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Methodological Challenges of Researching Positive Action Measures

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Abstract: This paper highlights some of the methodological challenges which have arisen in collecting data for an international study on positive action measures. It will describe strategies employed to encourage participation in the study from as wide a range of organisations and individuals using a mixed method approach. The paper will also discuss the methodological and sensitive issues related to this type of research in organisations and strategies adopted by the research team to ameliorate any problems that have arisen whilst maintaining trustworthiness and rigour in the study.

Keywords: Affirmative Action, Positive Action, Consensus Workshop, Expert Panel, Multi Method Approach, Equality Strands

Introduction

POSITIVE ACTION IS recognised as an important tool that organisations can use to prevent or remedy discrimination on the grounds of gender, race, religion, age, disability and sexual orientation (Archibong *et al.*, 2007; McCrudden, 2007). To date however few studies have examined the impact of positive action within organisations both in relation to their employment practices or service development (Dhambi *et al.*, 2006). Consequently little is known about the circumstances under which organisations choose to adopt positive action strategies, the type of groups targeted through positive action and how organisations monitor the effectiveness of such strategies (Band and Parker, 2002). This

paper reports on some of the challenges encountered in using a mixed methodology to collect data about positive action initiatives as part of an EU funded study which examined stakeholders' experiences of positive action measures and their views about the role positive action can play in preventing or remedying discrimination.¹ The study also sought to examine how legal frameworks, policies and practices of positive action in the European Union compared with Canada, United States and South Africa. Findings of the study and a legal analysis of positive action are reported elsewhere (Archibong *et al.*, 2009).

Overview of the Research Design

The study employed a mixed methodology combining both qualitative and quantitative methods, with a rationale that 'seeks elaboration, enhancement, illustration, (and) clarification of the results from one method with the results from another' (Greene *et al.*, 1989, pp. 259). A multi-method approach is particularly useful for addressing complex, sensitive and potentially contested issues where stakeholders might have different perspectives (Adamson, 2005). It also provides the opportunity for a 'transformative-emancipatory' approach, in which research findings acquire a practical meaning of use in developing interventions (Mertens, 2003; Caracelli and Greene, 1997). A mixed-method approach, therefore, seemed ideally suited to our project aims, which were to assess the effectiveness of positive action measures, from the viewpoint of different stakeholders responsible for designing positive action measures. Combining both methodologies allowed us to triangulate the study, thereby providing us with a more complete picture of the situation in different countries and ensuring greater validity of the study findings (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998).

We were also keen to ensure that the study was conducted using an approach that was diversity competent (Atkin and Chattoo, 2006). Efforts were made so that respondents did not feel inhibited about discussing their perceptions and experiences around positive action, particularly in light of existing negative attitudes and resistance to pursue positive action in some organisations. The research team were from diverse backgrounds, a balance of men and women with extensive knowledge of different diversity strands and had considerable insight into the use of positive action either within their working environment and/or through previous research. This helped to create an atmosphere of empathy and commonality between the researchers and those being researched. It also allowed research participants to express concerns and views about discriminatory practices which may not have been possible had the research team consisted of individuals who had not experienced disadvantage themselves (Gunaratnam, 2003).

Data collection for the study was carried out in three distinct phases (Figure one). This process was guided by the project steering group as well as members of the research consortium which consisted of our international collaborators.

¹ The study "International perspectives on positive action measures. A comparative analysis in the European Union, Canada, the United States and South Africa" has been financed under the European Community Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013).

Figure 1: Stages of Data Collection

Phase One

An initial in depth literature review was conducted in order to explore the wider theoretical and practice debates in relation to positive action. The findings of this review helped identify key themes and informed the development of a definition of positive action that was used in subsequent phases of the study. This was necessary given the confusion and inconsistency surrounding the use of the term ‘positive action’ and its perceived synonymity with terms such as ‘affirmative action’, ‘reverse discrimination’ and ‘positive discrimination’ (Archibong *et al.*, 2006; Groschi and Doherty, 1999; Adam, 1997).

