

# Monitoring Sexual Orientation

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Today, monitoring sexual orientation has become as accepted a method of promoting “good practice” in the voluntary sector as monitoring ethnicity. Although this article focuses on sexual orientation as an unnecessary, intrusive and even absurd category to monitor, the points raised can be applied to any category that is used to break people down into separate groups (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, disability status).

There are two main reasons why such monitoring should be abandoned: 1) It is an invasion of privacy; 2) It achieves nothing for genuine equality, equality of opportunity or tolerance. In fact, it does damage to seriously progressive campaigning for these things.

Some people may personally not have any problem at all with disclosing their sexual orientation on a form, whether it's at work, in the voluntary sector or at a blood donor clinic. But the fact remains that it is absolutely nobody's business in any of these environments who you have sex with. Who you tell is entirely up to you, and the mere presence of a “prefer not to say” option on sexual orientation monitoring forms doesn't justify the intrusive question in the first place, as plenty of people may feel obliged to answer just to keep the person handing out the forms happy. Monitoring of things like sexual orientation also collapses the public and private spheres by rejecting the notion that certain things are not relevant to certain places or contexts. Instead, such monitoring assumes that everything about a person is important and holds relevance to everything that they do, at all times and in all places. Here I think it needs to be stated plainly again: *who you have sex with is about as relevant to your work or voluntary activities as what you eat*. There is simply no reason for the question. With this in mind, I turn to an examination of the reasons proponents of monitoring give for asking about people's sexual orientation, reasons which they claim justify the intrusive and irrelevant nature of the query.

Supporters of monitoring of sexual orientation do believe benefits can be found:

Monitoring sexuality has brought us face to face with some peoples prejudice and has provided us with some sources of amusement such as when people return their forms with the word normal written across the LGBT section.

Or when some people havent understood the concept and come up to us and ask what is this? I have regular sex with a woman, am I homo or hetero? So, in our own little way we our challenging and educating people!<sup>1</sup>

So, this kind of monitoring allows staff to a) meet prejudice face-to-face, and b) laugh at their apparently ignorant volunteers. Progressive indeed! And the notion that ticking boxes brings staff face-to-face with prejudice is largely irrelevant – and often probably inaccurate – since staff can never know what is serious or what is a joke on a form, or whether the volunteer is simply ridiculing the entire question. Once again, it is only by real social

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<sup>1</sup> Source:

<http://www.volunteering.org.uk/Resources/goodpracticebank/Core+Themes/equalopportunitiesdiversity/imt/heonlygayinthevillage-indefenceofmonitoring.htm>.

engagement that we can discover views we find problematic or offensive, and it is only through such engagement that we can challenge them.

Has anything changed for the better in terms of equality for LGBT people because their sexual orientation has been disclosed on a form? The answer is clearly negative, and even the proponents of such monitoring would have to admit that real progress is achieved through real political action and campaigning, not through statistical monitoring. To take this criticism further, monitoring of sexual orientation actually damages serious campaigning for equality. It is politically and morally abhorrent to presume LGBT people are vulnerable and in need of special protection. If certain individuals request special protection from employers or staff due to genuine and specific concerns then that's a different matter, but this kind of monitoring makes the assumption of vulnerability on behalf of millions of people without any prior evidence.

(As an aside, even if we were to hypothetically accept that asking people about their sexual orientation is acceptable in the first place, how reliable a form of data collection is it? Firstly, large quantities of people are likely to tick "prefer not to say" just to avoid the whole issue. Secondly, LGBT people are probably somewhat less likely to answer the question than straight people, and are therefore more likely to choose "prefer not to say". Straight people are just as likely to perceive the question as inappropriate and pointless, but perhaps find it easier just to tick the "heterosexual" box to keep the member of staff happy. Of course, if LGBT people really are as vulnerable as the proponents of monitoring seem to believe, then they are even *more* unlikely to answer honestly. This could mean organisations with absolutely no prejudices whatsoever get very few (or indeed none) of their volunteers selecting anything other than heterosexual, and could then face "good practice" policing.)

Ensuring that questions about sexual orientation are present on all monitoring forms also presumes that everybody "else" is a potential threat to LGBT people, and that this threat can be neutralised through simple monitoring to ensure that a few LGBT people are members of the organisation concerned. Even if such box ticking did reveal serious prejudicial beliefs, which is highly unlikely, the monitoring does nothing to actually change the attitudes of those people. Proponents may argue that they "can then educate those people in person" (see above quote). Instead, shouldn't they wait until they hear something that needs challenging before assuming people need to be questioned to stop them offending LGBT people? Assuming the worst about people we don't know is a sign of chronic distrust and needs to be countered. A good first step would be to eliminate this monitoring altogether, which presumes both the vulnerability of LGBT people and the potential danger of everybody else.

Monitoring sexual orientation is about as useful as a CCTV camera focused on the front door of an office block so as to record the ethnic makeup of entrants. It reveals a desire to measure *everything* whilst changing and doing *nothing*; it covers up the failure to actually tackle real discrimination where it does exist in a focused and pragmatic way, and instead sidesteps the whole issue of doing something about a problem by instead merely "measuring" it. It's unnecessary, useless and intrusive; it's also politically lazy, as it avoids doing real work to challenge real discrimination and inequality.