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Race and ethnicity research in Northern Ireland: challenges and opportunities. Report on the Local Race/ Ethnicity Research Symposium

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Race and Ethnicity Research in Northern Ireland: Challenges and Opportunities

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October 2024

Abstract:

A symposium held at Queen's University Belfast in June 2024 brought together people whose research and work focuses on 'race', ethnicity and migration in Northern Ireland to share and discuss research-related issues. Participants came from academic, statutory and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors. This document highlights key discussion points and recommendations arising from the four themed sessions. The event was held under Chatham House Rule, and as such, content shared in this document is not attributed to individual contributors.

Introduction

Socio-demographic and migration shifts over the past two decades in Northern Ireland (NI) have disrupted the markers of identity of its dominant majority. In contrast to other European countries and 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 populations neither prioritised nor addressed (NI Affairs Committee, 2022). This was also reflected in the research portfolio of universities in Northern Ireland (Belluigi, 2024; Belluigi and Moynihan, 2023), with local migration, 'race'/ethnicity and majority–minority dynamics understudied.

A symposium held at Queen's University Belfast in June 2024 brought together people whose research and work focuses on 'race', ethnicity and migration in Northern Ireland to share and discuss research-related issues. Participants came from academic, statutory and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors. This document highlights key discussion points and recommendations arising from the four themed sessions. The event was held under Chatham House Rule, and as such, content shared in this document is not attributed to individual contributors.

1 Implications of categorisations and nomenclature

The presentations in this section explored the conceptualisation and use of different social categories, with a particular focus on constructions of 'race' and 'ethnicity', terms which are frequently blurred as definitions within NI. Across European contexts (including the UK and the Republic of Ireland), these definitions vary between countries, and are linked to national histories and their responses to their colonial legacies, racism and migration. The presentations and discussion at the event particularly highlighted the failure to address skin-based racism across NI.

'Race', although socially constructed and thus disputed, continues to be a means of demarcating people based on their physical or visual characteristics. 'Ethnicity' can be seen as related to socially-acquired traits, such as language, cultural rituals, belief systems and ways of being. Many of these traits are not visible, and can be culturally acquired and socially learnt. Despite such distinctions within these definitions, many national(ist) discourses in Europe marginalise and racialised people (regardless of whether or not they are citizens). 'Whiteness' continues to be linked to European 'races' with the effect that, within Europe, 'ethnicity' is often projected on those received as 'non-white'. The legacy of European colonial history continues within such impositions of hierarchy on NI society, with some groups advantaged as having better life chances than others. Thus, the differing and blurred definitions used within public discourse, policy and research produced by universities can lead to misunderstandings and mis-categorisation being reproduced and unchallenged.

One key issue for discussion was how and why specific categories of 'race' and ethnicity are used in the collection of public and administrative data in NI, and the purpose of why the data is collected. For example, data is routinely collected as part of the monitoring process related to 'equality' or 'anti-discrimination' legislation in Northern Ireland, and the EU more widely. It can be argued that, without relevant such data collection and categorisation, it is difficult to establish what discrimination is going on and to what extent. Confidence in data categories is needed to identify, measure and address discrimination, racism and xenophobia in society. Without such cycles, and accountability to address what is identified, trust and buy-in to such data collection regimes will be eroded. However, it is also necessary for policy makers to have an understanding of the impact categories and labels related to 'race' and ethnicity can have on the lived experiences of people. They also need to be aware of the limits of data collected via surveys or from administrative sources. Specifically, these will not provide understandings of lived experiences in NI, including

the effects of othering and discrimination. It is also important to acknowledge that how a group or individual is perceived or categorised does not necessarily reflect how they self-identify.

Thus, symposium attendants were challenged by speakers to be conscious of the categorisation and splitting of groups. A primary concern was where this impacted the reduction of rights for those people most vulnerable within society. Related was the blurring of language in the categorisation of the status and conditions of people as 'refugee', 'asylum seeker', 'migrant', 'newcomer' et cetera by public bodies, within public data and in research representations, including in communication for non-academic 'impact' purposes. Many of these terms are too loosely framed and over-utilised, particularly the NI-specific jargon 'newcomer', and thus open to ill-implementation.

Key points:

- Researchers and policy makers need to reflect on what data are being captured, for which purposes, and in whose interest.
- An awareness of the history, conceptualisation and implications of key NI terms, such as 'newcomer', should be developed, to challenge and address harm or inadequacy.
- Researchers and policy makers also need to be aware of – and communicate – the implications and the limitations of categorisation.

