Can the quality of social research on ethnicity be improved through the introduction of guidance? Findings from a research commissioning pilot exercise

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Abstract
As the volume of UK social research addressing ethnicity grows so too do concerns regarding the ethical and scientific rigour of this research domain and its potential to do more harm than good. The establishment of standards and principles and the introduction of guidance documents at critical points within the research cycle might be one way to enhance the quality of such research. This article reports the findings from the piloting of a guidance document within the research commissioning process of a major funder of UK social research. The guidance document was positively received by researchers, the majority of whom reported it to be comprehensible, relevant and potentially useful in improving the quality of research proposals. However, a review of submitted proposals suggested the guidance had had little impact on practice. While guidance may have a role to play, it will need to be strongly promoted by commissioners and other gate-keepers. Findings also suggest the possibility that guidance may discourage some researchers from engaging with ethnicity if it raises problems without solutions; highlighting the need for complementary investments in research capacity development in this area.

Keywords: ethnicity; research guidance; research ethics, research methodology; research commissioning, governance

Introduction

Since the landmark introduction of an ethnicity question to the 1991 Census (Bulmer, 1996) and the influential Fourth National Survey of Ethnic Minorities in 1993-4 (Modood et al., 1997), the volume of social research addressing ethnicity[1] has grown dramatically in the UK. Social researchers are increasingly required to produce evidence capable of informing policy and practice development that is sensitive to the diversity of the UK's multi-ethnic population. In particular, there is demand for better understanding of the patterns and causes of ethnic inequalities in access to, uptake, experience and outcomes of public services across diverse arenas including employment, education and health (Mason, 2003). Early concerns that the identification of 'visible' minorities implies labelling them as deviant and contributes

to division and disadvantage (Ballard, 1997), appear largely to have given way to the belief that inequities cannot be rectified without robust data and rigorous analysis.

Nevertheless, as research addressing ethnicity increases so too do concerns about the scientific and ethical rigour of such work. Common criticisms include: the lack of conceptual clarity and failure to carefully articulate and justify approaches to measuring ethnicity (Ballard, 1997); inappropriate representation of ethnic groups as stable, discrete entities (Bradby, 2003; Aspinall and Chinouya, 2008; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, 2008); and inadequate engagement with the multidimensional nature of ethnicity (Burton, Nandi and Platt, 2010; Kaufman, Cooper and McGee, 1997). Other commentators have drawn attention to the need for greater consideration of how samples are drawn and participants recruited (Ellison, 2005; Nazroo, 2006; Epstein, 2008) as well as how data are generated from diverse samples, including issues of translation and cross-cultural validity (Chattoo and Atkin, 2006). Concerns have also been expressed regarding: the failure of social research to address the issues of most importance to minority ethnic people (Bulmer and Solomos, 2004); the lack of meaningful engagement of minority ethnic individuals and groups in the research process (Johnson, 2006; Mir, 2008); inadequate consideration of social, historical and political dimensions (Fawcett and Hearn 2004; Pollack, 2003; Gunaratnam, 2003; Kalra, 2006); and the potential for research to contribute to the stereotyping and pathologisation of ethnic minority individuals and communities. Indeed, it has been suggested that much social research that addresses ethnicity is in danger of producing partial and biased understandings and thereby doing more harm than good (Twine and Warren, 2000; Ratcliffe, 2001; Gunaratnam, 2007).

Though many of these issues have been recognised for some time (see for example Bulmer, 1986; Colledge, Van Geuns, Svensson; 1983; Williams, 1987) and continue to be regularly highlighted in new methodological papers, recent reviews of empirical work suggest that poor ethical and scientific standards are stubbornly persistent (Salway et al., 2011). This raises the question: *How can researchers be encouraged and supported to undertake research that appropriately pays attention to ethnicity?*

The present paper draws on a project based on the premise that there are critical junctures within the research cycle at which there is the potential to significantly increase both the quantity and quality of research that appropriately pays attention to ethnicity. For researcher-led research, these will include: research proposal development and independent scientific review (ISR); ethical review; and peer-review before publication. For more applied or directly commissioned research, the equivalent stages are: development of the commissioning brief or tender document; contract agreement; and fine-tuning of the final report and research products. Clearly, in some cases a research project may fall somewhere between these, perhaps being directly commissioned but also requiring ethical approval from a university or health service research ethics committee. Nonetheless, in most cases there are clear junctures at which research commissioners and researchers could be alerted to, and required to reflect upon, whether and how their research engages with ethnicity.

