientation questioning has been carried out internationally by organisations such as the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, Statistics Canada and Statistics New Zealand (although of course there may be cultural differences). Statistics Norway are currently embarking on a programme of research.

Question bank

Whilst conducting a review of the available literature a 'question bank' will also be compiled which aims to provide a summary of surveys already collecting relevant data. Research staff will take the opportunity to talk with survey project managers already running questions on sexual identity or orientation in order to learn from their experiences. A question bank is in the process of being produced for the UK and internationally. This will provide a useful public resource.

So far it appears that most general purpose surveys in the UK have opted for one summary question on sexual orientation or identity, interviewer administered to one adult in the household using a show card. Surveys that cover health issues and lifestyle have focused more on a suite of questions where sexual identity is only one of the aspects of sexuality measured.

For example:

The British Social Attitudes Survey, which was paper self-completion, asked one adult in the household;

> *"Which of the following best describes how you think of yourself?"*
>
> *1. Heterosexual ("straight")*
> *2. Gay*
> *3. Lesbian*
> *4. Bisexual*
> *5. Transsexual*
> *6. Can't choose*
> *7. Not answered*

The Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey, using CASI[2], asked one adult in the household;

> *"Which statement best describes your sexual orientation? This means sexual feelings, whether or not you have had any sexual partners. (Please choose the most appropriate response?"*
>
> *1. Entirely heterosexual (attracted to persons of the opposite sex)*
> *2. Mostly heterosexual, some homosexual feelings*
> *3. Bisexual (equally attracted to men and women)*
> *4. Mostly homosexual, some heterosexual feelings*
> *5. Entirely homosexual (attracted to persons of the same sex)*

While the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (CASI) asked one person in the household which sex respondents had felt sexually attracted to with a separate question about which sex they had had any kind of sexual experience with.

Internationally there has been little in the way of questioning on national surveys, aside from questions about sexual behaviour. Indeed, Belgium and Denmark have reported that historically legislation in their countries prohibits the collection of information about sexual orientation. However, following cognitive testing, the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics recommends asking: "*Do you think of yourself as straight or heterosexual; lesbian, gay or homosexual* (for women), *gay or homosexual* (for men)*; something else; or are you not sure?", u*sing audio-CASI with help screens to provide clarification of the terminology when required. They also recommend investigating whether the categories *"Questioning"* and *"Transgendered"* should be included.

It is worth noting that only a few studies have actually cognitively tested their questions and where they have been tested, it is often as part of a lengthier questionnaire. This means that the questions may only have been tested on heterosexuals in general population surveys or only on the LGB population for surveys specific to that group, depending on the testing selection criteria.

Quantitative trials

It is unusual to begin this kind of research project quantitatively. However, because of the literature review, and in particular some previous work conducted by the Scottish Executive, we felt confident that a question on sexual identity could be trialled on the National Statistics Omnibus survey. Not only would a quantitative trial provide information directly from the field in an ONS context, but could provide a sampling frame from which follow-up qualitative interviews might be obtained. Therefore a decision was taken to run the single question used by the Scottish Executive, on the Omnibus survey.

We were extremely cautious about the administration of the question which was asked at the very end of the interview so as not to affect response. The question was administered in CASI mode and under no circumstances was the question administered by the interviewer, even where respondents had physical or learning

[2] Computer Assisted Self Interviewing

difficulties which meant that they could not use the laptop. Therefore the data from this test cannot be used to provide estimates, since not all respondents would have been surveyed at this stage of exploration.

Following the success of the first Omnibus test, a second took place. The question wording and response options were altered to take into account the findings from the first test and to try a slightly different approach.

July/August 2006 Omnibus		**November/December 2006 Omnibus**	
"Which of the following best describes your sexual identity?"		*Do you consider yourself to be…*	
Heterosexual	92.0%	Heterosexual or straight	96.8%
Gay or Lesbian	1.3%	Gay or Lesbian	0.8%
Bisexual	1.2%	Bisexual	0.6%
Other (please specify)	0.9%	Other (please specify)	0.3%
Prefer not to say	4.6%	Prefer not to say	1.5%
Base=1910		*Base = 2124*	

Again, interviewers were instructed to be cautious so the results cannot provide estimates. However, this time the question was asked at the end of the core classificatory section, rather than at the end of the entire interview. Since this is the anticipated location for the IHS it was important to test the location of the question and we were confident that there would not be an adverse effect on response to the survey. Indeed, there was no apparent effect on response as a result of moving the question.

