

What are the purposes of ethnic monitoring? Give examples of its use. Outline the difficulties in implementing ethnic monitoring, including those that arise in accurately classifying an individual's 'race'?

Ethnic monitoring is a controversial subject that can basically be defined as the collection of racial data and statistics. Controversy exists because of the way in which information is collected, and the uses to which the data has, or in some cases has not, been put. Despite the debates about the validity of the collection of racial data, it is still collected, and has been since the 1960s. This very fact illustrates the way in which it is felt that the knowledge of an individual's 'race' is necessary to allow the study of social divisions, and the position of the individual within society.

There are three primary purposes for the collection of racial data. The first of which is the most basic element of fact finding. It is a common trait of bureaucratic societies to collect information about everything possible, regardless of the need for it, or whether there is any potential advantage in having access to the data. The pointlessness of this sort of data collection is illustrated by the fact that between 1966 and 1973, data was collected about immigrant school pupils in the UK, but the government later admitted that "no use was made of the data" (Skellington, 1992). However, it could be argued that the existence of this data might suggest areas which could be investigated more thoroughly in future studies, hopefully to the benefit of the subjects. Data about the cultural background of both pupils and staff is now being collected once more, which again indicates the importance placed on 'race' as an aspect of society.

The second, and potentially constructive, purpose is to help in the creation of government policy with regard to equal opportunities, and to highlight problems within society. It is only possible, for example, for government to provide funding and services to certain cultural groups if they know where such help is needed. Indeed, legal provision is made for local government to apply to central government for extra money to support areas densely populated by ethnic minorities. There are also elements of governmental budgeting that are based on the size of the local ethnic minority populations. While this appears a laudable reason for collecting data, the system has been abused in the past and money gained as a

governmental grant has not been used to the benefit of the ethnic minority populations. Such behaviour shows the need for careful control and monitoring of the system which is indeed the final primary purpose of collecting racial data.

Problems within society highlighted by racial data are primarily those of discrimination against ethnic minorities. The Commission for Racial Equality, and the Runnymede Trust argue that “without such data it is impossible to identify and locate discriminatory practices” (Skellington, 1992). Data about the black population from the 1971 census was been used by the Runnymede Trust in conjunction with information on housing allocation to prove discrimination by the Greater London Council against black families (Runnymede Trust, 1975). Many other investigations have been instigated as a result of this sort of analysis and use of data; and such investigations often lead to change in rules, laws, and policies which are all important in helping to combat racism at all levels in society.

The final purpose for monitoring is to allow judgements to be made about the effectiveness, and success, of policies made as a result of previously collected data, such as governmental grants as discussed above. Laws regarding equal opportunities in the workplace have been in force since 1968 making it illegal to treat anyone favourably on racial grounds. Without the collection of racial data it would be impossible for an employer to prove whether or not they were upholding equal opportunity laws: in effect, this makes the collection of racial data a legal necessity. The on-going evolution of laws due to feedback gained from data collection can be seen through the example of employment, as a law was passed eight years later, in 1976, which made discrimination through recruitment practices which stipulated, for example, an employee’s minimum height to be illegal as they discriminate indirectly against physically shorter nationalities such as the Chinese. It could be assumed that employers tried to avoid prosecution under the 1968 legislation by introducing such fatuous requirements to allow them to continue discriminating without breaking the law. However, racial data collection would have revealed this pattern, which would, in turn, lead to the revisiting of the situation, to identify the problem that ultimately resulted in the creation of the 1976 law prohibiting indirect discrimination.

In a similar vein, education is also an area where the collection of racial data has been deemed necessary. In 1979 a committee was formed to address the issue of the apparent under achievement of many black school pupils. They were, however, unable to reach any conclusions due to the lack of data collected since the information gathering within education had stopped six years previously. As they were unable to see whether there was any element of discrimination, it was impossible to realistically reassess, or to put in place, rules regarding education policies.

Data collection through surveying is only one way in which it is possible to glean information about ethnic minorities. Indeed, to put any statistical data into context, it is necessary to have a fuller understanding of the situation, which can only be gained by talking to the people concerned, rather than just analysing the results of a questionnaire. Case studies and interviews are becoming favoured as a tool for information collection as they are less open to misinterpretation during analysis as the participants are able to express their views and opinions without the constraints of a survey. Having to give answers to questions from a prescribed list of options is limiting, and open to misinterpretation by both the participant, and the researcher.

One of the greatest stumbling blocks with prescribed answers is the principal question of an individual's race. There is no standardised set of racial, or ethnic categories in which to group, or place, the individual. Even the terms used in current parlance to describe 'racial' groups have no common origin. The seemingly basic terms 'black' and 'white' refer merely to a skin colour, and could present problems for someone from a Mediterranean country trying to categorise themselves. Other terms used relate to the religion of the individual, such as 'Jew', and others relate to the individual's nationality but are also used to describe their race, such as 'Chinese' (which, it should be noted is *also* a language). With the limiting exception of legal nationality, it is seemingly impossible to provide suitable terms to categorise the individual, White (1979) suggested that "the search for 'races' ... has been shown to be a fool's errand". Nevertheless, a medley of terms is still used by researchers to try to determine an individual's race. The

vagueness of available terms is clearly demonstrated in a study by Leech (1989) executed in the United States in which 35% of the population did not use the same racial, or ethnic terms to describe themselves as they had done in the previous year, despite the list of terms remaining the same.

Data collected in major surveys, or by official organisations also suffers a total lack of standardisation: to name but a few, the Department of Education, the Metropolitan Police, national censuses, and hospitals all use different methods of classification for the individual. These differences are compounded further by the fact that in some instances the classification is a self-classification, and in others, an official imposes the classification on the individual. A laughable situation is the control of immigration and emigration statistics: the Internal Passenger Survey records details of people entering the country, but there is no record kept of people leaving the country, and as such, any attempt to analyse migration patterns will be, at best unprovable hypothesising. With such gaping holes and inconsistencies in data collection practices, it cannot be possible to achieve any aims of ethnic monitoring successfully.

It can be seen that the intentions of ethnic monitoring are basically constructive and positive, and that the existence of the data should enable ethnic minorities to be treated equally by society. Indeed, it is only by collecting such data that it is possible to maintain any sort of understanding of this area of society. However, the ways in which research and surveys are currently constructed and executed limit the usefulness, and validity of the data. If data has been collected without a specific aim or reason, it means that there is data available that could be, and indeed is, used detrimentally by extremist groups to promote racist activity, and to try to prove positive discrimination.

To allow any form of ethnic monitoring to work successfully, it is imperative that guidelines are introduced to make any such data collection worthwhile. Research aims need to be precisely established at the outset, and once they have been decided upon, relevant questions, and methods of data collection need to be agreed to allow meaningful results to be obtained. There needs to be co-operation between organisations interested in connected research findings; for example, schools, and employers should

decide upon criteria to study, and share them to allow relevant interpretation of an individual's movement within society to be made. It is also essential within any data collection process to incorporate safeguards to protect participants from any negative consequences both to them as individuals, or an entire section of society as a result of taking part in the research.

(1584 words)

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