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Ethnic Statistics: Better than Nothing or Worse than Nothing?

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Standard categories of ethnicity are often not appropriate

Introduction

Ethnicity is an important facet of self and group identity. However, its operationalisation into a concise, valid and reliable question has proved difficult. Further, the politics and pragmatics of ethnic or 'race' statistics have generated considerable debate. Those in favour include both those who wish to use statistical evidence to affect progressive change for minority ethnic groups and those who wish to propagate fears about the loss of British character because of the increasing number of non-white Britons. Those against have argued that the collection of statistical data gives the illusion of progress; that we already have ample evidence to promote positive change rather than constantly demanding more, finer and bigger datasets; and that statistics can be and often are used against the minorities rather than in their support. This chapter explores some of these problems. To begin with, however, I address issues in defining ethnicity.

Ethnic statistics: what are we measuring?

Among the concepts invoked by 'ethnicity' are culture, heritage, community, language, religion, lineage, geographical origin and shared symbolic elements ranging from food to clothes and rituals. Like many other identity claims, it is also flexible and situational, and, as Bulmer (1996, p. 35) notes, 'Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to the group'. Such identity claims are not infinitely flexible; nor are they impervious to external relations. Others' reactions and responses to our identity claims confirm or question our notions of selfhood and may lead to the repackaging of identities. Resistance to external impositions of identity is also an important consideration; it may lead to a reinterpretation of values and symbols as in 'black is beautiful'. Ethnicity, then, is an important means of identification; and particular aspects of ethnicity become important in particular relationships, historical periods and geographical locations. In Pakistan, for example, language is an important symbol of ethnic affiliation; conflicts in

Karachi between the *mohajirs* ('immigrants' from India during the 1947 partition) and others were termed *lissani jhagrdey*; literally, language battles. In Kashmir, struggles around self-determination are focused on a discourse of ethnicity which places religion and nationhood centre stage. Berthoud (1998) notes the differences in key distinguishing factors between different places:

If you look around the world, the lines of cleavage will vary from place to place. In Northern Ireland it is religious denomination. In Quebec it is language. In Belgium it is both of those in combination. In Bosnia, the gap is between those of Muslim and of Christian background; but in Croatia there are equally clear ethnic boundaries where religion is not relevant.

This flexibility and interconnectedness of ethnicity poses problems when one attempts to operationalise it into questions about ethnic identity. In relation to ethnicity, social policy has been closely associated with considerations of colour and culture, although the relative emphasis of the two has shifted. The multiculturalism of the late 1960s and 1970s conceptualised the 'race problem' in terms of cultural difference. The more radical anti-racism of the 1980s reconceptualised it in terms of racism and marginalisation. Attempts at ethnic categorisation encompass this duality of conceptualising non-white minority groups: white people are just that, 'white'; ethnicity resides in those who are different in culture and colour. As Berthoud (1998) notes, in Britain, 'the primary line of cleavage is based on colour. This is a characteristic which has undoubtedly been derived from one's family; and it has geographical associations common in ethnic differentiation'. However, as we will note, the assumption that colour (above religion or culture) is the non-negotiable part of ethnicity, and uniquely associated with discrimination, is challenged by many.

One anomalous variable in relation to ethnicity is religion – both in its status in law, and its relation to ethnicity (*see also* Chapter 17). British law, peculiarly, affords privileges to certain religions and 'religions/ethnicities'. Blasphemy laws cover only Christianity. Religious discrimination is outlawed in Northern Ireland. In Britain, the adherents of Judaism and Sikhism are formally defined as 'ethnicities' and thus protected under the race relations legislation, while those professing Islam, Hinduism and other religions are not. Further, Muslims contest the claims that colour is the major line of cleavage between groups; there is mounting evidence that Muslims experience forms of oppression and discrimination which are associated with their religion; colour discrimination is secondary for many. Following the Rushdie affair of the late 1980s, numerous cases of open discrimination against Muslims have been reported, and religious discrimination remains legal.

If we accept ethnicity to be a fuzzy, flexible and contingent concept then it follows that people's self-definitions of ethnic affiliation will be situational, will vary between people and time, and will be dependent on circumstances. I may regard myself as Pakistani, Asian or Punjabi; indeed, I do carry these as important aspects of my identity. Nor are these the only ethnic affiliations I allow myself. Within Punjabis there are cleavages by regional dialects and caste-like divisions. In terms of administrative statistics, then, ethnic self-definition, because of its variability and flexibility, is fraught with problems. Operationalisation of ethnicity in a standard and intelligent manner therefore is important if statistics are to have validity and reliability.

