

# **Developing survey questions on sexual identity:**

## **Report on National Statistics Omnibus Survey trials 1 and 2**

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January 2008

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# 1 Executive Summary

Data Collection Methodology (DCM) of ONS were commissioned to develop a question or suite of questions on self-perceived sexual identity to be used on government social surveys. There is an increasing requirement to collect data on sexual identity for equality monitoring purposes now that it is recognised as a diversity strand of equal importance to race, gender, age, disability and religion. This report describes one element of the initial exploratory work conducted at the start of the project<sup>1</sup>.

Two different versions of the question on sexual identity were tested on the National Statistics Omnibus Survey. The first version, tested in July and August 2006 was: *“Which of the following best describes your sexual identity? (Heterosexual; Gay or Lesbian; Bisexual; Other; Prefer not to say)”*. The second version, tested in November and December 2006, was *“Do you consider yourself to be ... (Heterosexual or straight; Gay or Lesbian; Bisexual; Other; Prefer not to say).”* Although most of the Omnibus is in CAPI<sup>2</sup> format, the sexual identity question was asked in CASI<sup>3</sup> due to its potentially sensitive nature and because it had not yet been tested on any ONS survey. Since such questioning had not been tried on an ONS survey before its’ administration was treated with caution. The interviewers were instructed to skip past this question if they believed the respondent to be unable to self-complete, or if privacy was compromised due to the involvement of a third person in the room. **Therefore the data do not provide an estimate of prevalence.**

In addition to the actual responses to the question, several sources of data were used to aid evaluation: interviewer feedback; field observations; exploration of reasons why respondents preferred not to state their sexual identity.

The evaluation is divided into three sections: investigation of the circumstances in which the question was not administered; a general evaluation; and an exploration of why some respondents preferred not to state their sexual identity.

## 1.1 Question not administered

Interviewers skipped past the sexual identity question in 15% of interviews. Interviewers were more likely to skip the question if they were interviewing older respondents, respondents from the lower socio-economic classification groups and respondents who were single. Male interviewers were more likely to skip the question when the respondent was female, particularly if she was over the age of 60.

In trial 2, interviewers were asked to select one of a possible three reasons why they skipped the question. The most common were judging the respondent unable to self-complete (54.6%), or being unable to assure privacy (30.7%). There were fewer cases of the respondent handing back the laptop after being given it (14.7%).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/about/data/measuring-equality/sexual-identity/default.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing i.e. question is read out by interviewer.

<sup>3</sup> Computer Assisted Self Interviewing i.e. question is self-completed by respondent.

Comments from interviewers showed that there were four different reasons why use of the laptop impeded administration of the question: illiteracy; fear of computers; physical impediments; and keystroke errors.

Privacy was commonly mentioned as a problem because of the presence of another family member, often one who was interpreting or supervising.

## **1.2 General Evaluation**

No respondents dropped out of the interview immediately after being asked this question, thus allaying fears that it could have a detrimental effect on response.

A higher proportion of respondents said they were heterosexual in the second trial (96.8%) than the first (92.0%). Fewer respondents described their sexual identity as 'other' in the second trial (0.3%) compared to the first (0.9%). When asked to describe what they meant by other, the responses in both trials were similar and either were answering a different question ('*female*', '*not active*' and '*I am ok with my sexuality*') or could have been fitted into the available categories ('*normal*', '*straight*'). The proportion of respondents who said they preferred not to state their sexual identity also fell significantly between the first and second trial (4.6% and 1.5% respectively).

Feedback from the field provided information on the acceptability, comprehension and administration of the question. In the vast majority of cases there were no interviewer comments on acceptability, other than 'ok', implying that it was readily accepted by most respondents. In other cases comments reflected a variety of respondent reactions including amusement, surprise and offence. Some thought it "*stood out*" because it was not in a module with similar questions. Interviewers often mentioned that the question was less problematic than they had anticipated.

The term 'heterosexual' was sometimes poorly understood, as demonstrated by interviewer comments and the increased selection of this first option when the term 'straight' was added. In addition, people often did not understand the question or confused sexual identity with sexual behaviour. Interviewers requested that they could be provided with more information about the purpose and meaning of the question so that they would be better prepared to answer respondents' queries.

One apparent weakness of the administration of the question was the need to use a laptop. It interrupted the flow of the interview, and some respondents would or could not use it. Although the interviewers were instructed only to administer the question as CASI, they did on occasion ask it as CAPI when the respondent specifically requested. The feedback did not show that this method caused problems. Furthermore, both interviewers and respondents believed that this question should not be treated differently from other sensitive questions and that CAPI should be presented as an option.

## **1.3 Those who responded 'prefer not to say'**

Even though fewer people selected 'prefer not to say' (PNTS) in the second trial, more people still chose this response than the three minority sexual identity groups combined.

The respondent characteristics which were associated with choosing the ‘prefer not to say’ option were: being older; being female (particularly if the interviewer was male); having no educational qualifications; belonging to a lower socio-economic category; living in London rather than the North East of England; coming from a deprived neighbourhood.

Those who selected the PNTS option were less likely to consent to being recontacted for further research at the Omnibus standard recall question than those who stated their self-perceived sexual identity (78% compared to 85%). A logistic regression showed that this relationship was likely to be mediated by deprivation rather than be causative. However, further investigation is necessary to be absolutely sure of this.

Respondents who had selected the PNTS option said they either intended to select one of the other options or they could not remember being asked the question. Those who recalled selecting this option did so for the following reasons: it was wrong to ask such questions because it could be used to pre-judge the responder; such information was no-one else’s business; did not believe the assurances of confidentiality; felt uncomfortable responding to this when the interviewer was female (male respondent); needed more information about the reasons for the question.

This qualitative data was used to generate a precoded list of reasons that was presented to those who selected the PNTS option in the second trial. In response, 33% said they preferred not to give a reason, 31% selected a reason which was related to comprehension, 20% said they objected to the question, 17% were concerned about confidentiality or privacy and 2% selected ‘other’.

## **1.4 Discussion**

On the whole, the response to the question was good and it was readily accepted by most. However, there are a few lessons that can be learnt from these trials.

- 1) Terms such as ‘sexual identity’ and ‘heterosexual’ are poorly understood. In the second trial the term ‘sexual identity’ was avoided and the term heterosexual was clarified by adding the term ‘straight’. These changes appear to have contributed to the improvement in response.
- 2) There should be a choice of modes of administration so that those who can’t or don’t wish to self complete on a computer are not excluded. Self-completion should remain as an option though.
- 3) Reassurance should be given to interviewers about the acceptability of the question as some interviewers had anticipated the question would be more problematic to administer than it was in reality.
- 4) Some thought should be given to the position of the questionnaire within the interview. The question might seem more appropriate and in context if it was put together with other similar questions, perhaps with those on gender or marital status.

## 2 Background

There is an increasing requirement for data on sexual orientation or identity in order to meet current and future legislative requirements. Sexual orientation is the term used in the legislation but sexual identity is the preferred term used by the ONS. The key users of this data will include central government departments; local government; public service providers (e.g. police & health authorities); Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) service providers; the LGB population; Academia and other research organisations.

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<sup>4</sup>.

The impact of asking a question on sexual identity on an ONS multi-purpose social survey such as the IHS 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 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 were the question to be included on a longitudinal survey.

