



MRS Best Practice Guide on Collecting Ethnicity Sample Data

Updated June 2024

Introduction

MRS has produced this Best Practice Guide to help practitioners act legally and ethically in collecting data and asking research participants questions on ethnicity.

Scope

Practitioners are required to give priority to local guidance i.e., where research practice takes place. This guidance is focusing on the collection of data from the UK, although the general principles and examples could apply and/or be adapted for other countries depending upon the cultural and language norms for collecting ethnicity data. It is essential to understand the accepted approach for collecting ethnicity sample data in any countries/locations where research is being undertaken and to adopt this approach. In some markets there may also be legal requirements e.g., in France the collection of ethnicity data is prohibited.

This guidance does not cover methodological issues relating to inclusive data such as sampling. The methodological issues are explored in [separate FAQs](#) which have been developed by the MRS Representation in Research working group.

Context

MRS best practice recommendation is that for research and data collection to be inclusive of the population, all relevant personal characteristics should be included. This ensures that all participants are equally valued, and their opinions and attitudes are being gathered and represented.

Practitioners can also use this guidance to assess whether they are complying with the MRS Code of Conduct in collecting demographic information for these areas including for the purposes of National Representative (Nat Rep) samples. For UK Nat Rep samples to be inclusive of the population age, gender identity, social grade, region, ethnicity, physical and/or mental health conditions and sexual orientation should all be collected.

This Guidance Note should be used in conjunction with the MRS Code of Conduct and Guidelines.

Interpretation of Requirements

When requirements use the word "must" these are mandatory requirements and is a principle or practice that applies the MRS Code of Conduct, which Members and Company Partners are obliged to follow.

The requirements which use the phrase "should" describe implementation and denotes a recommended practice. "May" or "can" refer to the ability to do something, the possibility of something, as well as granting permission.

Explanation of Key Terms

Race and ethnicity are sometimes used interchangeably. However, they do not have the same meaning although there is some overlap.

Race is a social construct that categorises individuals largely based upon physical attributes or traits such as skin colour.

The Equality Act includes the following in its **definition of race**:

- (a) colour;
- (b) nationality;
- (c) ethnic or national origins.
- (2) In relation to the protected characteristic of race—
 - (a) a reference to a person who has a particular protected characteristic is a reference to a person of a particular racial group;
 - (b) a reference to persons who share a protected characteristic is a reference to persons of the same racial group.
- (3) A racial group is a group of persons defined by reference to race; and a reference to a person's racial group is a reference to a racial group into which the person falls.
- (4) The fact that a racial group comprises two or more distinct racial groups does not prevent it from constituting a particular racial group

Ethnicity is wider than race and refers to shared cultural experiences, religious beliefs, traditions, ancestry, language dialect or national origins (e.g., African or Irish). Ethnicity is self-defined and subjectively meaningful to the person concerned and it can change over time. As such ethnicity should be self-reporting for research purposes even with children.

Ethnic minorities refer to all ethnic groups except the white British group. Ethnic minorities include white minorities, such as Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller groups.

BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and **BME (Black Minority Ethnic)** are terms no longer widely used as they emphasise certain ethnic minority groups (Asian and black) and exclude others (mixed, other and white ethnic minority groups). The terms can also mask disparities between different ethnic groups and create misleading interpretation of data.

Nationality is the belonging to a particular country or being a citizen of a particular nation. **Some ethnic groups are also nationalities** such as Bangladeshi, Chinese or Pakistani.

For its guidance MRS **uses the broadest term of ethnicity**.

Relevant Definitions from the MRS Code of Conduct (2023)

Client: *A client includes any individual, organisation, department or division, including any belonging to the same organisation as an MRS Member, which is responsible for commissioning or applying the results from a project.*

Participant: *is any individual or organisation from or about whom data is collected.*

Practitioners: includes all individuals within the data collection supply-chain e.g. researchers, moderators, interviewers, recruiters, mystery shoppers, contractors, freelancers and temporary workers.

Research: is the collection, use, or analysis of information about individuals or organisations intended to establish facts, acquire knowledge or reach conclusions. It uses techniques of the applied social, behavioural and data sciences, statistical principles and theory, to generate insights and support decision-making by providers of goods and services, governments, non-profit organisations and the general public.

Special category data: is the processing reveals racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union Membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation.

Vulnerable people: Vulnerable people means individuals whose permanent or temporary personal circumstances and/or characteristics mean that they are less able to protect or represent their interests (see [MRS Best Practice Guide on Research Participant Vulnerability](#)).