Early attempts at operationalising ethnicity, however, have been crude: defining non-white minorities, for example, at the level of 'born in the New Commonwealth' in some health statistics. (For a fervent criticism of past work on ethnicity and health *see* Chapter 25.) Table 16.1 shows more recent conceptualisations with similarities and differences between them. Significantly, CCETSW, an organisation centrally involved in anti-racist practice in the 1980s and early 1990s, gives importance to 'racial origin' in addition to 'ethnic origin'.

One casualty of any operationalisation of 'ethnicity' is that the resultant questions will be constraining and rigid. Most attempts also show other confusion. This confusion is also shared by the 1991 census question (Figure 16.1); *see* Coleman and Salt (1996) for accounts of other statistical series relating to minority ethnic communities. Two questions in the census related to ethnicity; the first (on country of birth) indirectly, the second (on ethnic group) directly. Country of birth cannot be directly related to ethnicity because of the substantial number of 'white' Britons born in pre-independence India, and an increasing number of minority ethnic people born in the UK. In the 1991 census, out of a total of 1.51 million non-white people, 0.7 million (46 per cent) were born in the UK (Salt, 1996). Question 11 asks about belonging to a particular 'ethnic group'. Those answering 'Black – Other' are invited to describe this; those ticking the final category 'Any other ethnic group' are asked for description with the additional instruction: 'If the person is descended from more than one ethnic or racial group, please tick the group to which the person considers he/she belongs, or tick the "Any other ethnic group" box and describe the person's ancestry in the space provided.' The ethnic question in the census is an amalgam of categories based on colour (white, black), notions of national background (Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian), and geographical origin. The difficulties in formulating a satisfactory

Table 16.1 Some non-census ethnic and racial classifications

<i>Local government (Application for planning permission, Islington, north London)</i>	<i>Quango (Application for Diploma in Social Work, CCETSW)</i>	<i>University (Oxford University survey questionnaire)</i>	<i>Official survey (National Dwelling Housing Survey, 1978)</i>
African	Racial origin:	White	White
Caribbean	Black	Black (Caribbean)	West Indian
Other black	Black (African)		Indian
Indian	Other	Black (other)	Pakistani
Pakistani	Ethnic origin:	Indian	Bangladeshi
Bangladeshi	African	Bangladeshi	Chinese
Chinese	Caribbean	Chinese	Turkish
Asian (other)	Indian	Asian (other)	African
Greek/Cypriot	Pakistani	Other	Arab
Turkish/Cypriot	Bangladeshi		Other
Irish	Chinese		
White	European (UK)		
Mixed/other	European (other)		
	Other		
	Welsh-speaking		
	Religion (NI only)		

Source: Coleman and Salt (1996, p. 12)

10 Country of birth

Please tick the appropriate box

If the 'Elsewhere' box is ticked, please write in the present name of the country in which the birthplace is now situated

- England ☐ 1
Scotland ☐ 2
Wales ☐ 3
Northern Ireland ☐ 4
Irish Republic ☐ 5
Elsewhere ☐

If elsewhere, please write in the present name of the country

11 Ethnic group

Please tick the appropriate box

- White ☐ 0
Black – Caribbean ☐ 1
Black – African ☐ 2
Black – Other ☐
please describe

- Indian ☐ 3
Pakistani ☐ 4
Bangladeshi ☐ 5
Chinese ☐ 6

Any other ethnic group ☐
please describe

If the person is descended from more than one ethnic or racial group, please tick the group to which the person considers he/she belongs, or tick the 'Any other ethnic group' box and describe the person's ancestry in the space provided.

Figure 16.1 Questions on country of birth and ethnic groups in the 1991 census of population

Source: 1991 census of population, enumeration form for private households, reproduced in Bulmer (1996), Crown copyright

question must not be underestimated; *see* Bulmer (1996) for accounts of some of these difficulties. However, the current categories appear conceptually haphazard and the current formulation suffers from some particular problems; we return to this later.

Statistics and social policy: why collect ethnic data?

Leech (1989), Bhrolchain (1990), Bulmer (1996), and others have summarised arguments for and against ethnic data collection. Only a brief and selective summary of these arguments is presented here.

A number of arguments can be put forward for ethnic data collection. One is that ethnic data collection is not different, in principle, from other forms of data collection in that such data represent a requirement of policy formulation and

implementation, Ahmad and Sheldon (1993) summarise six main benefits of ethnic data collection. First, some sources of government funding have been available for work on or with minority ethnic groups; to apply for such funding, local authorities need figures for the numbers and the make-up of minority ethnic groups in their area. Second, with detailed and appropriate statistics, authorities and other agencies can tailor their services appropriately. Third, ethnic data can help in siting services in appropriate localities. Fourth, they can provide evidence of discrimination both generally, and at different levels within an organisation, which can then be tackled. Fifth, they provide baseline or targeted data for policy formulation and implementation. Sixth, minority ethnic groups can use and have themselves used such research for campaigning purposes.