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 may also relate to their ability to answer or their attitudes towards such questioning. Examining personal barriers to response would enable us to suggest how the methodology could be improved for future. Respondents' ability to comprehend the questions and answers 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.

Data Collection Methodology (DCM) branch was commissioned to develop, test and evaluate question(s) on sexual identity for implementation in a government social survey context, with particular reference to the new Integrated Household Survey (IHS). This report forms part of the initial exploratory phase of the research testing questioning on the National Statistics Omnibus survey in 2006.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 *The Omnibus trials*

The National Statistics Omnibus Survey was chosen as the vehicle for carrying out initial testing. The Omnibus Survey is a multi-purpose survey conducted by the ONS. The Omnibus is administered to only one person in the household selected at random and is carried out with approximately 1,250 adults (aged 16 or over) in Britain every month.

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<sup>4</sup> See Wilmot A, 'In search of a question on sexual identity', presented at 62<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the American Association of Public Opinion Research, May 2007.

The main mode of administration is CAPI, although CASI is used for a few potentially sensitive topics. For these reasons it was considered to be the ideal vehicle for testing a question during this initial exploratory stage. A thorough evaluation of the question was conducted based on responses to the question and feedback from interviewers and respondents. Respondents were given the option not to answer the question, through the inclusion of a 'prefer not to say' category, in case they objected to it or did not know how to respond. However, in order to increase response to the question an investigation was conducted into why some people chose this option.

The first version of the question was trialled in July and August 2006, and was based on a question which had been tested and used by the Scottish Executive (McManus, 2003). The question was asked at the end of the Omnibus interview in order to minimise any possible effect on response rates. A second question was trialled in November and December 2006, and this was developed in line with findings from the first test as well as from wider literature. This time the question was brought forward in the interview and asked in the Omnibus classificatory module.

The presence of the interviewer or other people during a face-to-face survey may affect the answers given or whether people feel comfortable providing an answer at all. It was therefore important to ensure privacy during the interview. For this reason, the question was compulsorily self-completion (CASI) in these trials.

### 3.1.1 Introductory question to interviewers

Omnibus trial 1 (July/August):

Interviewers were instructed to skip past the module if the respondent was not assured of complete privacy, not considered able to self-complete a question on the laptop, or not willing to self-complete.

The following opinion question is being trialled and is for the respondent to self-complete. Therefore you should administer the question ONLY IF:

1. The respondent is assured of complete confidentiality, i.e. no one else can overlook the screen.
2. In your view the respondent will be able to self-administer a simple question.
  - 1: Proceed to introduction of self-completion
  - 2: Skip self-completion

Omnibus trial 2 (November/December):

In the second trial, the reasons for skipping past the module were made more explicit and the interviewer was able to state the reason why they chose not to administer the module.

The following opinion question is being trialled and is for the respondent to self-complete. Therefore you should administer the question ONLY IF:

1. The respondent is assured of complete confidentiality, i.e. no one else can overlook the screen.
2. The respondent is able to self-administer a question i.e. able to read and handle the laptop."

- 1: Proceed to introduction of self-completion
- 2: Skip self-completion:confidentiality cannot be assured
- 3: Skip self-completion:interviewer judgement of inability to self-complete
- 4: Skip self-completion:respondent given laptop but did not/could not complete

### 3.1.2 The sexual identity question

#### *Omnibus trial 1:*

The question used in the first trial and which had previously been tested by the Scottish Executive was:

This is a new question that we are trialling for equality monitoring purposes.  
Which of the following best describes your sexual identity?  
Type the number of your answer then press enter (the key with the yellow sticker).  
The interviewer will not be able to see your answer.@B"

- 1 : "Heterosexual",
- 2 : "Gay or Lesbian",
- 3 : "Bisexual",
- 4 : "Other (please specify)",
- 5 : "Prefer not to say"

#### *Omnibus trial 2:*

Based on findings from the first trial and information from other UK and international surveys collecting data on sexual identity, the question stem and some of the answer options changed for the second trial



This question is for you to fill in yourself. The interviewer will not be able to see any of your answers.

This is a new question that we are testing. The question is being developed for equality monitoring purposes.

Type the number of your answer then press Enter (the key with the yellow sticker). Do you consider yourself to be ...

- 1: "...Heterosexual or Straight",
- 2: "...Gay or Lesbian",
- 3: "...Bisexual",
- 4: "...Other (please specify)",
- 5: "...Prefer not to say?"

In both trials, the survey instrument was programmed so as to prevent the sexual identity being reviewed once the respondent moved on to the next question. This was done so as to give the respondent extra assurances of privacy since the interviewer would not be able to go back to see their response.

### 3.1.3 Reasons why respondents selected the 'prefer not to say' option

In the second Omnibus trial respondents were asked why they preferred not to answer the sexual identity question.

Please help us assess the previous question by telling us why you gave the answer you did. Type the number of each answer that applies, pressing the space bar between each one. Then press Enter (the key with the yellow sticker)."

:

Code all that apply

- 1: "Did not understand the question",
- 2: "Answer options unclear to me",
- 3: "None of the answers apply to me",
- 4: "Concerned about confidentiality or privacy",
- 5: "Unsure of sexual identity",
- 6: "Object to being asked question",
- 7: "Other reason(s)",
- 8: "Prefer not to give reason"

### 3.1.4 Interviewer instructions

The instructions given to interviewers differed somewhat between trials because of differences in the questioning, which may have impacted on the outcome:

- In the first, interviewers were told that the Scottish Executive had already tested the question and only 10% of respondents had been unhappy with it. In the second trial, interviewers were told that the question had already been tested on the Omnibus and ‘was administered without any major problems.’ This may have provided greater reassurance.
- In the second trial, interviewers were told to instruct the respondent to select the ‘Prefer Not To Say’ (PNTS) option if he/she objected to the question. No such instruction was given in the first.

## **3.2 Evaluation**

This evaluation is split into three sections:

i) An investigation of the circumstances in which the interviewer decided not to administer the question.

An option for the interviewer to skip the sexual identity question was included. Without prior experience of this kind of question it was considered practically and ethically sound to provide interviewers with a means to avoid asking it in the event that they encountered real barriers to doing so. Although such an option might not be included when the question is implemented for real, a lot of useful information can be obtained from investigating why this option was selected by interviewers during the trial.

- By comparing the characteristics of those who were and were not asked the question we can get an idea of the representativeness of the responding sample.
- We can investigate the types and frequency of barriers to asking the question which interviewers encounter, and develop methods for overcoming these barriers.

ii) A general evaluation of the module.

This includes an analysis of the responses to the question, and an investigation of its acceptability, comprehension and administration.

iii) A study of those respondents who said they preferred not to answer the question.

One of the key stages of this project involved finding out more about people who preferred not to answer the question. It is important to understand why these people responded in the way they did in order to be able to address, in our final recommendations, any concerns that this group had and by so doing attempt to reduce the proportion who do not self-identify.

