ARK Feature

Race and Ethnicity Research in Northern Ireland: challenges and opportunities

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Introduction

Within Northern Ireland (NI), socio-demographic and migration shifts over the past two decades have resulted in an increased diversity of markers of identity. Out of synch with the European Union (EU) and with other parts of the United Kingdom (UK), public legislation and strategies in NI have not yet responded adequately to such change, with the needs, protections and concerns raised by the new population neither prioritised nor addressed (NI Affairs Committee, 2022). This has also been reflected in the research portfolio of universities in NI (Belluigi, 2004; Belluigi and Moynihan, 2023), with migration, race/ethnicity and majority-minority dynamics under-studied.

A symposium at Queen's University Belfast (QUB) in June 2024 brought together people whose research and work focuses on race, ethnicity and migration in Northern Ireland, with participants from local academic, statutory and NGO sectors. This document focuses on key themes highlighted throughout the event.

1.   Definitions

Terms such as 'race' and 'ethnicity' are often used without thinking about their definition. 'Race', although socially constructed and disputed, can be used to demark people based on their physical or visual characteristics, such as skin colour. On the other hand, 'ethnicity' can be seen as relating to socially-acquired traits, such as language, cultural rituals, belief systems and ways of being. Many of these traits are not visible but can be culturally acquired and socially learnt. This means that categories of ethnicity can vary between countries, making comparisons difficult. Other terms, such as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', migrant' and 'newcomer', as also loosely defined, and so are open to misuse.

Nevertheless, information is frequently collected by organisations and public bodies to inform policy making on ethnic and racial equality, and to identify levels of discrimination. This calls for clarity in how and which data is captured, as well as an appreciation that the labels and language used in research and policy can impact on the lived experiences of people.

2.   Ethical challenges

Ethical issues in research can be multi-faceted, often involving research governance procedures, as well as the role of funders and research participants. For example, leading on from issues of definitions above, some groups (for example, 'African') can be perceived by ethics committees or funding organisations as vulnerable, and certain topics as sensitive or controversial (such as xenophobia), with the effect that the research project may be unnecessarily constrained, surveyed or delayed. In addition, the specific ethos of a funder can influence the researchers' capacity to carry out effective, inclusive and ethical engagement. One example is the provision of funds to 'pay' and reimburse participants, translators or interpreters, which is vital to ensure that the contributions of everyone involved in the research are valued. Furthermore, if policymakers fund research, they should be accountable to respond to the findings.

3. Research challenges

Ethical research also involves building positive relationships, such as with stakeholder or gatekeeper organisations. Co-production and participatory methods are useful ways of proactively engaging members of different communities in research, and in gaining access to hard-to-reach groups. In addition, there are clear benefits of involving co-researchers with the same language and national background as research participants. For example, a shared language ensures clear communication and understanding, which can foster stronger relationships and encourage research participation. Nevertheless, there needs to be clear and fair policy in terms of the role, training, reimbursement and acknowledgement of co-researchers in the research process and outputs.

The relatively small population size of Northern Ireland, its relatively homogeneous society, and the late adoption of recording of the multiple ethnicities within its population, have added challenges for quantitative and longitudinal analysis. For example, while Northern Ireland may be included in a UK-wide sample survey, the number of respondents may be too small to allow for meaningful or robust statistical analysis. It is difficult to resolve some of these challenges. A frequent solution is to merge survey respondents from different ethnic groups together, although this means that complexity and specificity gets lost in ways that compromise the validity of the findings.

Conclusion

This novel and timely event attracted a diverse range of participants from different sectors, some who undertake research, as well as those who use research. The event provided an important platform to outline some of the issues and concerns within a safe environment and try to suggest solutions. However, it was acknowledged that the latter is not always possible. Instead, it is important to recognise and highlight the limitations and context of research in its many forms.

A featured example is the central role of categorisation in quantitative research as well as policy development. Nevertheless, we need to acknowledge the inadequacy of such categorisation, as well as being aware that concepts, and thus categories, change over time and context. Accountability for the use of such data collection to address inequalities would assist in addressing the erosion of trust in public data collection regimes and in research and improve disclosure.

In conclusion, there was a strong feeling that this was an important and useful gathering and was one that should be repeated to improve the quality of research practice and to mutually enhance the critical capacity of NI's research communities.

References

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