Phase Two

Next, an online questionnaire was undertaken in order to provide an overview of the nature and extent of positive action activities taking place both at a country level and Europe wide. The survey was made accessible within the 27 European member states, two European Fair Trade Association countries (Iceland and Norway) and three non-EU countries (United States, Canada and South Africa) participating in the study. Using a Likert scale to record responses, the survey elicited information from organisations about their implementation of equality and diversity policies, their understanding and perceptions of positive action and their use of positive action measures, including outcome measures. It also asked organisations to identify possible barriers to positive action and any future plans to conduct positive action. Respondents were provided with the option of completing the questionnaire in English, French or German initially. The questionnaire was first sent to native speakers of the translated version to ensure that its content was translated appropriately for national contexts and to ensure that the original meaning of questions was maintained (Atkin and Chattoo, 2006). The need to achieve conceptual equivalence was considered to be particularly vital given the potential for misunderstanding and misinterpretation of terms such as ‘positive action’, ‘targeted recruitment’ and ‘championing schemes’ in countries where English was not the native language (Herdman *et al.*, 1998). Once amendments were made to the few translation errors identified, the questionnaire was further piloted on six people in the UK, in order to identify any other difficulties with the content and context of the tool. Feedback from these participants resulted in minor modifications being made to the questionnaire.

Phase Three

Having collated important baseline information about the type of positive action strategies in place in Phase two, we used qualitative methods in order to examine perceptions about the operationalisation of positive action measures in more detail (Mason, 1996). Information was obtained through consensus workshops, telephone interviews and documentary analysis. Consensus workshops were used as a means to collect and analyse views from multiple stakeholders, at the same time creating a 'safe' environment for all participants to voice their opinions and share their experiences (Merriam, 1998; Spencer, 1989). Consensus workshops were held in seven European countries (UK, Ireland, Sweden, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria and Netherlands) as well as Canada, America and South Africa. The European countries were selected on the basis of their size, geographical importance and experience with positive action measures on the different strands of equality whilst the choice of comparator non-European countries was based upon their respective histories and credibility in relation to anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action policies.

Discussions in the consensus workshops were structured around four key questions although participants were not discouraged from discussing other pertinent issues (see Figure 2). The process of consensus workshops proved particularly useful in initiating a structured debate amongst participants in response to each of these questions. Using a similar approach to focus groups, consensus workshop allows the researcher to probe participant's opinions and attitudes on a particular topic (Gilbert, 2008). At the end of the workshop however it also allows the facilitator to summarise the main issue or issues that have been raised by the group thereby providing participants with an opportunity to confirm, or reach a consensus upon what was said (Caracelli and Greene, 1997). Given the difficulties that positive action has posed to some organisations and the resistance that has been displayed to its implementation, this method of data collection was particularly appropriate in providing participants with a safe forum in which way to disclose feelings about organisational policies and practices (Lee, 1993).

Figure 2: Focus Questions for Consensus Workshops

1. What is your understanding of positive action?2. What is the impetus for positive action within your organisation?3. On reflection, is positive action an effective tool/strategy in achieving the goals intended?4. Has there been any impact from positive action strategies utilised by your organisation? Which groups have benefited the most and why?

Each workshop commenced with a plenary session presenting an overview of the research study. This was followed by group discussions, facilitated by the researchers, culminating in a final plenary session. Each group discussion was divided into four stages. First, the facilitator outlined the process, the topic, purpose and time available for the discussion, before introducing the focus question. Next, participants were given 3-5 minutes to write down their ideas in response to the question in not more than 10 words. Participants worked on each question in turn before the facilitator went on to obtain the group's thoughts, feelings and insights. Participants were then asked to cluster their group discussions into themes. These

stages were followed by the whole group reassembling for the final stage. The cards were stuck on a board and participants asked to rate the ideas that best represented their views by applying coloured stickers against them.

In addition to these consensus workshops, telephone interviews were conducted with a selection of workshop participants to check whether experiences of positive action matched the aspiration of initiatives and also to document examples of good practice of positive action in relation to the different equality strands. Finally in order to conduct a detailed examination of organisational policies and legal frameworks underpinning positive action in each of the 11 countries, we asked interviewees to provide us with relevant documentation such as project reports, mission statements, diversity monitoring data and race equality schemes. Documentary analysis has a long history in social science and can be a valuable source of data (Prior, 2003). Our aim through collecting such data was to establish how organisations had developed a rationale for introducing positive action measures and to examine how such measures linked to the organisation's wider equality framework. We also sent a list of questions to national experts in these countries in order to establish the legal standing of positive action within each of these countries (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Questions to Guide Analysis of the Legal Framework in Each Country

1.	Does legislation establish positive action measures?
2.	Does legislation establish obligations on public or private sector organisations to take positive action?
3.	What forms of positive action are permitted, but not required, by legislation?
4.	Are any forms of positive action prohibited by legislation?

Methodological Challenges

In collecting data for the study, a number of challenges were raised in relation to the recruitment of the sample and data collection.

