



## *The Nose Report*

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Report of research conducted by  
The Social Issues Research Centre

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## Executive Summary

Sneezing and nose-blowing are generally considered to be rather unpleasant, inconsequential activities that are best not talked about. In fact, most adults find it difficult to even come up with an appropriate word to describe the 'things' that one occasionally has to extract from one's nose. Bogeys? Boogers? Snot? Phlegm? Mucous? The lack of an acceptable, everyday term for 'nasal behaviour' is an indication of how little we talk about something that takes place fairly often and, quite literally, right under our noses. And yet sneezing and nose-blowing can reveal a great deal about how we position ourselves in different kinds of social settings. Why, for example, do we feel comfortable 'letting it out' in the privacy of our own homes when this would be unthinkable in the office, or in a shop, or on public transport? Why is 'serial sniffing' so very irritating? Using a combination of focus groups, a representative national poll and over 1,000 individual observations across the UK, the following SIRC report presents a unique and definitive look behind these seemingly natural, everyday habits in order to unravel the complex social codes that really determine how we sneeze and blow our noses. In this summary section we present some of the key findings from the report.

### Social codes

This report takes as its starting point the notion that sneezing and nose-blowing are strictly regulated according to social context and the social proximity, or social 'closeness', between the person sneezing / blowing their nose and the others around them. Maintaining accepted etiquette for sneezing and nose-blowing is essential if one is to avoid breaking well-established social taboos related to personal hygiene. In a world where we are increasingly anonymous in public spaces, external representations of who we are – including approaches to personal hygiene – can say a lot about how we see ourselves in relation to other people.

### 'Letting it out' vs. 'Keeping it in': social proximity and the 'comfort zone'

Overall, the observation data revealed that subjects were far more likely to 'let it out' than 'hold it in' when sneezing, although this changed considerably depending on social context. Almost three quarters of sneezing observed was classified by the researchers as 'letting it out' (71%).

Not surprisingly, the more socially private the situation, the more comfortable people are with sneezing and nose-blowing activities. In this sense sneezing and nose-blowing are in some ways reflective both of our social relationships with others, and of our perceptions of how others view us in social situations. Along these lines, participants agreed that they felt more comfortable 'letting it out' in the 'comfort zone' provided by friends and loved ones, as opposed to more rigidly regulated social interactions with work colleagues or strangers.

According to the poll data people are most comfortable sneezing and blowing their noses in private; in the company of strangers, 33% of respondents agreed that they are most at ease with sneezing and blowing their noses in open public spaces such as parks or public squares. The public spaces where participants were least comfortable with sneezing and nose-blowing included quiet public places such as

libraries and cinemas, shops and places where food and drink were being served and/or consumed. People are generally more at ease with sneezing in public than they are with blowing their noses: 48% of respondents suggested they were comfortable with sneezing in public, compared with just over a third (34%) who said the same for nose-blowing in a public space.

## The pleasures of sneezing

Despite the social codes governing sneezing and nose-blowing (and perhaps because of them), many participants recognised that these activities could be very pleasurable, given the appropriate social setting. While recognising that a 'let it out' sneeze was unacceptable in many social contexts, more than a quarter (29%) of respondents found a big sneeze enjoyable, with 18-24 year-olds deriving the most pleasure from 'letting it out'.

## Irritating sneezing and nose-blowing habits

'**Serial sniffing**' (see below for more detail) is considered to be a serious social transgression and one that many (57%) find highly irritating. While very few poll respondents actively admitted to serial sniffing in public, our observations and focus groups showed that serial sniffing is a very commonplace activity: 'sniffers' accounted for 1/3 of all observations conducted. Sniffing was seen as a particularly irritating habit because it is voluntary: serial sniffers make a conscious effort to sniff rather than 'let it out' because they are uncomfortable with nose-blowing in public spaces. In part because of this, focus group participants associated the 'serial sniffer' with a sense of social insecurity. An uncontrolled sneeze, with no attempt to cover the mouth or nose, is also considered to be a very socially unacceptable public nasal activity.

## Verbal comments

A large proportion (69%) of respondents said that they would make a verbal comment such as 'Excuse me' after sneezing; (53%) also said that they would make a comment such as 'Bless you' when observing other people sneezing. Women were more likely than men to comment in both instances. Surprisingly, for some this presented a moment of positive social interaction in social settings where verbal exchanges with strangers would otherwise be seen as awkward and unwelcome.

## Gender differences

According to the data gathered, women are generally more socially aware and embarrassed by public sneezing and nose-blowing activities than are men. In almost all aspects of sneezing and nose-blowing – from the use of tissues, to issues of hygiene, to volume – men appear to be less socially inhibited than women. This ties in to broader issues about what are considered to be 'acceptable' or normalised public hygiene activities for the different genders.

## Age differences

Sneezing and nose-blowing habits were also found to vary according to age. Those aged 18-24 and 55 or over expressed the highest degree of embarrassment and discomfort in relation to sneezing or nose-blowing in public.

## A typology of sneezing and nose-blowing

Drawing on information from observations and focus group participants it was possible to draw up a typology of the most common sneezing and nose-blowing activities. Most poll respondents identified with the category of **'Discreet Nose-blower'** (48%), followed by **'Apologetic Sneezer'**, as these represent the most socially unobtrusive sneezing and nose-blowing habits. Focus group participants associated these behaviours with 'good manners' and an awareness of the appropriate behaviour for a particular social setting. At the same time (as suggested above), a large number also recognised the pleasurable aspects of an 'explosive' sneeze - but only in the appropriate (private) context.

- The 'Let it Outer'** The 'Let it Outer', or 'expulsive' sneeze was the third most commonly recognised sneezing activity among poll respondents. Almost 30% of men identified with this category, while fewer women – slightly over 10% – admitted to being 'Let it Outers'. At the same time (as suggested above), this was the most commonly observed sneezing activity, with just under three quarters of sneezes fitting into this category. Focus group participants associated this kind of sneezing with an assertive or self-confident person.
- The 'Mousey Sneezer'** The 'implosive' or 'Mousey' sneeze proved to be an interesting category, as it was seen in both positive and negative terms: on one hand, the 'implosive' sneeze was considered to be socially acceptable and reflective of 'good manners', but it was also associated with being socially insecure. As a result fewer participants actively identified with this nose-blowing behaviour than with 'discreet nose-blowing' or 'apologetic sneezing'. Approximately one fifth (19%) saw themselves as 'Mousey' sneezers, while 26% of respondents agreed that suppressing a sneeze is unsatisfying.
- The Serial Sniffer** People were also uneager to identify with the category of 'serial sniffer', which, as one of the most irritating nasal behaviours, was generally associated with a transgression of social codes about how to deal with nasal hygiene in public. Serial sniffing, however, was a commonplace activity observed in major cities across the UK.
- The Ceaseless Sneezer** The Ceaseless Sneezer was identified as a person who would sneeze continually and repetitively in a way that seems indulgent or more exuberant than is physically necessary. This sneezing activity was often seen to be unacceptable in most public social context. Of the sneezers observed approximately 1 in 10 sneezed three times or more.
- Paranoid Examiner** The Paranoid Examiner was identified by participants as a person constantly concerned about the possibility of 'remnants' from sneezing or nose-blowing. Focus group participants associated the Paranoid Examiner with a person who is

sensitive about personal appearance and the perceptions that others make based on external representations of self. 1 in 5 women identified with this category, as opposed to 10% of men. 18-24 year-olds were most likely to identify with this category (27%).

It is always interesting to note the differences between what people *say* they do, and what they *actually* do when observed. This is particularly important when dealing with practices, such as sneezing and nose-blowing, that are governed by strict codes about what is socially acceptable. After all, would you admit to being a 'snot rocketeer' when you know that this is socially taboo? Would you admit to being an irritating 'serial sniffer'? By incorporating observational research alongside focus groups and poll data, the remainder of this report seeks to reveal in detail both the public and private sides of sneezing and nose-blowing as social practices.

## Introduction

Sneezing, blowing one's nose – these are seemingly insignificant human behaviours in which we all engage and which we witness in everybody around us. They are part of our daily routine at certain times of the year, whether arising from reactions to pollen in the air in the summer or the onset of the chilly season and the accompanying 'snuffles' in late October. Like other aspects of routine personal activities, keeping our noses clear and dry is something on which we rarely consciously dwell or discuss at length with friends or colleagues. But like many other aspects of our behaviour in public settings, dealing with our noses is very much a rule-governed activity. There are complex 'dos' and 'don'ts' of which we are seldom aware, until, that is, someone breaks these unwritten rules – acts counter to what the prevailing etiquette holds as 'correct' behaviour.

Such rules are deeply embedded in our culture and, like all things cultural, vary quite considerably around the world. What passes for acceptable nose clearance in Shanghai, say, would result in sustained tut-tutting and disdainful glances anywhere in Britain. In contrast, even a very discrete and tidy blowing of one's nose that would pass unremarked even in very formal English settings would result in a sense of shock in Japan – so much so that you would be rendered 'socially invisible: you could not possibly have broken the rules in this way and you are, therefore, not there.

In other countries the rules are more subtle and allow a degree of flexibility. Sneezing, for example, is seen as involuntary. You are seen as not choosing to sneeze, but you are expected to mask the behaviour and to apologise for it – the required 'excuse me' which, in New York, for example, will elicit a response of *gesundheit*, confirmation that you are, indeed, excused and that others are concerned about your health.

These days we rarely own or even consult formal etiquette guides. Where once a copy of *Debrett's* manual of 'correct' manners could be found in even modestly middle class homes, we now tend to shy away from the constraining formality that such works are seen as advocating. We feel that we live in a more relaxed age which rarely requires us to know in which direction the decanter of port should be passed or how we should address an Earl on first encounter. Beneath this relative informality, however, remain rules of etiquette that are *tacit* – rarely articulated in print or speech but which, nonetheless, guide and constrain our behaviour just as effectively.

Uncovering these 'hidden' rule structures is a central quest in much of social psychology. If we want to explain people's social behaviour, which is what social psychologists seek to do, then uncovering rule structures is a very effective way of doing so. It is a matter of making explicit what is, for the large part, implicit and taken-for-granted. We can do this in a number of ways. We can, for example, have a guess at what the rules might be, set out to break them and study people's reactions – a method pioneered in the 1960s by the sociologist, Harold Garfinkel. This can be fun. The next time someone greets you with the familiar "How are you?", give a lengthy account of your current physical and mental condition – the things that have been bothering you and perhaps the details of your visit to the doctor that morning. Very quickly it will be apparent that an unwritten rule has



been broken. The rule is that the phrase 'How are you?' is essentially a greeting rather than a serious question and requires the response "Fine, how are you?" or, following the American influence, "I'm good, thanks".

The only problem with Garfinkel's approach is that it can get you into all sorts of difficulties if conducted outside of the insulated settings of University social science departments – especially if the rules in which you are interested relate to personal hygiene and routine bodily functions. Your excuse that you were 'just doing some research' may not be sufficient to let you off the hook.

At the Social Issues Research Centre, while we are not averse to a bit of rule-breaking from time to time, we prefer less intrusive (and potentially less dangerous) methods to gain insights into what is really going on in our social worlds. We start by talking to people – in focus groups but also in less formal settings such as the pub. It never fails to amaze us how much insight into social behaviour can be gained from seemingly inconsequential conversations over a couple of beers, which is why when our focus groups finish we often treat all the participants to a drink in the bar next to our office, listening out for aspects of discourse that may not have been apparent in the groups themselves. In one such relaxed chat a young woman talked for over twenty minutes about her concerns about 'bits' being visible after she had blown her nose and the lengths she went to in ensuring that everything was left in proper nasal order afterwards.

We also watch people. SIRC's Co-Director, Kate Fox, produced what is widely considered to be the definitive account of English *mores* in her best-selling *Watching the English* mainly through her keen eye and insight into what lay beneath the seemingly trivial aspects of social life she observed. She also, famously, deliberately bumped into people in order to confirm that yes, when someone collides with *us* on a pavement or station concourse, the normal English reaction is to apologise to *them*! Observation research of this nature is all about detecting regularities in behaviour and inferring the often complex social norms from them.

Investigating how people deal with their noses in public involves, of course, delving into the world of social taboos. Like any other aspect of personal hygiene, these are behaviours about which one does not normally speak. We know that coughs and sneezes spread diseases and that we have a duty to minimise our impact on others around us. We will also all have early childhood memories of our noses being wiped by our mothers or being encouraged to blow into a handkerchief or tissue, illustrating the extent to which these are not natural behaviours – we have to be taught how to do them and how to do them *properly*.

In keeping with SIRC's approaches in this context we have talked with people about sneezing and nose blowing, and have been surprised by the interest that the subject can arouse – from reactions bordering on disgust to people who clearly do not understand the rules, or fail to observe them, to the sense of real pleasure that many people experience in 'letting it out', the cathartic discharge that comes from a good sneeze or satisfying blow. We have also watched people very closely – over a thousand of them from London to Dublin – on trains and buses, in bars and cafés, in libraries and museums, in shops and supermarkets and a variety of other public and not so public settings. For the first time in the UK, we believe, we now have a definitive account of the patterns of sneezing, nose blowing (and even

sniffs and dabs) and their social significance. Like all aspects of our behaviour, the manner in which we engage in such activities says a lot about us – the seemingly inconsequential way in which we combine the use of a 'catcher' (anything from a balm impregnated tissue to a jacket sleeve) with nasal exhalation communicates messages about what kind of person we are to those around us. From the regularities in behaviour and people's reactions to them we can also detect those all-essential social norms that, in a very real sense, form the basis of what we take to be civilised behaviour.

To complete this report we have also commissioned a poll of two thousand representative British citizens – what do people *think* or *say* that they do in the context of these routine aspects of personal hygiene? How does this contrast with what we know, through observation, that they *really* do? How do people judge others in terms of their nasal habits and with what type of sneezer or nose blower do people identify themselves? In the following sections of this report we provide the answers – some of which may surprise you.

## Methodology

The research was carried out using a number of different research methods. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were combined in order to gain a full and robust picture of the physiological, sociological and psychological issues being explored.

### Desk research

Detailed desk research was conducted to identify relevant studies of nose blowing and sneezing behaviours in the UK and other countries. Psychological, anthropological and sociological studies of broader aspects of etiquette were compiled and analysed to provide background for the substantive study.

### Focus Groups

Two focus groups were held at SIRC on October 2 and October 30, 2007. Each group comprised 9 participants – a total of 8 females and 10 males, aged between 18 and 68 years, selected from a broad range of backgrounds and occupations. The initial 'brainstorming' focus group was used to identify the relevant parameters for an observational study and was designed to elicit views on the contexts in which nose-blowing, overt sneezing, etc. are most commonly witnessed. Impressions of different styles of these behaviours and 'fashion' trends, 'customs' of personal hygiene and subtle taboos were also explored.

The second focus group was used to generate further material on the types sneezing, sniffing and nose-blowing behaviours. Categories of nasal behaviours were presented to the group for comment. Participants were also required to think about people they know who fit into the various categories identified – what kind of people they are in terms of personality, lifestyle, character traits, and so on. Outputs from both groups were used to inform the design of questions for the national survey.

### Observation

In order to paint a detailed and reliable picture of the different sneezing and nose-blowing habits of people across the UK and Ireland, SIRC's team of researchers logged a total of 18 days of direct observations in six different cities London, Birmingham, Leeds, Glasgow, Cardiff and Dublin. Over 1,000 individual structured observations (*n*1040) were logged between 08 October and 02 November, 2007 during this period, amounting to roughly 20,000 individual pieces of coded data on the sneezing and nose-blowing activities that were observed. Observations were conducted in a range of different public spaces, including: public transport; train and bus stations; restaurants, cafes and bars; museums, galleries and libraries; public parks and squares, and on the street.

In order to achieve the highest possible degree of comparability across the data gathered, researchers were required to follow a structured observation schedule. At the same time, the schedule structure allowed researchers to provide additional analytical or interpretive comments where possible.

Initially, pilot studies conducted in Leeds and Oxford produced little data; people simply were not sneezing, sniffing, dabbing or blowing their noses enough or, if they were, they were doing so away from the watchful eyes of our observers. With the advent of the first 'cold snap' and the start of the 'cold and flu season', however, time spent in the field produced more lucrative results.

## A typology of sneezing and nose-blowing

From the observational data a typology of sneezing and nose blowing behaviours was derived. Labels were attached to each group to reflect specific aspects of behavioural style. The types of people – in terms of observable characteristics – most typical of each of these styles were also analysed.

## National Poll

An omnibus poll was commissioned from YouGov and conducted between 09 and 12 November, 2007. The purpose of the poll was to provide a nationwide picture of types of nose blowing and related behaviours and returned a sample of over 2,000 respondents ( $n=2058$ ). The poll also explored the various categories of sneezing and nose-blowing derived from the observational data: to what extent, for example, did the respondents identify with 'Heroic sneezing', 'implosive sneezing' and how many admitted to examining the contents of their tissue post sneeze – what we have termed 'opening the book'?

A summary of all aspects of the research is presented below.