Though the idea of introducing guidance on researching ethnicity within the social research cycle seems reasonable, in practice there are a number of factors that might undermine the success of such efforts. First, the diversity of disciplinary

perspectives and associated potential lack of consensus on research principles and standards might mean that it is impossible to produce documents that are widely acceptable (Salway et al., 2009). Second, a general reluctance among some social researchers to embrace guidance documents and checklists that are seen as constraining and undermining of researcher creativity might mean that researchers are unwilling to cooperate (Butler, 2002). Finally, key actors within the research cycle, including research commissioners and journal editors, might be reluctant to promote adherence to such guidance documents for fear of over-burdening researchers and reviewers and thereby disrupting the existing processes, much of which relies upon the goodwill of unpaid voluntary contributors.

There have been some past attempts to produce guidance documents and guiding principles that aim to encourage greater ethical and scientific rigour in research on ethnicity. Some of these have been promoted generally rather than at specific points in the research cycle (e.g. Patel, 1999; Scottish Association of Black Researchers (SABRE), 2001; British Sociological Association (BSA) 2011), while others have been adopted by journal editors, particularly in the biomedical sciences (McKenzie and Crowcroft, 1996; Smart et al. 2008; Outram and Ellison, 2005). However, to-date there has been little evaluation of these initiatives, though Smart et al.'s (2008) examination of guidelines in biomedical journals concluded that they had had little impact on practice.

We report here the findings from a pilot of a guidance document within the research commissioning cycle of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), an important and well-respected funder of UK social research. The pilot's aims were to:

(1) assess the feasibility and desirability of introducing a guidance document focused on ethnicity within the JRF research commissioning process.

(2) explore whether such an intervention could enhance the quality of research proposals submitted in relation to how they engaged with ethnicity.

Method

Ethical approval for the study was given by the relevant University ethics committee. Drawing on a review of published papers and reports addressing various dimensions of ethical and scientific rigour in researching ethnicity described elsewhere (Salway et al., 2011), the research team prepared a draft guidance document of around five pages -*'Researching race/ethnicity sensitively and appropriately'* - using a format similar to that used in JRF's standard guidance for research applicants (http://www.jrf.org.uk/funding). The document was intended to prompt researchers to consider whether their proposed research should or should not pay attention to ethnicity and to alert researchers to the main scientific and ethical issues that have been highlighted in relation to researching ethnicity sensitively and appropriately. Recognising that ethnicity is a complex and contested concept, the guidance document did not offer any fixed definition nor any prescribed means of operationalising ethnicity. Nevertheless, the document did remind researchers of commonly recognised conceptual pitfalls including: over-emphasis of cultural aspects; inadequate attention to racism; portrayal of racial/ethnic identities as fixed and unchanging; downplaying diversity within 'groups'; overlooking 'majority' and 'White' ethnicities; and inadequate justification and inconsistency in use of key terms. The guidance aimed to encourage researchers to carefully consider and explicitly justify their conceptual and operational treatment of ethnicity. Similarly, acknowledging the range of disciplinary and methodological approaches that

researchers might adopt, the guidance document did not rigidly prescribe the shape and content that research proposals should take, but rather raised a range of issues that we felt all research proposals should consider and respond to. The document thereby complemented the existing JRF guidance that provided applicants with information regarding what the Foundation expected of a good research proposal. Box 1 presents a summary of the issues included in the guidance document.

- Box 1 about here -

Once the document had been agreed with members of the JRF's research commissioning team, a JRF research manager began to identify research calls for inclusion in the pilot. Four calls were identified between July and December 2009: Forced Labour; Young People & Housing; Alcohol and Locality; Young People who Drink Little. Researchers submitting proposals to two of these calls (termed 'intervention' calls) were provided with the additional '*Researching race/ethnicity*' guidance document prior to submission along with other standard documentation from the Foundation, while researchers submitting proposals to the other two calls received only the standard documentation and not the additional guidance (i.e. essentially the 'control' calls). Once all proposals had been received, applicants to all four calls were informed of the pilot and invited to participate via an email from a member of JRF staff. Applicants were asked to consent to take part in the pilot and specifically to give permission for their submitted proposal to be reviewed by our research team. Consenting applicants were then contacted by the research team by email and requested to follow an electronic link to an online questionnaire to provide their feedback on the usefulness and appropriateness of the *'Researching race/ethnicity'*

guidance document. The feedback questionnaire included a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Applicants who had not had sight of the guidance at the time of preparing their proposal were able to read and consider the document before completing the feedback questionnaire.