On-line Survey

In order to ensure that the survey had sufficient power to explore meaningful differences between countries, sectors and other factors, our aim was to achieve a total of 6,000 to 10,000 responses from public, private and third sector organisations. To reach a sufficient number of private sector organisations, our intention was to tap into the European Business Test Panel database, providing access to 3,000 businesses. Unfortunately this database was not made available to us due to the recent involvement of EBTP organisations in another research study. This drawback led us to utilise an alternative approach to establish initial conduit for the survey, whereby consortium members and steering committee members were responsible for contacting organisations to take part in the survey. In addition, this request went to all members of the European Commission diversity networks such as the Equinet (Network of national equality bodies) database as well as groups and individuals encountered through the research team's previous work on positive action. All of these organisations and individuals were sent an email providing information about the study and a link to the online ques-

tionnaire. This email also requested recipients to forward information about the questionnaire to relevant organisations.

Using a 'snowball' approach to recruit the sample meant that we do not know exactly how many organisations were actually contacted to take part in the survey. Regular monitoring of the website however indicated that after three months, the number of organisations responding to the survey was much lower than expected. This prompted us to discuss with steering group members potential barriers affecting completion of the questionnaire. Feedback revealed that some organisations claimed that they had not received the initial email whilst for others their organisation's firewall had prevented the email from being accepted. Some individuals admitted that there had not been sufficient incentive to open the email, particularly since there had not been any reference to the European Commission in the title. Others, who were more likely to be named recipients admitted that they had assumed their organisations would want to respond corporately, so had forwarded this information to a relevant individual with no knowledge of whether a response had been given. For those who had attempted to complete the questionnaire, it was felt that the definition of positive action used in the survey had not been explained sufficiently for people to be able to engage with it. This was also reflected in the high levels of confusion between positive action and positive discrimination from respondents in countries such as Austria, Greece, Hungary and Bulgaria.

In response to these comments, a number of changes were made to the way in which the survey was administered. First a financial incentive was introduced so that in the introductory section of the survey, organisations were made aware that on completion of the questionnaire they would automatically be entered into a draw with the chance of winning one of three cash prizes. This offer of financial incentive is in line with UK Government and Market Research Society good practice and other authoritative sources (Dunn *et al.*, 2009; Taylor 2008; Grant and Sugarman 2004; Grant 2002). Second, due to the low response rate from certain EU countries, the survey was translated into five additional languages (Slovakian, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Polish, and Italian). The revised target for the number of responses to the questionnaire was adjusted to 600, based on a 95% confidence interval of +/- 4% for a proportion of 50% in any binary response within the questionnaire. In addition the duration of the survey was extended from three to six months so that the collection of the quantitative data ran concurrently with the next phase of the study. Finally whilst attending the consensus workshops, participants were provided with access to computers so that they had a chance to complete the survey at an appropriate time.

In total, 632 respondents were found to have completed the survey. Most responses were received from Italy (12.2%) United Kingdom (9.2%); Austria (7.3%); Belgium (6.5%); Canada (5.5%) and Germany (5.2%). Equality and Diversity managers (23%) represented the highest pool of respondents while Managing Directors were next, represented at 20%. In terms of sector distribution, the highest number of responses were from the public sector (39%); followed by the voluntary sector (37%), and lastly, the private sector (19%). However, the private sector comprised a larger proportion in North America and South Africa, at 43%. In total, roughly a quarter of the public sector and voluntary sector respondents were from the education sector (colleges and universities) (24%) and private sector respondents were predominantly from the professional and business services sector (29%).

Comparative Study

Half-day consensus workshops were the main focal point for data collection activities in each of the selected countries during the comparative phase of the study. Responsibility for sending out invitations to attend these workshops rested with our initial contact person in each of these countries who was expected to circulate email invitations through relevant networks and act as workshop facilitators. To this end, a training session was provided on the consensus workshop method to facilitators in all the case study countries to ensure trustworthiness of the approach and facilitate data collection in a consistent manner across countries. In addition members of the research team acted as co-facilitators in the consensus workshops.

