

Social research for our multiethnic society: are UK researchers adequately trained and supported?

Social researchers are increasingly required to produce evidence that informs policy and practice development for the UK's multiethnic population. In particular, there is demand for better understanding of i) the patterns and causes of ethnic inequalities in receipt and experience of public services and ii) outcomes across diverse arenas including employment, education and health. However, appropriately and sensitively researching ethnic diversity raises a host of challenges. Indeed, social research in this area may do more harm than good (Salway et al., 2009).

This article reports on a recent consultation with representatives of Government social research departments (n=6) and private research agencies [PRA] (n=8). Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted to identify current practice, concerns and support needs in relation to researching ethnicity.

Deciding when and how to address ethnic diversity:

Research addressing the needs and experiences of ethnic minorities was an important focus across both groups, with four respondents in each reporting specific research programmes and others indicating some relevant activity. Four Government respondents described departmental processes for deciding whether a research project should include attention to ethnic diversity. Of the remaining two, one reported that no such process is currently in place, and the other that their work always addresses ethnic diversity. Among the PRAs, no explicit procedures were in place for deciding when to address ethnic diversity. Instead decisions were based on experience (5) or recommendations from commissioners/ partners (3).

Four Government respondents saw no challenges for their organisation regarding when and how to research ethnic diversity and considered themselves to be experts in the field. This finding should be set against other research which suggests that social research frequently: employs inappropriate conceptualisations of ethnic 'groups'; fails to address issues of concern to minority ethnic people; lacks cultural competence; and fails to incorporate a broader social, historical and political analysis of ethnicity (Gunaratnam, 2003; Kalra, 2006). The other two respondents highlighted several methodological and practical challenges, and saw these as ongoing given the complex and fluid nature of ethnic identification in UK society. Three PRA respondents saw some challenges in deciding when to address ethnic diversity and seven in identifying *how* to do this. Communicating the reasons for addressing ethnic diversity to commissioners was another challenge. No explicit written guidance regarding *how* to address ethnic diversity in research was reported for the PRAs. However, one Government respondent highlighted that their department had developed written guidance to deal, in part, with this issue.

The need for guidance

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Eleven participants responded positively when asked whether guidance on when and how to address ethnic diversity in research would be helpful. The remaining three (two Government and one PRA respondent) thought, however, that guidance would be helpful to other organisations. The most popular format for guidance was a website coupled with tailored consultancy support. Opportunities for staged and flexible learning were felt to be important, as well as concrete examples of good practice, rather than simply checklists of pitfalls to avoid.

The most common issues requiring guidance included: when and why to include attention to ethnic diversity; ethnic categories and labels; working across languages; working with community researchers; and researching 'invisible minorities'. Government respondents also stressed that guidance should ideally pay attention to the other diversity strands (particularly gender and disability).

A way forward

This consultation suggests that many UK social researchers need to be able to research ethnic diversity but feel they lack the skills to do so appropriately. Further, it seems likely that brief guidance checklists will be insufficient to prompt improved practice and that a more comprehensive web-based learning resource would be helpful. Such a resource will need to engage with researchers who are novices in the area as well as those who regard themselves as experts (but who would nevertheless benefit from ongoing development and self-critique).

This consultation forms part of a larger project funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Visit <http://research.shu.ac.uk/ethics-ethnicity/> to find out more or contact Sarah Salway at s.salway@shu.ac.uk. Project team members: Ruth Barley, George Ellison, Peter Allmark, Gina Higginbottom and Kate Gerrish.

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