As well as gathering feedback from applicants, the pilot also involved a careful review of proposals submitted to JRF from all consenting applicants. A review template was developed based on the key issues covered in the additional *'Researching race/ethnicity'* guidance document and refined through iterative testing on four proposals to ensure that it was comprehensive and could be consistently applied. The research proposals were then divided between two members of the research team who carefully read the proposals and applied the review template which involved both completing a series of check boxes and taking detailed notes. One of the researchers was blind to whether the proposals under review were 'intervention' or 'control'.

A total of 77 proposals were submitted in response to the four calls that were included in the pilot (56 to the intervention calls and 21 to the control calls). Out of these, applicants gave consent and we were able to review 33 proposals from the intervention calls and 13 proposals from the control calls (close to 60% in both cases). Just five applicants actively refused to participate, while the remainder did not respond to several reminders.

Response rates for the online feedback questionnaire were lower; with only 26 lead applicants submitting fully completed questionnaires (34%) and a further 10 submitting partially completed questionnaires (making 36/77, 47%). Background information from the questionnaire illustrated that a range of expertise was represented amongst respondents. Twenty three respondents ranked their team's

general research expertise as 'experienced', eight as 'intermediate' and none as 'novice'; with 12 considering their expertise in 'the area of race, ethnicity and/or minorities research' to be 'experienced', 17 'intermediate' and two 'novice'.

Findings

Negotiating the pilot: commissioner concerns

Negotiating the detail of the pilot with JRF staff took quite a long period of time and raised a number of issues relating both to the content and the process of implementing the pilot, summarised in Box 2.

- Box 2 about here -

Four members of JRF staff individually reviewed the draft guidance document. Two areas of particular concern were noted. First, whether it was appropriate for the guidance document to focus exclusively on ethnicity, rather than cover all axes of difference and inequality more comprehensively. In the end it was decided to title the document *'Additional guidance for the preparation of research proposals: Diversity and Equality'*, with an introductory paragraph included up front explaining that the Foundation had chosen to focus initially on ethnicity but that this did not imply that other dimensions of diversity were considered less important by the Foundation. The original title *'Researching race/ethnicity sensitively and appropriately'* was included as a sub-heading. The second set of issues raised related to the need for the guidance document to be clear and relevant to all applicants regardless of the research methodologies being employed or the substantive focus of the research proposed. It was therefore agreed that the document should not be too prescriptive; raising issues for consideration rather than advocating preferred

approaches. Nevertheless, there were some areas where existing JRF guidance was already quite directive and it was important that the additional document was compatible with these aspects, for instance in relation to involving 'people with direct experience' in the research process.

In addition, a number of issues were raised that related to how the pilot would operate in practice and particularly whether it might negatively impact upon the smooth running of the research commissioning process. JRF staff raised concerns about over-burdening applicants and about the potential for the guidance to skew proposals so that ethnicity received more attention than they felt was warranted. These concerns meant that several research managers preferred not to allow their research calls to be included in the pilot for fear of disruption to their normal processes.

Feedback from research applicants

Most respondents who provided feedback via the online questionnaire reported that they had either read the *'Researching race/ethnicity'* guidance prior to or since submitting their proposal. Respondents could also follow a link from the questionnaire to (re)examine the guidance before completing the questionnaire.

Overall, the '*Researching race/ethnicity*' guidance document was received positively by those applicants who provided feedback, being reported by the majority of respondents as being comprehensible, relevant and potentially useful. Out of the 36 respondents who answered the questions relating to the content of the guidance, 28 (78%) reported that the issues covered were 'very straightforward' to understand and only eight that there was 'some difficulty' (Table 1).

