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Researching ethnic inequalities

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- **Social researchers are increasingly required to produce evidence on the patterns and causes of ethnic inequalities in diverse arenas of social and economic wellbeing.**
- **However, researching inequalities between ethnic groups presents important ethical and methodological challenges.**
- **Using fixed ethnic categories in research requires careful consideration because ethnic identities are complex and fluid.**
- **Because of this complexity, researchers should recognise the diverse pathways through which ethnicity may influence experiences and outcomes.**
- **Describing and explaining differences between ethnic groups also demands careful attention to sampling, data generation and analysis so that misleading interpretations are avoided.**
- **The potential for research into ethnic inequality to do more harm than good should be recognised and addressed.**
- **Researchers should find ways to ensure that their research focus and approach is informed by the experiences and priorities of individuals from all ethnic groups.**

Since the landmark introduction of an ethnic group question to the 1991 Census (Bulmer, 1996) and the influential *Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities* in 1993-4 (Modood et al., 1997), the volume of social research addressing ethnicity has grown dramatically in the UK. Social researchers are increasingly required to produce evidence capable of informing policy and practice development that is sensitive to the diversity of the UK's multiethnic population. In particular, there is demand for better understanding of the patterns and causes of ethnic inequalities in the uptake, experience and outcomes of public services across diverse arenas including employment, education and health (Mason, 2003).

Early concerns that the identification of 'visible' minorities implies labelling them as deviant and contributes to division and disadvantage (Ballard, 1997), appear largely to have given way to the belief that inequities cannot be rectified without good

data. Nevertheless, as research addressing ethnic inequality increases, so too do concerns about the scientific and ethical rigour of such work. Common criticisms include: inappropriate representations of ethnic groups as stable, discrete entities; failure to address concerns of minority ethnic people; and inadequate consideration of social, historical and political dimensions (Gunaratnam, 2003; Kalra, 2006). These criticisms reflect the significant challenges facing ethnic inequalities research. Here we highlight some central conceptual, methodological and ethical issues that deserve attention.

Conceptualising ethnicity

The term 'ethnicity' is employed in diverse and contradictory ways in social research as well as in wider societal discourse. In its most generic form, 'ethnicity' represents a form of social or group identity, drawing on notions of shared origins or ancestry. However, different conceptualisations emphasise different aspects of such group identity and view the processes of ethnic identification very differently. Some conceptualisations emphasise cultural commonality, identifying shared beliefs and behaviours, sameness and belonging – essentially an internal identification. In contrast, other conceptualisations emphasise geographical origins and shared biological features among ethnic group members. Still others focus on socio-political dimensions, viewing ethnicity as the process through which boundaries between hierarchically organised groups are constructed, with an emphasis on external labelling, discrimination and disadvantage. Some conceptualisations invoke a combination of all three of these dimensions, identifying ethnicity as a 'biosocial' or 'biocultural' concept. There is also variation in the extent to which the boundaries and characteristics of ethnic groups are seen as fixed and stable. While some researchers work with ethnic categories as if they are clearly bounded and secure, it is increasingly argued that identities must be seen as fluid; in a continual state of becoming (Hall, 1996; Bradby, 2003). Social researchers are also encouraged to make explicit in their research the multifaceted nature of ethnicity and the varied influences it may have on experiences and outcomes.

Framing research questions

A focus on ethnic inequalities tends to frame research studies in terms of comparisons between sets of individuals categorised as belonging to discrete ethnic 'groups'. Such an approach may identify areas of inequity. However, employing discrete categorical variables is challenging for those who regard ethnicity as fluid and context-specific. Furthermore, a fuller understanding of why ethnic inequalities arise and how they might be addressed is only likely through exploration of the processes of ethnic identification. Where researchers are constrained to work with ethnic categories, it is worth considering whether a study:

- avoids presenting ethnic categories as taken-for-granted, natural or neutral
- explores similarities as well as differences across ethnic groups
- adequately considers underlying dimension(s) of ethnicity and their relevance
- over-emphasises ethnicity, to the exclusion of other social identifiers
- is important to, and engages meaningfully with, those who are the subject of the research.

Operationalising ethnicity

Any attempt at producing ethnic categories (however refined) will not circumvent the fundamental tension that exists in fixing socially mediated identities that are inherently complex and variable. Furthermore, categorisation schemes and nomenclature vary over time and place, as illustrated by ongoing revisions to the UK census codes. This fluidity of categories and labels challenges their meaningfulness, comparison and synthesis (Morning, 2008). However, researchers can nonetheless seek to identify the best available categorisation for the study in hand (Ellison, 2005).

An important consideration is whether the categories chosen are adequate proxies for the factors of interest in the current study (be these cultural, socio-political or genealogical). Particular categorisations will have greater utility in some studies than others. For instance, Salway (2007) argued that the collective ethnic category 'South Asian' was inappropriate for understanding women's employment patterns and instead used the more refined categories of 'Indian', 'Pakistani' and 'Bangladeshi'. In contrast, Ali et al. (2006) in their study of GP-patient interactions used the broader category 'South Asian' and found the finer distinctions neither relevant nor necessary.