In order to understand how the initial Omnibus question was received from an interviewer's perspective, feedback from the Omnibus interviewers and field managers was sought though direct questioning and a focus group. This will support the written guidance that will be provided for interviewers along side the final question(s) wording.

One of the key stages of this project involves finding out more about those respondents who preferred not to answer the question. Around 5% of respondents answered in this way to our first test, which is more than the combined total of those reporting LGB or other. This area of research has not, to our knowledge, been carried out before so will enhance the research literature.

We began by examining the quantitative data from the first test relating to these responses along with any interviewer comments. However the data alone did not provide reasons why respondents gave this response. We therefore supplemented the quantitative data on this group with a qualitative in-depth follow-up, asking respondents how they felt about the questioning.

There were ethical concerns about asking people who said that they preferred not to give a response. So as not to highlight the sexual identity question in particular, on follow-up we also asked respondents' views on other topics which might be considered sensitive in nature, such as income, and other diversity strands, such as ethnicity and disability. Researchers conducting the interviews, which were carried out over the phone, also checked that respondents were in a confidential environment. The researchers did not know any of the answers given during the Omnibus interview and because 'heterosexual', 'LGB' and 'other' respondents were included in the purposive sample the researcher may not have been talking to someone who answered 'prefer not to say'. Only the person allocating the interviews, but not conducting any of them, knew of the previous Omnibus responses. This meant that consideration could also be given to the sex and ethnic background of the researcher in relation to the respondent and their previous answers before allocating the interviews.

There were certainly comprehension issues, in particular with respect to the term 'heterosexual'. The term 'straight' was therefore added alongside the term heterosexual for clarification. It was apparent that those who had answered in this way were happy to tell the qualitative interviewer over the phone that they were heterosexual. The sex of the interviewer had influenced the original response in some cases, with men preferring to be interviewed by a man and women preferring to be interviewed by a woman, even though the question was self-completion.

The proportion who chose not to say fell from 4.6% in July and August to 1.5% in November and December, suggesting that introducing the term 'straight' had been effective. Nevertheless the proportion was similar to the combined proportion of those selecting the minority groups.

The second quantitative test included more detailed questioning as to the reasons why respondents may have preferred not to answer (of course respondents were still given the option not to respond at all). The results show that those who responded could be spilt into three categories: those who objected to the question; those who were concerned about confidentiality or privacy, and those with comprehension issues (see table 2).

Table 2 Reasons given for selecting 'prefer not to say' (November and December 2006)

Response	Weighted %	Unweighted count
Did not understand the question	6	3
Answer options unclear to me	1	1
None of the answers apply to me	24	6
Concerned about confidentiality or privacy	17	6
Object to being asked question	20	7
Other reason	2	1
Prefer not to give a reason	33	9
Total	**100**	**33**

The percentages sum to more than 100% as respondents could give more than one answer

There was a clear relationship between the selection of 'prefer not to say' and low educational achievement, low socio-economic classification and high deprivation (and possibly older age).

A major theme which emerged from the qualitative interviews and indeed from other research, for example, the work commissioned by Statistics New Zealand, was that respondents wanted to know why such a question was being asked. In both versions of the question tested the only reason given was that the question was being developed for equality monitoring purposes. This statement may be poorly understood by the less well educated or those that had not come across equality monitoring in the work place.

Ability to use a laptop is certainly related to age, and perhaps also to deprivation and education. As such, other modes of administration should be explored to make the question accessible to all.

Focus groups
Focus groups will inform the subject matter and methodology for later stages of research, including the design of the questioning and cognitive/in-depth interviews. Later stages of research will also explore topics or subgroups which it was not possible or appropriate to include in the focus groups. However the groups will explore the subject more broadly, rather than a detailed exploration of individual case histories and attitudes.

They intend to examine whether a suite, rather than a single question, is necessary in order to achieve a measure of self-perceived sexual identity and as a consequence may touch on issues related to behaviour, desire or attraction. Issues such as experiences of discrimination may therefore be addressed along with respondents' fears of disclosing information on their sexual identity. The groups will examine the participant's use and understanding of terminology. They will also examine the context in which the questions may be asked. The findings will further inform the design of the question(s), to help ensure that they can be understood and answered by the public, and to address issues relating to willingness to answer.