This area of research has not, to our knowledge, been carried out before so will enhance the research literature. In addition to the Omnibus data, several sources of information were used to inform this evaluation. These were:

### ***Interviewer feedback***

At the end of each interview, interviewers were asked to provide written comments on how the question was administered and how respondents reacted to it. Interviewers were not instructed to probe on reasons why respondents may have reacted the way they did. However, if the respondent spontaneously commented on the question, interviewers were

instructed to ask their permission to feed the information back to research staff. Since it is quite possible that the interviewer would have made general comments about the question at the end of only one of the interviews in their quota, it is meaningless to quote frequencies of responses.

### ***Field manager feedback***

Field managers were sent an email a few weeks after the field period requesting feedback on the module. Usually the field managers reported back on comments that they had received from their interviewers but sometimes they gave first-hand feedback.

### ***Interview(er) observations***

Members of the DCM research team accompanied interviewers in the field. The purpose of the observations was to gain, first-hand, insight into how the sexual identity questions were received by respondents and interviewers. Four interviewers were observed, each by a different research team member. Nine interviews were observed in total, with both male and female respondents in different age and marital status groups.

### ***Focus groups with interviewers***

A focus group was held with Omnibus interviewers who had been involved in the sexual identity trials, to explore their experience of handling these questions. Interviewers were invited to the group based on a number of characteristics: sex, number of Omnibus quotas completed during the trial months, type of quota area, number of times the sexual identity question had been skipped and number of LGB or 'prefer not to say' answers obtained. The group comprised eight participants and was held in London. In addition, at further focus groups set up on another topic, the issue of the sexual identity module was raised in order to gain advice from interviewers who had experience with other similar sensitive topics such as contraception.

### ***Follow-up interviews with those who preferred not to answer a question on sexual identity***

In order to investigate further the reasons why respondents preferred not to answer the question on sexual identity in the first Omnibus trial, follow-up interviews were conducted over the telephone with a purposive sample of 19 respondents. Fifteen had selected the 'prefer not to say' option, whilst four had stated their sexual identity. Sample criteria included sex, age, marital status and ethnic group.

There were ethical and practical issues to consider when asking respondents why they had not wanted to answer the question.

- Interviewers were not aware of the original Omnibus responses. Therefore, a sample of respondents who had self-identified were also interviewed. Respondents were not required to repeat their previous Omnibus response but were just asked about their attitudes to the questioning.
- So as not to highlight the sexual identity question in particular, interviewers also asked respondents' views on other topics which might be considered sensitive such as income, ethnicity and disability

At the start of the interview it was made clear to respondents that the interview was voluntary and confidential. Researchers conducting the telephone interviews also checked that respondents were speaking in privacy. Consideration was also given to the sex and ethnic background of the researcher in relation to the respondent.

## 4 Findings

Unless otherwise stated, all reported differences are significant at the 95% confidence level.

### 4.1 Question not administered

Interviewers were instructed to skip the sexual identity module if privacy was not assured, if the respondent was not thought capable of using a laptop, or if the respondent was unwilling to self-complete.

Interviewers skipped the question in 15% of interviews (343) in trial 1 and 14% (313) in trial 2. An examination of the characteristics of respondents who were not asked the question, and of reasons why it was skipped, inform us about the representativeness of those who responded and of the barriers to administering the question.

#### 4.1.1 Demographic characteristics

Interviewers skipped the question in more interviews with female respondents (15%) than male respondents (13%). They skipped it more frequently in interviews with older respondents – 41% of interviews with those aged over 75 but only 6% of interviews with those under 45. Interviewers were more likely to skip the question with Asian respondents (27%) than White respondents (13%). Socio-economic classification was also related to the likelihood that interviewers would skip past the question – they skipped it in 8% of interviews with those in managerial and professional occupations, 12% of interviews with those in intermediate occupations and 19% of interviews with those in routine and manual occupations. Interviewers were less likely to skip the question when interviewing those with a degree level qualification or a qualification below degree level (7%) than those without a recognised qualification (27% respectively). They skipped the question in 34% of interviews with respondents who were widowed, but in fewer than 15% of interviews with respondents who were married, cohabiting, divorced or single.

Many of these variables could be related. For example, those in managerial occupations are usually better educated than those in manual occupations, and widows tend to be older respondents. Therefore a logistic regression was performed to see which variables were independently related to the likelihood of the interviewer skipping the sexual identity question. The only variables which independently predicted likelihood of the question being skipped were: age (the question was more often skipped with older respondents); educational qualification (interviewers were more likely to skip the question with respondents who had no recognised qualifications); socio-economic classification (the lower the SEC, the more likely the interviewer was to skip the question); and marital status (the interviewers were least likely to ask the question of single people).

Table 1: Whether the interviewer skipped past the sexual identity question; by demographic characteristics of respondent  
*All data are unweighted*

	Asked SI question %	Skipped %	Base
Overall	86.0	14.0	<b>4690</b>
<i>Sex</i>			
Male	87.4	12.6	<b>2085</b>
Female	84.9	15.1	<b>2605</b>
<i>Age</i>			
16-24	94.6	5.4	<b>426</b>
25-44	93.8	6.2	<b>1588</b>
45-54	91.7	8.3	<b>714</b>
55-64	86.5	13.5	<b>750</b>
65-74	77.8	22.2	<b>659</b>
75 and over	58.8	41.2	<b>553</b>
<i>Marital status</i>			
Married/cohabiting	88.6	11.4	<b>2582</b>
Single	89.6	10.4	<b>999</b>
Widowed	66.3	33.7	<b>534</b>
Divorced/separated	86.4	13.6	<b>565</b>
Same sex cohabiting	100.0		<b>[6]</b>
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
White	86.6	13.4	<b>4301</b>
Mixed	[84.2]	[15.8]	<b>[38]</b>
Asian	72.7	27.3	<b>165</b>
Black	85.2	14.8	<b>115</b>
Other	87.0	13.0	<b>69</b>
<i>Educational qualifications</i>			
Degree or equivalent	93.3	6.7	<b>816</b>
Below degree	92.6	7.4	<b>2298</b>
Other/none	72.7	27.3	<b>1563</b>
<i>Socio-economic classification</i>			
Managerial and profess	91.7	8.3	<b>1559</b>
Intermediate	87.6	12.4	<b>914</b>
Routine and manual	81.4	18.6	<b>1833</b>
<i>Region</i>			
North East	81.7	18.3	<b>213</b>
North West	86.8	13.2	<b>569</b>
Yorkshire and Humber	82.7	17.3	<b>434</b>
East Midlands	80.1	19.9	<b>376</b>
West Midlands	80.4	19.6	<b>414</b>
East of England	87.2	12.8	<b>452</b>
London	85.6	14.4	<b>423</b>
South East	91.9	8.1	<b>714</b>
South West	89.2	10.8	<b>397</b>
Wales	80.6	19.4	<b>258</b>
Scotland	90.7	9.3	<b>440</b>
<b>Base</b>	<b>4034</b>	<b>656</b>	<b>4690</b>

	Asked SI question %	Skipped %	Base
<i>Index of deprivation (Version 2 only)</i>			
1.2 to 9.0 (least deprived)	91.4	8.6	<b>432</b>
9.0 to 13.9	88.2	11.8	<b>408</b>
13.9 to 21.0	89.1	10.9	<b>469</b>
21.0 to 32.9	83.0	17.0	<b>352</b>
32.9 to 83.8 (most deprived)	79.8	20.2	<b>431</b>
<i>ACORN (Version 2 only)</i>			
Achievers	87.7	12.3	<b>578</b>
Urban prosperity	89.2	10.8	<b>185</b>
Comfortably off	88.6	11.4	<b>595</b>
Moderate means	85.7	14.3	<b>321</b>
Hard pressed	79.6	20.4	<b>495</b>
<b>Base</b>	<b>1868</b>	<b>306</b>	<b>2174</b>

