Ethical practice and scientific standards in researching ethnicity: methodological challenges of conducting a literature review.

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Background & objectives

Forming part of the larger project ' Ethnic diversity in UK social science and public policy research: a consultation and development exercise to produce guidelines for sound scientific and ethical practice', this review of existing published research literature was intended to identify and summarise the key issues and themes that researchers have recognised in relation to ethical practice and scientific standards in researching race/ethnicity within the social sciences. The review was not intended to provide an exhaustive account of all research papers that have dealt with these issues, but rather to document the range of key themes that arise from the disparate disciplines within the social sciences. Our aim was to gain an understanding of the breadth of issues that have been identified, rather than to ascertain how prevalent particular themes are within the literature. This approach was warranted since the broader objective was to identify issues for potential inclusion within the guidance documents for researchers and commissioners of research that the project aims to produce (see project proposal). The review was also intended to be replicable.

Systematic sampling of papers for review

Initially a systematic review was partially undertaken to address these aims using a computerised search of Sheffield Hallam University's library catalogue and online databases. Using Sheffield Hallam University's Library and Information Services key databases were identified for each of the following disciplines: sociology, social policy, geography, education, social work, health, psychology, economics, business, anthropology, linguistics, criminology and housing.

A pilot scheme of 'hand searched' articles was conducted in order to establish key words to use in searching for articles. These key words were then split up into two groups and at least one term from each group was used in each search query.

The first group of words were substantive terms. In the initial stages the following terms were used:

ethnic*, rac*, cultur*, minority, religion, language

The second group of terms used were intended to focus the search on papers that dealt specifically with conceptual/theoretical or methodological issues. They were:

method*, concept*, measur*, research*, theor*

A combination of terms was used to search for relevant articles and book chapters.

An initial search revealed that looking for these terms in the full text of an article was not productive. In particular, the vast majority of papers include the term 'method*' but do not necessarily engage in a discussion of methodological issues as a particular focus. Similarly it was discovered that searching for these terms in the abstract produced a wide range of articles that were not relevant to the task in hand. It was therefore decided that the search would be restricted to hunting for these terms in the title (article and journal titles) of the paper, on the assumption that papers that use these terms in the title are more likely to engage in a focused discussion of the issues of interest.

Even with this restriction, many papers were identified that were not irrelevant. One clear example of this is through the use of the search term 'cultur*'. This search picked out biological uses of this term as well as sociological and anthropological, so that papers such as *'Which is the best method to trace group A streptococci in sore throat patients: culture or GAS antigen test?'* by Hjortdahl et al (2004) were identified via the search strategy but excluded from the review. Another example was the use of the search terms 'language' and 'measur*' which identified papers such as Fenson et al's (2000) paper '*Measuring Variability in Early Child Language: Don't Shoot the Messenger'* which discusses early child development within the search strategy.

Following the identification of potentially relevant papers using the search terms described above, a process of selection of papers for further review was undertaken. In some cases (as above) the title of a paper revealed its relevance or irrelevance. When this was not the case, the abstract was read to identify the focus of the paper more clearly. In order for a paper to be included within the review, it had to include a focused discussion on at least one of the following issues:

1. Whether and when race/ethnicity should be considered as an axis of investigation within social science research
2. Whether and when social science studies should include samples including minority ethnic individuals
3. How the concepts of race and/or ethnicity should be theorised within social science research
4. The scientific principles and standards that should be employed in research that includes attention to race/ethnicity
5. The ethical issues relating to inclusion/exclusion of race/ethnicity within social science research.

It was soon noted, however, that some key papers would not be identified by the above approach because their titles do not include the key words being utilised. This was particularly true within the fields of sociology and anthropology (though other disciplines were also affected) where authors are inclined to choose esoteric titles for their papers. One example of a paper that we know to be relevant to the project but which was not included in our search findings is Miri Song and David Parker's (1995) sociological paper *Commonality, Difference and Dynamics of Disclosure in in-depth interviewing.* This is just one example of a key paper that the research team had already identified. Clearly, there was the potential for the search strategy identified above to overlook many other relevant papers and this

concern indicated the inappropriateness of this approach for the task in hand. While the method described above was systematic, it failed to identify the body of literature that we were concerned to access.

Another problem we discovered was the repetition of large numbers of articles that make the same points. While we want to conduct a review that is replicable and systematic it is not meant to be exhaustive. Its purpose is to give an over-arching perspective on key issues and themes arising from the literature. The above method produces an exhaustive list of articles containing certain terms in their title rather than giving an overview of available literature. For example, within psychology there are large numbers of articles that deal with the issue of cross-cultural assessment and largely raise the same issues. A detailed review of all of these papers would not be the best use of time and resources. The systematic review approach outlined above does not account for this, and neither does it offer a straightforward way of selecting a sub-sample of such papers. For these reasons we decided to abandon the database-led systematic review approach and to find an alterative way of accessing the literature that we sought to summarise.

An alternative approach to sampling papers for review

After a team discussion an alternative approach to identifying key papers for review was developed. First, a list social science journals that focus on race and ethnicity will be identified along with the details of the editors. Editors of these journals will be contacted and asked to identify two or three influential authors and/or papers both from within and outside their own journals. The approach assumes that these editors are specialists in their field and therefore well-placed to identify important papers that have contributed insights relating to the conceptual or methodological issues arising in researching race/ethnicity. This approach will allow us to identify key papers that have been written within the various disciplines the journals cover. Using the expertise of editors to identify papers within their own fields ensures that our review is still replicable. We hope that this will also reduce the possibility of missing important articles in any given discipline, especially those the research team is not particularly familiar with. This approach also ensures that an over-arching perspective of the literature is gained allowing resources and time to be used effectively.