Often, researchers interested to explore ethnic inequalities must rely on secondary data collected using standardised, statutory classifications. Where new data can be collected there are pros and cons to adopting bespoke rather than standardised classifications. For instance, UK census categories have been criticised for being ethnocentric and conceptually confused (Ballard, 1997). Such standardised categories may also be imprecise measures of the dimension(s) of ethnicity under investigation. For example, the census category 'Black African' has doubtful utility in many contexts because of the substantial heterogeneity in national origins, religion, and language it conceals (Aspinall and Chinouya, 2008). However, statutory categories have often undergone substantial testing to ensure acceptability and meaning

to respondents (ONS, 2003); a factor that may influence how research findings are received and acted upon. Moreover, standardised categories facilitate comparisons and comprehensive data on population size (denominators) will usually only be available for statutory categories. A final issue is how ethnic category should be assigned. Self-reported ethnicity will best reflect individual perceptions of who we are and some argue this is the only accurate and ethical way to measure ethnicity. Nonetheless, assignment of ethnicity by a third party may also be appropriate, particularly when the focus is on external ethnic identification and treatment of 'others'.

Samples

Studies aiming to describe and explain ethnic inequalities can adopt either an exclusive or a comparative sampling strategy. Exclusive strategies recruit participants from just one ethnic group and are justified when an issue only, or disproportionately, affects the population concerned, or has not previously been adequately studied with regard to that group. In exclusive designs, comparisons may be drawn with earlier findings from other ethnic groups. In quantitative work, such exclusive samples should be representative of the wider population that could be categorised as belonging to the ethnic group involved. In qualitative work the exclusive sample drawn will relate to the wider group in a more theoretical or interpretive way. Bearing in mind the tendency for research to stereotype the experiences of minority ethnic groups, qualitative samples will often usefully capture a diverse set of respondents.

Comparative sampling strategies recruit participants from two or more ethnic groups to assess any similarities or differences in the area of interest. The ethnic categories used should capture equivalent levels of intra-group diversity and focus on comparable dimensions of ethnic identity (be these cultural, socio-political or genealogical). These are technical issues that need not undermine simple descriptive comparisons but require careful consideration when aiming to explore causal relations between ethnicity and outcomes. Similar concerns arise in qualitative work when the groups sampled do not include individuals with uniform or meaningful experiences, and thereby can lead to misleading interpretations. However, the qualitative researcher has greater flexibility to investigate ethnic group identification and, if appropriate, to modify the sampling strategy as analysis proceeds. Comparative sampling strategies, whether quantitative or qualitative, should also generate an equivalent volume of data for each ethnic group of interest, to ensure that any comparisons are not compromised by spurious findings from smaller samples. In quantitative surveys, so-called boosted samples are often used to generate adequate samples for minority ethnic groups (e.g. the new longitudinal survey *Understanding Society*). Without such boosts the sample sizes of minority ethnic groups in representative samples will usually be too small to sustain comparative analyses.

Finally, effective recruitment of research participants from different ethnic groups may mean tailored information, utilisation of varied networks, and additional resources (McLean and Campbell, 2003). Researchers should also be alert to the dangers of over-researching particular ethnic groups leading to fatigue, particularly where there has been poor translation of findings into positive change.

Generating data

Since ethnicity can be a proxy for a wide range of factors, studies that seek to do more than simply document inequalities between ethnic groups must generate data on a variety of potentially important dimensions. Effectively capturing processes of discrimination and exclusion may require innovative tools (Pollack, 2003). Researching ethnic inequalities will also frequently imply working across languages and cultural contexts, requiring careful attention to measurement validity and rigorous translation procedures (Behling and Law, 2000). More generally, researchers must be alert to the possibility that data generation approaches operate differently among different ethnic groups. Further, the identity of the data gatherer and interactions with research participants deserve attention, although notions of 'insider' and 'outsider' status are complex and there are no simple rules regarding ethnic matching (Gunaratnam, 2003).

Analyses and interpretation

While comparative analyses between ethnic groups may be useful in flagging up inequalities, caution is needed. Importantly, researchers must avoid interpreting ethnic associations as explanations. Analyses should seek to identify underlying causal factors rather than simply inferring their existence. Where data on causal attributes are unavailable the interpretation of associations can only be speculative. Furthermore, even where a wide range of data is available (such as language, cultural beliefs, experiences of racism and so on), relevant variables, such as historical factors or wider social structures, are likely to remain beyond the scope of analysis. It is also worth recognising that a focus on ethnic inequalities may obscure diversity within groups and similarities across groups. In both qualitative and quantitative work it will be useful to explore how factors, such as age, gender, class and so on, interrelate with ethnicity. Meanwhile, exploring absolute levels of particular outcomes and drawing

multiple comparisons between groups (rather than simply using a majority White comparator) will help to avoid overlooking important issues facing minority groups when they are similar to those experienced by the majority.

Representation and dissemination

Several ethical issues have been mentioned above including the failure to address topics of concern to minority ethnic people; poor translation of findings into positive action; and over-researching particular groups. A further concern is the potential for group harm that can ensue from research into ethnic inequalities. Particular care is needed in the presentation of findings. Researchers should manage the (mis) interpretation and (mis)use of their findings by the media and others to avoid stigmatising and pathologising particular ethnic groups. As with all good social research, effective communication to different stakeholders will require tailored approaches, but particular care is needed to ensure that the subjects of research have ready access to findings in formats that are accessible and relevant.

Conclusions

Many of the issues raised above—clear conceptualisation, careful measurement, strategic sampling, rigorous analyses and accurate representation—are general matters of social scientific rigour. However, at the heart of these issues is the tension between treating ethnicity as one of the major social divisions in modern societies and avoiding giving it essentialist explanatory power. Researching ethnic inequalities presents significant conceptual and methodological challenges. Furthermore, there are real concerns that poor research may do more harm than good. This *Update* aims to help researchers recognise and navigate the issues. While there are no simple answers, critical reflexivity and a cautious approach to interpretation can go a long way to improving the quality of research and the usefulness of findings.

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