[ ] Figures in parentheses indicate the estimates are unreliable due to small bases and any analyses using these figures may be invalid

**Table 2: Logistic regression - odds of interviewer skipping the sexual identity question; by respondent characteristics**

<i>All respondents</i>		
Variables in the model	Odds ratios for skipping the sexual identity question	95% confidence intervals
<b>Sex</b>		
Men	NS	
Women (reference group)		
<b>Age</b>		
16-24 (reference group)	1.00	
25-44	ns	
45-54	3.08**	(1.43-6.61)
55-64	4.63**	(2.19-9.82)
65-74	7.99**	(3.78-16.90)
75 and over	17.05**	(7.98-36.42)
<b>Marital status</b>		
Married/cohabiting (reference group)	1	
Single	1.50*	(1.11-2.03)
Widowed	NS	
Divorced/separated	NS	
Same sex cohabiting	NS	
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White (reference group)	1	
Mixed	NS	
Asian	5.90**	(3.71-9.40)
Black	NS	
Other	NS	
<b>Educational qualifications</b>		
Degree or equivalent (reference group)	1	
Below degree	NS	
Other/None	2.04**	(1.38-3.00)
<b>Socio-economic classification</b>		
Managerial and professional (reference group)	1	
Intermediate	NS	
Routine and manual	1.67**	(1.28-2.17)

\* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01 NS = not significant

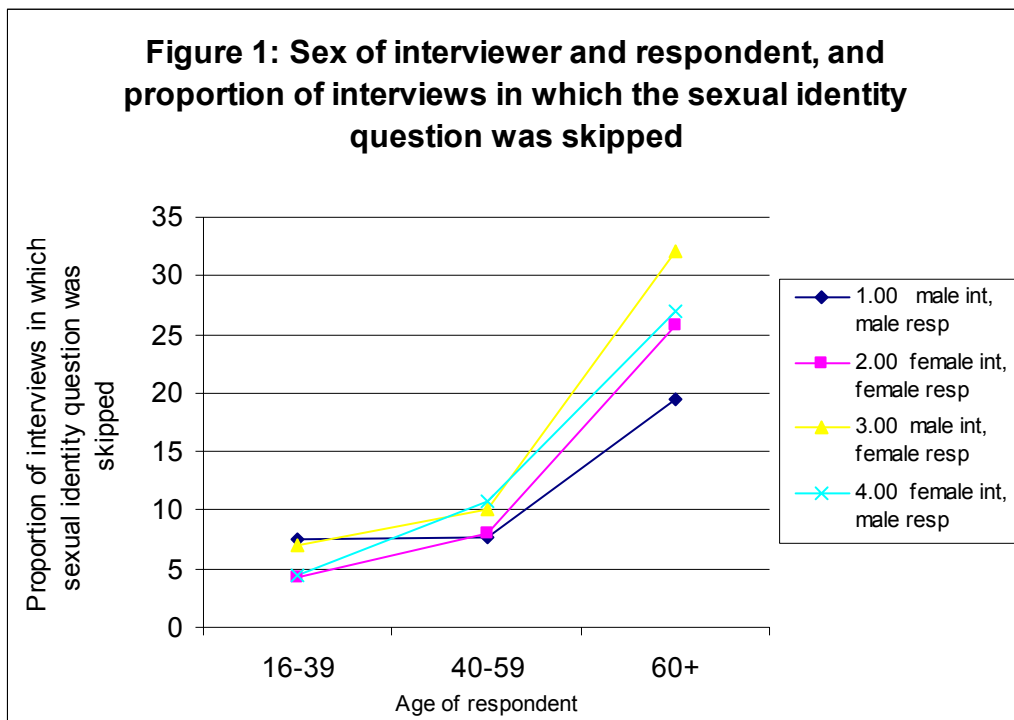
Although, as mentioned above, the sex of the respondent affected the likelihood of the question being skipped, it was found that the sex of the interviewer did not affect this likelihood (it was skipped in 13% of interviews conducted by male interviewers and 12% of interviews conducted by female interviewers). Table 3 shows how the sex of interviewer in relation to the sex of respondent was related to the likelihood of administering the question. Male interviewers were more likely to skip it if the respondent was female (15% of interviews) than if the respondent was male (11% of interviews).

Table 3: Proportion of interviews in which the sexual identity question was skipped; By sex of interviewer and respondent

Sex of interviewer	Sex of respondent	Proportion of interviews where sex id question was skipped	Unweighted base
		%	n
Male	Male	10.7	1371
Female	Female	12.0	958
Male	Female	14.9	1647
Female	Male	12.1	714

This relationship is not simple, and appears to be mediated by age, as apparent from Figure 1. The likelihood of the question being asked of younger respondents (under age 60) was unrelated to the sex of the interviewer or the respondent. With older respondents, interviewers were less likely to ask the question if they were male and the respondent female (32%) than if the interviewer was female (26%), regardless of respondent's sex, or the interviewer male and the respondent male (19%). There are two plausible explanations for this finding:

- male interviewers judged older, but not younger, women to have difficulties using a laptop; or
- male interviewers thought it inappropriate to ask the sexual identity question of women.



#### 4.1.2 Barriers to administration

In the second trial interviewers were asked to select one of a possible three reasons why they skipped past the sexual identity question and the responses to this are shown in Table 4. The most common reasons were judging the respondent unable to self-complete (56%), or being unable to assure privacy (31%). There were fewer instances of the respondent handing back the laptop after being given it (15%). These findings should be treated with caution as comments given by the interviewers often did not match how they responded to this question. For example, of those who said that privacy was the problem, several typed that the respondent did not want to use the laptop. Of those who selected the second option – skipping the question because they judged the respondent unable to use the laptop – some mentioned that confidentiality was a problem.

Table 4: Interviewers' decision whether to skip past the sexual identity question  
Trial 2 only

Decision whether to skip question	Unweighted %	Proportion of interviews where question was skipped
1 Proceed to self-completion question	85.9	
2 Skip self-completion:confidentiality cannot be assured	4.3	30.7
3 Skip self-completion:interviewer judgement of inability to self-complete	7.7	54.6
4 Skip self-completion:respondent given laptop but did not/could not complete	2.1	14.7
<i>Base</i>	<i>2221</i>	<i>656</i>

The interviewer comments given in cases where the interviewer skipped past the question can provide insight into why they chose to skip it. Interviewers frequently did not comment but the comments that were given fell into five main themes:

##### *i) Problems relating to privacy*

Where the interviewer indicated that privacy could not be assured this was either due to the presence of another person nearby, usually a family member, who could potentially view the response, or because another person was interpreting due to language problems or learning difficulties. Interviewers described a number of instances where people were sitting too close to the respondent, for example on a “*very small sofa*”.

In some Muslim households the interview could only be conducted with the head of household in attendance making it difficult for the interviewer to administer sensitive questions.

