

Sex and gender in the 2021 census

In the 2011 census, the first question requested the respondent's full name. The second asked: What is your sex? In answering, he or she was invited to tick either a box marked male or another marked female.

That same simple binary question has been asked in every census in Britain since the regular national survey began in 1841. It is not likely, however, to be asked in that way in 2021.

For the past two years, the Office for National Statistics (ONS), which administers the 10-yearly census in England and Wales, has been developing and testing a number of different possible new ways of presenting this previously straightforward question.

In considering what questions should be asked, and how they should be worded, the ONS is obliged to take account of several factors which can conflict with each other.

It has to have regard for the quality and usefulness of the information the census is intended to collect, for the benefit of policy-makers in all areas of public life. These policy-makers include not only the government, local government and statutory public authorities, but many other agencies and institutions which have responsibility for areas of public administration and welfare provision.

The introduction of the Equality Act in 2010 increased the responsibilities of public authorities in connection with people with a range of what the Act termed "protected characteristics". These characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership and pregnancy and maternity. In order to fulfil their public duty, service providers require information, and the regular national census is an obvious opportunity to obtain it.

As part of its assessment of the "user value" of the questions asked in the census, the ONS is considering the need to gather more information about "the trans population", which it defines as "those whose gender identity is different from the sex they were assigned at birth". Currently there is no reliable information regarding the number of people within the population who come within this definition.

The ONS not only has to consider the requirements of data users. It has to take account of how respondents perceive the questions they are being asked. Respondents want questions to be asked in a way which allows them to give the answer which they consider to be the correct one.

A pilot exercise carried out by the ONS showed that "some members of the public [reported] that they were unable to complete the current (2011) sex question accurately as it only offered the two categories of male or female".

In view of this complaint, the ONS is testing some alternative forms of words. One suggested option is to keep the original question, but to add a third box marked "other" in which respondents can self-identify what they consider themselves to be.

Another idea being canvassed is to keep the What is your sex? question unchanged, but to include a separate additional question on "gender identity".

The subjects of sexual orientation and gender identity are controversial and sensitive to a great many people – not just to Christians – and if questions on those subjects are included in the 2021 census, the final wording is unlikely to please everyone.

A third ONS obligation is to ensure the validity and authority of the census data as a whole. Public resistance to the inclusion, or to the wording, of particular questions can put at risk the reliability of the whole census.

This resistance manifests itself in a number of ways.

One reaction of respondents is to ignore altogether any question they don't like. If a lot of people do this, it will greatly affect the accuracy, and therefore the usefulness, of the data collected.

Even more seriously, some respondents can be so offended by a question that they not only fail to answer that particular question, but they withdraw from the whole census process, failing to return the form and ceasing to co-operate with census enumerators.

A test survey in 2016, for instance, showed that 30 per cent of respondents would find it "unacceptable" for a question on sexual orientation to be included in the 2021 census. They might therefore not answer it.

One per cent of the entire survey sample, however, would go much further - abandoning the census process altogether if it included a question on sexual orientation. This may seem a small percentage, but across the whole of the population of England and Wales recorded at the 2011 census, it would have amounted to 560,759 people - sufficient to distort some of the findings, even if only slightly.

One suggested compromise still under consideration is to include a "prefer not to say" option in the sexual orientation question. Trials have shown that this would reduce resistance by 25 per cent.

Under the Census Act 1920, respondents are required by law to answer all questions except the one on their religious belief. The inclusion of a prefer not to say box satisfies the law, since the respondent would still be answering the question.

Another concern of the ONS is the accuracy of the data entered by respondents. When unhappy with questions, some respondents may not ignore the questions or abandon the census process, but their displeasure may lead them to be careless or casual, or even deliberately inaccurate, about some of their answers. To minimise the risk of this, the ONS goes to great lengths to ensure that only questions which need to be asked are included in the census, and that they are worded in an acceptable way.

For some of the above reasons, it is still far from certain that there will be a question on sexual orientation in the 2021 census.

Finally, the ONS also needs to consider whether the inclusion of a question in the 2021 census is the best way of collecting the information being sought. In the age of the internet, there are many ways of gathering statistics, and for some types of data, a different vehicle may be more effective.

