



Ethnicity and Migration

Companion to VISION Tool for Data
Assessment to Mitigate **Risk of Bias**

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Introduction

This tool is designed to guide researchers through the process of working with data on ethnicity and migration. The tool is primarily designed for work with survey data and administrative data, but can be adapted to apply to other types of data.

The aim of this tool is to ensure that data is adopted in the context of deep knowledge of potential bias, and analysed in a way that is cognizant of potential biases that might be endogenous to the dataset and/or analysis; and that appropriate steps are taken to mitigate the effects of those biases. Moreover, the tool recognises that the effect of structural and normative biases that may have been internalised by the researcher, or that may reside in the academic discipline in which the research is situated, can equally and importantly produce bias during data adoption, analysis and interpretation. Finally, the tool includes a section that can apply to reporting findings, whether this is in the form of academic research articles, reports targeted at media, policymakers, thinktanks and other interested professionals, briefing papers, blogs, and media outlets.

The overarching objective is to limit the risk of reproducing or introducing biases specifically associated with ethnicity and migration status when working with data-driven empirical research.

If you wish to consult the authors when adapting the tool, please do so using the contact information provided above.

Who should use this tool

This tool is designed to be used for secondary data analyses, i.e. when adopting pre-existing datasets for analysis. The VISION Consortium works primarily with administrative data and survey data, therefore the questions are targeted at the problems that may arise particularly with these types of datasets. Nevertheless, the tool can be adapted for use with other forms of data.

This tool is not designed to guide data collection. Some of the questions in part 1 of the tool may aid data collection, but this is not a survey design tool or a data collection tool and should not be used as primary guidance in these cases.

How to use this tool

This tool generates questions to ask of the data that you are adopting, and of yourself when working with the data. Recommended best practice is to consider these questions reflectively and collectively. These questions can inspire conversations, ongoing discussions, and additional actions that, when taken, can mitigate the risk of bias. Be mindful not to treat the document as a box-checking exercise that permits you to proceed having duly considered the risk of reproducing or introducing bias with regard to ethnicity and migration status. The questions included in the tool are relatively complex and require due consideration and reflection, and should result in specific actions taken to mitigate the risk of bias.

When working through the tool, cross reference the questions, where necessary, with the additional information indicated in Part 1, 2 and 3 below.

Part 1

Assessing secondary data before use

1.1 How is the data collected?

The method of data collection can affect participation, and different populations may be differentially affected. This question asks about the method of collecting data: whether this takes place in a face-to-face setting with an interviewer or whether a participant or client completes the relevant data questions themselves (i.e., self-completion). As Sykes et al write: 'The type of survey mode (mail, telephone, face-to-face) and the length and content of the questionnaire are important to consider. The survey mode chosen is important as ethnic groups may differ in the way they prefer to be contacted (telephone, mail, e-mail or face-to-face). ... Therefore, survey modes affect the response differences at the individual level due to the mode of data collection or the way respondents interact with the questionnaire, which may change per ethnic group' (Sykes et al., 2010). This can also be applied to administrative data that may be collected in face-to-face consultation, via telephone, online, or in a combination of ways.

When demographic questions are asked in surveys and in administrative settings (such as at a medical appointment) there is usually a question about 'race' or ethnicity. Oftentimes the wording of this question and the options for responses are standardised to group people into certain categories. It is crucial to identify whether the participant or client fills this out or whether the data-collector completes this on their behalf. With regard to the latter, if the 'race' or ethnicity is assumed by the data collector and is not verified, then the data cannot be considered accurate. It is worth considering whether limited categories will offer an accurate reflection of the potential participants. For example, consider groupings that do not neatly fit into standardised census categories such as Arab, Hispanic, Turkish, Iranian, Central Asian; and consider the options available for indicating mixed backgrounds. Consider compounding or other intersecting factors to ethnicity, for example ancestry, caste, or religion. If the data limits the accurate representation of potential participants, it should be considered biased in terms of 'race' or ethnicity. For example, people may have opted not to provide information that is an inaccurate reflection of their identity or because there is not an appropriate category in which to provide it, or may have only partially attributed their (mixed) identity because of limited options. If this data is then used, any analysis, or reporting, pertaining to 'race' and ethnicity should highlight this lack and where possible indicate the relevant gap in available knowledge.