##### *ii) Problems with the laptop*

The requirement to use the laptop prevented the question from being administered because the respondent had:

- language or learning difficulties which meant they were unable to read the question;
- a fear of computers, usually due to lack of experience with them; or
- a physical impediment which would make using the laptop very difficult, for example blindness or back problems.

In addition there were occasions when the respondent had taken the laptop with the intention of responding but ran into difficulties. One example was when a respondent



wanted to change their response but was unable to do so because the programme had been designed to prevent the possibility of reviewing responses to this question, to maintain privacy. So as not to present a wrong response they returned to the option to skip the question.

### ***iii) Age***

Interviewers reported that older respondents were less likely to be familiar with computers and more likely to have a physical impediment to using them. They also felt that it was inappropriate to ask this type of question of certain age groups. Occasionally it was unclear whether it was the respondent or the interviewer who felt the question inappropriate "*felt it wasn't relevant at 80 yrs of age*".

### ***iv) Reactions to the question***

Interviewers often skipped the question if respondents reacted negatively when asked it. The negative reactions can be divided into those which were emotional (eg "*did not like*", "*found it upsetting*") and those relating to the context of the question - . because the question lacked explanation and context some respondents saw it as irrelevant to them. Interviewers requested a more detailed explanation of the purpose of the question.

### ***v) Comprehension***

Where interviewers cited lack of comprehension as the reason for skipping the question this was usually after the respondent had tried to answer it but failed "*he looked at the screen and his face went bewildered*". At times it was based on the a priori judgement that the respondent would not be able to understand "*after taking so long and questioning each question in my opinion felt better not to ask.*"

## **4.2 General evaluation of the sexual identity module**

**Due to the high proportion of interviews in which the sexual identity question was not asked (15%), the data should not be considered to provide a reliable estimate of prevalence.**

The overall response rate to the Omnibus in the four months in which the question was trialled was 65%. The responses to the sexual identity question in each trial are shown in Table 5. There were no significant differences between the first and second trials in the proportion describing themselves as gay or lesbian (1.3%, 0.8% respectively) and bisexual (1.2%, 0.6% respectively). However, a higher proportion of respondents described themselves as heterosexual in the second trial (96.8%) than in the first (92%). The proportion describing themselves as 'other' fell from 0.9% (22 respondents) in the first trial to 0.3% (5 respondents) in the second, perhaps indicating an improvement in comprehension.

Those who responded 'other' were asked to write in how they would describe their sexual identity. In the first trial, eight people indicated that they were unable to describe their sexual identity, and one chose not to by typing '*other*'. Ten responses could have been fitted into the available categories ('normal', 'straight', heterosexual) thus indicating possible misreading or miscomprehension of the options, and four appeared to be answering a different question ('*female*', '*f*', '*I am ok with my sexuality*' and '*not active*'). In the second trial, three were unable to describe their sexual identity, one could

have been fitted into the available categories (*'heterosexual'*) and one was answering a different question (*'female'*). Therefore, although fewer respondents answered 'other' to the second version of the question, the same types of description were given.

The proportion who said they preferred not to state their sexual identity also fell significantly from 4.6% in the first trial to 1.5% in the second. The characteristics of the group of people who preferred not to state their sexual identity will be considered in more detail later on in this report. The rest of this section considers only the respondents who stated their sexual identity.

Table 5: Results of sexual identity question in both trials  
(*weighted percentages and unweighted bases*)

Self-perceived sexual identity	Trial 1	Trial 2	Combined
	%	%	%
Heterosexual(/Straight)	92.0	96.8	94.4
Gay or Lesbian	1.3	0.8	1
Bisexual	1.2	0.6	0.9
Other	0.9	0.3	0.6
Prefer not to say	4.6	1.5	3
<i>Base</i>	<i>2126</i>	<i>1907</i>	<i>4033</i>

#### 4.2.1 Acceptability

In the second trial no respondents dropped out of the interview immediately following the administration of the sexual identity question. This finding allays fears that the question could be so unacceptable that it would negatively impact response to the Omnibus. In the first trial the sexual identity question was administered at the very end of the interview and so respondents would not have had an opportunity to drop out after it.

Interviewers were asked to comment on the acceptability of the question although often the interviewer did not provide a comment or just typed 'ok' indicating that it was unproblematic. There were some negative comments, for example that it was "embarrassing" or "out of context". Interviewers also reported "sniggers" and "giggles" from respondents, indicating amusement or embarrassment.

During the observed interviews, respondents rarely displayed any kind of reaction to being asked this question, although one showed 'good-humoured surprise'. Respondents commented that they would have been happy for the interviewer to ask them this question. No negative reactions to the questioning were observed.

Interviewers reported being pleasantly surprised that their a priori expectations of the question causing problems were not borne out by their experiences in the field. It is possible that this unnecessary angst would have, in some instances, deterred interviewers

from administering the question, or have been conveyed in some manner to the respondent, thus affecting their response. This highlights the importance of providing interviewers with appropriate reassurance in advance.

Interviewers from both trials mentioned that respondents needed more information about the purpose of the question so that it wasn't seen as irrelevant or out of context. Some explanation of the purpose was provided in the written interviewer instructions but perhaps this needs elaboration or to be provided 'on screen'. On the other hand, there were interviewers who disagreed and felt that a lengthier introduction would draw more attention to the topic and was not necessary. They believed that sexual identity should be treated as "*just another question*", although conceded that interviewers should have a good explanation available if requested by the respondent.

#### **4.2.2 Comprehension**

There was evidence, from all the qualitative data sources, that respondents faced difficulties in interpreting the question and, more commonly, the answer categories. Difficulties with comprehension pose a threat to the quality of the data because respondents cannot be expected to provide a valid answer if they do not understand what they are being asked.

The term which was most difficult to comprehend was 'heterosexual' although all the options caused difficulties on occasion. The meaning of the question was also not always fully understood. Respondents confused the concepts of sexual identity and sexual behaviour – one stated that they had kids as proof of their heterosexuality and on another occasion an interviewer commented that the respondent "*does not have sex so thought 'other' then changed mind.*" The concept of sexual identity was also confused with gender - one interviewer queried how to classify a respondent who was transgender.

In the second trial, where the question stem was changed and the option 'heterosexual' was expanded to 'heterosexual or straight', there were fewer reported problems with comprehension, but they did not disappear entirely. One interviewer in this second trial said the respondent was "*baffled by all choices including 'heterosexual/straight', said 'don't know anything about that'*". Interviewers working on both trials said they preferred the second version and felt that it had sorted out many of the problems of the first, although did not go on to explain what these problems were. At the focus groups, interviewers pointed out that, even in the second trial, not all respondents saw the word 'straight' and suggested reversing the order of the words in the precode to 'straight or heterosexual'.

Interviewers reported that respondents used a range of strategies to deal with the question when they did not fully understand it. These strategies were:-

- Choosing the 'other' option.
- Choosing the 'prefer not to say' option.
- Refusing to answer the question by handing the computer back to the interviewer.
- Asking the interviewer for advice. Although interviewers were instructed not to explain the question/concept or response options, it was clear that they often did so anyway: "*I had to explain about the different words on the computer.*"

- Asking another person present in the room for help. This was for help with either understanding or answering the question, “*Completely thrown by terminology - wanted husband to answer this one*”.