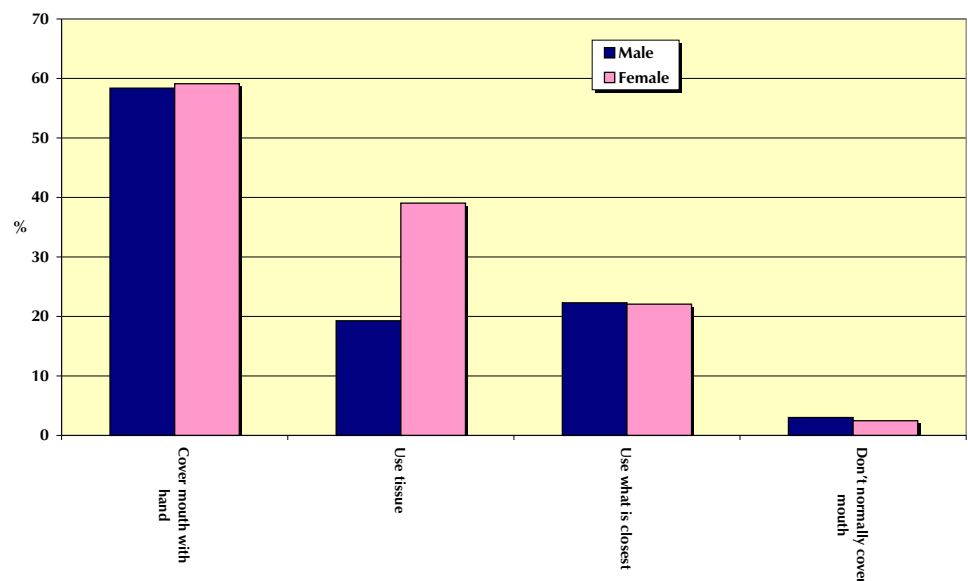
## Findings from the research

### Covering up a sneeze

In our national poll the majority of people (59%) reported that they normally covered their mouths when they sneezed with their hand, with only a small minority (3%) suggesting that they did not. Nearly a third (30%) normally used a tissue, while just over a fifth (22%) professed to using what ever was close at hand; a handkerchief or toilet roll, for example. More than twice as many women (39%) said that they relied on tissues than men (19%), as shown in Figure 1.

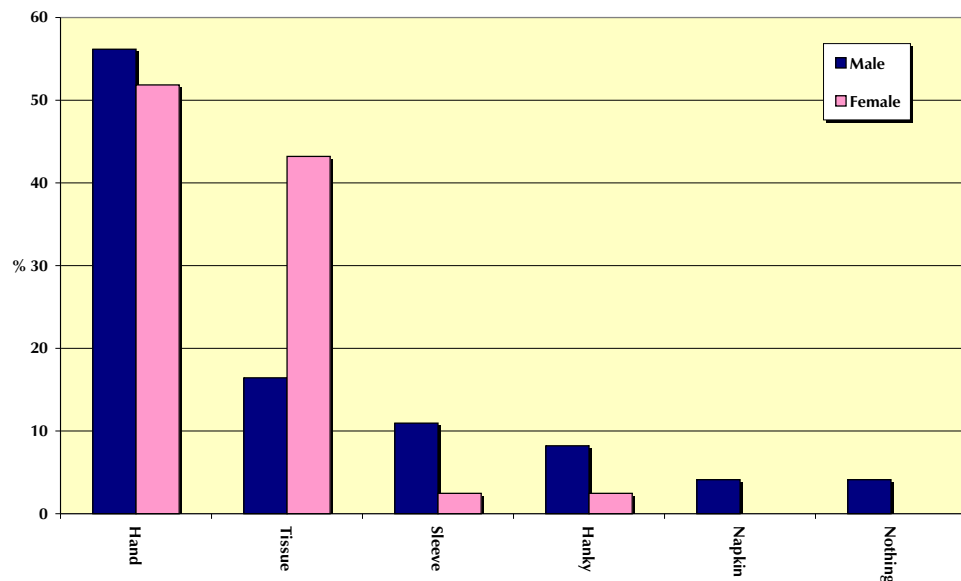
Our observations were consistent with these statements, as shown in Figure 2, with 54% of subjects covering a sneeze with their hand and less than 3% of the population (all men) just sneezing into the air around them. Women were observed to be much more likely than men to cover their sneeze with a tissue (43% vs. 16%), in line with the poll findings, while men were five times more likely than women to use their shirt or coat sleeve to cover up their sneeze. The use of the hand to mask a sneeze decreased linearly with age in both sets of data while the use of tissues and handkerchiefs increased.

Figure 1. YouGov Poll: What respondents use when they sneeze. (by gender)



The fact that sneezes are generally covered, by whatever means, is probably just as well. When asked to consider behaviour in others that caused annoyance, not covering one's mouth while sneezing was reported in the poll as the most irritating (61%).

Figure 2. Observation Data: What the subjects use when they sneeze. (by gender)



In the focus group discussions it was apparent that fewer men carried tissues with them than women. The responses from the poll also indicate that women are generally more prepared in this context. Men, on the other hand, tended to carry tissues with them only when they felt unwell.

*"I don't consider: 'Oh, I'll carry some tissues with me.' It's not something I think about ... oh in case I need them." (Male, 35)*

*"The only time I would [carry tissues] is when I've got a cold ... if I'm walking round with a cold and I'm sneezing then I would get tissues and make sure I've got them, but the rest of the time I wouldn't carry them around." (Male, 47)*

## Catching the blow

From the poll data, women reported that they were far more likely (63%) to use tissues when blowing their noses than men (35%), who tended to use a handkerchief rather more on these occasions (28% and 8% respectively) – see Figure 3. The observation data are rather different in this context, as shown in Figure 4. Here we can see that rather more of both sexes used a tissue when blowing their nose (85% of women and 59% of men). Our observations, however, were largely conducted in public spaces – what people do at home may be different and more reflective of the poll figures.

Figure 3. YouGov Poll: What the respondents use when they blow their nose. (by gender)

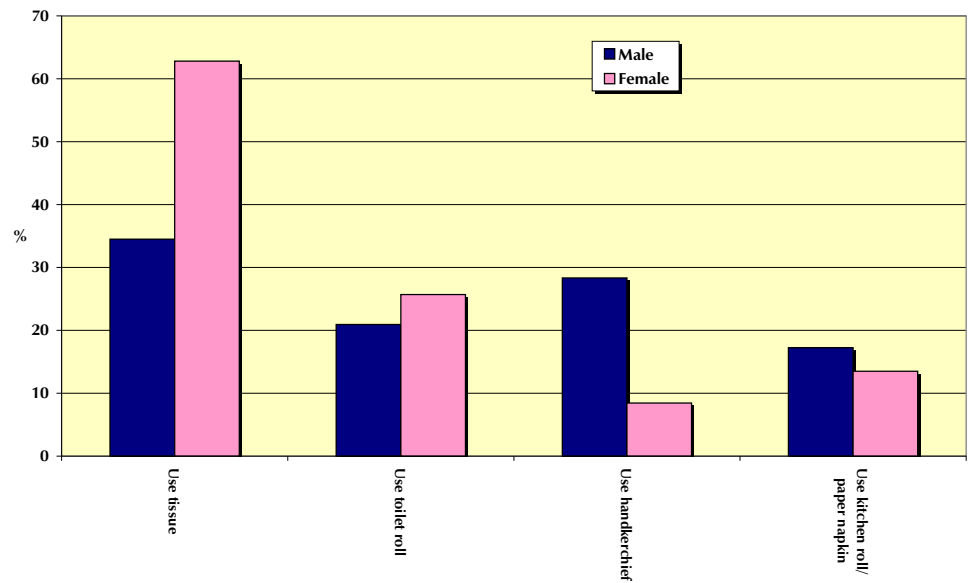
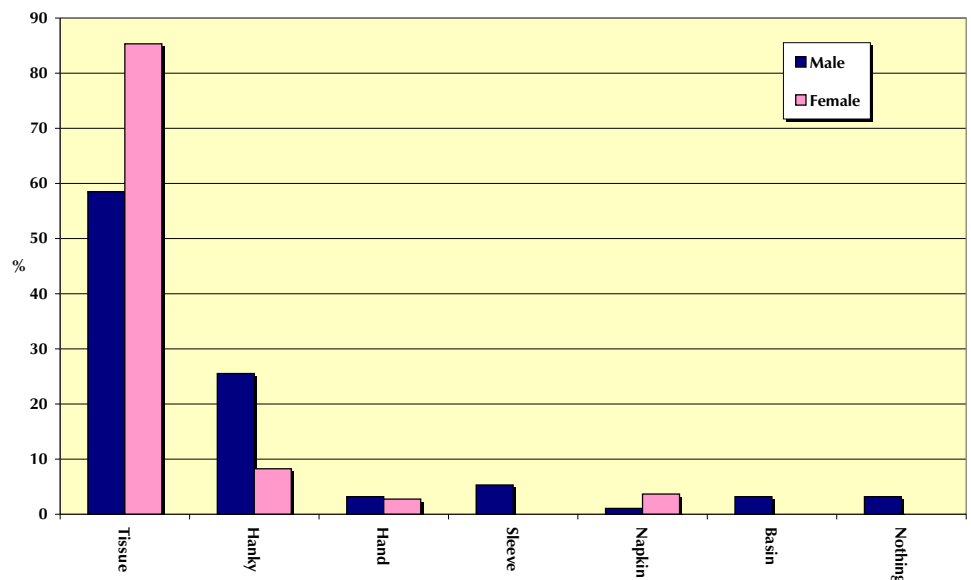


Figure 4. Observation Data: What the subjects use when they blow their nose. (by gender)



From both the poll and observation data it also appeared that the 'mechanics' of nose blowing change with age. We can see from Figures 5 and 6 that the use of

tissues is considerably less frequent, and the use of handkerchiefs significantly more frequent, among those aged 45 and over.

Figure 5. YouGov Poll: What the respondents use when they blow their nose. (by age)

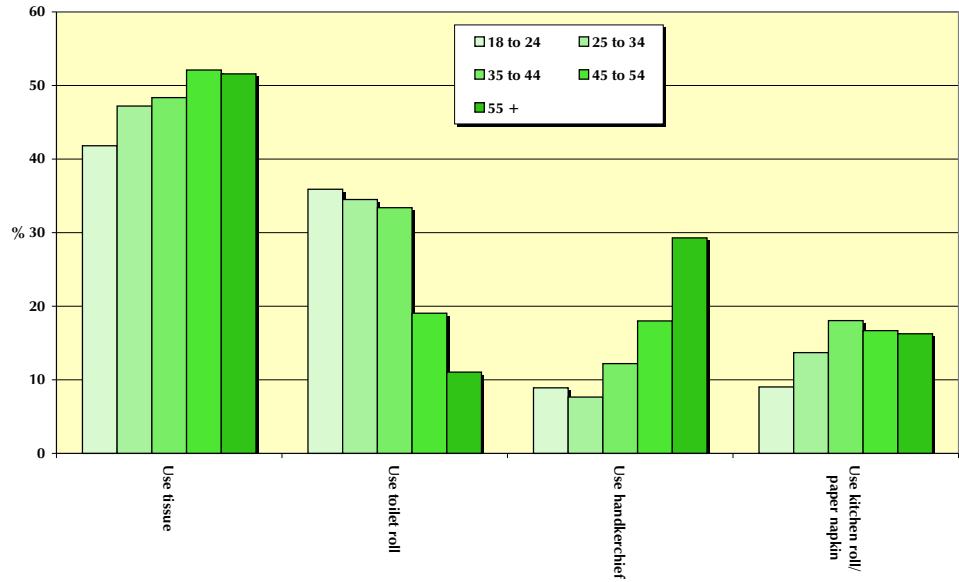
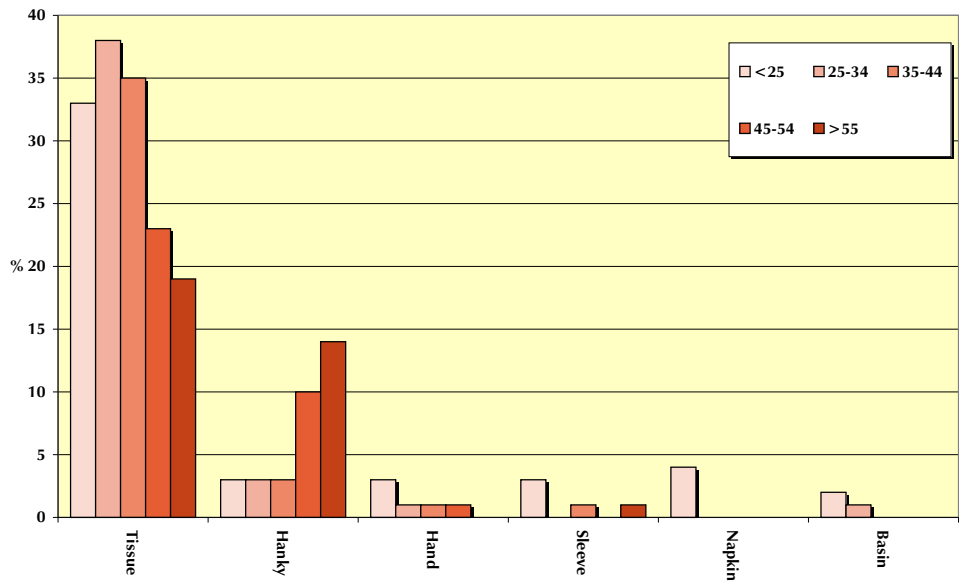


Figure 6. Observation Data: What the subjects use when they blow their nose. (by age)





Participants in the focus groups also viewed the ownership and use of handkerchiefs as the preserve of their elders.

*"My grandfather always goes out with a handkerchief. Even (going) to the allotment... he'd have a handkerchief... I wouldn't think about taking a handkerchief for nasal hygiene; I would use disposable tissues for that." (Male, 35)*

## Opening up

Although one might expect the typical Brit to be rather reserved when it comes to discussing bodily functions, half of the respondents in the poll said that they were comfortable talking about sneezing and nose-blowing and only 11% admitted that they found the subject 'unpleasant'. Nearly twice as many women (14%) than men (8%), however, agreed that sneezing and nose-blowing were unpleasant subjects. The youngest (18-24 years) and the oldest (over 55s) respondents were the most likely to feel a little squeamish when discussing nasal habits and hygiene (13% and 14% respectively), while the 35-45 year olds appeared the most at ease with the subject (53%).

These figures were very much reflected in the focus groups and the informal chats with people in the pub. Having worried a little at the beginning that we might find it difficult to prompt and sustain discussion of these 'delicate' subjects, we found quite the opposite – some people would just not stop talking and had to be tactfully restrained by the moderators. And one, perhaps surprising, theme that emerged throughout the discussions was the pleasure of it all.

## The pleasure of sneezing and blowing

There was an overriding sentiment expressed in the focus groups that the act of sneezing and blowing one's nose was immensely pleasurable. A certain sense of release followed these acts and the experience of 'generally clearing the tubes' was a source of considerable satisfaction for many participants.

*"But I find it really satisfying sneezing, assuming you've done all the etiquette things, you know, that wonderful sensation of a totally satisfying sneeze." (Female, 58)*

## Letting it out

The groups described numerous types of sneezing and nose blowing, which we discuss in the final sections of this report. There was, however, enthusiastic agreement that 'letting it out' in whatever style could be enjoyable, particularly when accompanied, or followed by, a loud vocal outburst in the case of sneezing.

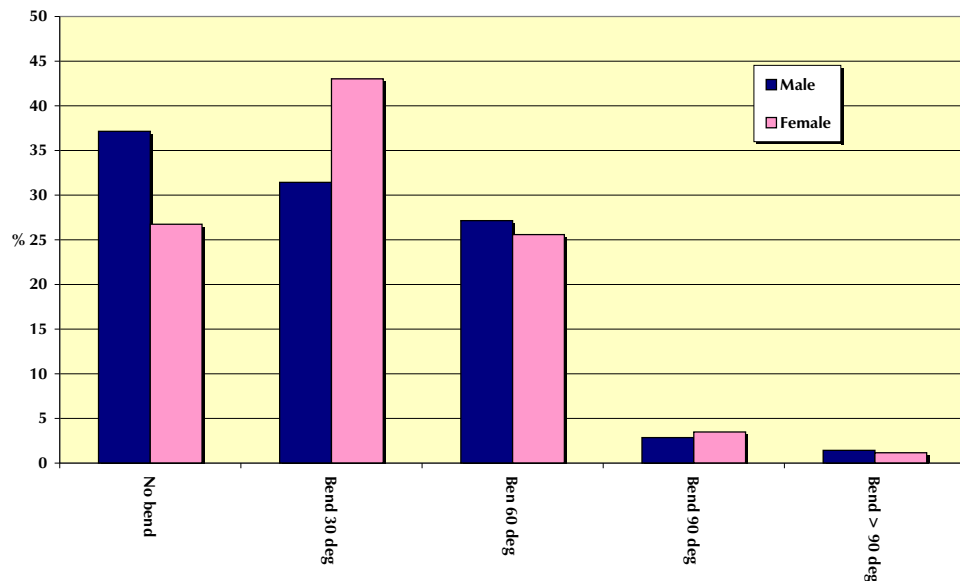
*"There's something enjoyable about sneezing in fact, within reason, unless you have a serious attack of them and ... really allowing yourself to make a noise when you're clearing it out; with a bit of a 'Hah, hah, hah' afterwards, it's all part of the pleasure" (Male, 38)*

Part of the pleasure also appeared to be derived from a sense of momentarily losing control and some even admitted to 'throwing' their whole body into the act.

*"I like to bend over half way too when it's a really big one!" (Female, 27)*

Our observations showed that our focus groups were by no means untypical, as illustrated in Figure 7. Here we can see that the majority of people (over two thirds) bend over when they sneeze – women rather more so than men. The most typical bend is about 30 degrees but over a quarter of the people we observed bent 60 degrees forwards (very rarely backwards) and nearly 5% were doubled up as they sneezed.

