



EEiC

Thinking Clearly

What is ethnicity?

A complex term with many meanings

Though the terms 'ethnicity' and 'ethnic group' are used frequently in Britain today, their meaning is not always clear. Indeed, 'ethnicity' can be used to mean a range of different things, and is measured in a variety of ways, making it a confusing and contentious concept.

A form of 'bio-social' identity

Ethnic identity draws on a range of social and biological characteristics often linked to notions of ancestry, heritage, culture and appearance – 'where you come from', 'what you believe', 'what you do' and 'what you look like'.

Flexible not fixed

Ethnic identities are not natural or fixed. The meaning and importance of ethnicity varies across space and time.

A product of social relations

Ethnic identities are a product of the societies in which we live. In each social context particular bio-social characteristics become important markers of individual and group identity. Societal structures and ideologies reinforce feelings of 'belonging to' and 'difference from' particular groups or communities. Ethnic identities are hierarchical and shape access to resources within society. Minority ethnic identities are commonly constructed as inferior and minority ethnic people may face significant discrimination and exclusion.

A proxy for factors affecting health

Because ethnicity is operationalised in society along the lines of physical features, ancestry, religion and so on, ethnicity can often be a useful proxy for factors that affect health including: access to health-promoting resources; exposure to health risks; and health-seeking behaviours.

Ethnic groups and categories

There is a popular misconception that groups categorised using ethnicity are homogenous with innate genetic differences or distinct cultures. In fact, there is much heterogeneity within ethnic groups. Nevertheless, such categories are not meaningless and can be useful when they identify groups of people who are at risk of particular disadvantage. The categories used by government agencies – such as the Census 2011 categories – undergo extensive testing for acceptability and relevance, and are revised over time to reflect changes in this fluid concept. Nevertheless, these categories will not always be useful and meaningful.

An important measure of need and access

Because social relations influence the provision of healthcare, and because biological and social characteristics influence health need, we often find significant inequalities between ethnic groups in health outcomes and healthcare access and experience. Ethnicity is therefore an important variable to consider in planning health and social care services.

Now see Thinking Clearly! What are the links between ethnicity and health?