Legal and Regulatory Obligations

The MRS Code of Conduct (2023) contains several requirements covering design, data collection and reporting which are relevant to collecting, using and reporting ethnicity data. The following are the key requirements:

Design

The MRS Code (2023) requires practitioners to design research to the specification agreed with clients and to ensure that any data collection is fit for purposes and appropriate for the audience being analysed. When collecting participant data practitioners must not harm or adversely affect participants.

Rule 9 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take all reasonable precautions to ensure that participants are not harmed or adversely affected by their professional activities and ensure that there are measures in place to guard against potential harm.

Rule 11 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take reasonable steps to design projects to the specification and/or quality standards agreed with clients.

Data Collection

The MRS Code (2023) requires participants to be able to express their views, in a way which they prefer and with the option to not respond.

Rule 28 (c) of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must take reasonable steps to ensure ... c. that participants are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know/prefer not to say.

Reporting

The MRS Code (2023) requires practitioners to include sufficient technical information within published data and reports to enable assessment of the validity of the results. In the context of inclusive data, reporting must clarify what sampling characteristics and parameters are used when defining Nationally Representative ('Nat Rep') or City Representative samples. Characteristics which should be considered include ethnicity.

MRS' best practice recommendation is that all relevant characteristics should be included for Nat Rep samples to be inclusive of the population e.g., age, gender identity, social grade, region, ethnicity, physical disabilities and/or mental health conditions and sexual orientation.

The relevant rules are:

Rule 58 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must ensure that data include sufficient technical information to enable reasonable assessment of the validity of results.

Rule 59 of the MRS Code of Conduct:

Members must ensure that reports include sufficient information to enable reasonable assessment of the validity of results

The Data Protection Act 2018 and the UK GDPR requires a legal basis for processing of personal data. Some personal data is categorised as 'special category data' and is subject to additional requirements when being collected.

Personal data categorised as special category data is data on:

- religious or philosophical beliefs
- health
- racial or ethnic origin
- trade union membership
- political beliefs
- sex life or sexual orientation
- genetic data
- biometric data (including photos when used for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person) of data subjects

Data on racial or ethnic origin is categorised as special category data.

Special category data needs to be treated with greater care as collecting and using it is more likely to interfere with individual's fundamental rights or result in discrimination. This is part of the risk-based approach of the UK GDPR.

Researchers processing ethnic data as well as personal data will need to have a legal basis for the data being processed. When processing special category data practitioners must have a lawful basis under Article 6 of the GDPR in addition to meeting a special condition under Article 9 of the GDPR but these grounds do not have to be linked. [The MRS GDPR in Brief No.10 - Collection of Ethnic Data and Other Special Category Data](#) provides guidance on what practitioners need to do to meet these requirements and checklists to help to identify what practitioners need to do to collect sensitive special category data such as ethnic data in accordance with GDPR.

There is no restriction for processing any special category data such as ethnic data as long as the requirements of Article 6 and Article 9 are being met, and practitioners fully document what they do when collecting special category data and how they do it.

Equalities Act 2010 protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. It replaced previous anti-discrimination laws with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthening protection in some situations. It sets out the different ways in which it is unlawful to treat someone.¹

It is against the law to discriminate against anyone because of:

- age
- gender reassignment
- being married or in a civil partnership
- being pregnant or on maternity leave
- disability
- race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin
- religion or belief
- sex
- sexual orientation

These are called 'protected characteristics' and race including colour, nationality, ethnic or national origin are included within the legislation.

Individuals are protected from discrimination:

- at work
- in education
- as a consumer
- when using public services
- when buying or renting property
- as a member or guest of a private club or association

Ethical Design Considerations

1. Practitioners must take reasonable steps to design projects collecting ethnicity data to the specification or quality standards agreed with clients; this includes which characteristics and parameters are to be used when identifying participant ethnicity. Collection of ethnicity questions needs to be appropriately tailored to the data collection tool.
2. Practitioners must ensure that participants will be able to proceed with any data collection about ethnicity without being required to respond if they do not wish to.
3. Practitioners must include the response options 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' when gathering ethnicity data from participants, to meet the MRS Code of Conduct data collection requirements.
4. Practitioners should consider the mode effects for collecting ethnicity data, such as:
 - **Enabling self-identification:** Ethnicity, like religion and national identity, are self-identification measures reflecting how participants define themselves. The modes should enable, where possible, participants to self-identify. For example, when asking for ethnicity during interviewer assisted data collection the participants should be allowed to answer the questions freely without restrictions.