- Table 1 about here -

Of these eight, just two mentioned specific difficulties, though these related less to *understanding* the guidance document per se and more to operationalising ethnic diversity within their particular research project:

> 'Perhaps it was my topic - race and ethnicity was not the main issue of the research topic - however, they will certainly be explored along with other demographic information when the data is collected. Therefore, my difficulty was more of a worry than a difficulty - because I felt as though I had not specifically chosen people from a range of ethnic/race backgrounds.'

> 'I found the guidelines made it tempting to just concentrate on white groups in the research given the diversity of ethnic groups in the UK and that there was no clear way we could 'represent' all of or to some extent even any of them. As the proposal was about low drinking behaviours it was impossible to ignore (nor would we want to ignore) non-white ethnic groups but I felt the guidelines didn't offer sufficient suggestion on how best to do that and felt more like a warning.'

Both of these comments highlight the fact that brief guidance documents are insufficient to equip researchers with the skills and information to make complex design decisions, but they also suggest that guidance can raise awareness and perhaps encourage researchers to consider previously overlooked issues. Nevertheless, it would be a concern if guidance discouraged researchers from incorporating attention to ethnicity because it appeared to demand unattainable standards, or if it raised awareness of potential problems without suggesting potential solutions.

Thirty five respondents answered a question about the relevance of the issues covered in the guidance for their proposed research project with 16 (46%) reporting that they were 'very relevant', 18 'somewhat relevant' and just one 'largely irrelevant' (Table 1). The responses to this question varied depending on the research call, with three quarters of those responding to the 'Forced Labour' call, compared to none of

those responding to the 'Young People and Housing' call, saying that the issues were 'very relevant'. When asked to give more detail on any issues raised in the guidance that seemed irrelevant, one respondent mentioned that their study was to take place in an area of England with little ethnic diversity. However, the majority of responses again related more to complexities and challenges of research design and the challenges of applying the guidance in their particular research context, rather than to any general irrelevance of the issues included in the guidance.

> 'The proposed samples were too small to investigate ethnicity in any meaningful sense.'

> 'The only challenge is one which we would find, even without the guidance - how to include the voices of as many different groups as possible within project timings and budgets.'

> 'Nothing really that was irrelevant - I guess our proposal took a much broader perspective, wanting to acknowledge cultural issues without giving them a prominent focus in our proposal and thus detracting from the other main aims and issues in our proposed study.'

Respondents were also asked whether they felt that any important issues were omitted from the guidance document. Seven of the 30 respondents answering this question said 'yes', identifying a range of issues that they felt deserved greater attention in the guidance. In particular, several respondents identified the need for the guidance to cover more aspects of diversity than just ethnicity. Other responses again related to the need for more detail on how to address the issues raised through concrete examples and more detailed instruction.

> 'Examples of how race/ethnicity had been identified well/badly in other JRF applications or other public documents: be that in terms of accuracy / fairness / completeness / appropriate language.'

> 'We didn't feel any issues were missing, but that it might be helpful to bring them to life a little, by giving examples?'

Twenty six respondents completed the section of the questionnaire relating to their experience of using the guidance. Just two of these reported that they felt the document took too much time to read and consider, and one that the document made the job of preparing the proposal 'more difficult'. Fourteen respondents felt that the document made their job of preparing the proposal 'easier' (Table 1).

When asked whether the guidance document had any significant effect on how they prepared (or would have prepared) their proposal, responses were evenly split (Table 1). Among those who reported no effect, their explanations were primarily that the document covered issues with which they were familiar and therefore would already take into consideration. For example, a typical comment was:

> 'Most of these issues are well known and I would have been aware of them in any case.'

For those who thought the guidance did (or would) have affected their preparation of the proposal, few specific details were given, but there was a general sense that the guidance highlighted issues that might otherwise have been (or were) overlooked or dealt with less explicitly in the proposal. Respondents commented:

> '[The guidance] Helped me to ensure I covered all relevant (to JRF) points. Helped strengthen our application by reminding us to engage with certain issues (that otherwise we may have overlooked) - so very useful as a research checklist.'

> 'The guidance would have affected some of our thinking and perhaps some of the detail of the proposed study. There are things I wished we had said now in the proposal having read this guidance.'

Interestingly, though only half of the respondents felt that the guidance document had had (or would have had) an impact on the preparation of their own proposal, 24 out of 26 (92%) said that they thought the guidance could enhance the quality of proposals submitted to the JRF. Those who felt that the guidance could

contribute to better quality proposals mainly emphasised the usefulness of raising awareness of issues with which some researchers may be unfamiliar.

