Adult Education Research Conference
2007 Conference Proceedings (Halifax, NS, Canada)

Conducting Qualitative Research on Race

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Abstract: The "race-of-interviewer" effect is well documented in the research literature. Research designs that seek to control for these effects do not eliminate other methodological issues such as the impact of social desirability on the responses of White participants, and interviewer-respondent rapport among Black participants.

The methodological findings presented in this paper are based on the observations from a study entitled: Black and White Attorneys' Perspectives on Race, the Legal System, and Continuing Legal Education: A Critical Race Theory Analysis. This study addressed two major research questions:
1. How do Black and White attorneys view the role of race in the legal system?
2. How do Black and White attorneys view the efficacy of continuing legal education in addressing the role of race in the legal system?

The sample included 14 Black Participants and 10 White Participants. The data collection plan in this study was complicated by a factor that has become increasingly important among researchers who conduct interviews across different racial groups: The impact of cross-racial interviewing.

The "Race of Interviewer" Effects

The literature on race-of-interviewer effects indicates that White respondents and Black respondents are both susceptible to race-of-interviewer effects. Hachett and Schuman (1975) noted that in cross-racial interviewing the process for both races seems to one of avoiding responses that might offend the interviewer of the opposing race and of being frank (or at least franker) with interviewers of one's on race. Schaeffer (1980) found that the race-of-interviewer effects were large enough to justify the practice of matching interviewer and respondent race for interviews on racial topics. Livert, et. al. (1998), found that Blacks and Hispanics who were interviewed by Whites were less likely to report illegal substance use and more likely to report disapproval and perceived harm from such use. In other words, they were more likely to give socially desirable responses when the race of the interviewer was different from their own. Cotter, Cohen, & Coulter (1982) found that interviewer effects attributable to the perceived race of the interviewer can even be observed over the telephone. They found that White respondents exhibited less prejudice toward Blacks if they believed that they were speaking to Black interviewers and that White interviewers elicited a wider variety of responses, representing the broad range of attitudes which are held toward Blacks in the White population. A recurring theme in the research findings is that interviewees are more likely to modify their answers to racially charged questions as their perceived embarrassment in answering the questions "incorrectly" increases (Snook, 2004). Social desirability is generally thought to underlie the propensity for interviewees to tailor their answers to meet the expectations of the interviewer and to avoid embarrassment.

Thus, given the overwhelming evidence that cross-racial interviews on race-related topics may not yield reliable data, this research project was conducted using only same-race interviews. There were two interviewers who collected the data for the study: a Black male and a White

female. In order to insure interviewer consistency, both of the interviewers worked closely with each other prior to conducting interviews to put together the interview script. The Black interviewer conducted the first interview and used the tape as an additional training tool for the White interviewer. After reviewing the tape, the White interviewer conducted her first interview and that tape was reviewed for consistency with the interview script and to ascertain the appropriateness of selected probes.

Despite the use of same race interviews, the White participants seemed to still be inclined to tailor their answers to meet the expectations of the interviewer because of social desirability. The Black interviewees did not tailor their answers to meet the expectation of the interviewer; indeed, interviewer rapport was extraordinarily easy to establish with the Black participants seemingly due to the nature of the research topic.

White Interviewee Observations

Social desirability seemed to significantly influence the White participants' responses even within the context of same race interviews. There was a decided tendency on the part of White Participants to distance themselves from the research topic. The participants never included themselves as a part of the problem. This was especially evident when the participants were asked direct questions about the impact of race on their own professional practices. The White participants were more often visibly uncomfortable when talking about race; many would not make eye contact with the White interviewer – several White participants expressly stated that they were uncomfortable talking about the problem.

The White participants spoke more freely and openly after the tape was turned off in their presence. One White participant talked about having a "good ole boy" for a client who made remarks that bordered on being racist – this participant noted that she decided that she kept her lips zipped and did not say anything because "you cannot change them." This participant wanted to make sure that the White interviewer knew that she was not racist even though she had clients who were; she attempted to distance herself from the problem. This participant would not make eye contact with the interviewer even though she too was White. It was obvious that this participant was uncomfortable with the topic. Another White participant, Brian, also expressly noted the difficulty of speaking to the topic after the tape was turned off. He exclaimed "this is a very difficult topic to talk about." While the tape was turned on, the interviewer noted that Brian made very little eye contact and seemed to mumble when he talked about race. The interviewer made this same observation of many of the White participants: they often would not make eye contact and were visibly uncomfortable talking about the topic especially when they believed their responses were being recorded and they often distanced themselves from the problems created by White racism. The need to distance oneself from the problem of racism seems to be a device that is used to protect self image. The interviewer noted after the first interview with a White participant that she too felt "uncomfortable" about the prospect of having to talk about race. She noted in her field notes that this discomfort was a result of talking about race and having to make interview participants talk about race. She commented after the first interview that "talking about race with a White person wasn't as uncomfortable as she thought because when talking about race, she was always talking about "the other" White people." It appears as if the interview participants did the same thing.