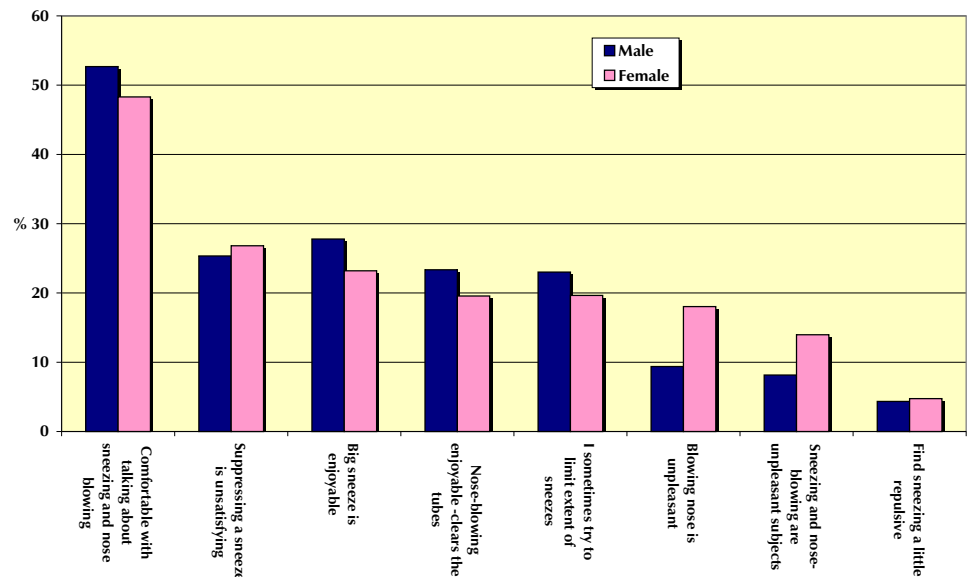
Figure 7. Observation Data: Degree of 'bend' when sneezing. (by gender)



A number of participants also claimed that they blew their noses before leaving the house or prior to some social or business-related engagement. For some, this 'pre-emptive strike' was simply another personal grooming ritual; for others it was a way of preventing potential social embarrassment. The quick nasal check in front of the mirror seemed to be an act to which most of the group could relate or had adopted at one time or another. One respondent even reported regularly asking strangers in public bathrooms 'clean and clear?' before leaving. Some of the group, however, found this rather 'detailed' approach to the issue quite surprising.

The joy of sneezing was also evident in the data from the national poll, as shown in Figure 8. A quarter of respondents said that they found a 'big sneeze enjoyable' and over a fifth (21%) derived pleasure from 'clearing the tubes'. Nearly twice the number of 18-24 year olds (38%) reported enjoying a big sneeze than the 45-55 year olds and over 55s (20%). Despite extolling the virtues of a 'big sneeze', however, over a quarter of the 18-24 year olds found nose-blowing unpleasant, the highest proportion of any age group.

Figure 8. YouGov Poll: Attitudes to sneezing and nose-blowing. (by gender)



Uninhibited sneezing was viewed as pleasurable to such an extent that when, on the rare but familiar occasions that the urge to sneeze inexplicably subsided, the respondents suggested that this left them with a feeling of dismay.

*"The worst bit is when you go to sneeze and it's coming and you know there's going to be a sneeze and it sort of disintegrates and it doesn't happen...that's a really frustrating thing." (Female, 57)*

*"Yeah, you feel cheated!" (Male, 35)*

## Keeping it in

Over a quarter of the sample from the YouGov survey agreed that suppressing a sneeze was unsatisfying, with slightly more women (27%) than men (25%) sharing this opinion. Women were also less likely than men to feel the need to limit the extent of their sneezes (20% and 23% respectively). Interestingly this tendency was reported more by socio-economic categories ABC1 (25%) more than those from C2DE (17%). Across all age groups the youngest cohort were the most likely to find suppressing a sneeze unsatisfying.

Comments from the focus groups indicated that most found the concept of suppressing a sneeze rather perplexing and, even a little unhealthy.

*"But you see people who hold their noses when they sneeze." (Female, 28)*

*"Yeah, like that" (demonstrating) (Female, 42)*

*"That can't do you much good actually, it sort of makes your ears pop if you hold a sneeze and then don't let it out...doesn't feel healthy. I've done it a couple of times. It's a horrible feeling." (Male, 38)*

*"Only if literally you're trying to stop yourself for some reason, it's not good." (Female, 60)*

## Hygiene

The issue of hygiene was a concern expressed by the majority of participants in the focus group discussions. Public transport appeared to be the location in which most of them experienced particular revulsion.

*"Hate it!" (Female, 46)*

*"Drives me mad, all that stuff. People cough in your face, sneeze in your face, it's disgusting." (Female, 55)*

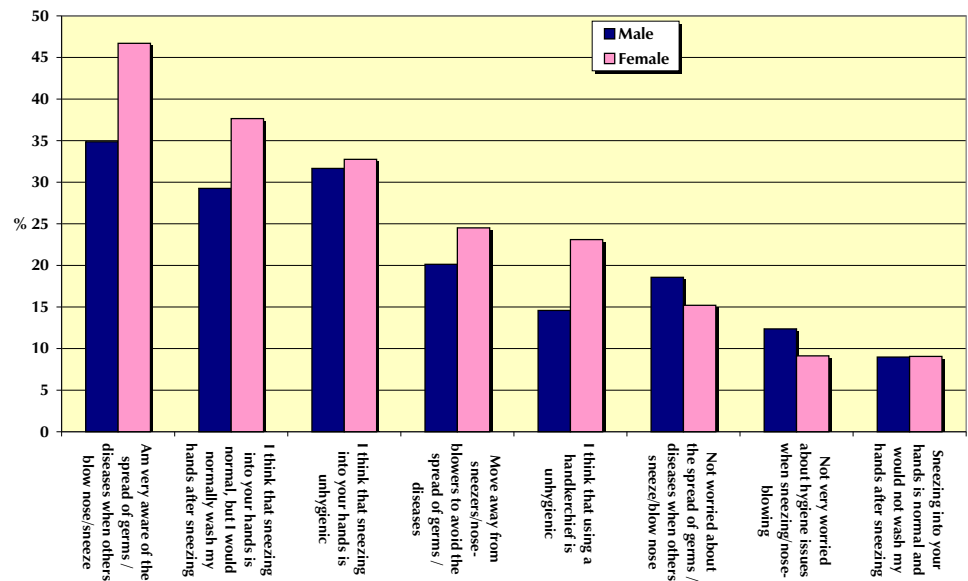
*"Or anywhere when you're constantly on public transport, you're constantly ill." (Male, 48)*

There was some feeling that the participants' collective outrage at being sneezed or coughed on, particularly in the confines of a bus or train, was heightened by an increasing awareness or preoccupation with personal hygiene and health. A recent television commercial depicting germs 'floating around' inside a train carriage was cited by one group member in this context.

From the poll data these concerns seem tangible. A substantial proportion (41%) of the respondents reported being 'very aware of the spread of germs and diseases' when others around them sneezed or blew their noses. This sentiment was expressed significantly more by women (47%) than men (35%). Indeed, women consistently reported being more concerned with issues of hygiene in relation to nasal behaviour, both on a personal level and in the displays of others, as shown in Figure 9.

A quarter of women, for example, said that they move away from sneezers or nose-blowers to minimise the possibility of 'catching something', compared to only a fifth of men. Significantly more women (38%) than men (29%) also said that they would wash their hands after sneezing into them, while nearly a fifth of men reported not being worried by the impact of other's sneezing on the spread of germs and diseases. Women were also far more likely to view the use of a handkerchief as unhygienic (23%) than their male counterparts (15%).

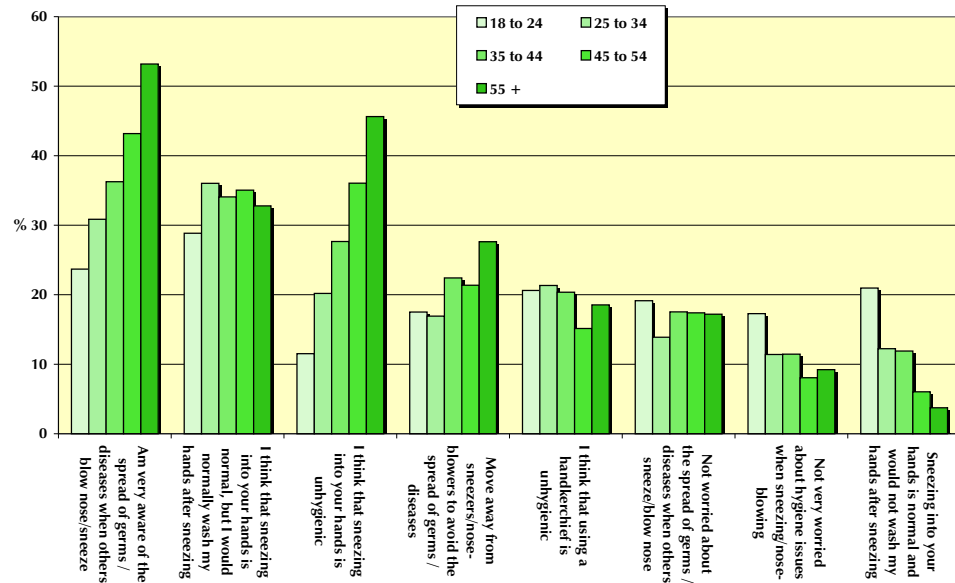
Figure 9. YouGov Poll: Attitudes to hygiene – sneezing and nose-blowing. (by gender)



There are significant generational differences in attitudes to nasal hygiene. Figure 10 below clearly illustrates how concerns with the spread of germs and diseases in the context of nose blowing and sneezing increases markedly with age. While this fact in itself may not be particularly surprising – older generations, for example, may worry more about their susceptibility to disease – the differences between each age band are significant.

Over half (53%) of the over 55s claimed that they were 'very aware' of the spread of germs and diseases when others sneezed or blew their noses, a sentiment expressed by under a quarter (24%) of 18 to 24 year olds. The over 55s were also nearly four times more likely to view the act of sneezing into one's hand as unhygienic compared with the youngest cohort. While only 4% of over 55s thought it acceptable not to wash their hands after sneezing into them, over a fifth (21%) of under 25s appeared to have no particular problem with this.

Figure 10. YouGov Poll: Attitudes to hygiene – sneezing and nose-blowing. (by age)



The concept of etiquette came up in the discussions and may, in part, be connected to the significantly different generational attitudes towards nasal hygiene. Some suggested that covering ones mouth, turning away etc. were simply a question of 'good manners'.

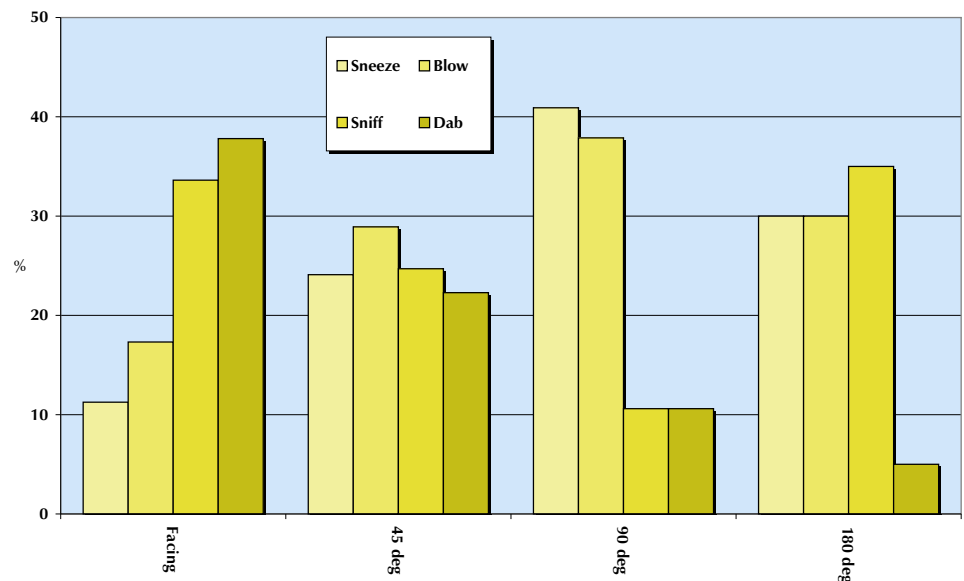
*"It's a germs thing for me. Even if you haven't got a tissue or a handkerchief or anything at least you would cover yourself up a bit or make an effort to turn round or something but they (people with 'bad manners') just don't do anything at all." (Male, 48)*

Others implied that in certain circumstances, while on public transport for example, one had an implied duty of care to their other passengers– to cover the mouth, use a tissue and be aware of the spread of germs and disease.

There were a few slight regional variations on the subject of nasal hygiene. Southerners appeared to be the most concerned about the potential spread of germs and diseases while Northerners were the most likely to consider sneezing into one's hand unhygienic. Approximately a quarter of Londoners considered handkerchiefs unhygienic compared with only a tenth of Scots.

This awareness of hygiene and the need to turn away from other people was evident in the observational data. Figure 11 shows the extent to which people orient themselves away from the person or people they are with when engaging in various types of nasal activity.

Figure 11. Observation Data: Extent of orientation (by type of behaviour)



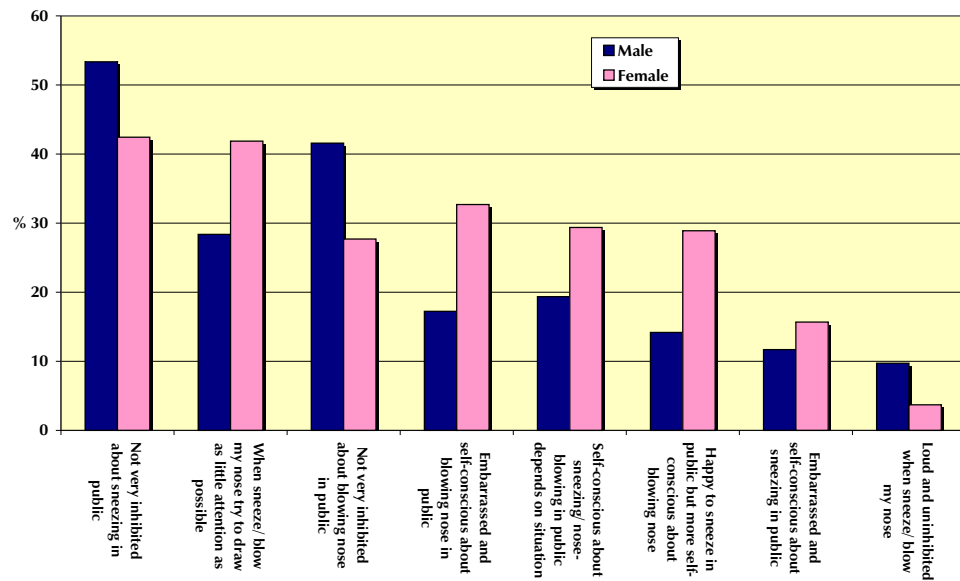
From Figure 11 we can see that when people are just dabbing their nose they orient away from others relatively little. In the case of sneezing, however, we see a much greater degree of turning away – typically at right-angles to the other and in just under a third of cases completely turning their backs on the person or people they are with. Even when alone in the street or elsewhere people were observed to turn their heads to one side.

There is a clear but unwritten rule at work here and one which has considerable utility – the prevention of the spread of germs which in times past might actually have killed other people. In seemingly trivial aspects of everyday life we witness what are essentially 'adaptive' social mechanisms at work.

## Comfort zones

Results from the poll indicate that people were generally less inhibited about sneezing in public than they were about blowing their noses, as shown in Figure 12. Nearly half (48%) suggested that they were not very inhibited when it came to sneezing in public and just over a third (34%) said that they were not very inhibited when blowing their noses. Interestingly, while only 14% admitted to feeling self-conscious when sneezing, as many as a quarter felt embarrassed when nose-blowing in public.

Figure 12. YouGov Poll: Attitudes to sneezing and nose-blowing in public. (by gender)



During the focus group discussions there was a consensus that 'the art' of blowing one's nose in public was to be as inconspicuous as possible. This could mean facing forward while avoiding eye contact, or turning away from people to avoid offence. When in close proximity to others there was general agreement that the participants would

*"Try to tone it [sneezing / nose blowing] down" (Female, 42)*

A feeling shared by some was that this level of control, however, might impact on the pleasurable aspects of 'letting it out'.

*"You're distracted by trying to hide it." (Male, 22)*

Over a third (35%) regarded 'the art' of public sneezing or nose-blowing as drawing as little attention to oneself as possible while only 7% considered themselves to be loud and uninhibited when engaged in public displays of nasal clearing. Exploring attitudes to public behaviour in this context also highlighted some significant gender differences.

