

*Enhancing the quality and  
quantity of social  
research on ethnicity:  
learning from a  
consultation, review and  
piloting exercise*

Principles and Values of UK Research on  
Ethnicity and Health

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# BACKGROUND - 1

- ⦿ Expectations of evidence-based policy and practice across range of social policy areas.
- ⦿ RR(A)A - significant duties on public bodies. Recognition of need for better data and increased understanding.
- ⦿ But, much funded social research focuses predominantly on majority White British population and fails to consider race/ethnicity as a variable of analysis.
- ⦿ Where research does engage with ethnicity - varied approaches and practices to conceptualising, measuring, analysing and reporting of results.
- ⦿ Complex and contentious ethical and scientific issues arise. Danger that research does more harm than good.

# BACKGROUND - 2

- ◎ Social researchers increasingly expected to consider the importance of attention to race/ethnicity, but little guidance and poor quality assurance.
- ◎ Critical junctures in the research cycle:
  - (1) Scoping and commissioning of research
  - (2) Independent Scientific Review (ISR) or equivalent prior to receiving funding
  - (3) Ethics Approval prior to commencing a study
  - (4) Peer-review at publication stage.
- ◎ Is it feasible and desirable to introduce guidance at these points? Would such guidance have a positive impact?

# PROJECT OVERVIEW

Review work & Consultation  
(Learned Societies, published literature, social researchers in various settings, ethics/ISR boards)



Development of guidance for different stages  
(Commissioners, researchers, review boards, peer reviewers)



Piloting of guidance  
(Commissioners/funders; review boards; journals)



Further refinement & other outputs

# REVIEW & CONSULTATION

- ◎ **Published literature** on when and how to include attention to racial/ethnic diversity within 'social policy-relevant' research.
  - ▶ systematic search of electronic databases
  - ▶ papers recommended by experts (editors of journals focusing on race/ethnicity)
  - ▶ 'social policy-relevant' broadly defined, 50+ papers reviewed, analysis template employed

# ISSUES FOR RESEARCHERS: literature 1

- ◎ **Relationships with commissioners and sponsors**
  - ▶ scrutinise research briefs
  - ▶ recognise politicised and controversial nature
  - ▶ seek to avoid short-term policy imperatives
  
- ◎ **Responsibilities to wider society**
  - ▶ reflect on 'topics'/'problems' considered worth researching
  - ▶ consider whether adequate attention is given to:
    - the concerns of minority ethnic individuals & 'groups'
    - structures and processes of racial exclusion
    - White ethnicities
    - relations between 'groups' and 'communities'

# ISSUES FOR RESEARCHERS: literature 2

- ◎ **Responsibilities to minority 'groups' and 'communities'**
  - ▶ avoidance of group harm
  - ▶ partnership working, cultural congruence
  
- ◎ **Conceptualising and theorising 'race' and 'ethnicity'**
  - ▶ explicate conceptual basis for exploring race/ethnicity
  - ▶ careful and consistent use of terms
  - ▶ recognise historical specificities
  - ▶ recognise and counter essentialist and culturalist tendencies
  - ▶ give adequate attention to revealing and understanding racism / racial exclusion
  - ▶ consider responsibility to challenge narrow and stigmatising constructions of racial/ethnic identities

# ISSUES FOR RESEARCHERS: literature 3

- ◎ **Design and conduct of particular studies - A**
  - ▶ *When and why to include attention to ethnic diversity*
    - when evaluating policies or interventions
    - when other axes of social hierarchy seem important
  
  - ▶ *Categorisation and labelling*
    - recognise that categories & labels are not value-neutral
    - scrutinise classification and labels carefully in relation to a particular study's focus
    - recognise dangers of 'fixing' categories (fluid and contingent nature)
    - recognise and counter tendency to homogenise
  
  - ▶ *Sampling and recruitment*
    - may need additional resources and different strategies
    - caution regarding comparability of samples

# ISSUES FOR RESEARCHERS: literature 4

- ◎ **Design and conduct of particular studies - B**
  - ▶ *Data generation and measurement tools*
    - be aware that methods may operate differentially e.g. diversity of expression may affect narrative methods
    - consider complex insider/outsider issues
    - consider cross-cultural equivalence of standardised tools
    - seek out elusive structures and processes
  
