WHAT'S IT GOT TO DO WITH YOU?

10 reasons why you should fill in those funny box things at the end of forms

QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS...

Wherever you go, people want to know your business. Your age, gender, sexuality, race, religion, whether you're disabled... Where does all this information go?

It goes to help make things better, that's where it goes.

It tells local authorities where to direct their services; it shows organisations if certain people aren't making the most of them; and it makes sure that you get the right slice of what you're paying for.

They can't change things without your help.

BIG BROTHER IS NOT WATCHING YOU. FUNNY AS THAT MAY SEEM.

We're all told to watch who we give our personal information to, what with identity theft and everything.

But when you give information about your age, race, religion, disability, sexuality or whatever to, say, your local authority, you can be sure that it will only be used to make things better. In fact, they usually won't even know it's you!

IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU. REALLY. SORRY ABOUT THAT.

Yes, occasionally you may fill in a form with your name and address. But the section with information about age, race, sexuality etc is almost always dealt with separately.

Your personal information is about you – hello! – the rest is statistics. And if they occasionally keep it on your file, it will only ever be to make sure that you as a white/black older/young married/single straight/gay man/woman are being properly catered for.

COME THE REVOLUTION!

Some people worry about giving information in case it should fall into the wrong hands.

But when a public body gets your form, they don't just file it away in the basement. There are very strict laws to make sure they protect those details and deal with them responsibly.

And if you don't trust them for whatever reason – or you don't feel comfortable – then don't give the information. No one can make you.

GO AHEAD. ASK.

So, what information do they want out of you?

They'll want to know whether you're a man or a woman. They may want to know your ethnicity. And they'll want to know what age category you fit into.

These days, they may also want to know your sexuality: are you gay/lesbian, heterosexual (they might say straight) or bisexual?

They're not after dinner and a movie. They just need to know to be able to do their job properly. Same with disability. Data like this helps authorities get services right.

6 GET SERVICES RIGHT? THAT'LL BE THE DAY.

Well, we can't moan about authorities wasting money if we're not prepared to help.

Take a couple of examples. If there are lots of older people in an area, maybe more Dial-a-Ride services are needed. People from certain groups have particular health needs: there are higher rates of breast cancer among lesbians, for instance, so provision has to be made. Maybe your first language is not English and you'd prefer library books in your own language.

You can see why they need to know.

RACE, SEX, RELIGION, SEXUALITY? IS THAT IT?

Well, who's asking? Depending on whose form you're filling in, you can usually see why they need the information.

They might want to know if you're homeless. Or have a particular condition. Or are transgender. They might also need to know your salary or how much you receive in benefits.

They're not being nosy – the information helps make services better by targeting them at the right people. And, as always, it won't come back to you personally.

EMPLOYERS NEED TO KNOW TOO.

It's easy to see why your local council might need to know this stuff, but what about when you're asked to fill in a form like this by a private company? When you're applying for a job, for instance?

The reasons are similar: to make sure they're being fair and that people from all backgrounds are represented. And of course the details you give are protected by those same strict laws.

YOU WANT TO KNOW MY *WHAT!!?*

It can seem nosier when someone is asking the questions face to face rather than getting you to fill in a form. But it's the same. They're really not interested in you personally, not in that way. They do it with everyone.

And if you'd rather fill the form in yourself, just tell them.

10 STAND UP AND BE COUNTED!

It's quite natural to feel protective of your personal information. It's not only natural, it's sensible.

But if local authorities and hospitals and police forces and employers don't know who's out there, they can't be expected to get it right.

If you don't fill in the form and then find that no one's thought about YOUR needs, well, you can hardly complain, can you?

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Stonewall

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