> 'It does provide a series of key issues that could serve to prompt people who have not worked in this area before.'

> 'I would hope it would: there is still a distinct lack of awareness of 'race' equality issues amongst many public agencies and some researchers and they need as much 'encouragement' as possible to ensure this dimension is incorporated properly into all proposals.'

> 'I can't remember if JRF staff and their advisers require these issues to be considered as a condition for accepting proposals: it should be such.'

Review of submitted proposals

Turning now to the findings from our review of submitted proposals, overall we found little evidence that proposals prepared in response to 'intervention' calls (with access to the guidance document) differed in any systematic way from those submitted to the 'control' calls.

Looking first very broadly at whether the proposals included any reference to ethnicity and/or race, however limited, we found that 11 out of 13 control proposals (85%) and 30 out of 33 (91%) intervention proposals included some mention. However, on the whole, proposals paid very limited attention to these issues and very few proposals included reference to ethnicity and/or race consistently across background, rationale, research questions, methodology and outputs. Just three intervention proposals and two control proposals included any detailed justification for why the proposed research should pay attention to ethnicity and/or race. Among the five proposals that paid no attention to ethnicity or race at all, none included any justification for, or any discussion of the potential limitations of, adopting a research design that overlooked these factors. This is surprising given that all of these

proposals clearly intended to inform policy and practice development for the UK's multi-ethnic population as a whole.

Across both sets of calls, proposals were, by-and-large, characterised by: an absence of any critical engagement with the concepts of ethnicity and/or race; lack of clarity and justification for how ethnicity and/or race would be operationalised within the studies; and very limited detail regarding methods of data generation or analysis. All of the key issues raised in the guidance document (Box 1) were generally dealt with poorly.

JRF's standard guidance for research applicants, as well as the additional *'Researching race/ethnicity'* guidance, include explicit reference to the potential value of including 'people with direct experience' (such as service users and members of the public) in the planning and conduct of research. It was therefore surprising to find that fewer than half of the proposals - 20 out of 46 - showed signs that the focus and framing of the proposed research had been (or would be) informed by those individuals and groups who were the focus of the research. Furthermore, just four proposals showed any consideration of ethnic diversity in relation to user/public engagement in the research even where it was clear from the research methods that an ethnically diverse sample of participants was to be recruited. Exceptions included a proposal that planned to involve a group of community researchers with diverse ethnic backgrounds and language skills and three proposals that aimed to ensure that people from minority ethnic groups were represented on user consultation/steering groups. However, no detail was provided in any of these proposals regarding how meaningful participation would be achieved or how potential obstacles might be overcome.

The '*Researching race/ethnicity'* guidance document included sections that explicitly discussed the complexities involved in defining and operationalising ethnicity and ethnic categories. There was, however, little evidence in the proposals that any of these issues had been considered by researchers. Though almost all proposals referred to ethnicity, race or related concepts such as 'cultural groups' or 'socially diverse groups', it was rare to find that applicants had made any attempt to explain or define such terms. Furthermore, in those proposals that showed evidence that ethnicity and/or race was regarded as a factor to be considered in the analyses, there was commonly no detail regarding how this would be achieved in practice. Many proposals indicated or implied that ethnic group categories would be employed, but just six proposals included clear identification of the specific ethnic categories to be employed, and none of these included a detailed justification or discussion of the pros and cons of the identified categories. This is particularly notable given that few of the proposals involved working with secondary data where the ethnic categories were already fixed and would therefore give researchers such little flexibility in their analyses.

In a number of proposals it appeared that the researchers intended to explore ethnicity and/or race in a flexible, process-oriented way - for instance by undertaking ethnographic work in ethically-diverse neighbourhoods rather than collecting individual-level data from samples of people categorised into particular ethnic 'groups'. While a potentially sound and useful approach, here again we found a disappointing lack of detail on how the central concepts were understood or how relevant data would be generated.