In addition to reviewing key papers that present issues and ideas relating to the ethics and scientific standards of social science research into ethnicity, it was also of interest to explore current practice in this area. We therefore identified a second literature review strategy that aimed to systematically sample a selection of recent social science articles in order to explore their use or non-use of ethnicity. We took the associated journals of the Learned Societies affiliated to the UK Academy of Social Sciences as out starting point. Though clearly not exhaustive of all social science research, the journals linked to the Learned Societies should provide an overview of current research practice across the social science disciplines and provide a replicable approach. In addition, however, because the focus of the larger project is on social policy-relevant research, journals that do not deal with social policy related issues will be excluded from the review. The intention will be (i) to review all papers published within a limited time period to ascertain what proportion of papers dealt with issues of race/ethnicity, and (ii) for a

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sub-sample of papers that did include attention to race/ethnicity, to examine in detail how and why this was done.

<u>Textual Analysis</u>

During the process of designing our initial systematic review, an analysis framework and coding template was also created. While we discovered that the search methods used in our initial review were not effective for this project (and equally when conducting a similar literature review), the analysis framework created as part of our initial methodology is still helpful. It will therefore be used to analyse the papers found using our new search methods.

This framework was developed during the initial stages of conducting our original systematic review. In the initial pilot stage, a selection of 'hand searched' papers which included a focused discussion of at least one of the five areas identified above, were carefully read and key themes extracted which provided the foundation for the content of our analysis framework. After compiling potential themes from ten articles, a matrix was designed which included ten major themes each with a series of sub-themes (or codes). The draft framework was then applied to a further set of papers by two researchers independently in order to identify any additional themes for inclusion, as well as to clarify the meaning and applicability of each theme/code.

Ten major themes were included in the analysis framework. Each theme contains between three and five sub-themes/codes. The layout of the framework is thus as follows[1]:

1. Descriptors (including article source, author and their contact details)
2. Manuscript Characteristics (including subject focus, type of paper and methods used)
3. Agendas and wider Issues (including value base, relationship of research to wider society, funders etc, the reasoning behind including or excluding attention to race and/or ethnicity)
4. Concepts, measurements and design (including conceptual points, study design, methods, measurement tools)
5. Relationship with minority communities (including partnerships and the possibility of group harm)
6. Sampling and recruitment (including exclusion/ inclusion criteria, recruitment strategies)
7. Relationship with participants (including power, control participant harm, communication, consent, confidentiality, anonymity)
8. Analysis and Interpretation (including confounding factors, causation, reflexivity)
9. Representation, reporting and dissemination (including participant voice, representation and dissemination)
10. Relationship with other researchers (including research team make-up, publishing and reviewing)

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[1] A summary of the analysis framework and coding template can be found in Appendix 1.

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A detailed set of explanations was also prepared to accompany the coding framework in order to increase the consistency with which the themes/codes are applied by different researchers within the team. This framework will be used to analyse the articles that have been identified through our new sampling approaches.

Concluding Remarks

There have been challenges in designing the literature review for this project. As described above, a systematic, database-led approach was not found to be appropriate to our aims. In particular, there were two major problems in using this methodology: namely the failure to find relevant papers with esoteric titles; and the inability to sample papers from an exhaustive list.

An alterative approach to identifying published papers for review will be adopted as described above. Systematic application of an analysis framework to these papers will enable us to describe the range of issues relating to researching race/ethnicity that researchers across social science disciplines have identified. This summary will in turn help to inform the proposed guidance regarding researching race/ethnicity that this project is seeking to produce.

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Appendix 1

JRF Ethnicity, ethics and scientific rigour
Summary of analysis and coding template for published papers

				1	2	3	4	5
1	Descriptors	Doc. No.	Author	Contact Details	Year	Title	Journal or Source	Country of focus
2	Manuscript characteristics	Doc. No.	Author	Discipline and/or substantive focus	Conceptual/Methodological/ Operational	Review paper/Opinion piece/ Individual Study	Qualitative/ Quantitative	Specific methods/ methodologies
3	Agendas and wider issues	Doc. No.	Author	Explicit Value Base	Relationship of research to wider society	Relationship to funders, commissioners, public	When and why should research include attention to ethnicity	When and why should research not include attention to ethnicity
4	Concepts, measurement and design	Doc. No.	Author	Conceptual points (ethnic groups and processes)	How to measure/identify/categorise ethnicity	Conceptualising and measuring variables across groups	Study design	Methods and approaches to data generation
5	Relationship with minority communities	Doc. No.	Author	Partnerships, involvement, ways of working	Group harm	Other issues identified		
6	Sampling and recruitment	Doc. No.	Author	Exclusion/inclusion criteria and processes	Quantitative sampling approaches	Recruitment strategies	How to achieve a scientifically robust sample	How to operate in an ethically sound manner whilst recruiting to the study
7	Relationship with participants	Doc. No.	Author	Relationships/ power/ control	Participant harm	Language and communication	Consent	Anonymity and confidentiality
8	Analysis and interpretation	Doc. No.	Author	Consideration of confounding factors, inter-sectionality	Establishing (routes of) causation, attribution issues	Reflexivity, values and perspectives of researchers	Sample size, generalisability, credibility	Comparisons made, establishing difference and similarity
9	Representation, reporting and dissemination	Doc. No.	Author	Participant voice, participant verification and ownership	Written Reports: language, representation	Modes of dissemination, accessibility	Use and abuse of findings, responsibilities of researchers and users	
10	Relationships with researchers	Doc. No.	Author	Research team make-up	Publishing, reviewing	Other issues: researchers	Other issues: general (not covered on previous worksheets)	Are authors explicit re. grounds for advocating approaches