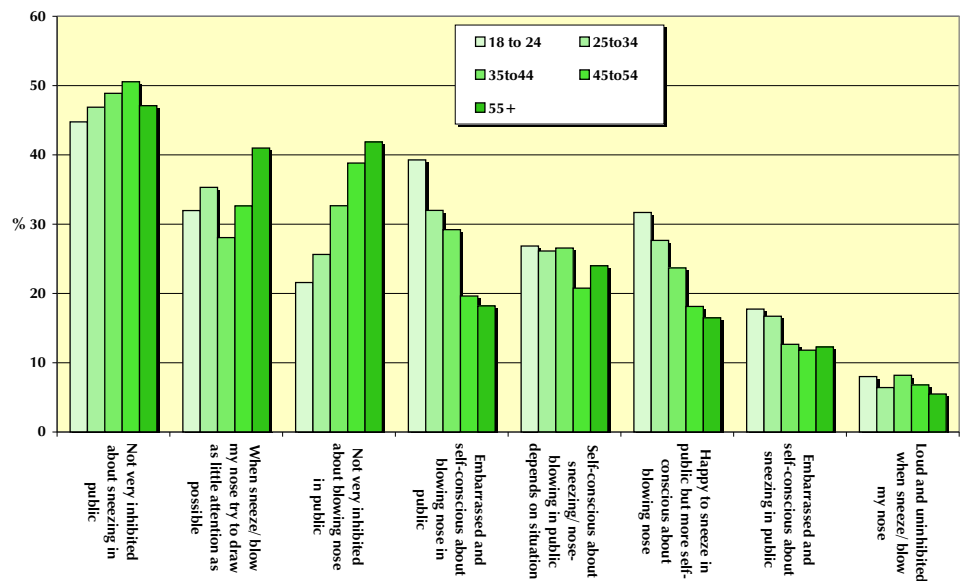
Women were far more likely than men to subscribe to the notion that 'less is more' when sneezing or nose-blowing in public, with 42% of them wishing to draw as little attention to themselves as possible during these activities. One third of women also claimed to be embarrassed and self-conscious when blowing their noses in public (compared with 17% of men). In addition, women appeared to be more sensitive of particular social contexts: 29% suggested that the extent to which they felt self-conscious in public was dependent on where they were and the people that they were with. Only 19% of men agreed with this statement.

While the older generations would appear to prefer a certain anonymity when they sneeze (41% said that they try and draw as little attention as possible to



themselves), it is the 18-24 year olds that were the most likely to feel self-conscious and embarrassed when sneezing and nose-blowing in public (39%). From Figure 13 we can see that this is also the age group that are most likely to use their hand when sneezing and the least likely to use a tissue. The 18-24 year olds, furthermore, are the cohort that said that while being comfortable sneezing in public they were more conscious of blowing their noses in public.

Figure 13. YouGov Poll: Attitudes to sneezing and nose-blowing in public. (by age)



Londoners reported being the most self-conscious when blowing their noses (30%) and sneezing (17%) in public while Southerners were the most likely to attempt to blend into the background when engaged in public nasal displays (42%). The Scots, on the other hand, were the least concerned with drawing attention to themselves in this context.

## Sneezing among family and friends

Levels of comfort and self-consciousness when blowing one's nose or sneezing was seen to be very much dependent on the social context or social proximity to others. This was expressed by one of the group, a teacher:

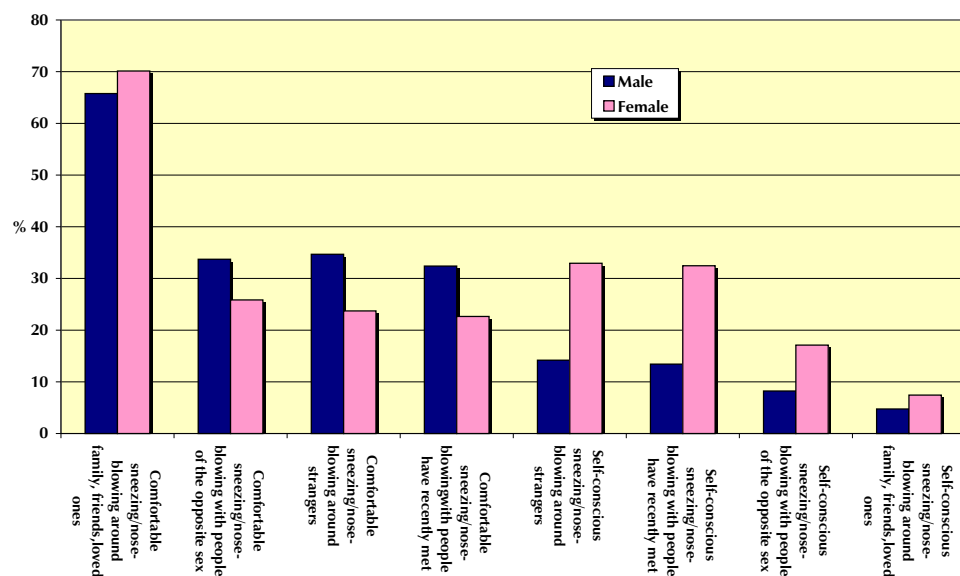
*"I was going to say a lot of it is how comfortable you are in your situation as well. So, like I remember when I'm not feeling particularly comfortable in a certain environment, I wouldn't want to blow my nose in that environment but if it was around my family or my friends or even in the classroom actually, cause I know my kids will do it when they're sick, and it kind of shows I'm a warrior and I'm there and I'm ill and I'll blow my nose in front of them and it makes a really loud trumpet sound."*  
(Female, 25)

There was an indication, from another participant, that being with people one knew well also reduced the social risk, should anything untoward occur – a possibility that some members of the group had obviously given some consideration:

*"I think sometimes if you're in company and you sort of think: 'Oh Gosh, you know I can't do this now, it's just not the time'...you've got more likelihood of sort of saving that sneeze, but if you're with your family in a more relaxed environment you're not worried about the consequences, so you just sort of explode because you're not worried about the repercussions so much." (Male, 19)*

Once again, there were some significant gender differences in this context that were highlighted in our national poll, as shown in Figure 14. In all but one instance, men reported being more comfortable with sneezing and nose-blowing than women. Men said that they would be more at ease than women when blowing their noses in front of members of the opposite sex (M-34%, F-26%), strangers (M-35%, F-24%) and people that they had recently met (M-32%, F-23%). Closer to home, when in front of family, friends and loved ones, women demonstrated less inhibition than men.

Figure 14. YouGov Poll: Sneezing / nose-blowing and social proximity. (by gender)



Consistently, however, women reported being more self conscious than men when sneezing and blowing their noses in the company of others. This was an issue that arose in the focus group discussions and comments on the subject were mostly offered by the female participants.

*"But I do think that men do it – sorry to get sexist here – but I do think men find it easier to burp and sneeze and do anything objectionable in public than women." (Female, 46)*

*"I mean there are definitely big cultural norms as well but a lot of men tend to be quite confident about, well going back to the earlier comment about the gender difference between burping and sneezing and all those things and socially men have been more conditioned to be open about those things." (Male, 48)*

Participants from the groups were divided between those who were perfectly comfortable blowing their noses in public and those who were certainly not; some even found the thought of public nose blowing abhorrent, suggesting that they would have to know someone 'very well' before they would consider clearing their noses in front of them. For these participants, nose blowing was an act always conducted in a private space. If they needed to blow their nose they would do so away from others.

*"If I'm at home on my own, I'll do it because I'm sat at home completely on my own and nobody is going to hear it but I wouldn't do it round the dinner table. It's almost like you have to be so controlled when you're in public you can completely let go when you're on your own..." (Male, 48)*

While for these individuals a secluded space was essential, data from the poll indicate that most of us prefer, or feel the most comfortable, blowing our noses in private.

Figure 15. YouGov Poll: Sneezing / nose-blowing and social context. (by gender)

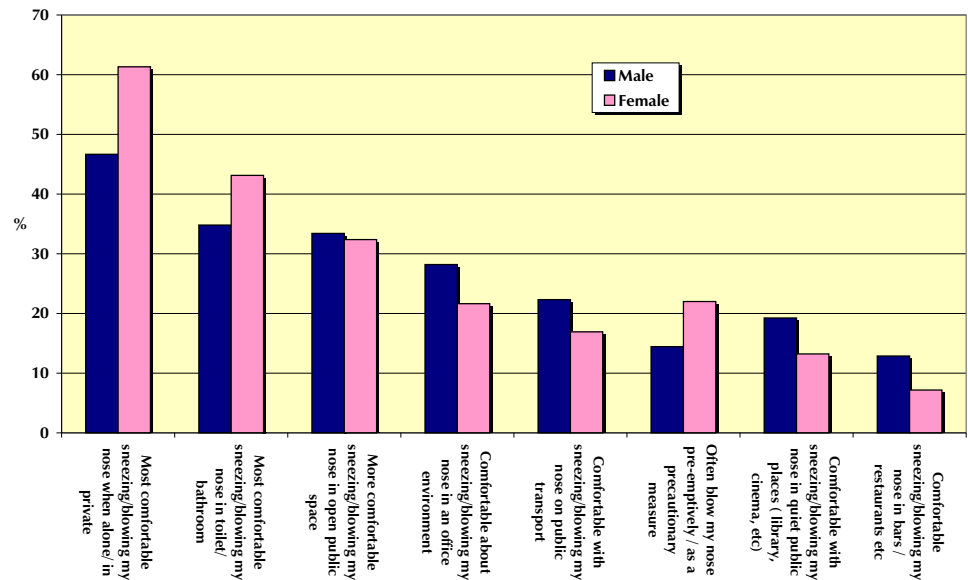
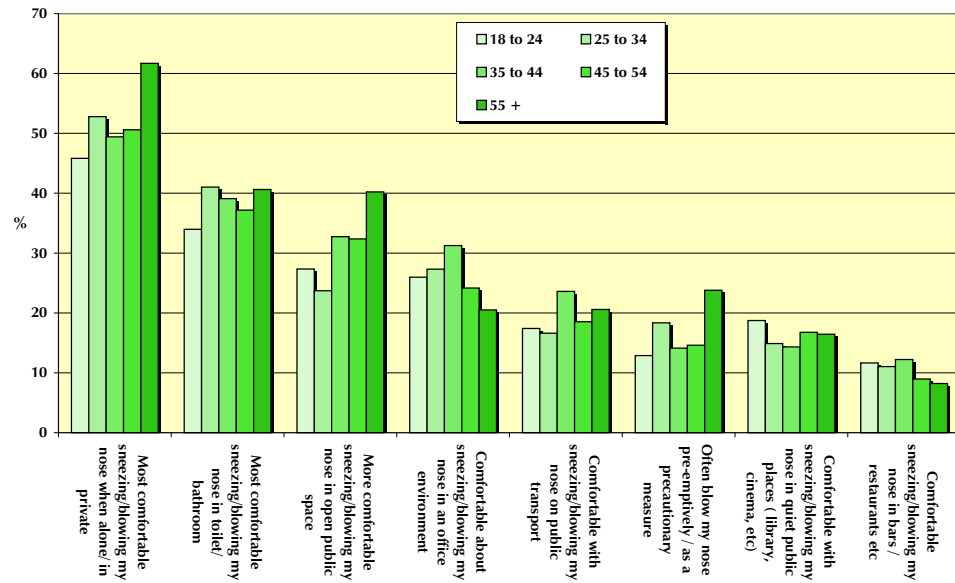


Figure 15 re-emphasises the gender differences in terms of levels of comfort when blowing one's nose. Women were significantly more likely than men to feel comfortable blowing their noses when alone (61%) or in the bathroom (43%), while men were happier to sneeze or blow their nose on public transport, at the office, in both open and quiet public spaces and in restaurants and bars.

Figure 15 also shows that women were also more inclined to blow their noses pre-emptively as a precautionary measure. Interestingly, the over 55s also related more to this behaviour than any other age group and also felt the most comfortable blowing their noses in private.

Figure 16. YouGov Poll: Sneezing / nose-blowing and social context. (by age)



## Work environments

It was apparent from the group discussions that depending on the individual, there are elaborate set of rules governing nasal etiquette that are dependant on one's particular social circumstance and physical location. In the office / work environment, for example, a quarter of people in the national poll felt comfortable sneezing or blowing their noses. In line with what we have noted above, men felt more comfortable (28%) than women (22%) in this context, while the 35-44 year olds were the least likely to regard this as an issue.

*"I had a moment at work, I was standing by [a colleague's] desk actually, and I was talking to him and I was looking down because he was sitting down and I was looking down at the desk and a drop just fell onto his desk...that's embarrassing!" (Female, 28)*

*"Well you've got a choice haven't you. If you're in a meeting or in a group like this, I'm stuck over here and it's very difficult for me to get out and my nose starts running, you know, I've got a choice of either I sit here sniffing or blowing my nose, so I've got to weigh it up...which is worse for everybody and I'll probably try not to for as long as I can bear it or anybody else can and then I'll blow my nose." (Female, 52)*

*"Me and [a colleague] work in the same office which is probably slightly smaller than this room and the door is off to the side to the bathroom*

*and I'll quite happily sneeze, burp, blow my nose, sniff in the middle of the office, whereas you'll always go (referring to colleague) to the bathroom and sort yourself out, so to speak." (Male, 19)*

## Bars, restaurants and cafes

Only a small proportion (10%) of respondents said that they were comfortable blowing their noses or sneezing in bars, restaurants and cafes. What was clear from conversations in the focus groups was that this was largely as a result of concern with issues of hygiene and the spread of germs. Elaborate displays of nasal clearing were regarded as rather off-putting and particularly inappropriate while dining.

*"But if another person at another table wanted to blow their nose...although as you say not into a filthy hankie or a great big half hour session or something, I'd find that off putting." (Female, 42)*

The respondents were clearly uncomfortable with others' displays in places where food was served. This appears to have made them more aware of their own behaviour when in bars and restaurants and motivated them to moderate their sneezing and nose-blowing to avoid causing offence to others around them.

There is a substantial code of conduct that governs the way we eat and drink in the company of others and the subject has been written about extensively. As Norbert Elias has noted in *The Civilising Process*, early guides to social etiquette for the middle and lower classes gave precise instructions about how to behave at the dinner table – including rules on sneezing and nose-blowing:

*"Again and again we find the injunctions to take one's allotted place and not to touch one's nose and ears at table...do not blow your nose too noisily...Do not fall asleep at table. And so on... (in) the Courtesies of Bonvicino da Riva (a medieval text on social etiquette), one of the most personal and – in keeping with Italian development – most 'advanced' of table guides, contains, apart from the precepts mentioned from the French collection, the instructions to turn round when coughing and sneezing, and not to lick one's fingers..."*

*"Erasmus in his treatise acted as the forerunner of a new standard of shame and repugnance which first began to form slowly in the secular upper class. Yet he also spoke as a matter of course about things which it has since become embarrassing to mention...Erasmus says it is not civil to require that the young man 'ventris flatum retineat' (hold back his wind), for in so doing he might, under the appearance of urbanity, contract an illness; and Erasmus comments similarly on sneezing and related acts."*

The participants in the focus groups were also aware of being conscious of the 'good manners' associated with dining out; not only in the specific ways in which we might handle food, but also in the general rules that guide our conduct.

*"Perhaps in the same way that your behaviour does change in a restaurant (referring to politeness etc)...maybe it's in keeping with that kind of behaviour." (Male, 38)*

## Open public spaces and strangers

If the poll respondents had to sneeze in the presence of other people, they felt the most comfortable doing so in an open public place such as a park or a square (33%). In these locations, despite potentially being surrounded by others, open spaces offered a certain anonymity which helped reduce the anxiety that they had when sneezing or blowing their noses. Being 'spread out' also appeared to reduce the likelihood that their nasal behaviour would be witnessed, judged or cause other people offence.

## On public transport and stations

Respondents, however, were less likely to feel so comfortable while on public transport (20%), as shown in Figure 15. Talking with the groups it was clear that the ways in which people blew their noses, sneezed or continually sniffed on public transport was a source of immense irritation. Being in a confined space they generally felt more susceptible to germs, but also 'hemmed in' and unable to move away from unwanted sneezers and nose-blowers. Public transport also seemed to amplify the respondents' irritation to the noises accompanying 'nasal cleansing'. Having vocalised such strong feelings regarding the ways in which others behaved, the majority were extremely conscious of their own behaviour when on public transport.

*"(on a train) You just do it as inconspicuously as possible, I mean if I know I'm going to be doing it a lot I'll have one big blow and a wipe for a while and then one big blow again rather than blowing and blowing and blowing...you just try and do as much as you can not to piss people off." (Male, 22)*

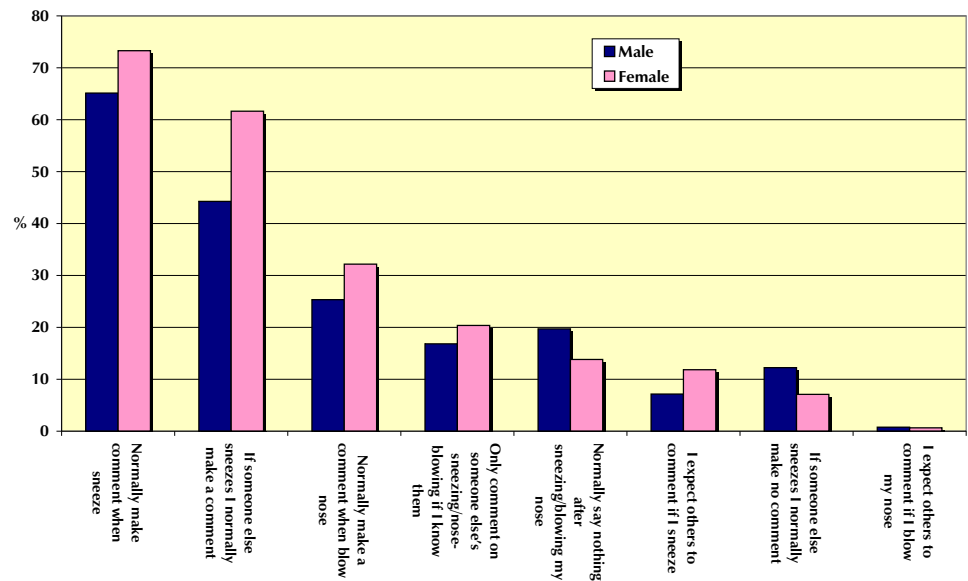
## Other closed quiet spaces

With the exception of bars, cafes and restaurants the respondents were the least likely to feel comfortable blowing their noses or sneezing in quiet public places. Again the impact of noise and the potential for disturbing or irritating others would appear to be a primary concern here. Both libraries and cinemas, two examples of quiet public places provided in the poll, are places people go to for a specific purpose. Even the most innocuous of sneezes, in locations of this type, has the potential to distract others from the task at hand, whether it is gathering information for a research project, or trying to follow a particularly intricate film narrative.