Workshop venues were centrally located in major cities so as to make it more attractive to potential participants and potential workshop delegates were informed beforehand that all expenses incurred by them in relation to their attendance of the workshop would be covered. Before any of the workshops were conducted, a pilot workshop was held in Bradford which was attended by 18 individuals - half the number of people who had registered to attend this event. The pilot workshop proved useful not only in highlighting the need to publicise the consensus workshops as widely as possible but also to over-recruit as a contingency to manage the dropout rates thus preventing under-representation of workshop participants from specific sectors. In light of the relatively low numbers of individuals responding to the email invitation to attend the workshop, we also adjusted the number of participants we expected to recruit from 100 to 50. Registered participants were sent a programme outlining how the session would be structured and were asked to inform the organisers about any specific needs they might have on the day. Systems were also set up so that registered participants were contacted by the research team at least three times prior to the event and an appeal was made to participants' consciences to discourage any unnecessary cancellation. As a result, a total of 282 people took part in nine consensus workshops of varying sizes (see Table 1).

In the case of the US, it was necessary to hold an expert panel through a conference call to supplement the information collected from the small number of participants attending the consensus workshop. This was also conducted for confirmability and involved three members of the research team and three panel members from education, health and human resources backgrounds. The confirmability was necessary to assess trustworthiness of the US consensus workshop data, as participants were drawn from a less divergent pool. All panel members were selected for their substantial academic and practical experience of the issues involved in this study. Panel members were initially presented with an overview of the main issues, particularly the key statements identified from the consensus workshop in the USA. Then they were asked to present additional views on their understanding, drivers, effectiveness and impact of positive (affirmative) action in the USA.

Table 1: Breakdown of Participants Involved in the Workshops and Telephone Interviews

	Consensus workshop	Telephone inter-view	Conference call	Total
Austria	38	11	-	49
Canada	13	7	-	20
Hungary	55	16	-	71
Ireland	41	7	-	48
Netherlands	14	6	-	20
Slovakia	40	12	-	52
Sweden	-	48	-	48
South Africa	16	10	-	26
UK	51	11	-	62
USA	14	13	3	30
Total	282	141	3	426

On the whole, feedback from participants attending the workshops was generally positive. It was felt that the workshops provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their practice with colleagues in a similar line of work and share best practice that otherwise they would not have an opportunity to engage with. For participants in the UK the consensus workshop process was thought to be instructive and the feedback from colleagues very useful. They felt a sense of community and above all everyone was able to share their experiences and understanding of positive action. In South Africa, participants thought the consensus workshop engendered honest dialogues and in-depth discussions about quality and sustainability of positive (affirmative) action programmes. Conversely, a few attendees who were not familiar with the consensus workshop method of data collection had expected to attend an event where information provision about positive action would take place rather than the sharing of information between participants and facilitators.

Conclusion

The study highlighted a number of challenges in conducting research about positive action initiatives both on a national and international scale. The greatest difficulties arose in recruiting a large enough sample to take part in the on-line survey. This was less problematic for the collection of qualitative data where the major issue was not one of 'sample size' in the statistical sense. Rather than aim for a large number of participants, we were striving for an adequately in-depth analysis of all aspects of the data to secure sufficiently robust and extensively integrated sets of data at different levels. In this sense, we aimed to make the data collection comprehensive enough in both breadth (types of data) and depth (extent of data collected from each participant) to generate and support the interpretations. With regard to the on-line survey, a key challenge in a study such as this was trying to gain access to a

representative group of organisations from all three sectors in a range of different countries. The lack of an adequate identifiable sampling frame, e.g. a comprehensive database of organisations, coupled with a likely under-representation of organisations who are not fully engaged with positive action measures, restricted the generalisability of the study. Nevertheless the study captured a reasonable picture of experiences of organisations who were engaged, at least, in considering introducing positive action measures.

Use of an on-line survey as a means to collect information about positive action also proved to have limitations. Although the survey provided a definition of positive action to help respondents assess whether any of their organisational activities could be classed as such, there was uncertainty amongst respondents about what the concept of positive action encompassed with a notable failure to distinguish between positive action and positive discrimination in some countries. Additionally the reluctance from organisations to engage with the survey on positive action could also be explained by the difference in terminologies used to describe corrective measures in different parts of the world. In this respect the consensus workshops were useful in highlighting how European countries were more likely to talk about 'positive action' whereas the term 'affirmative action' was more commonly used in the non-European countries. Combining both the quantitative and qualitative methodologies therefore provided us with a more complete picture of the situation in different countries and ensured greater validity of the study findings (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Also, by highlighting the specific and differing organisational constraints in undertaking targeted measures for disadvantaged groups, we were able to adopt a 'transformative-emancipatory' approach which enabled us to recommend practical solutions to the implementation of positive action measures grounded in participants' lived experience (Adamson *et al.*, 2004; Mertens, 2003).

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