¹ The Equality Act 2010 does not apply to Northern Ireland although there is separate legislation the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 which prohibits discrimination on racial grounds. See: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/diversity-and-discrimination>

- **Avoid inferences:** In some circumstances others may provide ethnicity data on behalf of participants, e.g., on behalf of a young child. However, practitioners should avoid making judgements or inferring ethnicity.
 - **Use pre-specified classifications with care:** Pre-specified classifications can constrain participants ability to self-identify ethnicity, leading participants to choose one of the options offered rather than expressing their own ethnicity. The use of pre-specified lists should be balanced with open options allowing for participants to self-identify.
 - **Include a write-in field for "Another ethnic background, please describe" type of response option:** Another option with self describe, allows participants to report their ethnicity in their own way rather than being classified as "Other".
5. Practitioners should consider the following when collecting ethnicity condition data from participants:
- **Provide adequate preamble/context before ethnic data questions are asked:** *this is an example of a very sensitive question, and it is important that participants are pre-warned that this type of questioning is to be included.*
 - **Ethnicity questions should be placed together:** research such as that undertaken for the England and Wales Census 2021, shows that questions on the same topic should be placed together where possible.
 - **Encourage clients to consider the level of detail required:** this is particularly important if considering collecting in-depth information about ethnicity. The level of detail required for a project should be reviewed to ensure that it is appropriate, proportionate and balanced.
 - **Respect privacy of participants:** ensure that steps are taken to maintain confidentiality of responses, and this is conveyed to participants.
 - **Balance data collection needs against the potential for intrusion:** whilst collecting inclusive data is important, participants also should be protected from harm and have the right to a private life. Consider how ethnicity data is collected, why it is being collected and implement measures to reduce the level of intrusion and potential for participant harm.
 - **Privacy notice:** The inclusion of Special Category of Personal Data must be covered in the Privacy Notice. Consideration on whether there should be a link to the Privacy Notice at the appropriate point in any data collection materials.
 - **Order to response options:** to avoid unconscious ethnicity bias the order of ethnic response options provided should be considered. Often White ethnicity option is put at the top of the ethnicity response options list which can have undertone of superiority. When undertaking data collection across the UK's four nations any response options should be changed depending in the country in which the question is being asked.
 - **Open responses:** Self-completion and online tools should, as a minimum, include an open field for participants to answer in a way that reflects their response if it does not fit in with any of the response options provided. Interviewer-aided techniques for collecting information need to build in a level of discretion and flexibility for interviewers, to ensure the questions are responsive and are handled sensitively by interviewers.
 - **Other questions:** to allow participants to fully express their ethnicity, GSS recommend that the harmonised questions on ethnic group are asked in conjunction with the GSS harmonised questions on national identity and religion. Testing has shown that asking a national identity question immediately before ethnicity increases public acceptability of the ethnicity question. Asking questions on national identify and religion in addition to ethnicity enables a more comprehensive understanding of participant's ethnic and cultural identity which in turn leads to more accurate picture of the population.

GSS recommend that the questions are asked in the following order:

- National identity: see [here](#) for the GSS harmonised standard.
- Ethnic group: see [here](#) for the GSS harmonised standard.
- Religion: see [here](#) for the GSS harmonised standard.

6. Practitioners must report on the characteristics and parameters used when reporting on samples which are described as either Nat Rep or City Rep.

Examples of Question and Response Options

There is no one size fits all question and response approach to collecting data about ethnicity. There are however some established question and response options from [GSS](#) and ONS which are widely used in the UK.

Ethnic group data has been collected from the England and Wales Census since the 1991 Census. There has been a harmonised standard for collecting ethnicity data developed by the Government Statistical Service (GSS) since 2011.

GSS notes that collecting data on ethnicity is complex because of the subjective and multifaceted nature of the concept. It is self-defined and subjectively meaningful to an individual and tends to evolve in the context of social and political attitudes or developments. Examples 1 and 2 in this section are taken from the 2011 GSS harmonised standards for ethnicity.

It should be noted that the GSS is updating the current standard looking at evidence such as the ethnic group questions and output classifications for the Census 2021 for England and Wales, the Census for Northern Ireland and the recommended questions for Scotland's 2022 Census.

In October 2020, the National Statistician established the [Inclusive Data Taskforce](#). It was designed to improve the UK's inclusive data this includes ethnicity. In response to the recommendations, the ONS oversaw the publication of an [Implementation Plan](#) in January 2022. This gives information about the current and planned initiatives across the UK statistical system. It refers to a [GSS Harmonisation workplan](#), which was published in February 2022. This workplan includes reviewing, refining, and updating harmonised standards.