  - ▶ *Working across languages*
    - do not exclude on basis of English language competency
    - adequate consultation, piloting and translation
    - bilingual/multilingual researchers within the team
  
  - ▶ *Care of study participants*
    - power and vulnerability
    - care regarding harm, consent and anonymity

# ISSUES FOR RESEARCHERS: literature 5

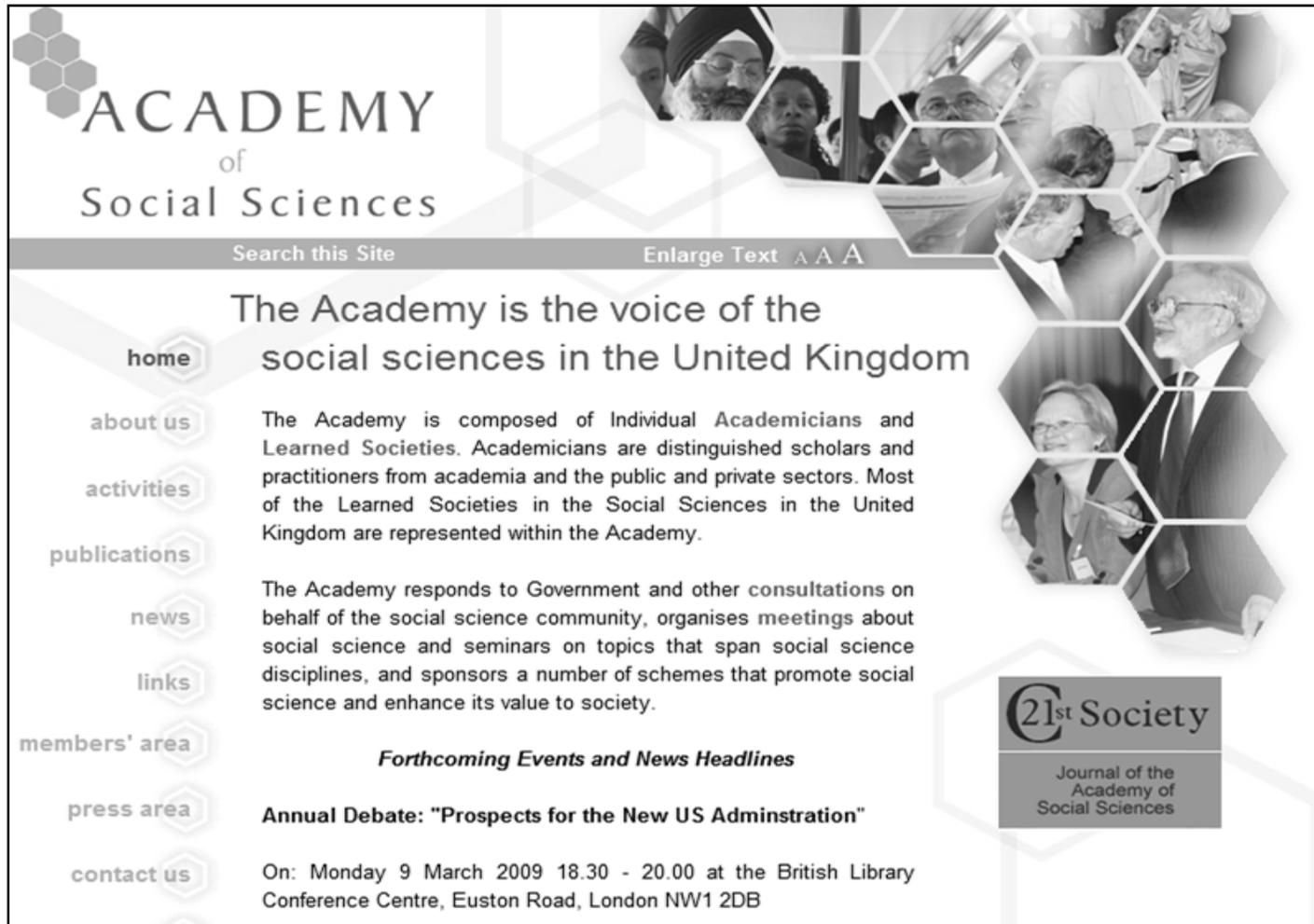
- ◎ **Design and conduct of particular studies - C**
  - ▶ *Analyses and interpretation: comparisons and causation*
    - recognise and counter tendency for *associations* to be interpreted as *explanations*
    - be aware of inter-linked hierarchies of disadvantage and 'intersectionality'
    - seek to identify underlying causal factors
    - examine diversity within and similarity across 'groups'
    - be alert to bias in methods of data collection and analysis
  