Interviewers attributed the problems with comprehension to various different respondent characteristics including that they were too young, too old, had language difficulties or were poorly educated.

#### **4.2.3 Administration**

The question was self-administered in order to protect privacy and ensure that respondents could answer without being influenced by the presence of a relative or friend. However, the fact that it had to be self-completed was considered by interviewers to be the biggest hindrance to its administration.

Passing over the laptop for one question was considered to be an inconvenience and interrupted the smooth flow of the interview: “*it cuts the interview in bits*” and “*slowed the interview down*”. There were also practical complications due to the trailing power cables. In addition, not all respondents realised that they were only supposed to self-complete the sexual identity question and answered further questions despite an instruction to hand the laptop back to the interviewer.

Interviewers and field managers felt that the question was unnecessarily highlighted and stood out because it was not in a block with similar questions. It was suggested that it should be grouped together with other sensitive questions, such as ethnicity and income, in a single CASI module. Another suggestion was to place it after the marital status question so that it was in a more logical position. This approach, however, may influence responses, and should not be adopted without thorough testing.

There was also evidence to suggest that respondents sometimes pressed the wrong key. During the observed interviews, a respondent who was unfamiliar with using computers spontaneously announced that he was heterosexual but accidentally chose ‘other’ and then was unable to go back and change his response.

Interviewers mentioned that there was an impediment to self-completion, either because of the respondent’s age, computer inexperience or disability, but despite this, the question was answered. In these circumstances it was not always clear whether the respondent nevertheless attempted to self-complete or whether another person completed the question for him/her. There were instances where the interviewer stated that they had to complete the question instead of the respondent.

These findings show that although CASI was offered, respondents often did not respond privately because they asked the interviewer or other person for help, they spoke their responses out loud, or they asked the interviewer to administer the question. These approaches are unlikely to have affected the quality of the data providing that the respondent felt comfortable providing an honest answer in such circumstances..

The above finding was supported by the interviewer focus groups where the consensus was that the approach for the sexual identity questions does not need to be more cautious

than that employed for other potentially sensitive topics such as smoking, drinking and sexual health.

### **4.3 Preferring not to state sexual identity**

Overall, 3.0% of respondents selected the option ‘prefer not to say’ to the sexual identity question. Although the proportion was much lower in trial 2 than trial 1 (1.5% vs 4.6%), it was still higher than the combined proportion who said they were gay, lesbian, bisexual or ‘other’. It was therefore very important to examine why people preferred not to state their sexual identity as well as look at the characteristics of those people. It was also useful to compare the two trials and to consider which features led to such an improvement in response to the substantive sexual identity categories. By doing these detailed analyses, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, it was hoped that it would be possible to improve the question, or its administration..

#### **4.3.1 Differences between the first and second versions of the question**

A starting point for this investigation would be to consider what changes were made in the second trial which could have caused the reduction in those preferring not to state their identity. There were three possibilities:

1. The question stem was changed from “Which of the following best describes your sexual identity?” to “Do you consider yourself to be....” followed by the response options. It is possible that the version used in the second trial was more acceptable or comprehensible to the respondents than the version in the first trial.
2. The word ‘straight’ was added to the heterosexual response category to aid comprehension.
3. The question was brought forward in the interview and asked alongside other classificatory variables.

#### **4.3.2 Characteristics of those choosing the ‘prefer not to say’ option.**

Table 6 shows the major demographic variables by selection of the ‘prefer not to say’ option (weighted percentages and unweighted bases). The small number of PNTS responses obtained (125 in total) restricted the analysis to univariate even when all four months of data were combined.

This analysis is split into two sections. The first is a comparison of the characteristics of those who did and did not prefer not state their sexual identity. The second section is mainly qualitative and looks at reasons why respondents chose the PNTS option.

Table 6: Whether respondent preferred not to answer the question; by demographic characteristics

	Responded %	PNTS %	Base unwt n		Responded %	PNTS %	Base unwt n
Overall	97.0	3.0	<b>4033</b>				
<i>Sex</i>				<i>Index of deprivation (Trial 2 only)</i>			
Male	97.3	2.7	<b>2361</b>	1.2 to 9.0 (least deprived)	99.5	0.5	<b>395</b>
Female	96.6	3.4	<b>1672</b>	9.0 to 13.9	98.4	1.6	<b>359</b>
<i>Age</i>				13.9 to 21.0	98.8	1.2	<b>418</b>
16-24	97.4	2.6	<b>403</b>	21.0 to 32.9	98.0	2.0	<b>292</b>
25-44	97.5	2.5	<b>1489</b>	32.9 to 83.8 (most deprived)	96.9	3.1	<b>344</b>
45-54	98.2	1.8	<b>654</b>	<i>ACORN (Trial 2 only)</i>			
55-64	95.4	4.6	<b>649</b>	Achievers	99.1	0.9	<b>506</b>
65-74	95.0	5.0	<b>513</b>	Urban prosperity	99.2	0.8	<b>165</b>
75 and over	96.4	3.6	<b>325</b>	Comfortably off	98.2	1.8	<b>527</b>
<i>Marital status</i>				Moderate means	97.9	2.1	<b>275</b>
Married/cohabiting	97.1	2.9	<b>2286</b>	Hard pressed	97.8	2.2	<b>394</b>
Single	96.7	3.3	<b>895</b>	<b>Base</b>	<b>1836</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>1867</b>
Widowed	97.1	2.9	<b>354</b>				
Divorced/separated	96.6	3.4	<b>488</b>				
Same sex cohabiting	[84.8]	[15.2]	<b>[6]</b>				
<i>Ethnicity</i>							
White	97.2	2.8	<b>3723</b>				
Mixed	[98.3]	[1.7]	<b>[32]</b>				
Asian	95.2	4.8	<b>120</b>				
Black	91.6	8.4	<b>98</b>				
Other	96.7	3.3	<b>60</b>				
<i>Educational qualifications</i>							
Degree or equivalent	99.4	0.6	<b>761</b>				
Below degree	97.4	2.6	<b>2128</b>				
Other/None	94.2	5.8	<b>1136</b>				
<i>Socio-economic classification</i>							
Managerial and professional	98.5	1.5	<b>761</b>				
Intermediate	96.2	3.8	<b>2128</b>				
Routine and manual	96.2	3.8	<b>148</b>				
Not classified	96.1	3.9	<b>988</b>				
<i>Region</i>							
North East	98.6	1.4	<b>174</b>				
North West	95.8	4.2	<b>494</b>				
Yorkshire and Humberside	97.4	2.6	<b>359</b>				
East Midlands	98.1	1.9	<b>301</b>				
West Midlands	96.6	3.4	<b>333</b>				
East of England	97.9	2.1	<b>394</b>				
London	94.3	5.7	<b>362</b>				
South East	97.2	2.8	<b>655</b>				
South West	97.1	2.9	<b>354</b>				
Wales	98.3	1.7	<b>208</b>				
Scotland	97.9	2.1	<b>399</b>				
<b>Base</b>	<b>3908</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>4033</b>				

## Demographic characteristics

### Sex

Female respondents were significantly more likely to select PNTS than male respondents (3.4% compared to 2.7%). This seems to concur with the greater reluctance of interviewers to administer the question with female respondents as noted in section 4.1.1.