The England and Wales Census for 2021 is different in that it allows flat classifications and includes more ethnic group classifications than 2011, to allow previously unrecorded combinations of identities. Other changes compared to the previous 2011 Census are the addition of Roma to the White ethnic group and a write in response for the Black African ethnic group. Examples 3 and 4 in this section are taken from the 2021 Census for England and Wales, and the proposed 2022 Scotland Census.

The response options for the GSS and Census questions, except the GSS telephone option, are not aligned to the MRS Code of Conduct requirements as they do not include don't know and prefer not to say. If practitioners were to use this question, they would need to expand the response options to include these two additional options. These have been added to show how this question could be used and be in adherence to MRS Code requirements (shown in red text in the examples below).

1. Face-to-face interview or self-complete mode question and response options to determine ethnicity – GSS harmonised standard

Below is the 2011 harmonised standard ethnic group question for use in England. This question is recommended when a show card is used in a face-to-face interview or for self-completion modes (both paper and electronic). A similar approach is taken for Wales except that Welsh features first in the response options for White. Similarly in Northern Ireland the list is the same except for the White options which are restricted to White and Irish Traveller.

If practitioners were to use this question, they would need to expand the response options to include 'don't know' and 'prefer not say'. These have been added to show how this question could be used and adapted to be in adherence to MRS Code requirements. MRS also recommends the use of alternative phrases to 'other', such as 'another' which is perceived as less emotive than 'other', e.g., 'Another White background, please write in'. These example response options have been amended to reflect this approach.

What is your ethnic group? (Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background)

White

- English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Another White background, please describe

Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- Another Mixed / Multiple ethnic background, please describe

Asian / Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Another Asian background, please describe

Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

- African
- Caribbean
- Another Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe

Other ethnic group

- Arab
- Another ethnic group, please describe

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Below is the 2011 harmonised standard recommended ethnic group question for use in Scotland. This question is recommended when a show card is used in a face-to-face interview or self-completion survey (both paper and electronic).

This question has been developed to enable direct comparison with the Scottish Census and other sources in Scotland. Note this is different to England's response options for example it includes Polish, splits Scottish and Other

British, includes Scottish ethnicity options e.g., Chinese Scottish etc.

If practitioners were to use this question, they would need to expand the response options to include 'don't know' and 'prefer not say'. These have been added to show how this question could be used and adapted to be in adherence to MRS Code requirements. MRS also recommends the use of alternative phrases to 'other', such as 'another' which is perceived as less emotive than 'other', e.g., 'Another White background, please write in'. These example response options have been amended to reflect this approach.

What is your ethnic group?

(Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background)

- White
- Scottish
- Other British
- Irish
- Gypsy/Traveller
- Polish
- Another White ethnic group, please describe

Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups

- Any Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, please describe

Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British

- Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish or Pakistani British
- Indian, Indian Scottish or Indian British
- Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi Scottish or Bangladeshi British
- Chinese, Chinese Scottish or Chinese British
- Another Asian, please describe

African

- African, African Scottish or African British
- Another African, please describe

Caribbean or Black

- Caribbean, Caribbean Scottish or Caribbean British
- Black, Black Scottish or Black British
- Another Caribbean or Black, please describe

Other ethnic group

- Arab, Arab Scottish or Arab British
- Another ethnic group, please describe

Don't know

Prefer not to say

2. Telephone interview questions – GSS harmonised standard

Where use of a show card is not possible (such as in telephone surveys), the question should be asked in stages due to the length of the question. Below is the 2011 harmonised standard ethnic group question for use in England. The recommended stages are presented below (Part 1 and Part 2).

The interviewer should use the word 'or' after each response option in parts 1 and 2 of the two-stage question. A pause in speech should be used to indicate a forward slash (/). For Scotland 'or' is used instead of a forward slash. Similarly, the four nation variations (identified for face-to-face and self-

completion) apply to the telephone response options. MRS also recommends the use of alternative phrases to 'other', such as 'another' which is perceived as less emotive than 'other', e.g., 'Another White background, please write in'. These example response options have been amended to reflect this approach.

Part 1

Interviewer to read:

What is your ethnic group? I will read out the options, choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background.

Interviewer to read options:

- White, or
- Mixed/ Multiple ethnic groups, or
- Asian/ Asian British, or
- Black/ African/ Caribbean/ Black British, or
- Chinese, or
- Arab, or
- Another ethnic group

Part 2

Interviewer to read:

And which one of these best describes your ethnic group or background?

Interviewer to read the following options if response to Part 1:

Part 1 = "White"

- English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British, or
- Irish, or
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller, or
- Another White background?

