

Sexual Orientation and the 2011 Census – background information

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1. Summary

ONS recently announced that a question on sexual orientation is unlikely to be included in the 2011 Census (please see full response to consultation report, available on the National Statistics website at: www.statistics.gov.uk/about/consultations/2011Census_response.asp).

Following this announcement, ONS has been asked to provide more detail on its rationale for this decision. The purpose of this paper is to provide additional background information. It describes the research of other UK government departments and statistical agencies in other countries relating to the collection of information on sexual orientation, and highlights some of the potential issues with collecting this information in the Census.

2. Background

The main priority for the Census is to get the headcount right. There are far more demands for additional topics for the 2011 Census than can ever reasonably be accommodated. Even to include the topics which have the strongest cases made for them would require an increase from three to four pages of questions per person. Difficult choices have to be made between topics and questions, based on a number of criteria, including: the user need; whether sources other than the Census could meet the user need; whether a suitable question can be developed that respondents understand and can answer; and whether inclusion of the topic/question would reduce response rates.

Stonewall⁸ states that, "*The Government is using the figure of 5-7% of the population which Stonewall feels is a reasonable estimate. However, there is no hard data on the number of lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in the UK as no national census has ever asked people to define their sexuality*". The consultation on the content of the 2011 Census has established a strong user requirement for information on sexual orientation. The information would be used to provide/target services to the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual community. It would also be used for the purposes of equality monitoring, and meeting current and future legislative requirements such as the Employment Equality (sexual orientation) regulations 2003, and the Single Equality Act. In 2007, the Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR) will be recognising sexual orientation as a diversity strand of equal importance to race, gender, age, disability and religion. However, sexual orientation is currently the only equality strand on which the Census does not collect information. A report summarising the responses to the consultation for sexual orientation can be found on the National Statistics website at: www.statistics.gov.uk/about/consultations/downloads/2011Census_assessment_sexual_orientation.pdf.

3. Potential issues with collecting sexual orientation data in the Census

3.1 Conceptual issues

Sexuality is multi-faceted and difficult to define. The conceptual issues surrounding sexual orientation were discussed in depth at a Royal Statistical Society seminar held on 17th January 2006. The seminar entitled, 'Queering Statistics: issues associated with estimating the extent and nature of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual population' identified two particular issues. Firstly, there are the difficulties of determining what you want to measure, i.e. behaviour, desire or identity, which can be present independently or in any combination. Secondly,

there are potential difficulties collecting the information in a way that respondents understand and accept.

McManus⁴ states that, *"different conceptions of what constitutes sexual orientation – including attraction, identity, lifestyle, partnership and community – may co-exist within a single study. While this sometimes may not matter, for particular policy areas the definition may be directly relevant to the topic being studied"*. For example, users interested in sexual health may be particularly interested in sexual behaviour, whereas users focusing on discrimination may be more interested in self-perceived identity. This research highlights the difficulty of developing a single question to be used on a vehicle such as the Census.

The conceptual issues with sexual orientation can also lead to difficulties with language and what people understand or accept by certain words or expressions. McManus⁴ states that, *"concepts and labels of self identity vary not only by age, but by a whole range of other social and demographic factors including ethnicity, immigration and socio-economic status and sex"*.

We understand that the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) recently carried out an interviewer administered survey that included questions on sexual orientation. The research showed that people have difficulty understanding a question on sexual orientation and that it is difficult to produce categories that are adequate and understood by the respondents. This could have led to under-reporting which may be even more of an issue with self-completion questionnaires such as the Census. Further information is being sought about the research of the DTI. McManus⁴ refers to a survey carried out by the Metropolitan Police which asked a question on self-perceived sexual orientation. Feedback from interviewers working on this survey revealed that the main query from respondents was, 'what's heterosexuality?' If concepts are poorly defined and understood then the quality of the data would be affected.

3.2 Quality and accuracy of responses

It is essential that the data collected in the Census are meaningful and accurate. ONS has concerns about the likely quality and accuracy of responses to a sexual orientation question in the Census. Barry¹ suggests that, *"in the likely circumstance in which a significant or majority proportion of the lesbian and gay community were not in a position to disclose their sexual orientation, such inaccurate quantitative data could then be used to reduce the level of recognition, funding of or service provision to that community"*.

Statistics New Zealand⁷ carried out some detailed focus group research on sexual orientation to determine public attitudes on the inclusion of sexual orientation questions in their 2006 Census. Some of the participants were concerned that if a question was included on the New Zealand Census, then the data may be used as conclusive evidence of the size of the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) population. They were conscious that the results would need to be interpreted carefully, especially the first time the question was asked. Research in the USA by Black et al.² suggests that, *"because gays and lesbians constitute a relatively small fraction of the population, modest measurement problems could lead to serious errors in inference"*.