## Verbal comments

Data from the survey indicate that a large proportion of people (69%) regularly made a comment, such as 'excuse me' or something similar, following a sneeze and nearly a third (29%) did so after blowing their noses. When witnessing others sneezing over a half (53%) said that they would offer a 'bless you' or something similar to the perpetrator. Again the results from the poll highlight significant differences between the sexes in this context.

Figure 17. YouGov Poll: Comments accompanying sneezing / nose-blowing. (by gender)



Seventy-three percent of women compared with 65% of men said that they normally commented after sneezing and nearly a third (32%) would do so after blowing their noses (compared with a quarter of men); excusing themselves to perhaps alleviate any potential embarrassment. This reinforces the results from other questions in the survey that indicated women were more self-conscious and less confident with sneezing and blowing their noses in public (see Figure 12). From the focus group discussions it was apparent that women were more likely to consider sneezing and nose-blowing as minor social transgressions, for which they felt a greater need to apologise or excuse themselves. Similarly, they would be more likely to empathise and comment more on others' sneezing; helping to dilute any social embarrassment others might feel by acknowledging and excusing the act. Women were significantly more likely (62% compared with 44% of men), to make a reassuring comments when other people around them sneezed.

### Sneezing as a vehicle for social bonding

Sneezing in public, despite being viewed by some as a social faux-pas, had certain benefits it would seem. The act itself, perhaps exposing a certain vulnerability, had helped one group participant to initiate an encounter on a train journey:

*"The way I blow my nose...when I blow my nose it sounds a bit like a trumpet, I don't know why, and when that happens I've ended up chatting with teenagers on a train on a journey home or something...it's been a really good ice-breaker you know? People have felt able to talk to me more than they would have done had I not made that kind of a noise."  
(Female, 25)*

## Sneezing and the opposite sex

While nearly a third of respondents (30%) said that they were comfortable sneezing or blowing their noses with people of the opposite sex, 13% reported that they were not. Again we see significant gender variations here: approximately a quarter of women (26%) said that they were comfortable, compared with over a third of men (34%) and women were twice as likely as men to report being self-conscious in front of members of the opposite sex when blowing their noses or sneezing (17% and 8% respectively). What was clear from the discussions was that men not only felt less inhibited about sneezing and nose blowing than women, but they also appear to retain a rather juvenile fascination for the subject, the intricacies and lasting appeal of which often escaped their female acquaintances.

*"I have to say, boyfriends have been much more open about disclosing the contents [of their tissues] at any available moment, ...sharing that moment and being particularly proud about the contents. It's not the kind of sharing I had in mind...flowers, roses, chocolates...not really the contents of his nose." (Female, 27)*

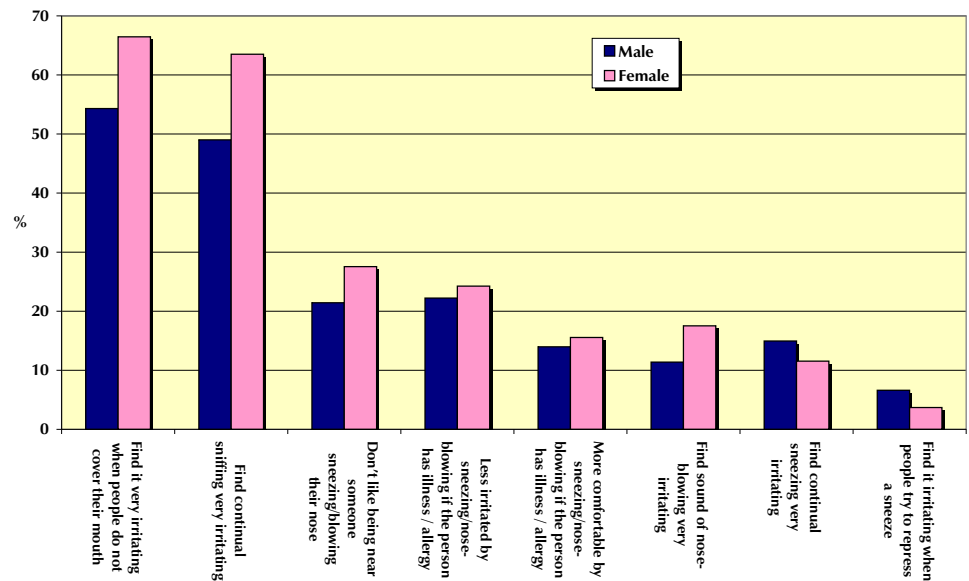
*"I'm under the illusion that my wife still finds all this stuff very amusing. She's told me many, many times. I still find it hilarious..." (Male, 48)*

## Most irritating types of nasal behaviour

During the group discussions it became apparent that the participants had a tendency to become extremely irritated by certain types of sneezing, sniffing and nose-blowing. So what are the most annoying nasal habits? We thought it a useful exercise to ask.



Figure 18. YouGov Poll: Irritation / annoyance with the nasal behaviour of others. (by gender)



As previously mentioned the greatest source of irritation for the respondents of the survey was other people not covering their mouths when they sneezed (61%). One discussant whole-heartedly agreed.

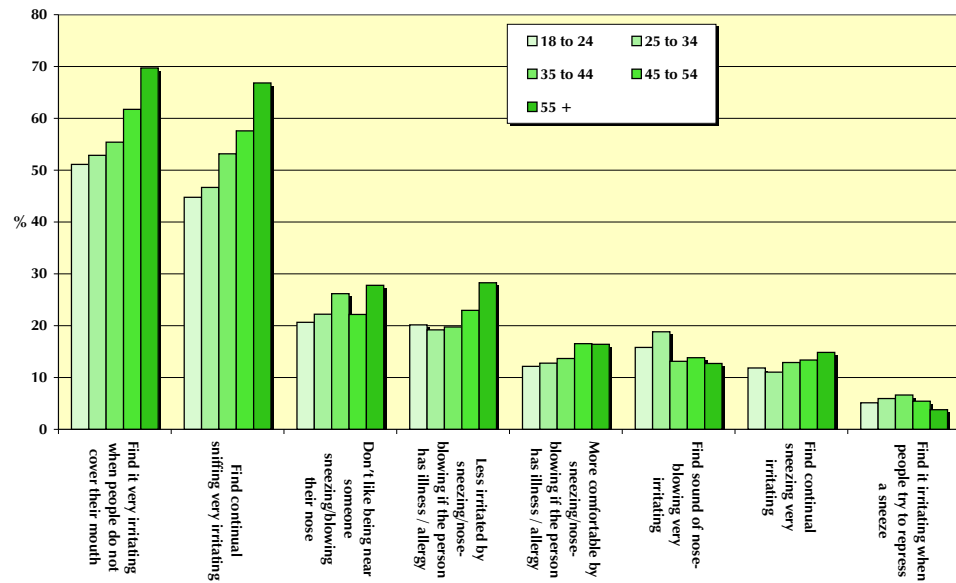
*"I've got a friend who irritates me when they sneeze because they don't do anything about it, they just sneeze into the room in front of anybody and it drives me nuts... no handkerchief, no tissue, no effort to even cover their mouth with their hand or anything. I can't stand that, it really irritates me." (Male, 48)*

Constant or 'serial sniffing' was also felt to be intensely annoying (57%). Women (64%) were significantly more likely to find this irritating than men (49%). Although men reported being slightly more irritated by people attempting to repress a sneeze (M7%, F4%) they also found constant sneezing more annoying than women (M15%, F12%) inferring that to avoid irritating men in this context one has to strike a 'happy medium'. On the whole, however, women appeared to be more irritated with the nasal conduct of others than their male counterparts.

*"They just don't know which is worse, sniffing or blowing their nose and they just assume that sniffing is more contained and that would be the better thing to do rather than blowing their nose." (Female, 25)*

Levels of irritation with 'serial sniffing' and not covering one's mouth increase with age. More than two thirds of the over 55s claimed to be very irritated by continual sniffing.

Figure 19. YouGov Poll: Irritation / annoyance with the nasal behaviour of others. (by age)



The over 55s, however, were also the most likely to tolerate people that exhibited outward signs of suffering from allergies or illness. Conversations with some of the group members also indicated that they were prepared to cut the afflicted 'some slack'.

*"If somebody has a cold and they're suffering then I give them a bit of credit if you like, so the tolerance band will be extended, you know."  
(Male, 38)*

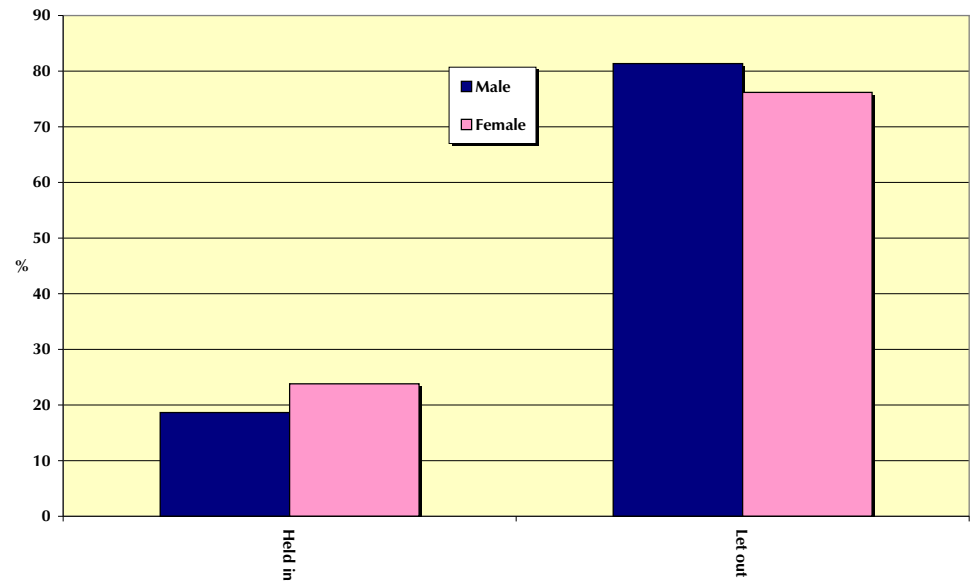
Having admitted to giving the unwell a little latitude in this context, however, clearly defined, 'reasonable' limits still existed.

*"He's forever like (imitating his sniff), and I know it's not his fault and I have to really keep calm but sometimes when I'm in a bad mood or my patience has run out I have to walk away."  
(Female, 28)*

### Letting it out – Holding it in: Variations in the 'real world'

While the data gathered from our poll and focus group was instrumental in gathering what people think and say about sneezing and nose-blowing, detailed observations were also needed to document what people actually *do* in their normal everyday lives. In the real world, 'letting it out' when sneezing and nose blowing is far more common than keeping it in. We can see from Figure 20 that men are slightly more likely to let it out than women (81% vs. 76%) but the gender differences are relatively minor in this context.

Figure 20. Observation Data: Letting it out and holding it in. (by gender)



Men are also less likely than women to clear their noses with a single blow, as shown in Figure 21, or a single sneeze, as shown in Figure 22.

Figure 21. Observation Data: Nose blowing – number of times. (by gender)

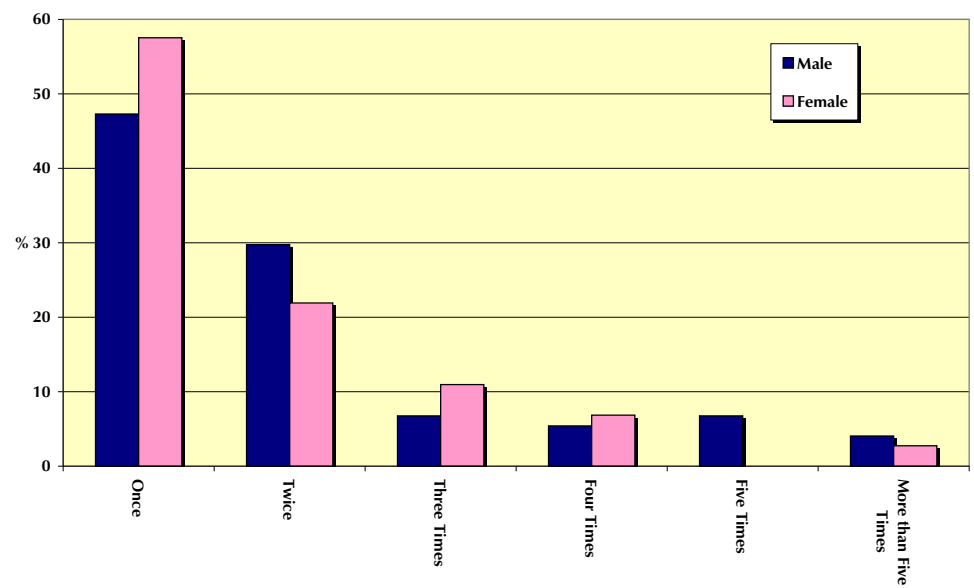
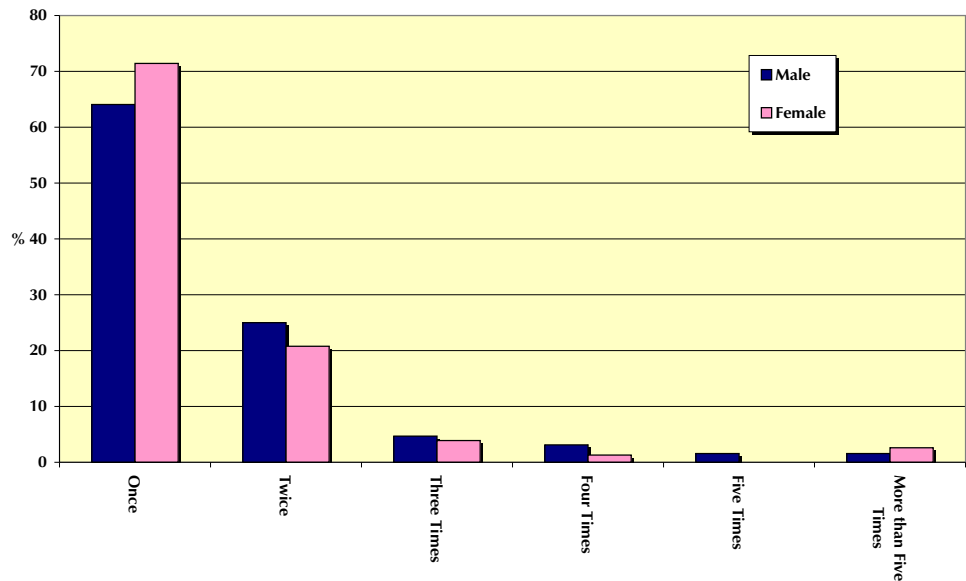
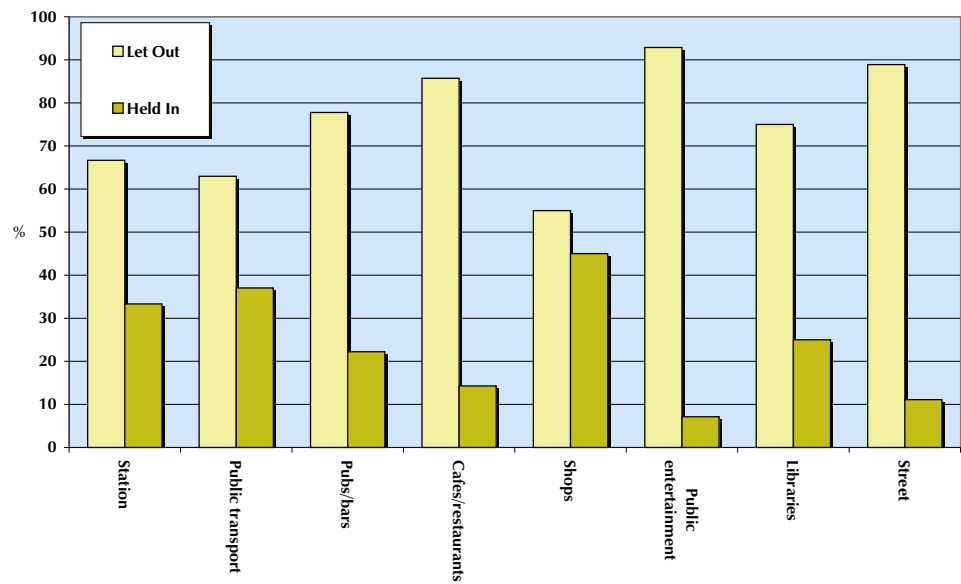


Figure 22. Observation Data: Sneezing – number of times. (by gender)



The observation data also showed quite clearly that sneezing and nose blowing was very much related to the particular environment in which people found themselves, as shown in Figure 23.