A further area for attention that was highlighted in the '*Researching race/ethnicity*' guidance document related to the care of participants, alerting researchers to additional issues that *may* be relevant when conducting research that includes minority ethnic participants. We found evidence of such considerations in just eight proposals in total, four of these being proposals submitted in response to the control 'Forced Labour' call perhaps reflecting a perception that the participants in this research programme were felt to be particularly vulnerable. Proposals mentioned: using intermediaries to establish trust with communities; taking particular care to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, for instance by using pseudonyms; and, ensuring that data collection activities take into consideration differing needs and preferences of participants such as language, working hours and childcare (though these are clearly not all specific to working with minority ethnic participants).

The '*Researching race/ethnicity*' guidance document also alerted researchers to several issues relating to the generation and analysis of data that deserve careful consideration, particularly when exploring ethnic differences or inequalities. Again, it was rare to find that any of these issues had been explicitly considered in the proposals. In relation to ensuring the validity and appropriateness of data generation tools across different participant groups, just two proposals included anything of pertinence. One proposal mentioned that interviewers and interviewees would be matched by gender and language and another that an online survey would be used since the researchers believed this would to be accessible to 'hard-to-reach' groups. Interestingly, just six proposals mentioned including data collection in more than one language, four of these being proposals to the 'Forced Labour' call. None of these proposals included any discussion of how they would ensure rigorous methods of translation or conceptual equivalence across languages.

Even though a large number of proposals lacked detail on how they would sample across ethnic categories, many nevertheless implied that comparisons by ethnicity would be made during analyses. By-and-large, proposals either provided insufficient information to assess whether or not adequate samples would be achieved to allow such comparative analyses, or, the detail provided suggested that samples would not be adequate. Most proposals included very little detail on their approach to analysing ethnicity in relation to their topic of focus. While a handful of proposals made some reference to the importance of exploring diversity within ethnic groups, for instance along the lines of gender, many more did not. Just one proposal included any mention of the need for caution in inferring causal links from associations with ethnicity.

The final area we examined in the proposals related to the reporting and interpretation of findings. Few applicants explicitly stated an intention to report findings for different ethnic groups, but this was implied in other parts of the proposals since data would be generated and analysed by ethnicity. Given this, it was disappointing to find little reference to how the research would: avoid stereotyping or pathologising minority groups; ensure reflexivity; or assess the transferability of findings and the limits thereof.

Discussion and conclusion

Before summarising the findings and drawing conclusions from the pilot, it is important to acknowledge the possibility of non-response bias. While participation in the pilot was high, enabling review of around 60% of submitted proposals, the response rate to the online questionnaire was more disappointing, at just 47%. Clearly, this raises the possibility that responses to the questionnaire do not reflect the

experiences and opinions of the wider pool of researchers who make applications to the JRF. However, in the absence of information about responders and non-responders we can not assess the effect of non-response bias.

Findings from the pilot nevertheless suggest that it is possible to develop a guidance document that is perceived by a wide range of active social researchers to be relevant and useful, and that it was feasible to introduce such a document within the research commissioning cycle of a major funder of social research.

However, though JRF commissioners expressed generally positive attitudes towards the introduction of such guidance in principle, it is important to note that there were some significant concerns regarding the potential for such an intervention to disrupt the commissioning process. Furthermore, consistent messages from both commissioners and researchers were: the need for such guidance documents to be short and not to represent a burden to applicants; the importance of ensuring that terminology is widely comprehensible and issues raised are relevant regardless of disciplinary perspective or substantive focus; and concerns about the inappropriateness of privileging ethnicity to the exclusion of other axes of difference and disadvantage.

Nevertheless, the guidance document was generally received positively by researchers. Notwithstanding the possibility that applicants who did not participate in the pilot might have less favourable opinions, the wide range of reported expertise among respondents offers some confidence that the guidance document was accessible to researchers with varied prior exposure to the issues covered and that important inadequacies in the guidance document are unlikely to have been overlooked during the pilot. Likewise, the responses to the online questionnaire indicate that the guidance document was generally considered to be comprehensible,

exhaustive and desirable. Difficulties expressed related more to the challenges of application within specific research designs and contexts than to the guidance document *per se*. And perhaps these reservations are inevitable given that the guidance aimed to be brief and was intended to alert researchers to important issues for consideration rather than to provide rigid prescriptions. The applicants' responses do, however, raise two important questions: whether there is sufficient support to researchers available elsewhere on the issues raised; and, if not, whether such guidance could have the undesired effect of dissuading researchers from addressing ethnicity by appearing to demand unrealistic standards without concrete advice on how to achieve these. Indeed, for researchers with little or no experience of the area, guidance documents of this kind could lead to anxiety about 'getting it wrong' if there is insufficient support available elsewhere.