Part 1 = "Mixed/Multiple ethnic groups"

- White and Black Caribbean, or
- White and Black African, or
- White and Asian, or
- Another mixed / multiple ethnic background?

Part 1 = "Asian/Asian British"

- Indian, or
- Pakistani, or
- Bangladeshi, or
- Another Asian background?

Part 1 = "Black/African/Caribbean/Black British"

- African, or
- Caribbean, or
- Another Black / African / Caribbean background?

Part 1 = "Another ethnic group" or Part 2 = "Another ethnic group..."

Please can you describe your ethnic group or background? (record respondent's answer)

3. Ethnicity question used in the Census – England and Wales 2021

The following question and response options are taken from the England and Wales Census undertaken in 2021. For the Welsh questionnaire only, there was different options for Section C which was Asian, Asian Welsh or Asian British; and Section D was Black, Black Welsh, Black British, Caribbean or African.

If practitioners were to use this question, they would need to expand the response options to include 'don't know' and 'prefer not say'. These have been added to show how this question could be used and adapted to be in adherence to MRS Code requirements. MRS also recommends the use of alternative phrases to 'other', such as 'another' which is perceived as less emotive than 'other', e.g., 'Another White background, please write in'. These example response options have been amended to reflect this approach.

What is your ethnic group?

Choose one section and A to E, then tick one box to describe your ethnic group or background

A White

- English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British
- Irish
- Gypsy or Irish Traveller
- Roma
- Another White background, write in:

B Mixed or multiple ethnic groups

- White and Black Caribbean
- White and Black African
- White and Asian
- Another Mixed or Multiple background, write in:

C Asian or Asian British

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Bangladeshi
- Chinese
- Another Asian background, write in:

D Black, Black British, Caribbean or African

- Caribbean
- African background, write in below
- Another Black, Black British or Caribbean background, write in

E Other ethnic group

- Arab
- Another ethnic group, write in

Don't know

Checklist:

Practitioners should ask themselves and their clients the following questions when undertaking projects which use, collect or report data on physical and/or mental health conditions:

Design

1. What type of data does the client want me to collect?
2. If a project is using Nat Rep or City Rep samples, does this definition include participant ethnicity?

GDPR

3. Do I need to collect information on ethnicity?
4. Is there a research purpose for collecting data on ethnicity?
5. Is the data on ethnicity being collected relevant and not excessive?
6. Is the data on ethnicity needed to meet Nat Rep requirements or is it for another purpose?
7. Is a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) and/or an ethics review required for this project?
8. Has a DPIA and/or ethics review been completed and are there any changes and/or mitigations needed?

Question Design

9. What information do I need to gather from the participants?
10. Is the question/s suitable for the information on ethnicity I need to gather?
11. If interviewer administered have the interviewers been briefed to enable participants to self-identify their ethnicity?

Response Options

12. Can the responses for ethnicity be optional?
13. What response options for ethnicity should I provide?
14. Should I provide closed categories for collecting response options for ethnicity or open fields?
15. Are 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' options included in the response options for questions about ethnicity?
16. Should the response options be re-ordered e.g., is white first on the list and is this appropriate?
17. Is this a project for the UK's four nation, and have the response options been amended to reflect the characteristics of each of country of the UK?

Vulnerability

18. Are the participants from whom data about ethnicity is being collected likely to be vulnerable?
19. If there are vulnerable participants, has the [MRS Best Practice Guide on Research Participant Vulnerability](#) been referred to?

Reporting

20. Does the report detail the characteristics and parameters used for determining any Nat Rep or City Rep samples?
21. Does the report contain sufficient information to determine the validity of any results reported, including sampling parameters?

Useful Information Sources

- MRS: MRS Code of Conduct 2023
- MRS: [GDPR in Brief: Collection of Ethnic Data and Other Special Category Data](#)
- MRS: [MRS Guidelines: Essential Safeguards – Dealing with discriminatory comments](#)
- MRS: [Best Practice Guide on Research Participant Vulnerability](#)
- Government Statistical Service (GSS): [Ethnicity harmonised standard](#)
- Gov.UK: [Ethnicity classifications dashboard](#)
- Gov.UK: [Ethnicity facts and figures: List of ethnic groups](#)
- ONS: [Ethnic group, national identity, religion and language](#)
- National Records Scotland: [Scotland’s Census 2021 Ethnic Group Topic Report](#)
- NISRA: [Information on Census 2021 in Northern Ireland](#)
- Voices4All: [Demographic questions](#)
- Voices4All: [Sampling and weighting questions](#)