

ETHNIC AND CULTURAL SURVEYS

Challenges and best practice

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What are the challenges in conducting surveys on ethnicity and religion?

Private companies and public institutions increasingly want research programs that focus on ethnic and religious minorities. Companies want to tailor their offer to specific target groups and institutions aim to combat discrimination although some politicians do not rule out so-called 'positive' discrimination for minorities.

Identifying people within a specific ethnic or religious group is not easy. We normally have three classifications: immigrants, ethnic minorities and religious minorities. These terms may be defined and interpreted differently depending on the language and country involved, which is why it is crucial for the research industry to agree on unambiguous and globally valid definitions. The work of the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) could be helpful in this respect (see http://fra.europa.eu/fra/index.php?fuseaction=content.dsp_cat_cont ent&catid=43a80527705e6).

A priori

Different methods can be used to identify people within a minority group.

'A priori targeting' methods involve identifying a specific group before going on the field. For instance the onomastic method, often used in Germany, involves scanning telephone directories for names known to be typical of a certain ethnic group. This however would be prohibited in France, where it is forbidden by the CNIL (Commission Nationale de l'Informatique et des Libertés) to build lists of people

who are assumed to belong to a specific ethnic group, without their prior permission. Moreover, onomastic methods introduce a sample bias as they exclude mixed families where the father is not from the targeted population and it is difficult to include the second generation.

Another 'a priori targeting' approach would be to concentrate interviews in areas known to have a high proportion of relevant minorities. This method might be practical but the specific nature of the interview setting can impact socio-demographic characteristics and responses to certain questions.

'Facies' targeting, through face-to-face data collection, enables interviewers to recruit respondents based on their physical attributes, how they are dressed or religious symbols they wear, but this is allowed in some countries and forbidden in others.

Thirdly, there is the 'self-identification' method whereby potential respondents identify themselves as belonging to one or more of the target groups. Although probably the most expensive approach, this is certainly the least questionable as the decision stays with the respondent but then the penetration rate must be sufficiently high to justify the cost.

Inadequate

The choice of sampling approach depends on how much information about the target population is available. Desk research indicates that this is often inadequately documented by official or reliable data sources.

According to FRA, "There is great variety within the EU in the degree to which a Member State's census

or national population register is useful for identifying racial/ethnic inequality.... In the UK a question on ethnic background has formed part of the official census since 1991. In other countries their official population data registers whether the individual's parents were born abroad, thus making possible the identification of second generation immigrants, but no more than this.

In most of the ten new Member States which joined the EU in 2004 there is a question on 'nationality' which is understood more in ethnic terms than in terms of citizenship, and can be used to identify members of long-standing ethnic or national minorities within a country's borders (for example, Hungarians in Slovakia, Hungarians in Romania, etc.). However, these are incapable of identifying more recent immigrant groups.

"Most of the remaining countries ask only about citizenship and place of birth. This means that in most EU countries official data are of limited use for the purpose of identifying groups exposed to racial/ethnic discrimination, and evaluating measures against it, and are of even more limited use for providing comparability between Member States."

Face-to-face

Given this context, quota sampling is not relevant in many countries. Two expensive options remain: random digit dialling for the recruitment phase followed by focused enumeration, and random route cluster sampling.

In the first case, respondents are screened using CATI and asked to say whether they consider that they belong to a specific group. They are then invited to participate in an interview. Face-to-face is preferable as it reassures respondents who will give better responses on sensitive topics such as voting questions and in some countries, working with interviewers of the same origin can facilitate contacts. After the interview, they are asked to indicate whether any of their acquaintances are from the same group based on clear criteria. However, the reliability and representativeness of this approach

could be open to question because of declining land line telephone penetration rates in many locations.

If we have enough information about the target population in terms of relative share and geographical spread, random route cluster sampling is another possibility and this, according to the FRA, can be one of the most efficient and reliable ways to sample minority ethnic groups.

Are some questions taboo? In theory no, providing they are unbiased and meaningful. Respondents can always refuse to answer questions they think are too personal or sensitive. However, questions about religion or politics cannot be asked in many places, and in China and some Middle Eastern countries for instance, public authorities must give prior approval to the questionnaire and/or study results. As this is time-consuming and can jeopardise the research programme, it should always be considered in a proposal in response to a specific request for quotation.

Cautious

This kind of research requires a lot of care and there is a wide variation between countries on the existence and reliability of national data about minorities and immigrants. National laws also vary widely making it difficult to find a homogeneous approach for international research. This means we need to be very cautious when conducting this type of research and even more so when it comes to multicountry projects.

An ethical approach is absolutely necessary and it is essential that we advise our clients on what is possible and what are the limitations of difficult research programmes taking into account the national context, specific legislation and the lack of available information about certain target groups. Sometimes it is better to not to go ahead with a project that will jeopardise the client's reputation and ours. •

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