Focus groups will be held with members of the public in five subgroups: gay men, gay/lesbian women; heterosexual men; heterosexual women; and bisexual men and women. This level of homogeneity is important because it will allow people to feel comfortable, talking openly and honestly about the subject with others who identify in the same way (albeit that what constitutes 'identity' will be one of the topics for discussion). Furthermore it will allow areas of investigation to be explored with different groups in the appropriate depth (e.g. what might be of relevance or concern to one group might not be to another).

Special consideration was given to the inclusion of bisexuals. The advice from the expert group was that bisexual respondents were likely to have very different experiences and opinions to those in the other groups and therefore warranted separate investigation.

Trained moderators will be used. Consideration will be given to whether it is desirable (or possible) for the sexual identity and/or sex of the moderator and the participants of each group to match. There is potential danger of shared identification and assumptions, meaning topics might be missed or not dealt with in sufficient depth, against the potential advantage of participants feeling more confident or comfortable to speak freely. The groups might therefore be co-moderated, by one researcher sharing the sex and/or sexuality of the participants, the other researcher not.

We will aim to include people across a range of age groups and household compositions (e.g. living with parents/other family; sharing with unrelated adults) within each group. However the extremes of the age range (under 18 and over 70) will be excluded, and covered in later stages. BME[3] participants will be included if possible, but we will not have a target number or range for them. Nor will we aim to include disabled people. Potential issues relating to these ‘compound diversity’ subgroups will be addressed separately.

At ONS, respondent recruitment is conducted by the researchers themselves and not by an outside agency. Sample sources will include respondents to the Omnibus survey who agreed to being contacted about future research. Some participants will be recruited from people who have not been asked the Omnibus question using indirect sampling methods.

The groups will be held in London as the diversity mix of respondents in London allows for a more robust sample design as well as reducing cost. Later stages of the project will include research with respondents elsewhere.

4.2 Main phase of question development

Following the exploratory phase the research staff will design a proposed test question or suite of questions intended to measure self-perceived sexual identity.

Cognitive/in-depth one-to-one interviews

A series of cognitive/in-depth face-to-face interviews will be conducted with members of the public who fulfil the required sampling criteria.

Cognitive testing takes place in the course of one-to-one interviews. It explores the mental process by which respondents reach an answer to a question and in so doing it can show whether or not the question is working as intended. Respondents are asked how they understood the questions and how they formulated their answers. Respondents might also be asked to recast questions in their own words. This technique will be used during this project to investigate respondent understanding of questions developed for the measurement instrument.

In-depth interviews will be carried out in conjunction with the cognitive interviews to further explore conceptual issues related to the question sets where appropriate. This technique will also be used to explore how respondents' answers to the questions relate to their actual circumstances and will help to evaluate the question design.

These techniques described are more effective than formal quantitative surveys in identifying the problems experienced by respondents in answering questions because

[3] Black and Minority Ethnic groups

they place a more systematic and in-depth spotlight on each question and its administration, as well as routing and instructions.

At this point in time we anticipate conducting around 25 cognitive/in-depth one-to-one with respondents who will be purposively sampled. The sample will be based on criteria related to the subject matter in order to test the validity of the questioning. Small sub-groups that could not form part of the focus group work or for which it was inappropriate from a methodological perspective to include in the focus groups will be covered in the sampling at this stage of the project. For example, the transgender/transexual community, those in the youngest and older age-groups, those with compound diversity issues and those living in more rural communities and in other parts of England and Wales.

Quantitative test on household survey

Depending on the findings and recommendations thus far a further quantitative trial may be appropriate. But it is anticipated that the questioning could at this stage be included on one of the major household surveys forming part of the IHS. This would be the first time that the questioning would be tested on a survey where all members of the household are interviewed. Feedback will again be sought from field interviewers and managers, prior to a full roll-out.

A quantitative test for reliability will not be conducted due to the relatively small numbers involved, although other organisations will be contacted to identify whether such testing has been conducted elsewhere. The project will attempt to monitor data variability over time.

5. Conclusion

The research therefore intends to establish the way in which the questioning is conceptualised, comprehended and administered to the general population in a large-scale, national, household survey, where all household members are interviewed. It also intends to provide comprehensive advice on the data collection process across different data collection environments. The findings from this research will be made publicly available.

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