Race statistics – what might a community or radical agenda look like? A workshop report from the Radical Statistics 2015 conference

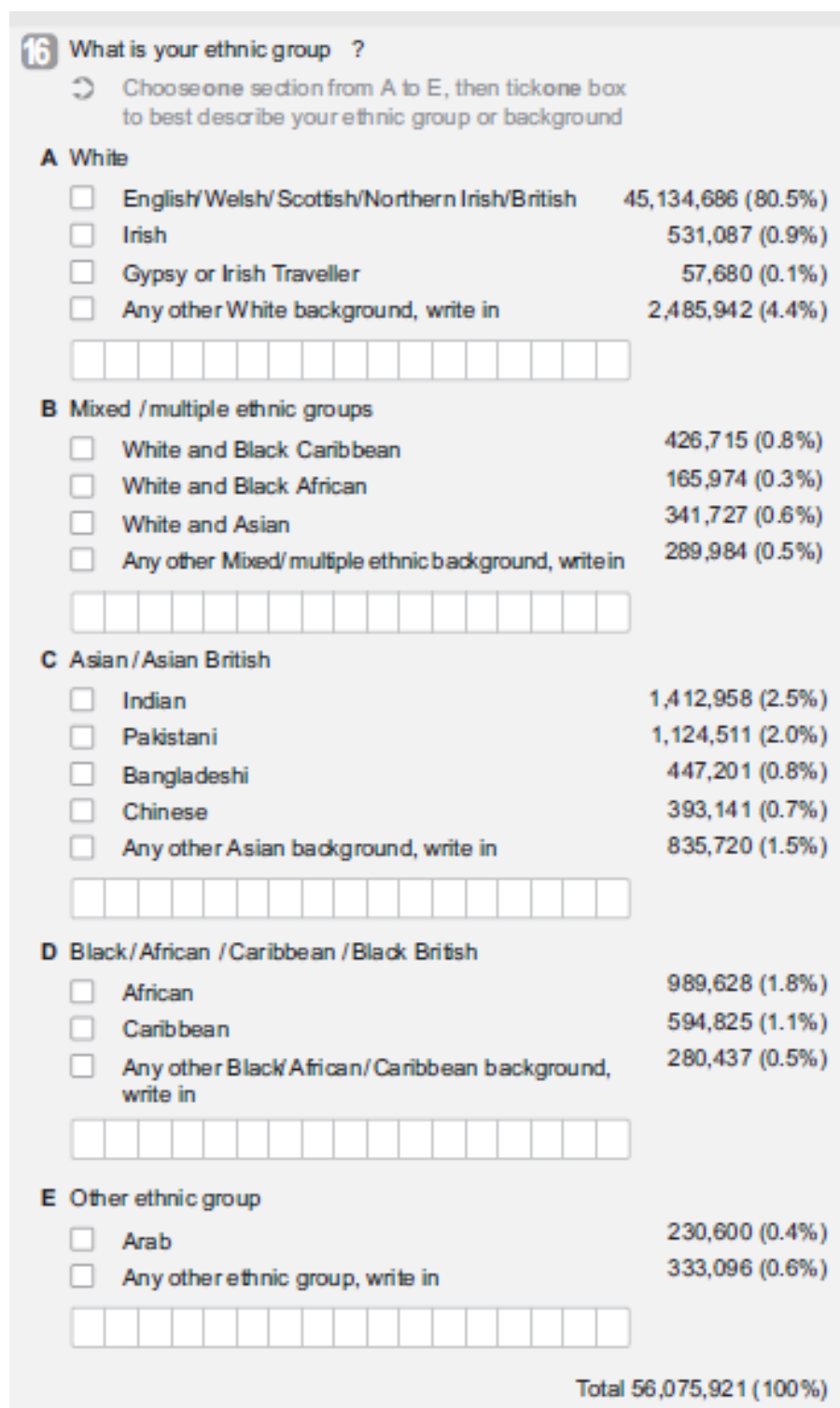*Ludi Simpson and Nissa Finney*

Introduction:
What are official race statistics for?

Official statistics are designed to highlight issues which policy intends to deal with. The statistics of 'ethnic group' in the UK are designed to highlight issues of race discrimination, of immigration, of cultural tradition that might indicate different services, and of potential risks to security or integration (Finney and Simpson, 2009, Chapter 2; Simon, 2012). There are lags such that the current government's intentions may not be synchronised with those that gave rise to the current statistics. The instruments that collect the statistics will have been shaped by the acceptability of categories, and it has become standard that ethnic group is self-identified. Nonetheless, that mix of objectives has driven the development of race statistics in the UK.