### *Age*

It appeared that older respondents were more likely to select PNTS than younger respondents, for example 5.0% of 65-74 year olds selected PNTS compared to 2.6% of 16-24 year olds, but this difference was not significant. However, interviewers were much more likely to skip the sexual identity question in interviews with older respondents (40% of those over the age of 75) than younger respondents (6% of 16 to 24 year olds) and so there may have been a much stronger relationship between PNTS and age if this screening stage had not been included.

### *Marital status*

There were no significant differences in terms of marital status in the proportions who answered PNTS. There were too few respondents who were cohabiting with a member of the same sex to comment on their responses to this question.

### *Ethnicity*

There were also no significant different differences in the proportions of respondents from different ethnic groups who answered the question, but this was to be expected due to the low number of respondents from minority ethnic groups.

### *Educational achievement*

A lower level of educational achievement was significantly related to an increased likelihood of choosing PNTS, ranging from 5.8% of those with no recognised qualifications to 0.6% of those with a degree or equivalent qualification. This may have been related to literacy and to ability to comprehend the question, or to differences in attitudes to the subject matter..

### *Socio-economic classification*

A lower socio-economic classification was associated with a greater likelihood of choosing PNTS – more than 3.8% of those in intermediate, routine and manual and not classified occupations compared with 1.5% of those in managerial and professional occupations. As above, this may have been related to literacy and ability to comprehend, or differences in attitudes.

### *Region*

London had the highest proportion of PNTS responders (5.7%) and the North East had the lowest (1.4%).

### *Index of multiple deprivation*

Index of multiple deprivation data were only available for the November and December data sets, in which there were a total of 31 PNTS responses. Those who came from the most deprived neighbourhoods were more than six times as likely to respond PNTS as those from the least deprived neighbourhoods (3.1% compared with 0.5%). As with education and socio-economic classification this may be related to literacy and comprehension, or to attitudinal differences.

## **4.3.3 Other factors**

### *General unwillingness to answer sensitive questions*

The income questions which are asked on the Omnibus are also considered to be sensitive and more than 6% refused to answer this section in the four months when the sexual identity question was asked. It may be the case that those who prefer not to state their sexual identity are generally unwilling to answer any questions of a sensitive nature. Table 7 shows that this is not the case – there was no relationship between selecting PNTS and refusing the income question.

Table 7: Whether respondent preferred not to answer the question; by refusal to answer income question

	Responded to sexual identity question %	PNTS %	Unweighted base n
Responded to income question	97.1	2.9	<b>3631</b>
Refused income question	97.0	3.0	<b>199</b>
Total	97.1	2.9	<b>3830</b>
<b>Base</b>	<b>3715</b>	<b>115</b>	

### *Sex of interviewer*

There are two separate issues – sex of interviewer per se and sex of interviewer in relation to sex of respondent. Interviewers did not think that the sex of the respondent viz a viz the interviewer made any difference, as discussed in the focus groups. However, the quantitative data show findings to the contrary.

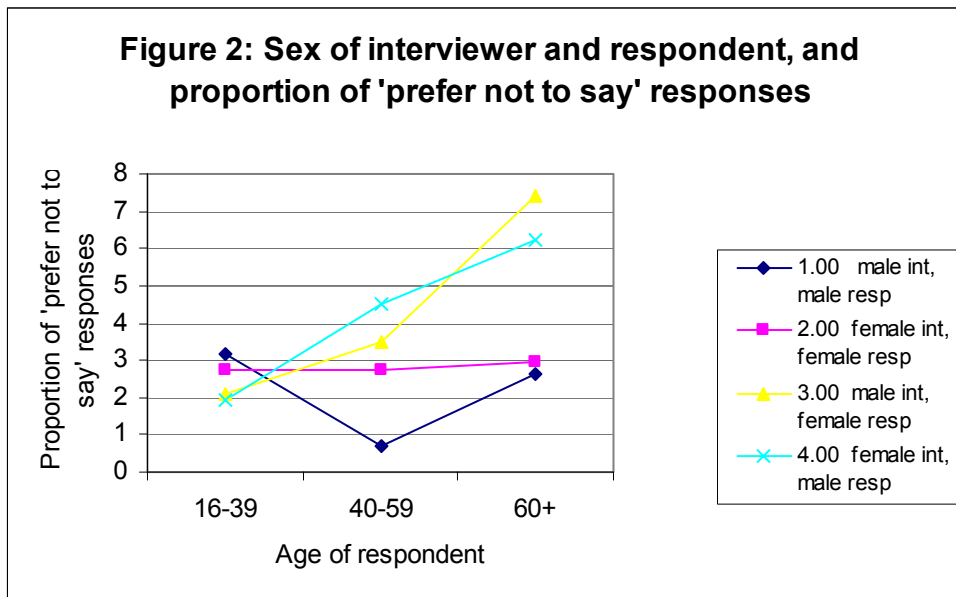
There was no significant difference in the proportion of respondents who selected the PNTS option when the interviewer was male (2.9% of interviews) compared to when the interviewer was female (3.2% of interviews). However, the sex of the interviewer in relation to the sex of the respondent does seem to make a difference to the likelihood of the respondent selecting the ‘PNTS’ option (Table 8). Respondents were more likely to select PNTS if the interviewer was of the opposite sex (3.7%) than if they and the interviewer were of the same sex (2.4%). The highest proportion of respondents selected PNTS if they were female and the interviewer male (3.8%).

Table 8: Proportion of respondents who chose the 'prefer not to say' option (PNTS) By sex of interviewer and respondent

Sex of interviewer	Sex of respondent	% PNTS	Unweighted base
		%	n
Male	Male	2.1	1212
Female	Female	2.8	827
Male	Female	3.8	1383
Female	Male	3.7	611

The effect on response of sex of the respondent in relationship to sex of interviewer is not simple, and appears to be related to age, as shown in Figure 2.





The sex of the interviewer or respondent had no bearing on whether young respondents (under 40) selected the ‘prefer not to say’ option. Amongst those aged 40-59, respondents were significantly less likely to give the ‘PNTS’ response if they and the interviewer were male (0.7%) than if they were male and the interviewer female (4.5%). In the oldest group (age 60+), respondents were least likely to select PNTS if they and the interviewer were of the same sex (2.8%) and most likely to if the respondent was female and the interviewer male (7.4%).

The question was administered as CASI and the wording explained that the interviewer would not be able to see the answer. Therefore it is not clear why response should be affected by the sex of the interviewer, although the question introduction may have been missed or misread. It is hoped that future focus groups or cognitive interviews with the general population will shed light on why the sex of the interviewer in relation to the sex of the respondent is important.

#### *Agreement to recall*

At the end of the Omnibus interview, respondents are asked for their consent to be contacted again for research: “Finally if we needed your help with any future research would it be all right if we contacted you again?”

Fewer respondents who selected the PNTS option at the sexual identity question agreed to future recall (78%) than those who stated their self-perceived sexual identity (85%). There are two possible explanations for this finding:

- 1) That a certain type of person is a ‘reluctant responder’ and is unwilling to answer sensitive questions and unwilling to be recontacted. If this is the correct explanation then the sexual identity question alone would be unlikely to be detrimental to follow-up response.
- 2) That some people were upset enough by the sexual identity question to not only refuse to answer it but consequently to refuse any further contact. If this is the correct

explanation then it could be very problematic if put on a longitudinal survey which depends on respondents' willingness to being recontacted repeatedly.