1.2 Who is collecting the data?

This question covers both the individual collecting data at the point of collection and the institution responsible for data collection (in the event of data being gathered by an institution or known organisation, or in the context of administrative data).

Institutions and organisations hold identities that are situated in social contexts and historical knowledge. The nature and purpose of an institution or organisation may impact people's perceptions of it and hence their willingness to interact, and the depth, honesty and authenticity of their interactions.

For example, the UK Home Office is a primary institution for collecting and publishing data on crime, migration, policing, licensing, counter terrorism, fire and rescue, and other statistics at the population level. Yet, a Home Office-branded survey initiative may encourage or discourage different people to participate and may affect the candour and reliability of the answers that people provide. The potential effect of the identity and reputation of an institution among the target population ought to be considered when adopting a dataset, including what steps were taken by the data gatherers to mitigate the risk of under-representing segments of the population due to a lack of engagement because of reputational issues. For example, people in insecure immigration status are often deterred even from seeking needed services or participating in routine activities (Bernstein et al., 2019). They are likely to refuse participation in surveys, and in particular surveys that are implemented by an institution associated with surveillance. The level of trust potential participants have in data collectors will also affect willingness to participate and this may be relevant along racial and ethnic lines. For example, in cases where there has been historic data misuse, or revictimization using data.

The question of who is collecting the data is particularly salient with regard to data on crime and policing. Racial bias in policing has long been established (Ross et al., 2021, Pierson et al., 2020), and therefore administrative police data is likely to reproduce that bias. It is necessary to take into account where racial and ethnic biases might appear, or be reproduced, in the data. For example, Knox et al find that if police racially discriminate when choosing who to investigate, analyses using administrative records to estimate racial discrimination in police behaviour are biased (Knox et al., 2020). As the authors note, administrative records do not record civilians who were observed but not investigated, therefore, there is no information on whether a racial bias resides with the decisionmaker (or the institutional decision-making process).

If using administrative data from health or specialist services it is worth taking account of potential biases that might be introduced by the service itself. For example, migrants may be less likely to pursue preventative care, particularly if medical appointments carry a charge (Woodward et al., 2014, Shortall et al., 2015, Khanlou et al., 2017). Some specialist services are unable to assist migrants who do not have access to public funds or social support, and even when they are able, migrants who have no access to social support are less likely to seek support from specialist services and therefore will not be properly represented in administrative data. Cultural norms will propel some populations towards services and others away (Gilbert et al., 2007, Pilav et al., 2022). Structural racism affects the interactions of professionals with some minoritized populations (Pilav et al., 2022, Shim and Starks, 2021). While this is often relatively well-established, it is useful to think through all of these questions in the context of a given dataset before using it.

Finally, where strategies that the data collector has used to mitigate bias are indicated, one should assess those strategies for their fitness for purpose, and for the likelihood of introducing new bias. For example, where there is a concern that people may not feel comfortable disclosing information in the home, a neutral space may be adopted to provide privacy. Yet, this introduces new travel costs and time costs that may prevent certain populations from participating (for example, women with children may not be able to attend; people with limited income may not be able to meet the travel costs; or people with health issues might find it challenging to travel). In cases where minoritized populations are overrepresented in these categories (for example, people in insecure migration status are often on limited income and so less likely to be able to meet travel costs) the mitigating inclusion strategy may introduce bias that is directly relevant to immigration status or ethnicity.

1.3 How are the questions asked – social, cultural and community norms?

Social, cultural and community norms might affect how one responds to questions in the context of a survey or in the context of administrative data. For example, health or relationship taboos might deter the disclosure of information in particular administrative settings. Socio-cultural factors intersect with practical questions that are covered in section 1.4. For example, consider whether some populations are less likely to be home at the time data collection is attempted, or are less likely to have an individual phone number.

Are days structured in a way that differs from what might be considered standard in the majority population across a group or subset of people (for example, members of an Orthodox Jewish population may not be reachable on the Sabbath). Consider whether some groups are less likely than others to seek out GP, social or specialist services, which will affect representativeness of any administrative data.

The length of time a person has been resident in the country might have an impact on their confidence to express themselves. This may be due to language skills (which is considered in section 1.4) or might be due to being unfamiliar with the administrative or institutional structures, or with specialist services and their service remit.