Recent work by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) (Modood *et al.*, 1997) gives evidence of diversity within the minority ethnic groups, as well as disadvantage experienced by many groups. Without ethnic data, the differences in the trajectories of different minority ethnic groups would be difficult to identify. Many powerful organisations, including the Commission for Racial Equality and the Runnymede Trust, have supported ethnic data collection in the census and ethnic monitoring to ensure equity of employment and access to services in statutory, independent and voluntary-sector organisations. Indeed, evidence on discrimination, from *ad hoc* studies as well as the repeated Policy Studies Institute Surveys, has contributed to Britain's having anti-discrimination legislation. However, not all regard ethnic data collection as having benign intentions or positive outcomes.

Arguments against ethnic data collection are of varying kinds. The greatest fear is perhaps about their use against the minority ethnic groups. From the days of Queen Elizabeth I's repatriation of non-white people to safeguard 'public relief' for white citizens to current times, measurement of difference has been associated with containing and controlling diversity. Statistics about immigration and about crimes, for example, have been used as justification of punitive and selective immigration control and oppressive policing, respectively. The distrust of official data collection by some minority groups and many white critics is therefore not mere paranoia. An organised campaign of non-cooperation with census tests before the 1981 census led to the abandonment of the ethnic question in that census. Similar fears of abuse have been expressed in other European countries and in North America, as Leech (1989) notes; *see also* Coleman and Salt (1996). This distrust was partially responsible for the considerable under-counting of certain minority ethnic groups in the 1991 census.

A second fear is that ethnic data collection becomes an end in itself rather than a vehicle for formulating, implementing or evaluating policy. Further, critics argue that there is no further need to prove racial discrimination and that the situation of minority ethnic groups remains poor. This rests on the lack of political will to effect change; having more, or finer, data will not change this. And, although having off-the-shelf categories allows for standardised data collection, their utility for social policy remains questionable; standardisation without utility is of little value. As Ahmad and Sheldon (1993) note:

Let us take the example of a health authority that wishes to improve its employment practices and its service delivery with regard to minority ethnic groups. For employment monitoring the type of data used in the Census may have some validity, though we suspect that some of the categories are too

broad in order to be of particular use. To offer appropriate diet these categories become meaningless. 'Indian', 'Black Caribbean', 'Black African', for example, tell nothing about diet habits. An 'Indian' may be a Punjabi, Bengali or Gujarati; Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Christian; vegetarian or meat eater, and amongst meat eaters requiring (or wanting) halal meat or non-halal meat; rice eater or chapati eater. If the same authority wishes to improve its interpreting services then the category 'Indian' tells it nothing about the mix of languages spoken (for example, Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali).

One fear is that use of standard categories dissuades data collectors from thinking through the information they need for their purposes and collecting relevant policy-oriented data. General-purpose, routine data collection may not be sufficiently targeted to identify or address many social policy issues.

Third, state definitions of needs and financial support for these needs have resulted in minority groups' packaging and repackaging themselves into relatively arbitrary collectivities; identities become created in response to how the state defines groups and communities. For example, the anti-racist era witnessed some initiatives at the level of 'black', encouraging collective organisation between local non-white populations. Within this discourse, the non-white colour and shared experience of racism became the most salient symbol of self and group identification, above notions of shared history, language, religion and area of origin. More generally, the now defunct Section 11 funding encouraged repackaging in terms of 'culturally specific' need or 'integration' into the wider society.

Finally, ethnic statistics hide as much as they reveal. Internal diversity becomes hidden under what is regarded as the primary identity. This is what has been referred to as 'racialisation' (Ahmad, 1993; *see also* Chapter 25). Nazroo, for example, in Chapter 25, shows how ethnic inequalities in health become substantially diminished when controls for socio-economic positions are employed in comparisons. Over-reliance on ethnic data, accompanied by a neglect of socio-economic disadvantage, is in danger of pathologising the very minority ethnic groups which these data purport to support.

Some problems with the ethnic question in the census

Problems of ethnic categorisation generally apply equally to the census. Three issues are worth highlighting in particular. First, the category 'White' is problematic for a number of reasons. It posits white people as the 'norm' against whom the 'ethnic difference' of others is measured. Further, it privileges white colour and broad European heritage over other identity claims; thus the linguistic and other service needs of Eastern Europeans, racialised discrimination experienced by the Irish, the high rates of coronary heart disease experienced by the Scots, go uncharted. Nor is the 'Country of birth' question any defence against this, with increasing numbers of people of non-UK heritage being born here. Importantly, many 'white' people find it offensive to have their identities reduced to a colour.