The outcome of a logistic regression showed that when selection of PNTS, age, sex, socio-economic classification, educational attainment, marital status and ethnicity are included in the equation, the only variable which independently predicts consent to recall is socio-economic classification. This finding indicates that those people in lower socio-economic groups are more reluctant to state their sexual identity, and are more reluctant to take part in further research. This supports the first explanation for the relationship between selection of 'prefer not to say' and consent to recall.

Nevertheless this relationship warrants further research as it could have important implications. High agreement to recall is particularly necessary on longitudinal surveys, for example the work module of the IHS.

There are two options for further investigation into this:

- 1) A split sample trial, on a survey such as the Omnibus, in which half the sample would be asked the sexual identity question.
- 2) Compare the rate of consent to recall on months when the sexual identity question is asked with the rate on four months when sex id is not asked. It would be necessary to factor in key characteristics such as socio-economic classification, age, education.

#### **4.3.4 Reasons given for choosing the 'prefer not to say' options**

##### ***Qualitative data – from follow-up interviews with respondents and from comments made by Omnibus interviewers***

The main source of data here was from the follow-up in-depth telephone interviews with a sample of those respondents who had selected the 'prefer not say' option. This is supplemented by interviewer feedback. Although the researchers conducting the telephone interviews did not know when the respondent selected PNTS, remarks made by interviewers in the comments section often reflect feedback that they received from respondents.

From these two data sources it became clear that objecting to the question was not the only reason why the 'prefer not to say' option was selected. The following reasons were also found:

- Keystroke errors by respondents who had intended to select one of the first three options to the question.
- Lack of comprehension. In some cases respondents misunderstood the question, in others it was the response options that caused difficulties, particularly 'heterosexual'.
- The selection of the PNTS option by another person who was assisting the respondent in completing the interview due to language or literacy problems. For example, in one case the respondent said that a friend had translated the interview for them but they could not remember this particular question, implying that the translator had answered it without consulting with them.

It is necessary to treat these explanations with caution because respondents may have been reluctant to admit that they had chosen PNTS due to social desirability, or they may have simply forgotten that they had done so.

Amongst those respondents who confirmed that they had selected the PNTS option intentionally there were a variety of reasons for doing so.

#### *Privacy*

Despite the use of a self-completion question to ensure privacy, the thought that the interviewer might see their response was still a concern. It is notable that some respondents who did not self-identify during the Omnibus interview then readily discussed their sexual identity over the phone. One reason given was that the telephone interviewer was the same sex as the respondent whereas the Omnibus interviewer had been opposite sex.

#### *Confidentiality*

Assurances of confidentiality were not convincing to all respondents. There was a belief that deliberate attempts would be made to “leak” the data through use of “*wireless technology*” which had led the respondent to search for evidence such as a “*flashing light showing wireless connectivity*”. In another case the respondent was unable to say why he did not trust the claims of confidentiality. “*Didn’t believe it. No real reason. Just the way I felt at the time*” .

#### *The topic*

There were also objections to the principle of being asked a question on this topic. A misunderstanding of the purpose of the question led to the belief that it would cause discrimination: “*I don’t think that those sort of questions should be asked... because I think everybody should be treated exactly the same*”. It was also suggested that this sort of information was simply “*no-one else’s business*”.

#### *Comprehension*

Difficulties in understanding the question and answer categories deterred respondents from answering the question. It was clear that the term causing most difficulty was 'heterosexual' but the other answer categories and the question stem also caused problems with comprehension. Rather than risk giving the wrong answer, respondents preferred not to answer the question at all. “*Saw the ‘prefer not to say option’ and just pressed the button*” .

#### *The possibility of further questioning*

It was not always the question itself which deterred response but rather the belief that if they answered this question then they would be routed to further questioning that was even more personal: “*It made him wonder what could be coming next.*”

All those respondents who confirmed during the follow-up interviews that they had selected PNTS either stated or implied that they were heterosexual.

#### *Other findings*

Those who selected the PNTS option differed in their attitudes to other sensitive questions such as ethnicity and income. Some respondents viewed all these questions in a

similar light and would not answer any of them. The fact that respondents were used to being asked about ethnicity and income meant that they were more inclined to answer such questions than questions on sexual identity which was an unfamiliar topic to them. They also distinguished between giving information about income to the Inland Revenue who clearly needed this information and giving such information to the ONS whose motives were less clear. This implies that more people would be willing to answer the question if they were given clear reasons for why the information is needed. However, it is also necessary to consider whether drawing attention to the question in this way might have a negative impact on those people who did not object to it.

***Quantitative data - from the self-completion question on why respondents preferred not to state their sexual identity (trial 2 only)***

The qualitative data gathered from the first trial on reasons for selecting PNTS were used to produce a pre-coded list of reasons. In the second Omnibus trial, respondents who selected PNTS were asked to choose which of this list applied to them. Respondents could select more than one option and the outcome is shown in Table 9.

Table 9: Reasons given for selecting 'prefer not to say' (Trial 2 only)

	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 reason	33	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>33</b>

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

The most common response was ‘prefer not to give reason’ (33%). Two reasons concerned some aspect of comprehension (‘did not understand the question’, ‘answer options unclear to me’) totalling 31% of the responses. The remaining responses: were ‘none of the answers apply to me’ (24%), objection to being asked the question (20%); concern about confidentiality or privacy (17%); and ‘other’ (2%).

The reasons given for choosing PNTS can be divided into soft and hard refusals. Hard refusals are where the respondent objects to the question on principal. Although it may be possible to persuade the respondent to change this attitude, it is categorised as a hard refusal because the implication is that they would respond similarly at any time. In contrast other respondents chose PNTS because they did not know what else to put, usually due to comprehension, or even because that is how they felt “*on the day*”. The implication is that these respondents may respond differently if asked the same question again. These are seen as soft refusals.

## 5 Next steps

Based on the findings from these two Omnibus trials, a third trial has been developed. In this third trial:

- Interviewers will no longer be instructed to skip the section in certain circumstances.
- CASI<sup>5</sup> will remain as the primary mode of administration but CAPI<sup>6</sup> will be permitted where necessary.
- Interviewers will be provided with an improved introduction to the question, and will be given an explanation of the purpose of it.

There is a possibility that such a high proportion of respondents selected the ‘heterosexual’ option in part because of its position at the top of the list (the primacy effect). In the third Omnibus trial half the sample will be presented with the response options in a reverse order (homosexual, bisexual, heterosexual/straight, other, prefer not to say) to see whether this affects the distribution of responses.

The eventual aim of this project is to develop a question or suite of questions which will be used on the Integrated Household Survey (IHS). Unlike the Omnibus survey, the IHS is a household survey which uses concurrent interviewing, that is household members are interviewed simultaneously. This has implications for privacy and means that the findings from the current research cannot be directly extrapolated to the IHS. Further research will be required to learn best how to ask the question to a group of respondents concurrently.

The next stage will be to conduct focus groups and cognitive interviews with members of the public to further explore issues such as privacy and terminology. The focus group and cognitive interview samples will be drawn purposively thereby enabling us to access people who have characteristics of particular interest to this research.