Minoritized people are less likely to access mental health services – often assumed to be due to cultural reasons but the costs of accessing mental health services are often prohibitive and minoritized people are overrepresented in low-income categories (Moroz et al., 2020, Pilav et al., 2022). Those from minoritized communities might be less likely to receive a referral to mental health services: unconscious bias in health-care provision affects the way health issues are perceived and processed and this has racialized and racializing implications. Over-pathologizing of some racialised or migrant groups is also an issue that affects mental health service uptake and success rates and therefore will impact the accuracy of administrative data (Synergie, 2018, Thiara et al., 2023). The framing of a diagnosis or referral in normative Western terms may also affect perceptions of its usefulness and impact uptake, again having an impact on administrative data. Researchers should always be cognizant that assumptions of cultural behaviour are not always accurate.

Trust is an issue: historically oppressed groups may be less trusting due to legacies of mistreatment and discrimination, and recent/ongoing breaches of trust and confidentiality. This may relate to the data collector's identity (see section 1.2), but also to the type of questions being asked and the socio-political environment at the time of asking. For example, consider traveller communities' distrust of state institutions and perceived 'outsiderness'. This has an effect on willingness to participate and to disclose even if they do participate. A good rule to apply is that any data use should be done only with a sound understanding of where distrust may lie among respondents in relation to the questions asked and the context of data collection.

Cross-cultural construct validity is an issue (Huang and Wong, 2014). Prince found that to properly establish valid assessment across cultures, it's necessary to undertake 'qualitative research to investigate the cultural relevance of the construct, a careful translation and adaptation of a common measure, followed by pre-testing and cognitive interviews on the populations to be tested'(Prince, 2008). If this has not been considered at the study design and data-gathering stages, it is important to retrospectively assess any constructs and concepts that might produce cross-cultural ambiguity in order to have confidence in the validity of findings in the context of ethnicity and migration.

Be mindful that 'culture' applies to groups beyond Black, minoritised ethnic groups, or migrant groups and should not be thought of as something that only these groups have. Being cognizant of the impact of culture involves recognising how ideas, norms, prejudices and normative biases are present for all parties involved in the exchange of information and therefore will have an impact on how information is communicated, received, interpreted and recorded.

1.4 How are the questions asked – practical and technological?

Certain populations might be less (or more) likely than others to have adequate IT skills (Poole et al., 2021). Language and literacy have an impact, particularly in the context of second language speakers. It should be considered whether interpretation has been available to respondents or to individuals accessing services in the context of administrative data. What languages have been accommodated in translation and interpretation? Obviously every language in the world is unlikely to be accommodated in either a survey or administrative setting, so it should be assessed as to whether that creates gaps in information and how significant those gaps might be.

In general, people may be less likely to disclose information in situations where they are not sure they will be properly understood. It is important to consider what the standards adopted for interpretation are. For example, are young family members asked to translate for older relatives? This may bias the data as it

will impact what participants are willing to disclose. Are spouses, partners or other family members asked to interpret? This will impact responses relating to domestic abuse or other sensitive topics that may be a source of conflict. Even in cases where there is no immediate relationship between an interpreter and a respondent or participant, in smaller language-based communities, people may be known to one another. Therefore, the presence of an interpreter may introduce potential bias into the data. Introducing interpreters and translators lowers confidentiality and so potentially creates bias in the data even while simultaneously facilitating accurate disclosure.

1.5 What do you know about the sampling approach?

While most data providers will include a booklet of details explaining the sampling approach and the logic behind it, it is worth considering whether specific precautions and protections related to 'race', ethnicity, and immigration status have been adequately accounted for. Are there any unconscious exclusions embedded in the sampling that might not have been considered: time of day when data was gathered, for example. One way of mitigating underrepresentation of minoritized groups is to introduce a booster survey to 'piggy-back' onto an existing study (Lynn et al., 2018). Given that minoritized populations are not always distributed evenly, if a booster survey has been included, consider whether it has been subject to the consideration that this might mask the experiences of minorities living in predominantly white areas? When boosts target certain minoritized populations, how are those designations made? Are groups with a specified social and cultural identity captured?

How does the data account for and accommodate transnational, hybrid and mixed identities? Are these given their own category and is that category an adequate expression of diverse identities?