2 Engagement with 'those researched'

Session Two explored the research process, including engagement and co-production with people who such research aims to benefit. Important stakeholders within this process are funders, the participants, organisations and communities being researched, and researchers. Many of the points highlighted in this session are useful for all research projects to consider. Nevertheless, the event raised some issues that are specific for research relating to 'race' and ethnicity in NI.

Funders

The role of a funder was highlighted as significant, not just for their financial contribution. The specific ethos of a funder can influence the capacity of researchers to carry out effective, inclusive and ethical engagement. For example, providing the funds to 'pay' and reimburse participants, translators or interpreters is vital if research is to be an endeavour that is respectful of contributions.

Funders may stipulate that research needs to have a meaningful impact. However, it can be difficult to explicitly evidence direct impact. Such a requirement may mean that researchers engage with larger, established NGOs who may have more capacity to engage with research, rather than build relations with smaller, more 'grass-roots' ones.

It was acknowledged that research can often be used as a political football, and potential impact can be thwarted by policy makers choosing to ignore uncomfortable findings. Thus, there is a need for government/ policy makers to have the will to effect change based on the results of research.

Organisations and communities

In relation to stakeholder or gatekeeper organisations, there was concern that some may be sceptical about taking part in research projects, due to their negative experiences of research participation in the past or feeling overburdened with the number of requests and limited capacity.

A key ethical issue relates to data analysis, interpretation and dissemination. There was a strong feeling communicated at the event that research should give something back to participants and their communities, who want to make a connection with the project, the researchers and its findings. Such processes take time, especially to build lasting mutually-beneficial relationships that

continue after the end of the research project. Providing feedback on how the data has been used is vital. However, ensuring that contact details for communication are continually updated may be a difficult and legally-challenging process.

The discussion highlighted the value and necessity of engaging with key informants and advisory boards, whilst ensuring that this is not a tokenistic gesture. Contributors should be invited because of their credentials and expertise, rather than essentialist biocentric assumptions (such as skin colour) of whom has authority to be 'representative' of certain groups or 'communities'.

Researchers

It was acknowledged that some university-based researchers can hold unreal expectations of what non-academic organisations can do, in terms of recruiting participants, with some projecting a sense of academic entitlement. This is particularly harmful when trying to engage with non-academic communities that are living within already difficult situations.

The multiple benefits were highlighted of involving co-researchers who are 'insiders', particularly with the same language and national background as the researched groups. Speakers in this session included such researchers who spoke from their first-hand experience in NI. Such benefits include helping to overcome scepticism, as well as helping to repair damaged relationships due to earlier involvement in research. The use of a shared language ensures clear communication and understanding, which can foster stronger relationships and encourage research participation.

Nevertheless, there was a concern raised about the impact of research on researchers, such as when focusing on trauma, and vicarious trauma. This highlights the need for a network of people doing such research to share strategies for protection, perseverance and reflections.

Key points:

- Government and other policy makers need to have the will to make changes based on the results of research, and to demonstrate accountability.
- Researchers need to be sensitive to the needs of individuals, groups and organisations.
- Co-researchers with familiarity or from researched groups, are beneficial to the quality of the research process, and to building sustainable relationships.

3 Ethics, positionality and 'objectivity' in research

Leading on from Session 2, this session focussed on ethics, positionality and objectivity in research. Throughout the discussion, the need to protect the privacy and dignity of participants in published reports was emphasised.

Ethics

Most research undertaken within a university needs to obtain ethical approval from a recognised body of academic peers. This is a norm within NI. However, several questions were raised relating to the role of such institutional ethical approval bodies. Firstly, what is the main role of the ethics process: is it to protect the universities, to protect the participants or the researcher? Secondly, are ethics committees risk averse, with the effect that academics, in turn, will avoid risk or disclosure of potential risk in order to secure approval? Thirdly, there was a concern that some ethics committees equate certain groups (for example, 'African') as automatically being '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. Thus, ethics committees can reproduce stereotypes and deficit discourses, in addition to creating conditions of unnecessarily delaying or discouraging certain research enquiry on certain topics or groups.