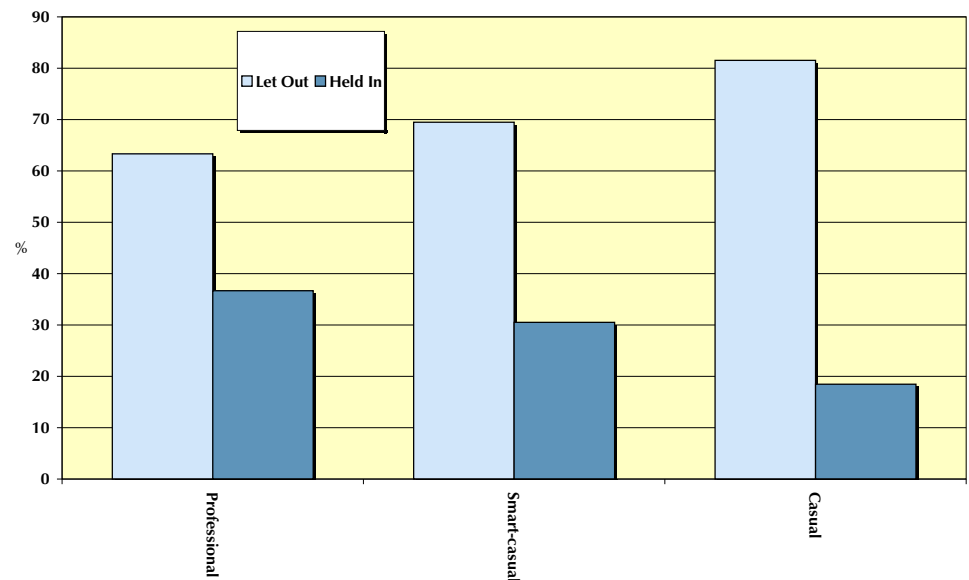
Figure 23. Observation Data: Sneezing / nose-blowing and social context. (held in/Let out)



Here we can see that the proportion of people 'letting it out', particularly when sneezing, increases steadily from the more 'held-in' styles that characterise stations and public transport to the more comfortable (in this context) settings of public entertainment areas, libraries and the street. It is in shops, however, where we are most restrained.

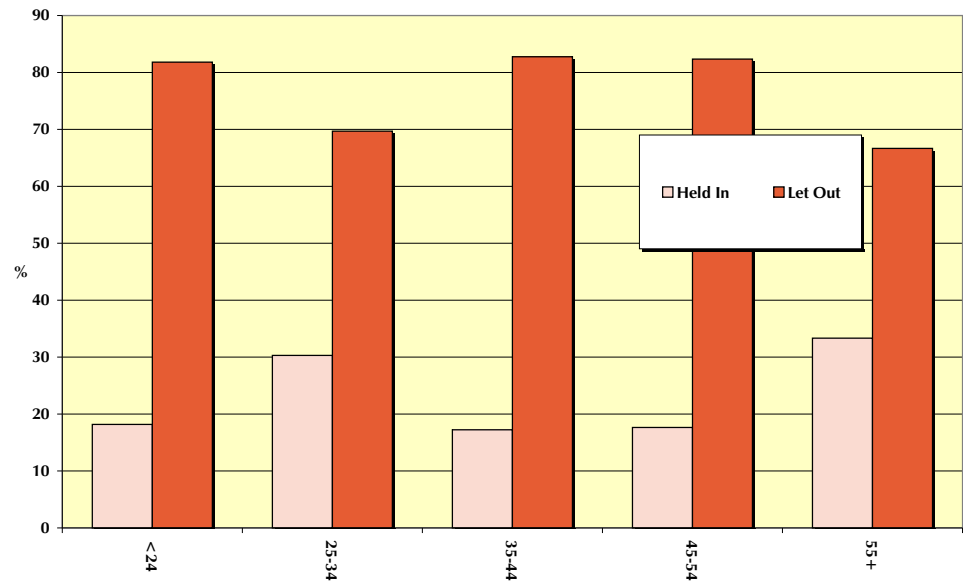
The observations also showed a clear relation between how smartly people were dressed and their nasal hygiene habits, as shown in Figure 24. Here we can see a linear increase in letting it out from formal, professional dress styles through smart casual up to casual attire. This might be related, in part, to the types of people who typically wear such kinds of clothes. More plausibly, however, is the notion that when we are most relaxed – e.g. in casual clothes – we find it easier to be less constrained in the manner in which we sneeze or blow our noses.

Figure 24. Observation Data: Sneezing / nose-blowing and attire. (held in/let out)



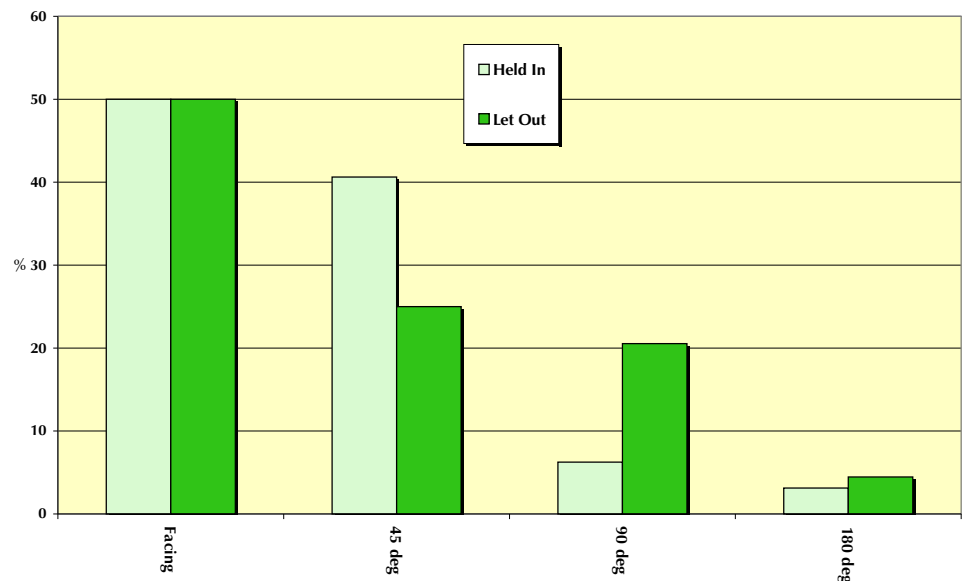
From our observations it was apparent that older people, especially those aged 55 or more, were the most 'reserved' when it comes to sneezing and nose-blowing, as shown in Figure 25. Unexpectedly, however, those aged between 25 and 34 there were proportionally fewer people letting it out than among the age group immediately above them – 34-45. Perhaps Generation X, to which group the latter belong, has incorporated a more relaxed approach to these behaviours than 'Generation Y' who followed them.

Figure 25. Observation Data: Letting it out / holding it in by age



Whether or not we inhibit our sneezes or blow our noses more discreetly in various contexts and setting, some universal rules still seem to apply. In the way that we saw a systematic pattern of orienting away from other people when we sneeze, we find a similar patten for letting it out/keeping it in across all type of nasal behaviour. We can see from Figure 26 that the more we let it out, the more we compensate by turning away from other people. While the ratio of in/out is about equal when facing people, the ratio among those turning at right angles with respect to the other person or persons is nearly four to one in favour of those letting it out. Among those keeping it in, there is a tendency to orient away much less sharply – just 45 degrees or so.

Figure 26. Observation Data: Sneezing / nose-blowing orientation. (held in/Let out)



The observations also revealed some quite predictable differences between men and women. Men tend to sneeze and blow their noses more loudly than women – on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is very quiet and 5 is very loud, men scored on average 3.35, compared with 2.94 for women, a statistically significant difference. Less predictable, however, was the finding the more men and women inspect the contents of their tissues or handkerchiefs after sneezing or blowing into them – 17% versus 11%. This is at some odds with what people think they do in this context as we see from the poll data later on. We would have expected women to be the more inquisitive in this context – they certainly claim to be in the poll – but perhaps their greater sense of decorum inhibits these 'natural' tendencies.

The hands that people use to perform nose blowing or to cover a sneeze was also recorded by our observers. Interestingly, the use of the left hand for such purposes is far more prevalent than we would predict given the distribution of right and left handedness among the British population. Only about 12% of us are left-handed but 27% of us use our left hand when sneezing – 35%, the right hand and 38% both hands. Even when blowing ones' nose the incidence of left-hand use is slightly higher at 14%, but most of us, 54% use both hands here.

The role of the left hand in this context is interesting because it is most often, even today, associated with 'dirty' tasks. This is why we shake hands with people using our right hand, even if we are left-handed, without realising why and while completely unaware of its earlier role in pagan traditions and folklore. Early social anthropologists such as Robert Hertz highlighted the fact that in many cultures the left is commonly associated with darkness, death, and physical pollution. Indeed, in numerous European languages – the Italian *sinistro*, for example – the word for 'left' is synonymous with darkness and evil. In relation to sneezing and nose-blowing, we have somehow adopted an almost superstitious form of

behaviour without realising it, in an age when washing one's hands (both of them) is a frequent and unremarkable activity.



## A typology of sneezing and nose blowing

As we can see from the information presented thus far, our sneezing and nose-blowing habits are directed by a complex series of social codes, depending on where we are and who we are with. Different kinds of individuals are also likely to interpret these codes in quite different ways, depending on the kind of person that they consider themselves to be, or the kind of person they would like other people to see in them. From the data gathered it is clear that people associate particular kinds of sociality, or particular personality types, with certain types of sneezing and nose-blowing. An assertive but controlled nose-blow, for example, is generally associated with a self-confident and extroverted character, while a more inhibited 'mousey' sneeze is commonly seen to suggest an intense sensitivity to the social judgment of others. As one focus group participant commented:

*"I think there is something to do with if you are a self-confident sort of person as opposed to a shy, timid person...your sneeze is going to be reflected in that." (Female, 52)*

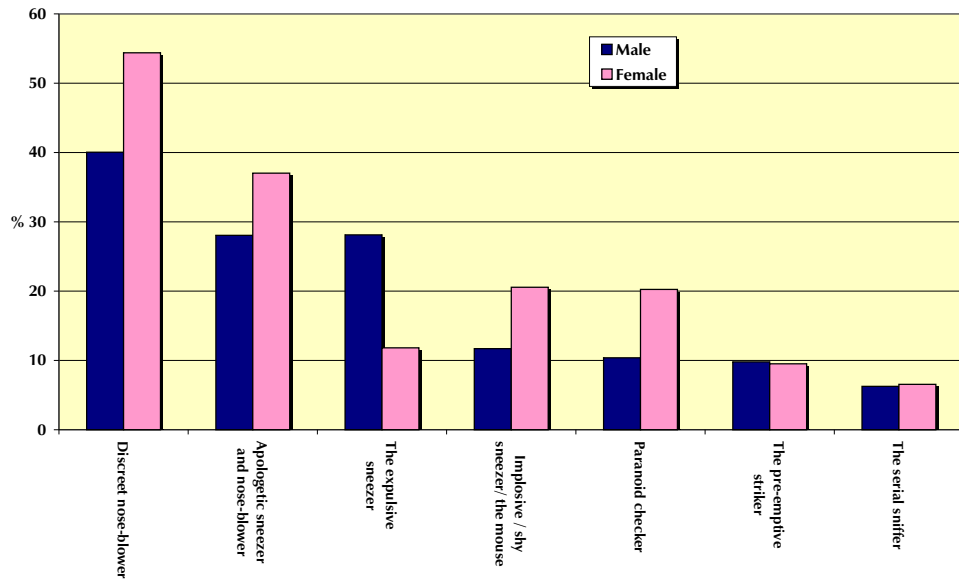
It is important to point out, however, that while these assumptions are socially very important, they are not necessarily psychologically exacting or provable; it would be somewhat dangerous to suggest that we might be able to directly infer the precise details of the psychological makeup of individuals simply from their approaches to sneezing and nose-blowing. Rather, it is the social significance of these categories that interests us. Whether or not a person sneezing confidently is in fact a confident person is to an extent an irrelevance; it is more important to consider whether that person thinks that they are a confident person, and whether or not others interpret their actions in the same way. In the increasingly busy, urban social contexts in which we encounter strangers, we often organize people into social categories according to their external appearance. In the absence of any other information about them, we order our exchanges with strangers depending on the assumptions we can make from a distance. Approaches to bodily functions are a crucial part of this, and split-second actions - such as a sniff, a sneeze or a dab - can have a very significant influence on the way that we see ourselves and those around us. As a member of one of the focus groups commented:

*"If it's a stranger and you don't know them you quickly form an opinion (from their nose-blowing habits)." (Male, 48)*

### Most common types of sneezing & nose-blowing

After analyzing the data gathered from focus groups, our national poll and over 1,000 individual observations of sneezing and nose-blowing in cities across the UK and Ireland, the following typology of sneezing and nose-blowing proved to be the most effective in identifying the most commonly recognised and recurrent approaches to sneezing and nose blowing. As with any typology there are of course shades of grey, and people are likely to exhibit characteristics of one or more sneezing/nose-blowing type depending on the social context in which they find themselves. In general, however, people showed a strong affinity, either explicitly or implicitly, with the following sneezing and nose-blowing practices, as shown in Figure 27.

Figure 27. YouGov Poll: Affinity with nose-blowing / sneezing practices I. (by gender)



### A family tradition?

When talking about particular kinds of sneezing and nose-blowing habits, a number of participants noted that they had a particular approach that 'runs in the family.' Whether for social reasons (one acts according to one's experiences) or for genetic reasons (one inherits sneezing allergies from one's parents) there is some evidence that particular sneezing and nose-blowing activities are passed on from parents to their children (see section below on learning to blow one's nose). As the following quotes from focus group participants suggest, this family influence can sometimes provide the impetus for sneezing and nose-blowing activities later in life:

*"Sometimes it's familial though isn't it? I mean the person I'm thinking of that used to do it, his father used to do it as well." (Female, 60)*

*"It runs in our family, big time. My father is a really extremely loud sneezer. He's a very, very loud, exuberant, noisy sneezer and I wonder whether that's sort of given me licence to be uninhibited about my sneezing." (Male, 38)*

Others commented on the ways in which parents serve as the starting point for developing a sense of awareness about the social codes that govern sneezing and nose-blowing:

*"But you do have to teach children to blow their nose though, when they first have a cold or something and you give them a tissue and you say blow, they go (demonstrating sniffing), ...or they just spit it back in, they have no idea of how to actually blow." (Female, 42)*

*"Having had children it's changed my views of sniffing because it doesn't occur to them to do anything else, and you have to say blow your nose, and as you're saying 'blow your nose' you're thinking: 'Why?' You know how odd that is? It's not as if the human form is designed that it had to blow its nose, sniffing is a perfectly adequate response to the situation."  
(Male, 51)*

A majority of the observational researchers observed instances in which 'appropriate' nose-blowing activities were demonstrated for children and younger people when their approach to sneezing or nose-blowing was considered inappropriate by a parent or teacher. Younger children and teenagers were observed wiping their noses on their sleeves or hands, only to be instructed to use a tissue by a parent or teacher. This supports the idea that sneezing and nose-blowing activities are socially constructed rather than being innate, uniform or involuntary. An example of this was given by a young boy in a museum in Leeds: engrossed with the science display in front of him, the boy wiped his nose absent-mindedly down the entire length of his sleeve until his mother intervened with a more appropriate alternative.

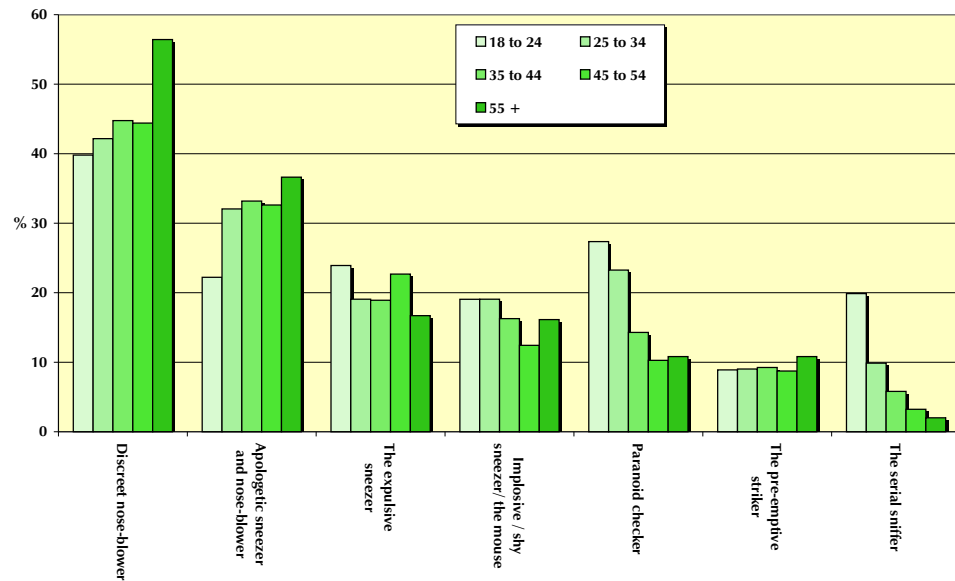
### The pre-emptive strike / better safe than sorry

The 'pre-emptive strike' or 'better safe than sorry' approach was identified during focus groups as the practice of blowing one's nose before entering a particular social situation in order to avoid nose-blowing in public. Immediately this practice suggests an intense concern on the part of the nose-blower for the views that others may have of them, as well as an awareness and foresight of the kinds of social sanctions that limit nose-blowing activities in certain social settings. A major concern was the idea that it was impossible to know for certain whether a public nose-blow had been completely successful, or if 'strays' remained afterwards. Being unable to know what people are seeing when they look at you (either in terms of actual physical 'strays' or the personality characteristics that are associated with them) is an unnerving prospect for some; the 'pre-emptive strike' is an effective means of avoiding this. For one of the focus group participants, this was indeed the case:

*"[I blow my nose] just in case there's a bit of a bogey there and I'm going out and I don't want people to see it. So, for example - I'm serious now - before I came out tonight I blew my nose, not because it was streaming or running, but just to clear it out...just in case there was a stray." (Male, 41)*

Of those who identified with the characteristics defined by the typology, roughly 10% saw themselves adopting the 'better safe than sorry' approach, with little significant difference between male and female respondents. Those in the higher age range of 55 and older were more likely to identify with the 'pre-emptive strike', perhaps suggesting a more traditional and conservative approach to sneezing and nose-blowing among this demographic, as shown in Figure 28.