The Statistics New Zealand focus group research⁷ highlighted a number of situations in which respondents may not disclose accurate information. These included; gay and lesbian respondents who had suffered negative reactions to their sexuality in the past and were now wary of declaring the information, people in a heterosexual relationship and the situation where Census forms are filled out by 'proxy' e.g. by one person in a household on behalf of others. Respondents

may feel that having to disclose their sexual orientation to another person is an invasion of privacy, especially in a household of unrelated adults.

The Statistics New Zealand focus group research⁷ also highlighted a particular issue with the accuracy of the data that could be collected from young respondents. *“Most gay and lesbian participants acknowledged that they would have been unlikely to answer the question honestly in their teenage years”*. McManus⁴ discusses the difficulties of monitoring young people’s sexuality and collecting data from those who are unsure about their sexuality.

Breitenbach³ refers to the Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) survey carried out in 2001. This survey included a question which asked respondents (through the use of a concealed response card) whether they were gay, lesbian, heterosexual or bisexual. The results showed that only 1% of people identified themselves as gay or lesbian, 95% as heterosexual, 0% as bisexual and 4% refused to answer the question.

The General Register Office for Scotland⁵ carried out a postal test to gauge the impact on response of including a question on sexual orientation in a census form. It is difficult to draw conclusions from the Scottish test as the response rate was only 31%. Of those responding to the questionnaires containing a question on sexual orientation, 1.3% responded in the Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual categories and 0.9% in the ‘other sexual orientation’; against 8.5% who chose the ‘prefer not to answer’ category and 6.2% who did not give a response at all. Other difficulties with drawing conclusions from this research are that the survey was voluntary with no follow-up of respondents. Also, the forms were only sent to one person per household so there would not have been any within household privacy issues. However, the research does indicate that if a question on sexual orientation was included in the Census, there may be issues with the quality and accuracy of the data collected.

3.3 Acceptability and impact on response rates

ONS has concerns about the issues of acceptability and potential effects on response rates with a sexual orientation question.

The main aim of a Census is to obtain an accurate count of the population at a particular point in time and maximising response rates is vital to achieving this. Inclusion of a question on sexual orientation could pose a risk to response rates, which is a significant issue for the Census.

Breitenbach³ refers to work carried out by the Department for Employment and Learning in Northern Ireland. They commissioned two questions in the Social Omnibus Survey asking whether people would provide monitoring information on their sexual orientation. Around 60% of people reported that they would provide the information if asked, but the majority of people said they did not feel it was necessary to monitor sexual orientation. They note the possibility that many of the people saying they would provide such information were heterosexual. Without testing such questions it is difficult to judge whether people’s behaviour would match their reported intentions.

The DTI tested a question on sexual orientation from an employment discrimination perspective for two employment surveys. We understand that the results showed that refusal to answer or accept a question was low. However, older people were least willing to answer a question on sexual orientation.

The 2006 Statistics Canada Census content consultation report⁶ refers to work that was carried out to test sexual orientation questions. During some focus

group work they found that, "Most participants did not approve of including a sexual orientation question on the Census". However, respondents were more willing to answer questions within the context of a health survey or a discrimination and human rights survey. They also found that people were most willing to answer questions if they understood why the question was being asked and how the data could be used. The reasons that respondents gave for not being willing to answer a question included the fact that the Census is mandatory, the issue of proxy reporting for other household members, privacy concerns, and the sensitivity of the topic. The outcome of this research means that Statistics Canada has no plans to include a question on sexual orientation in their 2006 Census. However, they are continuing with efforts to test the inclusion of a question on sexual orientation on a health survey and a survey on safety, human rights and victimisation.

Statistics New Zealand also decided not to include a question on sexual orientation in their 2006 Census. In their focus group work, they found that, "a majority voiced acceptance or grudging acceptance to the idea of a question on sexual orientation being included in the Census". However, this was based on a stipulation that the question was voluntary. They also found that many respondents could not perceive the value of collecting the data. The people who objected most strongly to such a question were respondents from certain ethnic and religious groups, rural areas and older respondents. However, many of these respondents were also concerned about other Census questions. Gay and lesbian respondents generally accepted the idea of asking a sexual orientation question in the Census, although older gay and lesbian respondents were less inclined to disclose the information.

4. Conclusion

ONS is not aware of any country which has included a question on sexual orientation in their Census. Work carried out by UK government departments and statistical agencies in other countries suggests that there are a number of issues surrounding the collection of data on sexual orientation. There are difficult conceptual issues to resolve and it may be difficult to construct a self-completion question that is understood by everybody. There are also concerns about the quality and accuracy of data that can be collected, and issues of acceptability to respondents and potential impact on Census response rates. For these reasons, the ONS view remains that a question on sexual orientation is not suitable for the Census and ONS do not currently intend to collect this information in the 2011 Census.

Despite these concerns, the increasing requirement for information on sexual orientation is clear and must be addressed by the ONS and others. A programme of work will be established to determine the most suitable way to meet this need. The first meeting of key interested parties across government and the UK will take place in April 2006. This will cover issues such as defining the concept that needs to be measured (behaviour, identity or desire) and addressing the difficulties in collecting good quality data.

5. References

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