In contrast to the generally positive views obtained from the feedback questionnaire, the review of proposals submitted suggested that the guidance may have had little, if any, impact on practice.

This inconsistency between the responses to the online questionnaire and the absence of apparent impact on the submitted proposals is puzzling. A number of factors may be at play. First, it is possible that some researchers assume that JRF, with its focus on applied, policy-relevant research, does not seek proposals with a large amount of conceptual and methodological detail. Might these same researchers pay more attention to issues of scientific and ethical rigour if they were submitting a research proposal to a different kind of funder, for instance a Research Council? Second, as one respondent suggested, perhaps the limited word count imposed by JRF (just 3,000 words) makes it difficult for applicants to provide detail on many aspects

of their research approach and design. Perhaps also tight deadlines prevented applicants from carefully considering the available guidance documentation and providing all the details that they could if given more time. Might we therefore find that many of the issues raised in the guidance document are tackled well in practice even if poorly articulated in the proposal documents? Finally, a further important possibility suggested by the responses of some applicants is that many of the issues raised in the guidance document are self-evident and taken-for-granted by researchers so that they perhaps feel there is no need to make them explicit in proposals. Again, this might suggest that when the research is actually undertaken, issues would be dealt with appropriately and sensitively.

The present study could not explore these possibilities in any detail with the data available. However, a number of points are worth noting. First, some of the applicants did provide quite a lot of detail on some other aspects of their proposed work suggesting that the failure to adequately address ethnicity in an equivalent amount of detail did not necessarily reflect a superficial approach overall. Second, a large number of proposals not only omitted specific details of how ethnicity would be operationalised within their proposed research, but also showed evidence of inconsistency, confusion and a lack of critical engagement with many of the key concepts involved.

Notwithstanding the possibility of some positive movement between what researchers *propose* and what they actually *do* if funded, we can nonetheless conclude that the introduction of a guidance document that was offered to applicants as an additional, optional source of information did not have any noticeable impact on the written proposals that were submitted to the JRF calls reviewed.

In conclusion then, our findings raise doubts as to the likely impact of guidance on research practice. Stronger promotion by commissioners might result in greater uptake and impact, particularly if this included feedback to unsuccessful applicants directly linked to the guidance content (though this is not currently JRF practice and would imply significant additional resource). It may also be the case that the introduction of such guidance documents can only be expected to have an impact over a longer period of time. The fact that many respondents found the guidance content to be consistent with their current practice, rather than being unhelpful, inapplicable or inappropriate, is encouraging. This suggests that common standards, at least in some areas of research practice, can be agreed upon despite a plurality of research traditions and that these could in turn encourage progress towards meeting these standards.

Nevertheless, our review of proposals and recent reviews of empirical research (Salway et al., 2011) indicate that there is considerable potential for improvement and suggest that some social researchers may currently be somewhat complacent. We would suggest that more needs to be done to raise awareness of the enduring challenges of research in this area and the perennial need for critical reflexivity among researchers. While research commissioners can and should play a role in demanding higher ethical and scientific standards, responsibility clearly also lies with the researchers themselves. Experienced researchers need to ensure continued attention to high standards while also challenging broader issues that undermine progress including the low representation of minority ethnic people among social researchers and the limited involvement of minority ethnic communities in shaping research agendas. Meanwhile, those less experienced in researching ethnicity will

require significant training opportunities to increase confidence and competence. Such enhanced capacity will be important to ensure that guidance aimed at alerting researchers to issues for consideration (without prescribing rigid solutions) does not have the undesired effect of discouraging engagement with ethnicity.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the importance of ensuring that any guidance documents developed and promoted should be seen as living documents to be regularly appraised in light on the evolving social world we seek to understand and the ethical and scientific standards to which we aspire.

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Endnotes

1. We employ the term 'ethnicity' loosely, recognising the varied meanings that researchers can attach to it, including cultural, socio-political and/or genealogical dimensions. For simplicity we choose not to use the term 'race' or the combined formulation 'race/ethnicity' in the general text of the article, though we recognise the close relationship these terms have with 'ethnicity' and the conflicting and contradictory ways in which they can be used. We did, however, employ these related terms during the piloting exercise since they are in use by social researchers and it was important not to overlook relevant information by restricting ourselves narrowly to the term 'ethnicity'.