Figure 28. YouGov Poll: Affinity with nose-blowing / sneezing practices I. (by age)



### Clean and clear / Paranoid Examiner

The Paranoid Examiner is defined as a person who is constantly worried about the possibility of lingering 'remnants' from sneezes or nose-blowing. As with those who identified with the 'pre-emptive strike', being in control of one's physical presentation of self is key here. The idea of having something unsightly on one's face (the most important physical focus for social interaction) is an unsettling prospect and one that causes some considerable concern. Of those who identified with this broad category, 16% of respondents associated themselves with the 'Paranoid Examiner'. As with other pre-emptive or precautionary measures, women were represented more prominently in this category. A fifth of all females identified with 'Paranoid Examiner', compared with 10% of males. As with concepts of body image more generally, people concerned with being nasally 'clean and clear' appear to be sensitive to the ways in which physical appearance serves as a reflection of social identity. After all, as our focus group participants reminded us, who wants to talk to someone with 'bats in the belfry'?

*"I don't blow my nose in front of people but only because I'm too conscious, I check afterwards that everything is fine and so watching other people blow them I just get too worried that there's just going to be something there at the end! (laughing)...then I'm gonna have to go for that 'you-rub-your-nose-so-that-they-rub-their-nose' kind of thing."  
(Female, 27)*

*"Normally I'd blow my nose, but then if I was with someone I'd turn round and say: 'Clean and clear?' You know, quick mirroring, and they'd be like: 'Yeah, fine', so then I wouldn't have to go through the*

*trauma of: 'have I got an unnatural thing hanging at the tip of my nose?'" (Female, 28)*

*"Ah yes, 'bats in the belfry'. [For me] It comes from catering...looking down [on customers] can be incredibly revealing. If I'm looking down and they're looking up, they do not want to be seeing the inside of the contents of my nose." (Male, 35)*

*"Yes, I always check. Then there is the imaginary (bogey)... during the course of the day you get a little something there (makes gesture as if removing). I am conscious of that." (Female, 47)*

## Implosive sneezing / The 'Mousey' Sneeze

In focus group discussions, and in our observations, the 'implosive sneeze' or the 'Mousey' sneeze was a relatively commonly identified category of sneezing, not least because this was considered to be the least socially invasive of sneezing practices. On one level, the 'implosive sneeze' was associated with a high degree of awareness of social surroundings and acting in a way that was considered to be socially appropriate and acceptable.

At the same time, 'implosive' sneezes were also associated with people lacking self-confidence, or those too wary of the opinions of others to simply 'let it out'. Generally, the 'Mousey' sneeze was associated with insecurity and being socially guarded - qualities that were not seen as desirable by some focus group participants:

*"Yeah, you just sort of...well, it's a personal thing, some people just sort of sneeze really heroically and other people sneeze and you think: 'What the hell was that!? Call that sneezing?'" (Male, 19)*

*"If I hear a (demonstrating small pathetic sneeze), I think: 'She actually just made a small noise like a mouse, was that just to annoy me?' I know that's a terrible thing to say but because I'm coming from the view point that a sneeze is to clear it out, [for me] it's a functional kind of thing." (Male, 35)*

Others were slightly more sympathetic, but still recognised that 'implosive' sneezing was a potential sign of being socially insecure:

*"Someone who does like a repressed sneeze, I think equally that can be quite sweet, endearing quality as well because if they deal with that nicely too you feel close to them too, but in a slightly different way...if I saw a camp person or a very elegant and Audrey Hepburn-type person I'd see it as totally within their personality to do a repressed sneeze and be all kind of coy about it and that would be fine too and a quite endearing quality in itself as well." (Female, 25)*

*"The same sort of person who would be very delicate about that small sort of sneeze, I would judge that they are quite insecure with their environment and that's why they're trying to cover it up." (Male, 31)*

Here, then, we are presented with two rather different sides of the social characteristics of an 'implosive' sneezer. This can perhaps be best explained by

thinking of 'implosive' sneezing on a sliding scale, where respondents have distinguished between implosive sneezes that are appropriately controlled and in-keeping with the social norms of a particular context, and those which appear overly stifled or 'kept in'. With this in mind it is interesting to note that in the national poll the number of people identifying themselves as 'implosive' sneezers is relatively small: of those who identified with the typology, 19% saw themselves as an 'implosive' or 'shy' sneezer. While people are eager to sneeze or blow their noses in a way that is discreet and socially acceptable, they are understandably less enthusiastic about being associated with social awkwardness or insecurity.

There is obviously a fine line between these two types, and it is important to consider the qualities that are generally associated with the 'implosive' sneeze in order to understand where this line falls. As Figure 27 above has shown, gender is an important factor when defining the 'implosive' sneezer. Of those who identified themselves with this category, women outnumber men by almost two to one. As in other aspects of the data gathered, this indicates that for both men and women sneezing and nose-blowing activities are underpinned by gender stereotypes about what is acceptable behaviour in public. It seems to be that women are well aware of the social sanctions that still exist for acting in an 'unfeminine' way in public. Similarly, men are aware that a 'mousey' sneeze is potentially in conflict with accepted public displays of 'masculinity'. The following comment from one of the female focus group participants reflects the particular social difficulties with reconciling these two sides of the 'implosive sneeze':

*"Well I think it's a concept that men have, that's its a little piddly, mousey sneeze...I think that says something in itself doesn't it, maybe its saying: 'Well aren't you man enough to say that you want to sneeze and just DO IT?' And, also it's not very feminine to do all these loud things with your body, is it?" (Female, 52)*

## The 'Let it Outer' / the expulsive sneeze

In direct contrast to the 'implosive' sneeze or the 'Mousey' sneeze is the category of the 'expulsive' sneeze or 'Let it Outer'. This was the third most popular sneezing activity, with almost 30% of males identifying with this category. Generally, participants associated this kind of sneeze with a confident, assertive person who feels at ease in a variety of social contexts. In contrast with more elaborate or expressive forms of sneezing, the 'expulsive' sneeze was defined as a pleasurable, affirmative sneeze, but one that was controlled and within the limits of social acceptability. 'Assertive' sneezing was seen as a no-nonsense approach to nasal hygiene; as one focus group participant commented:

*"It is a statement of self: 'I am sneezing and I am just doing a sneeze, sorry but in fact this is me and I'm having a sneeze, we all sneeze, I'm sneezing, I'm doing all the right things but I AM sneezing', as opposed to a little timid woman sitting there, or a man, sitting there being very unsure of themselves publicly anyway and then all of sudden this thing that they can't really control...and they try and do everything they can to not draw attention to themselves...I think there is an awful lot to do with that." (Female, 48)*

Participants in the focus groups also agreed that while this kind of sneezing was more noticeable and demonstrative than 'implosive' sneezing, it was also potentially more conducive to social interaction because it suggests a sense of self-confidence and openness with strangers - so long as the person sneezing doesn't over-do it:

*"Ok, assertive sneezing where somebody sneezes really confidently and stuff, I'd feel quite warm to them and safe with them, and able to strike up a conversation with them even if I didn't know them because they felt so comfortable with themselves and so secure in what they were doing it would be fine...so long as they do it politely and they're not smearing it on the windows or anything." (Female, 25)*

In keeping with the gender-related nature of 'implosive' sneezing, there is a marked discrepancy in the ratio of men to women who identify with the category of 'expulsive' sneezer. Of those who identified with the typology, 28% of males considered themselves to be 'expulsive' sneezers, as opposed to 12% of women, as we saw in Figure 27 above. The following comments from a focus group participant again emphasises the notion that certain sneezes are associated with particular genders:

*"No, seriously when we moved into our house I hadn't really met the neighbours and I thought: 'Oh god, the children are so noisy in the morning', because they get up and play on the landing...I said to them: 'I really hope the children don't disturb you too much in the morning playing on the landing', and she said: 'Oh no, that's fine, but I do hear you husband sneezing a lot in the bathroom', and I thought: 'Oh no! That's me, bugger!' (Group laughing), and I said: 'Oh yes he does, doesn't he? I'll tell him!'" (Female, 42)*

## The Clumsy Sneezers

A sub-category existing somewhere in between the expulsive and the explosive sneezer (see below) was defined as the 'clumsy sneezer'. Focus group participants identified 'clumsy' sneezers as people who would sneeze exuberantly in an essentially socially unacceptable way, but would do so in an apparently accidental manner. Most adopted a sympathetic approach towards 'clumsy' sneezers, associating their sneezing activity with the clumsy but affable characteristics of their personalities, as this focus group participant suggests:

*"I've got my an image of my brother here...like at the dinner table he would sneeze without being able to stop it and there would be all kinds of stuff coming all over the table, just a nightmare, and I'd think to myself it's just a clumsy thing you know...he just can't get to it in time." (Male, 21)*

## Discreet nose-blowing

Discreet nose-blowing was the nose-blowing habit most commonly identified among those taking part in the national poll, and in many ways presents one of the least obvious and most interesting of personal hygiene activities. Of those who

identified with the typology, almost half (48%) considered themselves to be discreet nose-blowers, as shown in Figure 27.

Existing somewhere on the spectrum between the social acceptability of 'mousey', 'implosive' sneezing and more 'assertive' or 'expulsive' sneezing, discreet nose-blowing is defined as a controlled and socially unobtrusive act that deals with nasal hygiene in a manner that is intended to cause the least possible offence to others. As with sniffing, there is a clear awareness that the largely voluntary nature of nose-blowing causes it to be a direct reflection on the individual undertaking the activity. While a person might be excused for being 'caught short' on a sneeze, nose-blowing and sniffing are essentially activities of individual agency. As a result, discrete nose-blowers employ a complex set of physical and symbolic markers to demonstrate their awareness of those around them.

Avoiding eye contact with others is a crucial aspect of discrete nose-blowing. Quite simply, avoiding eye contact is an extension of the assumption that 'if you can't see it, it isn't there'. Discreet nose-blowers look away and, in tacit participation in this ritual, on-lookers will cease to look-on until they gauge that it is safe to do so once more. An example of this was provided by an observation of two work colleagues in a café in Dublin. During their conversation one sniffed and then turned away to blow her nose with apparent embarrassment, studiously avoiding eye contact with her colleague. Her colleague looked down towards the ground for several seconds until he assumed it would be socially safe to look back up again and resume the conversation.

Another important physical trait of discreet nose-blowing was the attempt to physically move as far away from others as possible. On some occasions - and particularly in quieter public spaces - this involved leaving a room altogether, but usually discreet nose-blowers would attempt to angle their bodies away from others in order to be as unobtrusive as possible and then conceal the used tissue/handkerchief immediately (see earlier section on orientation).

As perhaps might be expected from the data above relating to 'implosive' and 'expulsive' sneezing, it was also noted that more women identify with discreet nose-blowing than men: 54% of females compared with 40% of males. Again, this might suggest that discreet nose-blowing is recognised as one of a series of nose-blowing activities that are associated with a stereotypically understated, 'feminine' approach to nasal hygiene.

## **Apologetic sneezing and nose-blowing / The Apologiser**

Second to discreet nose-blowing, 'apologetic' sneezing and nose-blowing was the most commonly identified habit. Among those who identified with the typology, 33% identified themselves as 'apologetic' sneezers and nose-blowers - i.e. they recognised that as well as trying to be discreet, they would also explicitly apologise and/or make apologetic exclamations during sneezing and nose-blowing. As with the physical movements associated with discreet nose-blowing, or the attempts at self-control during 'implosive' sneezing, these verbal statements are an acknowledgement that the sneezing or nose-blowing activity in question is socially embarrassing or uncomfortable, and must be recognised as such. However, these are often not apologies in the literal sense;



rather, 'apologetic' sneezers are aware of the phrases and exclamations that are habitually and ritually said after a sneeze or nose-blow, and these are repeated for others to sanction either with silence or with a similarly stylized response - the most common of which are, of course, is 'Excuse me'/'Bless you' and, if the other person is faster off the mark, 'Bless you'/'Thank you'.

These kinds of phrases have a long and complex history that stretch far beyond 21st century concerns with superbugs on the underground or sneezing on someone's cappuccino in a coffee bar. In many cultures there is a mythology associated with the spiritual force of the sneeze. Sneezing has often been associated either with the soul or with evil spirits entering or leaving the body; blessings would serve the purpose of safeguarding the spiritual well-being of the person sneezing. In Britain in particular, the ritual of blessing someone after sneezing is popularly associated with the bubonic plague epidemic that took place at the end of the 14th century AD (the 'Black Death'), during which sneezing became synonymous with imminent death. Over the centuries we have cast off many of the real –and imagined– associations between sneezing and evil forces, and yet we still use the same incantations to put sneezing in its proper social context.

In some cases, the need to apologise to others for one's sneezing and nose-blowing behaviour is so engrained and compelling that people will apologise and bless themselves even in the absence of other people; as one participant explained:

*"I must be a very constrained person because I find that even in my own company I still have to 'bless myself' ...I can't do the sneeze and open and all of that." (Female, 42)*

This is perhaps a rather extreme case of 'apologetic' sneezing; far more common-place is the practice of verbal exchanges between people - even with strangers - as a means of putting a sneeze or a nose-blow into the appropriate social frame of reference.

## **The explosive sneeze / The demonstrative sneeze / The Heroic Sneeze**

Like the 'implosive' sneeze, the 'explosive' or 'Heroic' sneeze presents two different dimensions of the same kind of sneezing habit; unlike the 'implosive' sneeze, the 'Heroic' sneeze involves an absolute minimum of personal restraint. On one hand, 'explosive' or 'Heroic' sneezes in public social spaces were met with the same high degree of revulsion reserved for 'serial sniffers' (see below). In fact, uncontrolled, uncovered explosive sneezes were ranked as the most irritating nasal activity in our national poll, with 61% of respondents ranking this as most objectionable. Like sniffing, 'explosive' sneezes were generally considered to be voluntary inasmuch as the culprit would be deliberately enjoying a robust and demonstrative sneeze, rather than attempting in some way to control it according to the social setting. This supposed conscious disregard for others was widely considered to be associated with arrogance, an assertion of dominance or presence, and more generally with 'bad manners' - the very antithesis of 'implosive' sneezing or discreet nose-blowing. As these focus group participants commented:

*"Do you not think there are three [types of sneezes]? There's the 'Sorry for sneezing I don't really want to sneeze' (implosive), then there's the 'I'm about to sneeze, business like lets get it over and done with' (expulsive) and there's the 'BEHOLD!!! MY SNEEZE!' (explosive / Heroic). When I think of that I think of some big old, retired Army Major with a big red face and a big bushy moustache....(demonstrating)...do you know what I mean? Can you see it?" (Male, 35)*

Others had similar impressions of 'explosive' sneezers:

*"Yeah he's male and he's a MASSIVELY loud sneezer, and this person I don't particularly like... Well, this sneezing is disproportionately loud, as I say it's only my view, but that's how it feels and it's irritating as a result of it. Because it feels far louder than needed...I mean it's a big open plan office and you can hear it as loud as an aeroplane going over. I think it's a little bit of attention seeking." (Male, 38)*

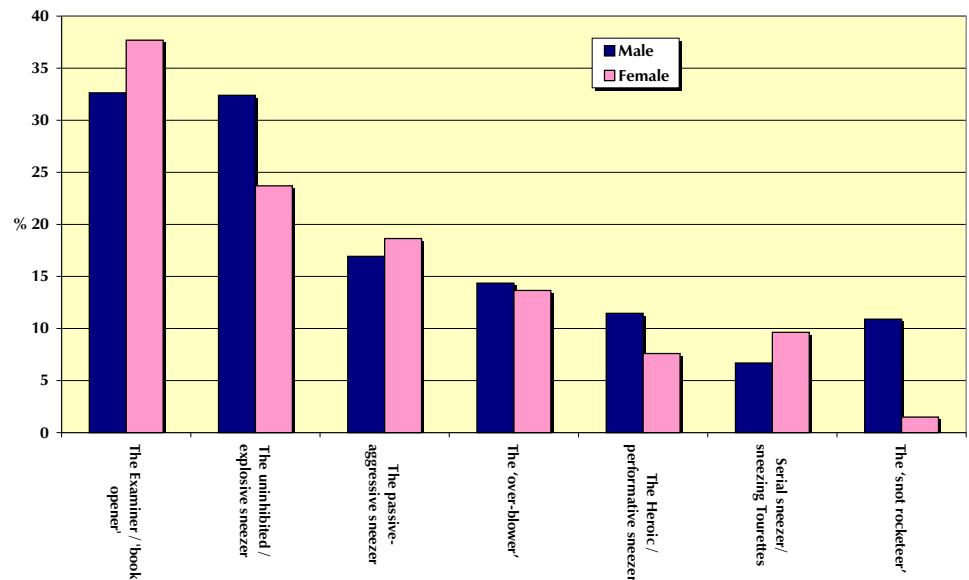
Still others were slightly more sympathetic, while also recognizing the compulsion that some feel to make their presence known through sneezing:

*"My father wasn't uninhibited about sneezing, it was just the way it came out...it was always a surprise like he'd never done it before, and then he'd always apologise, like, 'oh! I didn't expect that!' It would always come out at the quietest time. We used to always go to church on Sunday morning and it would always be, almost every week you know: 'Oh let's have a moment of silent prayer', and my dad would be like: 'WAHWHOOOOO!'" (Male, 36)*

While this generally negative image of the 'explosive' sneezer resonated in the comments of focus group participants describing other people, it was interesting to note how many of them also enjoyed an 'explosive' or 'Heroic' sneeze when in the privacy of their own home. Indeed, of those who identified with the typology in

the national poll, a considerable number - some 29% - recognised themselves within this category.