Why, it may be wondered, are we taking up so much space in this edition of The Bulletin to write about the minutiae of a long-established bureaucratic process. Are there no bigger and more urgent issues to address?

If we do think in that way, we will have missed something serious. If the What is your sex? question is expressed in a way which goes beyond the traditional binary approach, this will amount to official recognition of the answers the wording permits.

Any official recognition in the census of a non-binary understanding of sex and gender will have wide-ranging effects.

There is considerable risk that the figures obtained will be used to create and justify new categories of individual rights and to impose increased equality obligations on service-providers.

The confusion, tensions and practical difficulties which are already apparent in areas of public life in connection with sex and gender will be compounded.

Most Christians will be greatly distressed by any attempt officially to re-define the composition of the human race in a way which is incompatible with God's created order. The Bible makes it clear (Genesis 1:26-27) that God created man in two distinct sexes – male and female. For anyone to identify as something different, and to be given a formal opportunity by the State to do so, is an act of rebellion against the design of God.

It is also an act of folly, since God has made every person as they are, and, whatever the real, imagined or conditioned physiological or psychological identity stresses which arise in a small number of individual cases, everyone will find their greatest fulfilment in their acceptance of the person God has made them to be. To pursue something different from this is bound to be harmful and lead to unhappiness.

As well as being distressing, the present confusion over sex and gender issues is also bewildering. Over the past ten years, a notion has seemingly come from nowhere, and taken root within human society with astonishing speed, which not only rejects God's order, but also flies in the face of physical realities and common sense.

Previous generations did not succumb to such folly. They were certain that What is your sex? was a binary question.

In 1879, the writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894) wrote a book entitled *Travels with a donkey in the Cevennes*, about the 185-mile journey he had made from Le Puy to Alès in France in the previous year. In the course of that journey, he met and spoke with many local strangers. On one occasion he had a conversation with a rustic and asked him his religion. The man replied: "I make no shame of my religion. I am a Catholic."

Stevenson was deeply impressed by the uncompromising firmness and fixedness of this reply that he reflected on it and wrote about it later: "God, like a great power, like a great shining sun, has appeared to this simple fellow in the course of years, and become the ground and essence of his least reflections; and you may change creeds and dogmas by authority, or proclaim a new religion with the sound of trumpets, if you will, but here is a man who has his own thoughts, and will stubbornly adhere to them in good and evil."

What, you may wonder, has all this to do with our present subject of sex and gender?

Its significance lies in Stevenson's conclusion to this section of his journal. His encounter with the rustic Catholic reminded him of a number of other religious adherents he had met who all had in common that same characteristic of firm resolve and certainty. Describing their typical fixedness, Stevenson said this: "He is a Catholic, a Protestant or a Plymouth Brother, in the same indefeasible sense that a man is not a woman, or a woman not a man."

Indefeasible is not a commonly used word today, but it means incapable of being overturned, and it is interesting that Stevenson, when searching for an example of something which is indefeasible, should have selected as his parallel, out of all the analogies he might have used, that a man is not a woman, or a woman not a man.

Writing 140 years ago, Stevenson was in no doubt that everyone he might meet, in France or England or his native Scotland, would regard his or her sex as fixed and immutable: a man could never be anything other than a man, nor a woman anything other than a woman.

Natural man is no different now from what he or she was in Stevenson's day. Babies born now are no different from babies born in 1878. Our present generation has fallen victim to naivety and credulity.

Marriage and birth sex are two of the firm foundations of human society. The undermining of marriage in Europe dates from 1989 when the world's first officially-recognised same-sex union was introduced into

law in Denmark. Since then, 28 other European countries, including 22 other EU states, have followed suit.

The public and private confusion over the issue of “gender identity” has emerged much more recently and has rapidly intruded into an increasing number of areas of life.

In the wake of these two recent tragic developments in human society, many believers will have asked themselves: “If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (Psalm 11:3). It is not the purpose of this article to set out practical strategies, but we need to remember the opening words of that psalm: “In the Lord I put my trust.”

Rod Badams

Statements in the above article attributed to the ONS are available on the ONS web site:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/census> under 13 December 2017: census topic research

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