

From Pitfalls to Principles: Conducting Applied Social Research on Ethnic Inequalities

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From Pitfalls to Principles

Pitfalls exist at each stage of the research process:

1. *Conceptualisation of ethnicity*
2. *Framing research questions*
3. *Operationalisation of ethnicity*
4. *Research Design*
5. *Data generation*
6. *Data analysis and interpretation*

There are also broader concerns about...

7. *Ethical issues*

as well as practical concerns about...

8. *Research skills and experience*

of the researchers available.

Pitfall 1: *Conceptualisation*

- Ethnicity is employed in diverse and potentially contradictory ways as:
 - a sociopolitical concept
 - a cultural concept
 - a genealogical concept
- Ethnicity can be viewed as either:
 - discrete, fixed and stable or
 - diffuse, flexible and unstable
- Ethnicity can be viewed as either:
 - self-assigned or
 - other-ascribed
- Ethnicity can be viewed as either:
 - self-determined or
 - heritable

in practice,
ethnicity is
essentially a
combination
of all of
these things

Pitfall 2: *Framing Questions*

- A focus on (potential) ethnic inequalities tends to frame research in terms of comparisons between discrete ethnic categories
- Studies that use ethnic categories may not be well-placed to explore how inequalities arise alongside the processes of ethnic identification
- Research focussing on ethnic inequalities is therefore at increased risk of:
 - taking ethnic categories as 'givens'
 - emphasising differences over similarities
 - emphasising ethnicity over other attributes
 - generating simplistic findings
 - adopting an ethnocentric approach
- **It is important to identify any prior assumptions**

Pitfall 3: *Operationalisation*

- Any attempt to 'fix' ethnicity using categories cannot be entirely successful
- Categorisations therefore vary:
 - over time and
 - from one context to the next
- Variation in categorisations undermine their utility in comparative analyses
- Multi-faceted nature of ethnicity undermines the utility of any one category in aetiological analyses:
 - sociopolitical causes?
 - cultural causes?
 - genealogical causes?
- **Operationalisation must match research aims**

Pitfall 3: *Operationalisation*

Standardised versus bespoke categories?

- Benefits of standardised categories:
 - tested to ensure acceptability and salience
 - facilitate comparisons
- Problems with standardised categories:
 - ethnocentric and conceptually confused
 - imprecise measures of causal characteristics

Self-assigned or observer-ascribed ethnicity?

- Benefits of self-assigned ethnicity:
 - feasibility and validity
- Benefits of other-ascribed ethnicity:
 - feasibility and validity
- **Operationalisation must match research aims**

Pitfall 4: *Research Design*

- *Research designs* – The three aims of research into ethnic inequalities require different designs:
 - Descriptive (to expose differences)
 - Aetiological (to explore differences)
 - Therapeutic (to address differences)
- *Categorisation* – The analytical utility of categories will be determined by whether they:
 - capture equivalent levels of heterogeneity
 - reflect the causal characteristic(s) responsible
- *Sampling* – There are three sample frames:
 - Representative (unequal samples)
 - Exclusive (only one group included)
 - Boosted (equal sample sizes)
- **Research designs must match research aims**

Pitfall 5: *Data Generation*

- Research that aims to go beyond *describing* ethnic inequalities, must collect data on:
 - sociopolitical/structural processes,
 - cultural processes and
 - genealogical processes... to identify the relative importance of each
- Researching different ethnic groups may need to consider the impact of:
 - linguistic issues and
 - cultural issues... on the comparability of data collected
- **Data generation must match research aims**

Pitfall 6: Analysis and Interpretation

- Research that focuses on ethnic differences can be at risk of:
 - adopting an ethnocentric approach; or
 - emphasising relative over absolute risks
- Research that identifies ethnic differences is at risk of being interpreted as evidence that:
 - ethnic groups are inherently different;
 - ethnicity causes the differences; or
 - one aspect of ethnicity causes the differences
- Where data on all potential causal characteristics are not available, any interpretation of difference will be incomplete and speculative
- **Interpretation must not go beyond the data**

Pitfall 7: *Ethics*

- Research that fails to adopt samples that are ethnically-representative will be unable to generate evidence applicable to all ethnic groups
- Research that fails to adopt boosted samples will not generate robust evidence of inequalities
- Research that focuses on differences between categorised ethnic groups can be at risk of:
 - reification (the ethnic categories are ‘real’)
 - essentialisation (ethnicity is innate)
 - stereotyping (ethnic groups are different)
 - stigmatisation (ethnicity is value-laden)
- Research that focuses on ethnic inequalities can require more intensive research on minorities
- **Research must balance group benefits and risks**

Pitfall 8: *Research Team Skills*

- Research into ethnic inequalities requires expertise in:
 - conceptualisation
 - operationalisation
 - research design
 - analysis and interpretation
- Participatory approaches that draw on the views, aspirations and expertise of the ethnic groups involved are essential for:
 - framing research questions;
 - generating data; and
 - interpreting findings
- **Research teams benefit from ethnic diversity**

social research Update

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