



Ethnic & Racial Representation in Research & Data - How far did we come in 2021?

By Sania Haq, January 2022

2020 was a point of inflection and reckoning in relation to race and ethnicity, sparked by tragedies such as the murder of George Floyd and the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on non-white diaspora communities.

Thankfully, our sector responded by taking action in 2021 to ensure that research and data more accurately represent ethnic and racial groups in the UK. This led to the establishment of a number of committees and investigations being launched. This article aims to summarise key learnings and points of guidance that emerged from such initiatives, with a focus on:

- The **Inclusive Data Taskforce assembled by the Office for National Statistics (ONS)**, which released its Recommendations Report: [“Leaving no one behind. How can we be more inclusive in our data?”](#) in July, 2021. Its mandate was to investigate how research and data collection in the UK can be made more inclusive, improving upon the current approach in relation to population groups “that may be at greater risk of disadvantage, discrimination, or marginalisation, both generally and in our statistical picture of the UK.”
- The [Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report](#) published in March 2021. This (also known as the Sewell Report) covers a range of other topics, commenting on which is beyond the scope of this piece. The focus here is specifically on “Recommendation 24: Disaggregate the term ‘BAME’.”
- The work we have been doing as part of the [Market Research Society’s Representation in Researching Steering Group](#)

Why change is necessary - current limitations

If you are reading this, likelihood is I'm preaching to the converted re the power of research and data. More specifically, that it plays a critical role in helping us understand the experiences and needs of groups within society. This insight can, in turn, be used to inform policies and services that increase the likelihood of all groups having a fair opportunity to flourish.

Collecting data on race and ethnicity in the UK is of course not new, so we do have a good base to start from. There are also, however, a number of flaws, as outlined by the ONS Taskforce:

- **Infrequent** data collection - the Census, which offers comprehensive data and is in the public domain, is only conducted every 10 years. Once data is released, it can quickly become outdated
- **Inconsistencies** in how race and ethnicity are captured, making it difficult to compare datasets
- **Sample sizes** for non-white British groups are often not robust enough to conduct meaningful, valid analysis

Working towards a better future - four core areas

Addressing the below four areas will help in conducting a) **more effective** research and data collection that b) builds a **deeper understanding** of ethnic and racial minority groups in the UK.

Disaggregation of data to allow for the exploration of intersectional differences

Minority ethnic and racial groups are in no way monolithic, making broad brush comparisons at an aggregated level vs. the UK majority white population problematic. Not only are there broad inter-group differences among non-white groups (e.g., between Black and Asian communities) in terms of consumer behaviours and socio-economic outcomes, there are also many intra-group (e.g. within Asian communities) differences such as across country of origin, religion, age, and life-stage.

The Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report encourages more nuanced representation of minority ethnic groups. This consists of moving away from analysing data for the 'BAME' population, and instead looking at ethnic and racial subgroups in detail. The preference would be, where possible, to disaggregate beyond even broad ethnic or racial categories (e.g., Asian, Black, White). However, where limitations are present, then it is advised to use the five established broad categories in the UK (White, Black, Asian, Mixed and Other).

“The Commission agrees with advice provided by the RDU in that when reliable data for the full, harmonised set of classifications is not available, then the 5 aggregated groups (White, Black, Asian, Mixed and Other) can be used. It is further agreed that users should note the limitations of the analysis, in particular that data for an aggregated group (the Black group, for example) can mask differences in outcomes for detailed ethnic groups (the Black Caribbean and Black African groups, for example). Users should avoid, unless it is absolutely necessary, binary analysis for example comparing White and ‘Other than White’ because of the lack of analytical value this gives.”

[Recommendation 24: Disaggregate the term ‘BAME’, P26](#)

Beware of sample sizes....

Even with the best intentions, a very real challenge is achieving robust enough sample sizes of ethnic and racial minority groups. If access is readily available, then **oversampling** is recommended by the Taskforce as a way of ensuring data is sufficient for intersectional analysis (e.g., looking specifically at Black African females). Too often, however, this is not the case. Working with **specialist suppliers and communities** themselves can help increase your chances.

In the instance where there are clear sample gaps, **limitations** in relation to data analysis and interpretation should be made clear so as not to mislead readers or misrepresent the target audience. For example, stating that the sample is reflective of the broad ethnic/racial group at a total level (specifying the margin of error), however, does not allow for further subgroup analysis.

The Taskforce also highlights the value of using **qualitative research** to help build a deeper understanding of the lived experience of ethnic and racial groups, particularly where achieving robust quantitative insights is challenging. This is important to reflect on! While quantitative insight may be ideal, our North Star is essentially understanding, which is where qual can step in and fill gaps in our current, imperfect, world.

Being mindful of societal shifts and changes

An important overarching point made by the Taskforce is being aware of how societal changes can impact how we go about capturing data on race and ethnicity. While tracking and comparability are important for evidence-based decision-making over time, it is also critical to note that the way populations wish to define themselves may change. For example, there may be a desire for further disaggregation of categories, or certain subgroups may become more of a priority in terms of intersectional analysis. As such, the Taskforce advises reviewing categorisations every few years to ensure they remain relevant.

Does the exercise truly benefit the population of interest?

We should always remember the “why” - the aim of research and data collection should be to benefit the population of interest. Sadly, this is not always clear or even the end result when it comes to ethnic and racial minorities, which is one of the reasons they may (understandably) be less likely to take part. There are also a number of other barriers, which are covered in depth by the Taskforce and in [previous articles](#) I've written. A key addition to this body of knowledge, however, is insight gained by the Taskforce that highlights concerns around the extent to which research design is set-up to fairly represent minority audiences. Consulting community experts and small samples of the target audience during the research design process (e.g., on question wording etc.) can help to reduce such anxieties and the chances of (unintentionally) causing harm or offence.

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About the Author

Sania Haq, Head of Research at AudienceNet, specialises in intercultural research and has worked in this space for 10+ years. Sania helps her commercial clients in sectors such as music and entertainment navigate and reach diverse audiences, and works closely with governments and nonprofits to help them better understand and meet their socio-economic needs. She writes and speaks extensively on intercultural matters, in relation to research methods and more widely. In 2021 Sania joined the Market Research Society's Representation in Research Steering Group, and is the trainer for the MRS [training sessions](#). [‘Goodbye to Stereotypes – Designing Research that is Effective, Fair and Empowering’](#), on inclusive research.