  - ▶ *Representation and dissemination of findings*
    - be alert and manage (mis)use of findings
    - consider withholding certain findings
    - give adequate voice to marginalised
    - use innovative means to convey to different audiences

# REVIEW & CONSULTATION

Review of guidance on scientific ethics and practice provided by **Learned Societies**

- ◎ 32 Learned Societies listed as members of the UK Academy of Social Sciences
- ◎ Two key aims, to examine:
  - ▶ whether any explicit/implicit consideration of ‘ethnic diversity’
  - ▶ the factors influencing ‘active consideration’ of this issue

# REVIEW & CONSULTATION



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- [reflective fieldwork/emerging concepts and themes](#)
- [what to do if things don't go to plan](#)

# REVIEW & CONSULTATION

## Summary from Learned Societies work

- ◉ No evidence of systematic attention to ethnicity
- ◉ Preference for guidance over regulation
- ◉ Little explicit attention (sometimes intentionally)
- ◉ Generic statements leave interpretation to the reader
- ◉ Scientifically robust research → ethically robust
- ◉ Will existing guidance alert researchers?
- ◉ Some important areas of dissensus
- ◉ Explicit guidance did include some useful themes:
  - ▶ benefit wider society - inclusive
  - ▶ do not overlook sub-groups - not exclusionary
  - ▶ consider (differential) consequences - sensitive

# REVIEW & CONSULTATION

- ◎ **Consultation with social researchers** in government departments and private research agencies
  - ▶ self-completion or telephone questionnaire (mix of closed and open-ended questions)
  - ▶ 6 government departments, 8 research agencies
  - ▶ 3 further workshops to be delivered in April (Sheffield & London)

- ⦿ Confirmed increasing need to research this area.
- ⦿ Varied degrees of confidence - too confident?
- ⦿ Heavy reliance on internal peer review and researcher experience rather than codes/guidance
- ⦿ Researchers often take cue from commissioners regarding whether or not to include attention.
- ⦿ Desire for concrete guidance on how to do it in practice.
- ⦿ Worried about not being able to cope with increasing diversity, how to represent everyone
- ⦿ Felt need to consider multiple axes of diversity simultaneously

# CHALLENGES

- ◎ *Available literature and LS guidance does not adequately guide and support social researchers:*
  - more about pitfalls than clear examples of good practice
  - more about conceptual/theoretical basis than how to operationalise
  - a focus on fluidity and contingency does not necessarily sit easily with stark inequalities that social researchers tasked with understanding
  - more about *how* to research than *when* or *why* attention should be given to ethnic diversity
  - very little on sampling and recruitment and how this must link to analysis strategies
  - little to convince those who are not already aware of the need to consider ethnic diversity

# CHALLENGES

- ◎ *Important areas of dissensus:*

- What is ethnicity? Concepts and theories.
- Fixing ethnic categories versus exploring processes of ethnic identification, inclusion and exclusion?
- What role should values play in research?
- Research for knowledge generation versus research for social change?

- ◎ *Barriers to ensuring consistent standards across the research cycle (our piloting still in progress)*

- Sets of guiding principles seem unlikely to be enough to support better practice
- Concerns about over-burdening reviewers
- Skills/experience of those who commission and review

# MOVING FORWARD

## ◎ *Issues for discussion*

- How can we recognise differing contexts and disciplinary perspectives but at the same time encourage improved practice?
- What form should guidance take and how should it be promoted to effect change? (past efforts e.g. in biomedical journals have not been effective)
- Who should take responsibility?
- Is there a strong case for privileging attention to race/ethnicity? How can other axes of inequality also be considered?
- Can we develop criteria for when ethnicity should be taken into consideration, when it is reasonable to overlook, and in these cases, what considerations should be given to generalisability and translation of findings into policy/practice?