Figure 29. YouGov Poll: Affinity with nose-blowing / sneezing practices II. (by gender)



As with the other more demonstrative approaches to sneezing and nose-blowing, more men (32%) than women (24%) identified with the 'explosive sneezer'. but this is not to say that explosive sneezes are not enjoyed by women, given the appropriate social context. One female focus group participant noted that,

*"Yeah, I am a sniffer but if I'm actually sneezing, you know, where I can't help it...sneezing as in I've got an itch and it just goes, I believe in letting rip and just RAHOOO! Obviously covering it with a hand or hankie." (Female, 42)*

Another example of a positive 'explosive' sneeze is the 'sunshine' sneeze. Focusing on the positive, pleasurable aspects of a good sneeze, participants identified the sunshine sneeze as an activity brought on by walking in open public spaces in bright, sunny weather. In the world of medical science 'sunshine' sneezes are known as photic sneezes, which occur as a result of a hereditary allergic reaction to bright sunlight. Despite the allergic nature of the 'sunshine' sneeze, participants agreed that this was a positive and affirmative experience - but one best conducted in private, in open public spaces or in the company of close family and friends.

*"I don't know, but I think it's ironic that you did all of these things then sneezed a lot and died anyway. I think the thing about other cultures is interesting because right at the beginning when you started talking about sneezes I was reflecting that I sneeze when I have a cold but I also sneeze in bright sunlight. If I walk out of the house into bright sunlight I sneeze involuntary. It's not mucus related, there's no...it's just a very dry experience and very pleasurable actually, it's sort of quite*

*invigorating...if I'm on my own I think, oh this is fun really and a tremendous experience, BUT, if I'm blocked up and I sneeze I don't act that way either because of the health aspects that come in, or I'm aware of other people." (Male, 52)*

It would seem that the issue here is not whether 'explosive' sneezes are generally permissible (people seem to genuinely enjoy them at times), but rather the extent to which an indulgent, pleasurable, explosive sneeze can be a public act without causing offence to others. As has been seen above, this is dependent on the social proximity of the sneezer to those around him or her - or, indeed, the extent to which he or she cares what other people think. In general however it would seem that 'explosive' sneezing is a taboo-breaking activity. By failing to adhere to basic social codes about controlling one's sneezing in some way or another, an 'explosive' sneeze can lead to considerable social sanctions.

### The passive aggressive approach

The 'passive-aggressive approach' to sneezing serves to describe people who are prone to 'explosive' sneezes but who are otherwise quite shy and reserved. In contrast to the overtly arrogant or attention-seeking caricature of the 'Heroic' sneezer, the 'passive-aggressive approach' provides a kind of emotional release for those who are normally relatively restrained and self-contained. In this sense a good sneeze serves as a kind of physical release for emotional or psychological pressure that may not have a direct social outlet. Of those who identified with the typology, 18% saw themselves as 'passive aggressive' sneezers who sometimes use sneezing as a way of letting off steam.

*"You see the two people I was thinking of, it's almost like a double bluff, that actually they are two of the most emotionally repressed people I know, but therefore maybe this is a way of kind of letting go...they're also two quite angry people and so maybe there's sort of an aggressive sneeze." (Female, 60)*

### Examining the results / 'Opening the Book'

Along with explosive sneezing and serial sniffing, 'opening the book' or 'examining the results' of one's nasal activity was considered to be socially repulsive when observed in public. At the same time, however, many focus group participants and poll respondents also admitted that they were prone to 'opening the book' after sneezing or nose-blowing. People were also observed 'examining the results' on numerous occasions in public places. Of those who identified with the typology, 34% of respondents said that they 'examined the results'.

This presents a slightly paradoxical view of different kinds of people who might 'open the book' in public. Most focus group participants argued that examining the results was justified if a person was ill because this provided a way of checking the colour of one's phlegm, and thus the relative severity of a cold or flu:

*"...and then there's the awful thing, and I'm not being funny actually, if you think you might have an infection 'cause it really hurts, you do then*

*actually turn away - not right in front of people - and have a look and check if it's green... Yep, always check for greenies." (Female, 60)*

*"I want to see if it's white or yellow. If it's yellow I know that I'm getting it out. If it's white I think: 'Oh no, I just want to get rid of this rubbish in me and feel better again.'" (Female, 25)*

*"I would do it if I really felt gross and had a really nasty cold, and possibly kind of ear involvement, and I would look and I would look and see...and it's my little thing, you know, ooh, if it's been green for ages maybe I should go and [see a doctor]" (Female, 60)*

Observations were made in a number of different cities of people 'opening the book' in this way. One such case was seen on a train leaving Glasgow, where an older businessman attempted to examine the contents of his tissue without others noticing by hunching himself over and turning to face the window. In this sense examining the results is considered a sensible and acceptable thing to do in public (albeit in a discreet way) because it has a supposed direct medical application. It could be argued that 'examining the results' is more socially acceptable in this sense because it reflects positively on a person's personal hygiene and concern for their physical well-being. And yet there is a difference between pragmatic concern and morbid curiosity, and some focus group participants were somewhat less convinced of the practical medical usefulness of 'opening the book':

*"I do think that is disgusting. I can't understand why they are doing it. I mean, are they a doctor? And even if you did want to check up I still can't help thinking that: 'You could go away and do that somewhere else'. These things happen but you've kind of crossed a line there. I mean, you don't need to do that." (Male, 41)*

*"Have you seen those people who sneeze, they check it and something they're looking for isn't there so they fold it back up again and have a bit of a root?" (Male, 35)*

Between these two opinions, still others saw the practical value of 'opening the book', but considered it too personal an activity to undertake in public, no matter how discrete the action:

*"It is a health check, but it's very personal. You would do it in the privacy of your bathroom." (Female, 42)*

## The Serial Sniffer

As with nose-blowing, the voluntary nature of sniffing causes people to make explicit assumptions about those who choose to do it. Generally, the 'serial sniffer' was recognised as a person who is uncomfortable with blowing their nose in public, and so chooses to sniff instead as a means to dealing with a congested or runny nose. In stark contrast with the socially acceptable 'discreet' nose-blower, 'serial sniffing' was widely considered to be one of the most irritating and socially transgressive of all the recognised sneezing and nose-blowing habits, after 'explosive' sneezing while not covering one's mouth. Over a half (57%) of people agreed that they found sniffing very irritating, in comparison to only 15% who

found sneezing irritating. The fact that serial sniffing is repetitive and voluntary makes it socially repugnant to many, as one focus group participant suggested:

*"Sitting next to someone who is permanently sniffing... That drives me insane, I just want to say JUST blow your nose! Please!!" (Female, 28)*

Given the pariah status of 'serial sniffers' in social situations, it is perhaps not surprising that few people identified with the category. Only 6% of respondents identified with this type of nose-blowing activity. At the same time, numerous observations were made of sniffing and dabbing in public, suggesting that while people may not be eager to admit to serial sniffing, it is certainly more commonplace than the poll data would suggest. Numerous examples of 'serial sniffers' were seen in all the major cities included in the project. One such example of serial sniffing was observed in a library in Birmingham, where the young man's constant repetitive sniffing caused obvious offence to those sitting close to him.

Despite the revulsion felt towards serial sniffers, focus group participants did recognise the awkwardness of being in a social context where even discreet nose-blowing would be uncomfortable, and empathised with the choice to sniff rather than 'let it out'. A rare few even went as far as to admit sniffing themselves:

*"I'm definitely a sniffer rather than a nose blower...I do sit and sniff a lot." (Female, 42)*

*"Well you've got a choice haven't you? If you're in a meeting or in a group like this, I'm stuck over here and it's very difficult for me to get out and my nose starts running, you know, I've got a choice of either I sit here sniffing or blowing my nose, so I've got to weigh it up...which is worse for everybody and I'll probably try not to for as long as I can bear it or anybody else can and then I'll blow my nose." (Female, 52)*

Interestingly, although perhaps not too surprisingly, there was a marked difference in age groups when it came to identifying oneself as a 'serial sniffer'. In keeping with the popular stereotype of 'snivelling teenagers', young people between the ages of 18-24 made up by far the largest group of 'serial sniffers' (20%). One focus group participant agreed with this perspective:

*"A youthful thing because you don't actually hear that many mature people sniffing, it is a teenage type thing isn't it." (Female, 52)*

While it would be unhelpful to stereotype young people as an army of 'serial sniffers', it is certainly arguable that younger people might be less aware of the social conventions surrounding nasal hygiene, or, conversely, that they might be very aware of them at this stage in their lives and therefore less comfortable and confident about an assertive or more demonstrative nose-blow.

## Serial Sneezing

Another unpopular repetitive nasal activity is 'serial sneezing', or the act of sneezing repetitively and continuously in a way that appears more indulgent and enjoyable than is perhaps physically necessary. Serial sneezing presents a slightly different kind of social transgression to serial sniffing because, unlike conscious

acts such as sniffing or nose-blowing, it is generally considered that sneezing is involuntary and therefore out of the control of the sneezer. Nevertheless, focus group participants made it clear that repeated sneezing was an irritating and socially uncomfortable habit, and that they made assumptions about the characters of 'serial sneezers' as a result. Whether implosive or expulsive, serial sneezing is seen by some as a self-indulgent activity that goes beyond the limits of acceptable sneezing behaviour. Moreover, serial sneezing was more commonly associated with poor health and being run-down or sickly rather than other involuntary causes of sneezing such as hay fever or allergies. An example of this was seen in a restaurant in Dublin, where a man sneezed repeatedly causing those around him to lean away and offer disparaging glances. The man seemed very aware of his neighbours' discomfort and attempted to cover his mouth with a tissue during the course of the fit. Focus group participants also voiced their unease when it came to 'serial sneezers':

*What I hate is serial sneezers, really loud ones, who actually, I hate to say this, but it's usually men because if women do it it's usually...my daughter sometimes does, but hers are usually 'Achee, achew...(mouse noise made), but it's men who are serial sneezers and it just goes on and on and they kind of go: 'AACHOOOOOOOHAH!! I mean I'm sorry I'm not exaggerating...AACHOOOOOOOHAH, and so it goes on and it makes me sort of die each time, and you never quite know when the next one is coming...It's that sort of tourette's of sneezing isn't it?' (Female, 60)*

*"I really feel totally different in sympathy or empathy towards people who I think either coughing, sneezing or blowing are actually poorly and I feel sorry for them and people as I described who are sort of serial sneezers, you know who just seem to...after a bit you think: 'You're just doing this because you want to', and I can't feel any sympathy for that." (Female, 60)*

Serial sneezers are in this sense placed in the same category as explosive sneezers in their supposed disregard for acceptable social behaviour. As with explosive sneezers, the generally negative perception of serial sneezers meant very few people who identified with the typology were willing to associate themselves with the category of serial sneezer. Of the respondents, only 8% thought of themselves as serial sneezers. In their defence, self-confessed serial sneezers from the focus groups argued that making negative assumptions about serial sneezing was unfair:

*"Well, they think that I'm ill when I sneeze so you can see people going: 'Ah God!' And I find myself saying: 'It's okay, I've just got hay fever', but people back away...although I do cover, I always cover my face and I always move away but sometimes I have to stop because I can't stop sneezing. I think people kind of withdraw when they think you're sneezing because you're ill." (Female, 52)*

## The over-blow

This particularly unfortunate nose-blowing activity occurs when one underestimates the volume of what needs to be extracted while blowing one's

nose. What begins as a discreet nose-blow becomes a protracted and socially problematic situation where it is no longer possible to control the nose-blowing activity with the amount of tissue that one has.

A well-dressed man on the bus in Dublin provided a good example of the 'over-blow'. Initially the man attempted a discrete nose-blow, but appeared to have under-estimated the extent of the activity. This led to an intense sense of unease that he attempted to cover with dramatic verbal and physical expressions of surprise. A girl sitting close by quickly looked out the window and covered her mouth with her sleeve. Similarly, focus group participants associated experiences of 'the over-blow' with high degrees of embarrassment and an awareness that this unintentionally anti-social activity was an easy means to alienating themselves from those around them:

*"But if you have a cold it's awful because what starts as what you thought would be a short blow, when you've got a cold, just goes on and on and on and you feel like you're kind of emptying not just one tube, but then another and it just goes on and on and you do notice people getting...well I get irritated...It is that awful thing of starting something which you think is going to be discreet or whatever and it just goes on and on and on in a public situation." (Female, 60)*

*"I don't mind [blowing my nose] if I've got a tissue and everything but then if I over do it I find I need to do it more...do you find that? If you start sniffing then you sniff more so you need to get it out but then if you blow your nose too much then you need to blow your nose even more to keep doing it." (Female, 25)*

Of those who identified with the typology in the national poll, approximately 14% identified with the notion of 'the overblow'. This represents twice as many respondents as were willing to admit to being a serial sneezer or sniffer, suggesting that the 'overblow' is perhaps a more acceptable social mistake to make, simply because it is unintentional - in the mind of the person 'overblowing', at least. Some participants drew comparisons with a kind of 'overblow' that takes place when sneezing - or the 'face explosion' - although this was less prominent activity than 'overblowing' one's nose:

*"Has anyone had a 'face explosion'? Maybe you're ill, you're lying in bed, not feeling particularly great. A sneeze comes and it's quite a powerful sneeze and it brings a lot out but you haven't had a chance to get anything there." (Male, 35)*

## The snot-rocketeer

This is perhaps the most extreme of the sneezing and nose-blowing activities identified during the course of the project. As the name suggests, the 'snot rocketeers' are people who prefer to clear their noses by blocking one nostril while suddenly exhaling through the other. This one-fingered nose-cleansing activity requires no tissue or handkerchief and often leaves the remnants of the nose-clearing in full public view. If our typology of sneezing and nose-blowing activities exists on a spectrum, then the 'snot racketeer' exists as a polar opposite to the 'implosive' sneezer or the discrete nose-blow. There are cultural contexts in



which the 'snot rocket' is a perfectly acceptable means of clearing ones nasal passages in a variety of different social settings. The following quotes from focus group participants provide some anecdotal evidence of this:

*"It's a cultural thing towards Western, Northern European [countries] because [when] I was in Asia at the time, I lived in Thailand and Cambodia and places like that, and it was ridiculous to think of it as anything other than acceptable. I could never do it myself but my son picked it up and thought it was wonderful." (Female, 52)*

*"I've been in situations when I was younger where I wanted to blow my nose and I didn't have any tissues or something, in Sudan actually, and I don't have to blow my nose with my fingers, I just blow my nose walking along ...you see footballers do it." (Male, 42)*

In the West, however, it appears that this kind of activity is only socially sanctioned in very specific contexts where it is considered to be the only recourse – that is, in outside environments, normally during sporting activities, when it is not possible or convenient to have and/or stop to use a tissue or handkerchief.

*"I have a friend who does that too...just one finger over one nostril and a really big blow...I really don't like it, I really don't. We would talk about it sometimes because, maybe it's just because I would never have the guts, but there's no way I'd ever just put my hand over one nostril and just blow and eject." (Female, 27)*

*"Lots of people who run do that and in swimming pools actually." (Female, 60)*

*"I feel sick." (Male, 36)*

*"But in the sea people do that..." (Female, 60)*

*"Yeah, there are definite settings, like the rugby field they do it...and then if you're in a library you're not gonna do that..." (Male, 22)*

*"I did on a football pitch when I was younger, or a rugby pitch." (Male, 48)*

When used in other kinds of public social contexts, the 'snot rocket' causes grave offence. One researcher observed the 'snot rocket' performed by a construction worker making repairs on the pavement in Birmingham. As with certain sporting contexts such as football games, it appears that the construction worker considered this an acceptable form of behaviour given the setting. However, onlookers made expressions of revulsion and moved away, some holding hands or sleeves up to cover their mouths. A focus group participant summed up the extent to which this particular 'snot rocketeer' had miscalculated the social acceptability of his actions:

*"I think it's an environment thing as well, I mean what you were saying earlier about clearing you nose, I would never sit at a dinner table with my mum and do that but on a football pitch with loads of people watching and twenty other blokes I'd quite happily do it, [but at] a garden party, for instance, you still wouldn't do it." (Male, 19)*

In keeping with this perspective, those who identified with the typology in the national poll were least likely to associate with the category of 'snot rocketeer'; overall only 7% admitted to using the 'snot rocket', with only 1% of women identifying with this habit.