The categories used in the census in the UK (Figure 1) reflect this conceptual mix of objectives. They include appearance (the main headings White, Mixed, Asian, Black and Other) that helps deal with race discrimination. They attempt to isolate the indigenous population as White British, and everyone else retains a residue of immigration. The individual groups indicate Irish, Bangladeshi, Chinese and other heritages. Most groups are relatively large, but 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' and 'Arab' are new in the 2011 census as well as small. They are there by demand of the Home Office and others choosing the census as a convenient vessel for its policy targets.

Figure 1: Census question, England and Wales 2011, with estimated size of each group

16 What is your ethnic group ?

  Choose one section from A to E, then tick one box
  to best describe your ethnic group or background

A White

☐ English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British   45,134,686 (80.5%)
☐ Irish   531,087 (0.9%)
☐ Gypsy or Irish Traveller   57,680 (0.1%)
☐ Any other White background, write in   2,485,942 (4.4%)

B Mixed /multiple ethnic groups

☐ White and Black Caribbean   426,715 (0.8%)
☐ White and Black African   165,974 (0.3%)
☐ White and Asian   341,727 (0.6%)
☐ Any other Mixed/multiple ethnic background, write in   289,984 (0.5%)

C Asian/Asian British

☐ Indian   1,412,958 (2.5%)
☐ Pakistani   1,124,511 (2.0%)
☐ Bangladeshi   447,201 (0.8%)
☐ Chinese   393,141 (0.7%)
☐ Any other Asian background, write in   835,720 (1.5%)

D Black/African /Caribbean /Black British

☐ African   989,628 (1.8%)
☐ Caribbean   594,825 (1.1%)
☐ Any other Black/African/Caribbean background,   280,437 (0.5%)
   write in

E Other ethnic group

☐ Arab   230,600 (0.4%)
☐ Any other ethnic group, write in   333,096 (0.6%)

                                            Total 56,075,921 (100%)

Note: Within the UK, the Census question has changed since 1991 and 2001, and is significantly different in Scotland and in Northern Ireland. All the variations are included in Jivraj and Simpson (2015, Chapter 1, reproduced with permission).

Some people would criticise the census ethnic group question precisely because it reflects a conceptual mixture. Some would argue for its use only in conjunction with other data about religion, language, national identity, and nationality, all of which were also asked in the 2011 Census. On the other hand the convenience of the ethnic group question is precisely that it does cover so many bases of government policy and potential changes to policy.

What would community race statistics look like?

If statistics follow policy, would different statistics be demanded to tackle issues that have *not* had government attention? At Radical Statistics conference 2015, we facilitated a workshop aiming to answer this question.

We provided a copy of the census form reproduced in Figure 1, and asked participants to consider the evidence that would be required by campaigns to change policy on the following four under-recognised issues? Would the evidence need to use categories of race or ethnic group that are any different from those used in the census?

(a) Police violence in custody against black people.

(b) Unemployment and vulnerable employment much more frequent for minority populations, particularly Bangladeshis.

(c) Exploitation of immigrant workers in dangerous working conditions.

(d) Race discrimination by landlords and housing agencies when letting properties.

Here we use the comments at the workshop to raise some relevant points about community campaigns and their use of statistics.

Quotation marks are used to indicate direct contributions made by workshop participants.

Figure 2: Post-it notes recording participant contributions
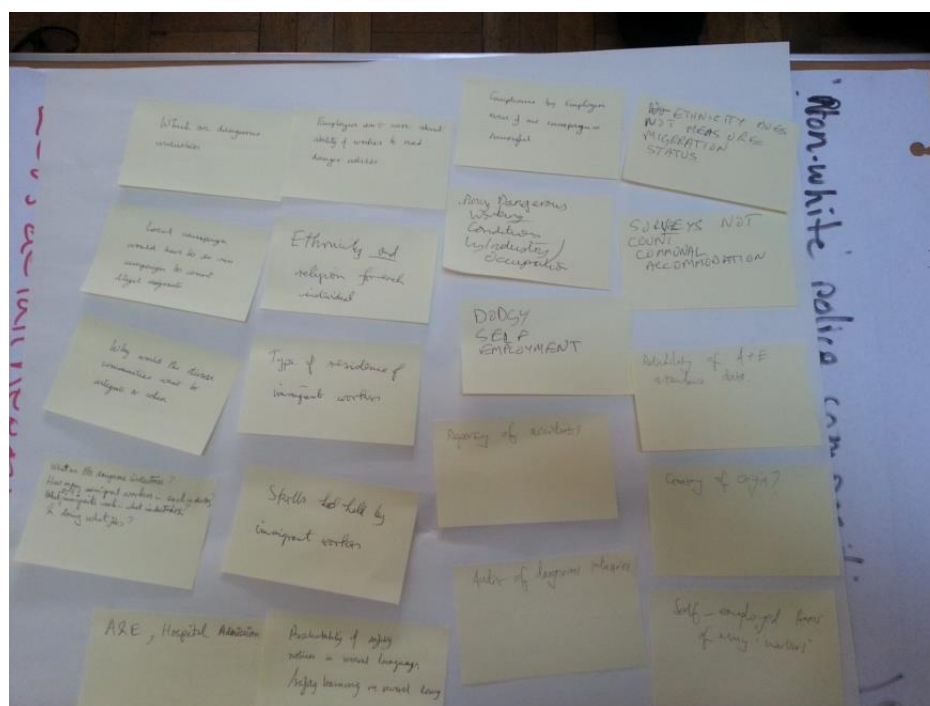
Police violence in custody against black people

