

'Race' and statistics

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Introduction

Since World War II there has been an increase in Britain in the collection of statistics which are categorised along the lines of 'race' or ethnicity. This has not been a neutral exercise in pursuit of knowledge but has evolved hand in hand with concerns about the 'race problem' (Booth, 1988). These statistics became part of the 'numbers game' used to justify racist immigration laws and helped fuel anti-Black feeling in Britain. The process of racialisation of statistics reflected and reinforced racist state policies (Ohri, 1988). More recently arguments about the use of statistics in favour of Black populations, in highlighting discrimination, targeting and monitoring services and so on have been put forward (Anwar, 1990). 'Ethnic data' have thus become the major tool for gaining 'race' equality in the new formalised, bureaucratised form of anti-racism.

The debate ranges from the usefulness of 'race' statistics as a potential weapon to fight 'race' discrimination to questioning the political will of the central and local state, and other organisations to fight racial discrimination. We look at the 'race' statistics debate over the last few years with particular reference to the arguments for and against collecting 'race' data, problems in defining meaningful categories for such data collection, and assessing the potential social policy relevance of 'ethnic' data, including the question in the 1991 Census. First, we look at some of the criticisms.

Arguments Against Collecting 'Race' Data

Leech (1989) has summarised the many areas of criticism. Proponents of collecting 'ethnic' data often proceed as if no useful information on 'ethnicity' were available and, by implication, that the only barrier to the eradication of racial discrimination is

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the lack of accurate ethnic data. It is doubtful if social policy would be hampered by the exclusion of the 'ethnic question' in the Census.

One particular problem here is the difficulty in operationalising concepts such as 'race' (only useful in relation to racism and racial discrimination) and 'ethnicity' (which effectively becomes a culturalist notion of 'race' if externally imposed and rigidly defined). There are also problems in accurate recording of ethnicity: in 1979 trials only 84% of white, 41% black and 68% Asian respondents recorded ethnicity correctly; in 1989 it was still low at 90%, 86% and 89% respectively. Bhrolchain (1990) suggests that the improvement may have resulted from people now being used to answering the 'ethnic question' in their contact with local and health authorities, and employers.

Parts of the black population campaigned against the 'ethnic question' before the 1981 Census and during various subsequent field trials. This is neither paranoia, nor is opposition to the Census peculiar to the UK: for example, in 1981 the Netherlands and in 1983 the Federal German Republic cancelled their censuses because of public fears of abuse of statistics. The experience of the black population in relation to the 'numbers game' in immigration policies and more specifically the abuse of 'race' monitoring statistics by the Metropolitan Police force made such fears much more real (Bhat et al, 1988). In 1989, for example, 5% of white and Asian, and 20% of the 'black' respondents objected to the ethnicity question in the Census (Bhrolchain, 1990). Bhrolchain (1990), however, remains reassured that this objection need not be taken seriously, as:

'People of black-Caribbean origin are sometimes reputed not to be enthusiastic form-fillers and some elements of their objections to the ethnicity question is likely to be due to a reluctance to answer questions in general, especially in an official context' (p561).

Such cavalier victim blaming is unacceptable.

Others have questioned the political will of both the central and the local state to fight racial discrimination (Sivanandan, 1991). Moore, in his evidence to the Home Affairs Committee on the 'ethnic question' in the Census, said:

'As a social scientist currently writing on questions of race and racism in the UK, I find it extremely irritating not to have certain Census data available: given the record of government since 1961, I would nonetheless advise the black population not to collaborate in the provision of such data in the present circumstances' (quoted in Leech, 1989).

The question of ownership of such data (by minority groups) has also been raised (Booth, 1988). Summarising her opposition to the 'ethnic question', Booth states: 'The real need is... not for better definitive data but a new framework of political will aimed at reducing and eradicating racial disadvantage and discrimination'.

Arguments for Collecting 'Race' Data

Often it is argued that the case for 'ethnic'/'race' data in the Census or elsewhere is no different in principle from any other type of question in as far as it is simply an example of the wider requirements of providing information relevant to policy formulation and implementation. The supporters of an ethnic question in the Census cite the following benefits: 1) some sources of central government funding such as Section 11, the Urban Programme etc are available for services to ethnic minorities-local authorities need accurate figures for ethnic minorities to apply for this; 2) with detailed ethnic statistics authorities can tailor their services to the clients' needs; 3) ethnic data can help in siting services in appropriate localities; 4) these data can provide evidence of discrimination, at different levels within an organisation which can then be tackled; 5) provide baseline data for policy formulation; 6) and can be used by ethnic minorities themselves for campaigning purposes (Bhrolchain, 1990). The supporters argue that:

'Campaigning through statistical descriptions has been an effective strategy for resource-poor social interests and one that has been successfully deployed in the United States by the Civil Rights Movement, the poverty lobby, consumer interests and by environmentalists' (Bhrolchain, 1990, p550).

Over the years the Commission for Racial Equality has campaigned vigorously for routine ethnic data collection, though it has not always been clear what exactly it means by 'ethnic data'. Supporters of the CRE, both individuals (Cross, 1980; Anwar, 1990; Bhrolchain, 1990) and institutions (such as Runnymede Trust) have variously rehearsed the above arguments. The following is illustrative of this:

'It was Census data that revealed unemployment rates among black teenagers to be twice the national average. It was Census data that was used to show how racial minorities had been concentrated in the most derelict, overcrowded and least secure sectors of inner-city housing, and how some local authorities had apparently overlooked these areas in planning development. It was Census data that helped demonstrate that, far from racial minorities making disproportionate demands on social services, the opposite was in fact the case' (Cross, quoted in Leech, 1989).

In taking this debate further we, briefly, look at issues around 'ethnic' categorisation.