Of course, not all research takes place in a university or organisation with an established ethics board. In such cases, researchers carry the responsibility to operate within established ethical norms, or to design their own ethical framework and safeguards, which includes considering at which point the ethical risks are too high. Such ethical frameworks are sometimes influenced and undermined by the funder or commissioning body which sets out the parameters, such as the timeframe or funding, as they are not protected by the bounds of academic autonomy. In addition, such research may be harder to publish due to the expectations of many journal publishers for institutional ethical clearance.

The Arts Council of NI have a 'pay the artist' policy, which includes payment for participation in research. However, this is not necessarily acceptable among other funders. Some may allow for participants to be given gifts or vouchers in appreciation of their time. While this may appear to be an ethical and positive action, is not useful if the vouchers are for shops or services that the participant does not use. This may not effectively reimburse contributors for the time invested in the research. In addition, expectations for remuneration may also be created which make independent and unfunded research more difficult.

Positionality and objectivity

The aim of positionality within research necessitates reflecting on researcher biases, assumptions and relation to the researched groups and subject-matter. Also important is the need to consider power dynamics and to avoid relying on stereotypes held by those dominantly-placed, and instead engage with the complexity of participants' accounts and lives.

Furthermore, researchers should try to anticipate how public, government and other readers will interpret and use the findings. This poses challenges if there are great differences in perceptions between those being researched and those who will be using the research, or if insights into the positionality of the researcher are interpreted as raising doubt about their credibility.

Key points:

- University ethical committees should be aware of the implications of their processes and decisions, such as causing unnecessary delays, reinforcing stereotypes or discouraging research on certain subjects or groups.
- Researchers need to consider how to capture the complexity of participants' lives.

4 Working with quantitative and administrative data sets

Much of the discussion in this session was based on participants' research experiences of undertaking secondary analysis, highlighting barriers to obtaining access to administrative or public datasets, and the limitations of such data for analysis of groups in the numerical minority.

Access

Some datasets in the UK are easily accessed by academics from data repositories, such as the UK Data Archive (<https://www.data-archive.ac.uk/>). This aligns with the move to public accountability and data sharing, reflected in policies of 'open access', 'open science', and 'freedom of information'. However, obtaining some data in NI has involved lengthy and complex application procedures, even with university's institutional ethics approvals. Moreover, there may be limitations to access, such as the mandatory use of a safe setting when undertaking analysis.

Analysis

One inherent problem in secondary analysis (that is, using datasets that already exist) is that the data reflect the aims and objectives of the original collection. Therefore, the range of variables, sample size or sample characteristics may not be suitable for a specific secondary analysis project. For example, where data on migrant populations are included, survey data often does not record pertinent information, such as the length of time living in Northern Ireland or whether they are 'first generation' or 'second generation', which may be an important factor.

The discussion highlighted major concerns about the underrepresentation of NI in UK-based datasets, and the representation of specific groups within that, for example, migrant populations. One solution is to oversample, that is, to have extra sample boosts for specific groups. Another suggestion raised at the event was to use similar datasets from the Republic of Ireland, where the number and proportion of migrants is higher than in Northern Ireland, thus providing the potential for more robust analysis. This may be appropriate for some, but not all, topics.

The Census of Population is designed to be completed by all people living in Northern Ireland, thus providing the most accurate estimate of the population. However, the discussion raised concerns about lower participation rates among some groups, due to language and other issues. This, in turn, may lead to underrepresentation of specific groups.

Key points:

- Barriers to access NI administrative or public data sets need to be reduced or removed.
- Researchers need to be aware of the limitations of existing datasets, especially when undertaking analysis of specific groups.
- UK-wide datasets often do not include participants from Northern Ireland, or may do so in small numbers, and this should be addressed.
- Connections for comparison and harmonising of data should also be considered with the Republic of Ireland.

Conclusion

This novel and timely event attracted a diverse range of participants from different sectors, some who undertook 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 to try to suggest solutions. However, it was acknowledged that the latter is not always possible. Instead, what was emphasised was the importance of recognising and acknowledging the context and the limitations of the research and on the researcher.

A featured example is that while researchers may wish to avoid putting people into 'boxes', categorisation is necessary for quantitative purposes such as finding out how much discrimination takes place. However, acknowledging the inadequacy of such categories is then important, in addition to being aware that concepts, and thus categories, change over time and context.

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

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The Programme for the Local Race/ Ethnicity Research Symposium is accessible at
<https://tinyurl.com/rersqub>

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