In summary, while we had described the topic using a single category of "Black", the discussion wanted greater nuance to the interpretation of police discriminatory treatment of individuals on the basis of their background.

The way the topic is described is itself rooted in a historical view of categories: *"Black was a political colour."*

The evidence should relate not just to those in custody: "How many non-white police are there in each area?" "Data needed on whole population, arrests and race, violence in custody, and deaths." "Is it proportionate to local population?"

The local context will lead to local ways of defining discriminated groups: "East Europeans + Turkish are within White Other". "Require nationality language to survey local problems".

Related evidence will be important: "Correlation vs 'experience' of discrim". "Views of victims". "Hospital statistics or other medical visits to prisoners".

Unemployment and vulnerable employment much more frequent for minority populations, particularly Bangladeshis.

In summary, the discussion gave rise to suggestions for detailed analysis of existing official data, but did not undermine the existing ethnic group categories.

Analysis of data about individuals should take into account other characteristics: "Developmental characteristics – ability – school entrance – school exit." "Educational background, ethnicity, place of birth (UK or other), location, last income, employment status, visible ethnicity, origin of name (ie English name, foreign name, uncommon name, same for surname". "Wage/income/benefits, full time / part time, household size, education." "Intention re labour market. Religion. Unionization. Sector". "Qualification, experience, language" "age education and associated household variables". "Where the people grew up (were educated and socialised)".

Measurement of unemployment and vulnerable employment: "£level, wages, earnings, income". "Job category & sector, un employment rate "Evidence of unequal levels of employment by ethnicity". "Count by skill levels. Contract type and duration". "FT/PT"

Evidence of discrimination should be sought directly: "Discrimination test – matched application". "Hiring practices, employers' attitudes".

Exploitation of immigrant workers in dangerous working conditions.

In summary, evidence on this topic would not be helped much by ethnicity, whether using official categories or others.

Something other than ethnicity is required, and would involve data collection: "Ethnicity does not measure migration status". "Local campaign would have to do own campaign to count illegal migrants". "Possibility of A+E attendance data. Country of origin?". "Country of origin of immigrant and of employer not available eg from HSE".

Evidence would be needed on conditions and contexts: "Which are dangerous industries?" "Employers don't care about ability of workers to read danger notices". "Dodgy self-employment". "Availability of safety notices in several languages / safety training in several languages". "Skills held by immigrant workers". "Compliance by employers even if our campaign is successful".

Official surveys of limited use: "Surveys not count communal accommodation".

Race discrimination by landlords and housing agencies when letting properties

In summary, it was felt that less detail of ethnic group categories was needed for this topic, and an accepted approach existed.

Use existing methods to get evidence: "Blind application testing with Caribbean, Pakistani, White applicants".

Conclusion

The workshop led to discussions about the nature of evidence and the use of evidence in building support for a campaign. Often the context of particular incidents damning for current policy, is needed for a campaign. If this is qualitative evidence, it would focus on individual characteristics of the episodes in question. When aiming to transfer the experience of individual incidents to a general issue, then the quantitative analysis involving aggregate statistics and perhaps ethnic categories becomes necessary and relevant.

In the discussion of direct discrimination by landlords and employers, there is an existing approach of 'blind application testing': if people whose needs match but are of different appearance or name, their different treatment can be attributed to discrimination. This is a simple extension of the accepted research strategy of 'mystery shoppers' commonly used in market research.

Overall, we think that the discussion was valuable and that this approach could be usefully repeated (and perhaps occasionally is) within campaigns that seek changes in policy. Certainly, the session highlighted that although ethnic group statistics may exist, they may not do so in combination with the indicators of disadvantage – such as in custody, employment, working conditions and housing – that community campaigns may be concerned with. Although the workshop discussions were hypothetical rather than related to a live campaign, they raised not only difficulties of evidencing discrimination but also some opportunities within the existing data landscape. We hope we have done justice to the workshop discussions, and that they stimulated further interest in linking community priorities and statistics. For those wishing to pursue those ideas, it is worth seeking out the community research case studies in Ritchie et al (1994).

References:

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Ludi Simpson, University of Manchester, and Nissa Finney, University of Manchester. Email contact: Ludi.Simpson@manchester.ac.uk