

Intro to Data Science

Assignment 1 – Adding to the Library of Missing Datasets

With the data released from the 2021 UK census, we can see an increase in mixed-race people as well as mixed-race households. Whilst there are debates around what are the best terms to use to refer to mixed individuals, mixed race, biracial, and dual-heritage, I am going to use the term mixed as this is what is used in the census. The data that is missing from this dataset is not the specific ethnicities that make up a person's heritage but rather the lack of structure that may be skewing demographics. What I mean in saying lack of structure is the lack of guidance around how to report one's background.

The missing data here is caused by a recording issue that doesn't allow people to disclose their heritage. The census uses self-reporting and so it is important to mention that I feel there is also good intention in not implementing guidance. A real-world example is of two siblings who have the same parents but look different, where one records themselves as white while the other records themselves as mixed. I would argue that though this may seem insignificant there are certain ways that this could mislead potential lawmakers.

Recording ethnicity is a relatively recent addition to the national census first appearing in 1991 and the trends that have become clearer through the last 40 years or so conclude that the population is becoming more diverse, including more mixed individuals and households.

An obvious issue with the need to clarify categorisation is the potential for accidentally legitimising racial pseudo-science, in representing race as more than a social construct. Asking for someone's ethnic 'breakdown' (25%75%, 50%50%) doesn't reflect the reality of how genes work in humans, someone who has parents of separate ethnicities isn't really 50% one and 50% the other, rather the person will have inherited some more genes from one parent than the other. Also would further categorisation rely on ideas of what types of people are meant to look like, does someone have to look non-white to be included in the title of mixed or how connected does a person need to be to their community?

There is also a historical precedent to be wary of rules that rely on how much of one ethnicity you are. Whilst England and Wales don't have the same issues as North America with their Indigenous population relying on the so-called 'blood quantum' it is good to look at the ways laws like these have impacted these populations to see the potential pitfalls. It is disingenuous to say that these are equal but there may be similarities that we can look to avoid.

Despite this, I still believe there is room for a genuine conversation about how the census form is created to produce more standardised recordings, which has the potential to impact society in the coming decades. Though the percentage of mixed-race individuals is only 3 per cent the trends are that England and Wales are becoming more diverse and as such we should look at how different demographics require different assistance. Physical and mental health often impact people of different ethnicities in different ways (to be clear, in that society treats different ethnicities differently which impacts health not that people of different ethnicities are biologically different as it pertains to race) and often require different or specialised treatments.

There are potential demographic differences that might come from the different generations of mixed people depending on their ethnicities and the distancing from those ethnicities and towards 'Britishness'. This has the potential to heavily impact policy-making decisions and implementation. As seen with the covid-19 pandemic there were significant differences in how different communities

acted, due to differences in living, such as single families versus multigenerational living and different levels of distrust of the medical establishment, which seemed in some ways linked culturally.

Whilst I do believe that this is something the Office for National Statistics should think about, I don't know whether or not the categorisation of people's ethnicities by percentages is actually helpful. Terms like 'first generation', 'second generation' etc. could be good stand-ins, though have their own pitfalls when it comes to people who are mixed with more than ethnicities. I struggle with the idea of implementing more structure to how this aspect of the census is filled out, as mentioned earlier in its potential legitimising of race as something biological, however, I think that there is also space for certain demographics to be miscategorized which could have a knock-on effect in policy making.

Whilst currently I view this as a fairly small-scale problem, as England and Wales become more diverse, I think this will pose more of an issue when it comes to understanding demographics.