Conflated Concepts and Confused Categories

Both 'race' and 'ethnicity' are problematic categories. We use 'race' as a social construct with links to racisms, old and new. As 'race' as an analytical category has lost favour 'ethnicity' has been popularised. The conceptual and technical problems in operationalisation of these concepts for data collection are considerable; some of these are referred to in the above sections. However, we feel that the Census, and most other forms of surveys using 'ethnic question' have failed to come to grips with these complexities. Our first concern is that the 'ethnic' question in the Census is both rigid and externally imposed: it uses a culturalist, geographical and 'nationalist' notion of 'race' dressed up as 'ethnicity'. The confusion is evident in the mixture of categories in the Census, based on colour (black; white), notions of 'nationality' (Pakistani; Indian), and geographical origin (Africa; Caribbean). This appeal to cultural distinctions, national allegiances, 'natural' boundaries of inclusion and exclusion has much in common with the discourse of the 'new racism' (Husband, 1991; Sivanandan, 1991). Some (eg. Sivanandan, 1991) would claim that such categorisation plays into the hands of the racists by creating and consolidating 'ethnic' differences, fragmenting the 'oppressed', separating not just 'us' from 'them' but also different sorts of 'them'. Gilroy (1990) has recently written about this conceptual inconsistency within certain areas of the anti-racist position. On the other hand are the arguments of Modood (1988), and others, strongly opposed to the use of the blanket term 'black', which he claims is equally reductionist and patronising, rendering cherished cultural and historical values invisible in the mass of 'blackness'. We do not wish to dwell on this here; for useful introductions to some of the debates the reader may refer to, for example, Miles (1988), Modood (1988), Gilroy (1990) and Sivanandan (1991).

Even if we had no doubts about the conceptual and analytic status of 'race' or 'ethnicity' and there were no such major problems in their operationalisation, there is still the question of the utility of 'ethnic' data, especially of the type employed in the Census, for research, planning and progressive political purposes.

'Ethnic' data, research and social policy

The use of 'ethnicity' as an analytical category implies the acceptance of some notion of homogeneity of condition, culture, attitudes, expectations, and in some cases language and religion within the groups defined on an 'ethnic' basis. All these may have implications for the way forms of racism affect communities and individuals in terms of, for example, definition of their needs, provision and adequacy of services, discrimination in employment and career progression. In theory a researcher may, using appropriate 'ethnic' categories, be able to make a useful assessment of service needs, an employer may be able to monitor the employment practices as these affect different 'ethnic' groups, a health authority may offer appropriate diet and communication aids on the basis of information on the 'ethnic' mix of its population. However, what is far from clear is the utility of categories such as 'Indian' or 'Black African' for these purposes.

Let us take the example of a health authority that wishes to improve its employment practises 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 (eg. Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali). Similarly, the use of this category for need assessment or as an independent variable in epidemiological studies would be far too broad to be meaningful (eg. perinatal mortality rates, and other indices of health differ on religious and geographical basis as do lifestyles and health related behaviours such as smoking and drinking).

We acknowledge that carefully collected information as part of a specific policy goal to improve (say) provision and location of services can be useful. We also accept that 'ethnic' data can be used by minority groups and local authorities to obtain central funds (notwithstanding the criticisms of this approach eg. Sivanandan, 1991). In addition, there are the problems for the researcher and the policy maker created by the use of non-standard 'ethnicity' categories, 'defined' on the basis of interviewer observation and country of birth, and leading to such absurd categories as 'Urdu children'. But we fear that the use of 'off the shelf' ethnic categories, in their 'new OPCS and Commission for Racial Equality approved' format will create a new set of problems.

We made the point earlier about 'race' and 'ethnicity' being social and political constructs; the standardisation of such categories will give them a spurious air of validity, as 'natural', 'objective' and 'universal' entities. We consider such potential reification of these categories to be of more than academic significance. One of us has written on the increased racialisation of research, with particular reference to health, which has done little to improve service delivery, or to advance aetiological understanding (Sheldon and Parker, 1991). We fear that the availability of routine 'ethnic' data from the Census and its adoption in the NHS 'minimum data set' will give increased impetus to this mindless empiricism. Such categories will have limited social policy relevance, yet create the illusion of high and quality based research activity.

The basic question to ask is 'what information do I need and why?'. This fundamental question has often been ignored in research on minority ethnic groups (see for example, Bhopal (1990) for a discussion of research on health); the reification of 'ethnic' categories will further undermine the need for a critical approach. Lastly, such categories may lead to the perpetuation of racial stereotypes of the needs, behaviours and expectations of 'Pakistanis', 'Indians', 'Black Africans', and so on, as homogeneous wholes.

Conclusion

The debate on the collection and the use of 'ethnic data' is not new and some of the issues covered in this paper have already been addressed (Anwar, 1990; Bhrolchain, 1990; Leech, 1989). Our own position is that 'ethnic' data can have a useful policy purpose, but for this the nature of the information and the level at which the independent variable of 'ethnicity' is defined must be specifically related to the policy needs. Thus, for example, to improve the acceptability of hospital food, the hospital should enquire about food habits; religion and regional background may be useful proxy variables for this- being an 'Indian' clearly is not. We are concerned that the trend towards standardisation will lead to reification of 'ethnic' categories of rather dubious validity, and to a lack of critical consideration of the need for and potential use of such data. Data collection thus may become an end in itself and the rising mountains of research give the illusion of progress. Whilst we do not argue for wholesale rejection of 'ethnic' data collection, the need for and policy relevance of such data requires careful consideration. Uncritical collection and use of 'ethnic' data will aid racialisation and stereotyping and thus reinforce oppression of the very minorities which the data were ostensibly meant to support.

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