The two other major considerations apply to the 'Black other' category, and to identification of mixed ethnic group, as noted by Berthoud (1998), among others. The difficulty in the case of the 'Black other' category resides in its ambiguity, which has encouraged hundreds of thousands of people, who in the census terms

would be classed 'Black Caribbeans', to record their ethnicity as 'Black other' (Ballard and Kalra, 1994) – a confusion confirmed in the PSI's Fourth National Survey, which tested the link between 'family origin' and 'ethnic group' (Berthoud, 1998). The vast majority of those born abroad gave both their 'family origin' (92 per cent) and their 'ethnic group' (94 per cent) as 'Black Caribbean'. In contrast, for those Caribbeans born in Britain, whereas 80 per cent gave their 'family origin' as 'Black Caribbean', only 62 per cent gave this as their 'ethnic group'; a further 23 per cent described themselves as 'Black British'. This ambiguity needs to be addressed in the next census and in routine data collection using the census categories (*see* Chapter 2).

There is a greater problem in categorising those of mixed ethnic origin. In the PSI survey 39 per cent of Black Caribbean and 15 per cent of Chinese had one white parent (Berthoud, 1998). The 1991 census showed that 39.5 per cent of Black Caribbean and 15.8 per cent of the Chinese had a white partner (Coleman and Salt, 1996, p. 200). If one considers mixed unions by generation, more younger Black Caribbean (aged 16–34) people had a white partner than did older people (aged 35–59); the proportion increased from under 4 per cent (older) to over 6 per cent (younger) for Pakistani men and 0.6 per cent to over 2 per cent for women; and increased from 12 to 16 per cent for Chinese men. Indian men and women showed similar rates between the two generations (around 7 per cent and 4 per cent for men and women, respectively); Chinese women showed a drop from 26 per cent among older women to 22 per cent (still a high proportion) of younger women being in mixed ethnic relationships. Mixed ethnicity is a fact of life of modern-day Britain; it looks set to increase overall, even in populations which until recently have experienced relatively few ethnically mixed unions. This creates problems for ethnic data collection. How does one accurately or meaningfully capture the ethnic identity of those of mixed-ethnicity parentage? And whereas the suggestion in the census question for people of mixed ethnicity to assign themselves to that ethnic group to which they consider they belong, is based on assumptions of self-assignment of ethnicity, such self-assignment is not entirely without problems. Self-assignment also needs to be accepted by the selected group for the individual to have meaningful ethnic group membership. Further, the census also invites people to place themselves in the 'Any other ethnic group' box and give a description. This is a recipe for considerable confusion, with some 'mixed ethnicity' people assigning themselves to one specific ethnic group and others being described as of 'mixed ethnicity'.

Berthoud's (1998) proposed solution is to have a question about the ethnicity of both the mother's and father's family (Table 16.2). While this will be an improvement on the current question, it is, at best, a partial solution (it does not address the issue of 'White' ethnicity at all). With considerable numbers of respondents not just being of mixed ethnicity themselves, but having one or both parents of mixed ethnicity, this formulation has a short shelf-life.

Solutions to these difficulties are not easy to find. However, without credible responses, the ethnicity data for some may continue to lack credibility, will not provide maximum utility and will need to be used with caution.

Table 16.2 What are your family's ethnic origins?

	<i>Your mother's family</i>	<i>Your father's family</i>
White	1	1
Black Caribbean	2	2
Black African	3	3
Black other	4	4
Indian	5	5
Pakistani	6	6
Bangladeshi	7	7
Chinese	8	8
Asian other	9	9
Other	10	10

Source: Berthoud (1998)

Ethnic data: better than nothing or worse than nothing?

Debates on the ethics and utility of ethnicity statistics will continue. Operationalising what is essentially a flexible and interconnected concept into a small number of categories which are meaningful to respondents, are valid and reliable, and have social policy utility is a tough task. The varied attempts at doing this have only partially succeeded. The changing demography means that classifications have to keep pace with social change – a difficult task in itself and one which leads to difficulties in historical comparisons. Nor should the objections to routine ethnic data collection be brushed aside as paranoia or scaremongering. The populations who have objected have legitimate fears (Leech, 1989). Equally, ethnic data collection can facilitate policy development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. But with one proviso: the presence of a political will to effect positive change.

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