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Box 1 - Summary of issues raised in the Researching race/ethnicity guidance document

Focus and framing of the research
Race/ethnicity is a very important axis of identity in contemporary societies and applicants should carefully consider the pros and cons of including/excluding attention to it within their work.

Applicants engaging with race/ethnicity should recognise common pitfalls including: over-emphasis of cultural aspects; inadequate attention to racism; portrayal of racial/ethnic identities as fixed and unchanging; downplaying diversity within 'groups'; overlooking 'majority' and 'White' ethnicities; inadequate justification and inconsistency of key terms.

Operationalising race/ethnicity: categories and labels
Where researchers seek to delineate sets of individuals categorised and labelled as belonging to one or more racial/ethnic 'groups' they should carefully consider the best way to operationalise such 'group' membership and provide clear justification.

Applicants should be aware that any categorisation is inherently imprecise and be alert to exaggeration of homogeneity within 'groups'.

Sampling and sample sizes
Regardless of whether qualitative or quantitative methods are used, applicants should ensure that the sampling approach employed generates samples of adequate size and comparability for all the 'groups' of interest.

Generating and analysing data
Comparative analyses between racial/ethnic 'groups' can be compromised if data collection tools operate differently for different 'groups'. Working across languages requires the use of rigorous translation techniques. Researchers also need to be well informed of cultural and social circumstances so that data are not misrepresented.

Studies should, wherever possible, generate and analyse data on an adequate range of potentially important factors so that underlying causal pathways linking ethnicity to outcomes can be explored rather than assumed.

Presentation and dissemination
Applicants should be aware of the inherently politicised and often controversial nature of research on race/ethnicity. There is a need to manage from the outset, the ways in which findings might be interpreted, distorted and (mis)used.

Care of participants
Appropriate steps should be taken to ensure the safety and comfort of study participants regardless of their racial/ethnic identity.

Involvement of people with direct experience
Drawing on appropriate expertise from minority ethnic communities can help ensure

that a study identifies issues that are relevant to these communities and that research engages sensitively and effectively with minority ethnic participants. Effective involvement requires careful planning and sensitive orchestration.

Resources and practicalities

Researching race/ethnicity sensitively and appropriately will have resource implications. Applicants should ensure the necessary skills, social diversity and experience within the research team as well as an adequate budget.

Box 2: Negotiating the JRF research commissioning pilot: questions raised by commissioners

General concerns:

- Which stakeholders need to be consulted and who has the authority to decide whether or not a particular call should be included in the pilot?
- Will the pilot risk disruption to the normal process of research commissioning?
- What will happen to the findings of the pilot?

Checklist content:

- Is it appropriate and desirable to privilege ethnicity? Should other axes of difference and inequality also be included?
- Is the content appropriate to JRF's internal processes and consistent with existing guidance?
- Is the wording clear and meaningful to the people who submit proposals to the Foundation regardless of their discipline or work setting?
- Is the document too long and therefore burdensome to applicants?

Logistics:

- How will applicants be made aware of the guidance?
- Who will be responsible for the smooth running of the pilot?
- How can we encourage participation but ensure it is voluntary?
- Do any aspects of proposals need to be kept confidential?

Table 1: Summary responses from applicants to online feedback questionnaire

Question	Responses
How easy did you find it to understand the issues covered in the guidance?	Very straightforward: 28 Some difficulty: 8 Very difficult: 0
How relevant were the issues discussed in the guidance to your proposed project?	Very relevant: 16 Somewhat relevant: 18 Largely irrelevant: 1
Were any important issues omitted from the guidance?	No: 23 Yes: 7
Did (or would) using the guidance take too much time?	No: 24 Yes: 2
Did (or would) using the guidance make the job of preparing the proposal …….	Easier: 14 More difficult: 1 Pretty much the same: 11
Did (or would) the guidance have a significant effect on the way you prepared your proposal?	No: 13 Yes: 13
Do you think the guidance can help to enhance quality of proposals submitted to JRF?	No: 2 Yes: 24

Note: Since some respondents skipped portions of the question the number of valid responses to each of the questions varied.