1.6 What was the environment in which the data was gathered?

The data-collection environment can have a significant impact on what information people feel comfortable disclosing. If a person is in a room where they can be heard by others, they may be self-conscious. It may not be safe or appropriate to discuss certain topics. This might affect some racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds more frequently than others. For example, living in multi-generational households affects who is likely to be present at any given time and this is more common for some groups than others, or might be more likely to affect incoming groups. Some minoritized groups are more likely than others to live in a multi-generational household, and therefore might be disproportionately affected by data gathered in the home (ONS 2021). On the other hand, single parents or migrant families with little or no childcare support may be less likely to participate in data gathered in settings outside of the home. These examples of variations in household type could potentially bias data and therefore should be considered.

These questions work as a guided reflection, to assist the researcher in identifying any biases that they may hold or may have been exposed to because of their discipline, university system, and background training, amongst others.

Part 2

Data analysis

2.1 What assumptions or stereotypes might you hold as a researcher?

This question asks the researcher to consider what assumptions or stereotypes might influence (consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously) your interpretation of the data. Generally, unconscious bias in research is applied in the context of how researchers relate to their colleagues, addressing things like limitations on career advancement, likelihood of success in the job market and so on. Yet, it is reasonable to assume that unconscious biases may also affect data interpretation. Studies on the practical effects of unconscious bias in healthcare find associations with unequal outcomes in care along racialised and classed lines (FitzGerald and Hurst, 2017, Buetow, 2019, Marcelin et al., 2019, Haider et al., 2014). It is reasonable to assume that unconscious bias has practical effects in aspects of data analysis and interpretation. In order to mitigate these effects, a process of reflection to identify and acknowledge internally held biases is a useful step. Opening analytical methods, assumptions and work to peer review, and encouraging reflective conversations can reduce the effects of such bias.

2.2 What hierarchies exist in your discipline?

Academic disciplines internalise hierarchies in research methods, best practices, and theoretical advancements. What bearing do these hierarchies have on your research? On your choice of analytical strategy? Interdisciplinary research that is subject to scrutiny from researchers across different disciplines can help to dispel the effects of disciplinary hierarchy.

For example, Smaldino and O'Connor find that disciplines vary in terms of competence, bias, and epistemic advantage (Smaldino and O'Connor, 2022). It's common for disciplines to reproduce disciplinary hierarchies due to internal preferences and power structures, and due to lack of exposure to epistemological diversity. Wiesner et al. report similar insights (Wiesner et al., 2022). Working with insights across disciplines can introduce a level of reflection that might otherwise be inaccessible to researchers. Furthermore, academic disciplines have conventionally been founded on exclusionary structures that incorporate white supremacy (Go, 2020) and Eurocentric dominance (Held, 2019); embedded epistemological hierarchies reproduce such exclusions and disciplines have had varying success at identifying, addressing, and nullifying the effects. Working mindfully across disciplines can further the project of eradicating racial (and other) structural hierarchies in academic research.

2.3 What is your positionality in relation to the data?

Positionality refers to the researcher's own relationship with the research subject, the data or the research participants. Researchers often develop interest in subjects where they have vested interests or lived experience. Researcher's past advantage or disadvantage may influence how data is analysed or interpreted. It might influence the relationship with research participants. It might affect what questions are asked, and what weight is given to particular themes or insights.

This question is relevant to the study of 'race', ethnicity and immigration status in cases where the researcher analysing the data may hold internal biases or unconscious biases based on a specific relationship with the data. This is true of all researchers all the time, as is considered in question 2.1. It is particularly relevant in some cases, such as in data that relates to politicised identities. For example, if a researcher identifies with an ethnic group that is involved in an ethnic conflict, this could potentially impact data analysis if any data relates, even tangentially, to the conflict or the conflicted ethnic groups. Biases may also be more pronounced if a researcher has a past trauma that might impact their relationship with a group of people.

While positionality should be considered when a researcher is too close to the data, it is also potentially an issue if the researcher or research team are too far removed from the data. When analysing data relating to a particular subgroup, identity group, or experience group, the researcher analysing the data should reflect on what impact their own identity and experiences might bring to bear on the analysis.

2.4 What are the potential effects of manipulating data?

Data often needs to be manipulated to be usable. Are identities and experiences eradicated, or falsely attributed by combining categories?

When combining categories, are you subscribing to hierarchies or groups that are imposed by an institution or authority and are such groupings accepted by the population from whom the data was collected? For example, you may combine Black African, Black Caribbean, and Mixed heritage as Black British while this is not always an accepted categorization by these groups. Alternatively, it may be more salient to combine Black Caribbean with Latin American groups depending on the exact research question.

Going into very specific groups for data analysis does pose some risks. It is important to note that detailed categorization of, for instance ethnicity, may make intergroup differences statistically not significant as the group sizes may become too small. This may result in overlooking ethnic differences. Hence, careful testing of different categorizations is strongly advised to investigate which groups should and should not be combined. Potentially, researchers can test the data with more detailed categories to start with and then group ethnic/migrant groups based on the patterns in the data (if needed), leading to a data analysis that is less likely to overlook ethnic differences based on predetermined hierarchies.

2.5 Who has the authority to speak on this subject matter?

When dealing with sensitive subject matter (or, any subject matter) what is the definition of knowledge? Experiential knowledge should be valued and where possible people with experiential knowledge of the subject matter should be enrolled at all parts of the process of research design, data gathering, analysis, and interpretation (Khosravi, 2010).

Conventionally, the authority to speak has resided with white middle-class and wealthy men, something that has widely been critiqued within the academy and research community. Being attentive to what historic biases this produces is crucial.

Consider whether in your analysis you are speaking for a group with whom you have had little or no di-

rect communication. In these cases, data analysis is at higher risk of bias and advice should be sought from people with the relevant embedded knowledge and experience such as community representatives, specialist services and advocacy organisations that have a strong participant or community-led working practice. Opinions should be sought in consultation with stakeholders. A single opinion cannot represent voice for a whole community or identity group and due care should be taken to seek multiple relevant perspectives that are reflective of the population and stakeholders. It is important not to assume that opinion and perspective is monolithic, to avoid tokenism in research design.

These questions relate to what you might consider before the final version of your findings is published. Think about how you report findings, and if any disclaimers or caveats might help protect these findings from being misused or misinterpreted.

Part 3

Reporting findings

3.1 Could your reporting be misinterpreted?

Findings related to 'race', ethnicity and insecure migration status might be misinterpreted, and at times careful reporting is necessary to protect against such misinterpretation. For example, research that finds violence rates to be higher amongst particular social/identity groups or populations is often related to other intersectional characteristics, structural causes, and historic dependencies. 'Race' or ethnicity may explain or offer insight into a person's position within systems of inequality which exposes them more to certain experiences. However, 'race' or ethnicity should never be considered an explanatory variable. While ethically sound academic research is cognizant of this, findings might be misrepresented or misinterpreted when reported in non-academic settings. Consider whether your findings may potentially be subject to such misinterpretation and if so, consider including a very clear statement to prevent misinterpretation. If misinterpretation is in good faith, including such a statement should be effective. It should be included in the introduction or abstract so it is not easily missed. For misinterpretation that is not in good faith, see 3.3.

3.2 Does your report induce or increase risk of harm to any population?

When working with existing administrative or survey data (that is, your study does not include collecting data) the ethics clearance is relatively straightforward, as most risk to human subjects comes at the data collection stage.

However, there still remains a level of risk that is embedded in the reporting of findings. Researchers should be cognizant of whether reporting findings about a population risks inducing harm to that population. This may take the form of a political backlash, but may also be characterised as things like reduced funding allocation for the provision of services or simply reinforcing inaccurate perceptions of that population. Final reports should be assessed for risk of harm to a population before being published into the public domain.

3.3 Could your results be misused or politicised?

Results can be adopted to be intentionally misused or politicised in ways that were never intended by the

authors. When working with data that relates to 'race', ethnicity, immigration status and other political identities this is relevant and very difficult to protect against. All work should be assessed for the potential that it could be misused or politicised in a way that may be misrepresentative or harmful to particular population groups. If there is a potential risk, this may be mitigated by using very clear language in the abstract and introduction to the contrary. Referencing literature that provides the necessary context may also mitigate the potential of misuse of results. For example, reports of higher unemployment among Hispanic populations should account for legacies of economic inequality, barriers to employment, and hiring prejudices: these are examples of contextual factors that should be clearly noted to avoid harmful assumptions and misinterpretations. An awareness of potential stereotypes and prejudices held by audiences (e.g. anti-migration or hard right-wing organisations) should inform how to mitigate potential misuse, misrepresentation and politicisation of research findings.

Misuse cannot always be prevented and in cases where there is high risk of misuse of findings, it is worth reflecting on whether the value of the published report outweighs the potential harm of misuse.

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