Presenting oneself in a positive light influences how people interact with others. The White attorneys did not want to be identified as a part of the problem and they certainly did not want to be labeled as being racist or bigoted. To the extent that the projection of a positive self-image becomes salient through the internalization of societal norms, what may appear to be an

unbiased statement of one's beliefs may in actuality be a conscious attempt to conceal beliefs by giving socially desirable responses (Goffman, 1963, 1973) or an unconscious reaction to being perceived in a negative light (Steele and Aronson, 1995). Thus, any attempt to measure attitudes on social issues such as race will tend to reflect more than expressed opinions but also may reflect an attempt to project oneself in a positive light. It appears as if the White participants in this study acted to protect their self-image in a number of instances. Hatchett and Schuman (1976) found that educated Whites had the strongest need to appear tolerant in Black eyes, and that they were most likely to shift upward in liberal expression when the interviewer was of a different race. It appears as if Whites do the same thing when they believe that a record is being made of their responses regardless of the race of the interviewer.

While clearly even more significant methodological issues would have been faced with the use of cross racial interviews (Campbell, 1981), this finding indicates that social desirability is still a significant issue in same race interviews in race research and this factor should be taken into consideration when designing race related studies.

Black Interviewee Observations

The most significant issue encountered with the Black participants was that of interviewer-respondent rapport (Davis and Silver, 2003). There are virtually no empirical studies addressing rapport; nevertheless, texts and articles on interviewing address the establishment of rapport between interviewer and respondent. Rapport has been defined as a "harmonious, empathetic, or sympathetic relation or connection to another self" and an "accord or affinity, in an ecological alignment with another system" (Newberry & Stubbs, 1990, p. 14). Direct face-to-face rapport motivates the person interviewed to answer fully and accurately (Marin, 1995). Studies indicate that rapport building in combination with specific interview techniques results in more detailed information being obtained during interviews (Pinizzotto & Davis, 1996). Such rapport building establishes harmony in the interview, leads to free discussion and creates a willingness in the mind of the interviewees to participate (Buckwalter, 1983). Establishing rapport has been deemed as one of the most important elements of the person-to-person communication process (Newberry Stubbs, 1990). While there is little agreement on conceptual definitions or rapport, Weiss (1970) noted that the following measures, among others, have been used: rate of eye contact between interviewer and respondent; frequency of interviewer smiles, nods, gestures; frequency of "no answers" to questions; degree of interviewer embarrassment in asking sensitive questions; participants' ratings of liking for each other; and respondent willingness to be re-interviewed. Rapport is related to the following characteristics: 1) characteristics of the interviewer, such as sex, age, education, race, and previous interviewing experience, 2) similar characteristics of respondents, 3) properties of the actual interview, such as length and completeness, and 4) the perceptions of both parties in the social relationship (Goudy & Potter, 1976).

The Black participants were almost always eager to talk about race. I argue that there was a natural race-based rapport that existed with the Black participants and the Black interviewer. Even though the Black interviewer only had a personal connection to one of the participants, all of the participants seemed to immediately connect to the Black interviewer as another person of color who could understand their experience of race. These participants always made eye contact when addressing the issue of race. Social desirability did not seem to significantly impact the Black participants' responses. The most significant problem observed was the tendency on the part of the Black participants to assume that the Black interviewer understood the nature of the race issue within their professional practices based solely on the fact that the interviewer was

also Black and as such they frequently gave "short" answers. Thus, more probing was frequently necessary in order to get complete data. For example, in addressing the lack of diversity within the leadership ranks of the State Bar of Georgia, one of the participants responded "you know." Such responses required the Black interviewer to dig deeper in order to get complete data.

The existence of interviewer rapport with the Black participants was evident in the frequency and ease with which the Black participants made eye contact and spoke at length about the issue of race in the profession and within their own law practices. For example, Carol, a Black participant, was very enthusiastic about the interview. Se made eye contact throughout the interview. She was excited to tell her story (CPA,MBA/JD) and saw the interview as tool to do so. She almost seemed to lead the interview. Similarly, Linda was comfortable making eye contact throughout the interview. She too wanted to tell her story. Richard and Kirby both were also enthusiastic about telling their story. Each also made eye contact throughout the interview. Kirby continued to talk even after the tape was turned off. The interview with Kirby was the longest among all of the participants – he wanted to make sure that his story was told.

Conclusion

Although the research design sought to control for cross racial interview effects by limiting interviews to same race interviews, the data revealed that same race interviews on the topic of race can also be problematic. For example, there was a decided tendency on the part of the White participants to distance themselves from the research topic. The participants never included themselves as a part of the problem. The White participants were more often visibly uncomfortable when talking about race; many would not make eye contact with the White interviewer – several White participants even admitted that they were uncomfortable talking about the problem. Lastly, the White participants were almost always more willing to talk about race after the tape was turned off. This would indicate that social desirability had impacted their responses to the interview questions during the time that they thought the interviews were being recorded.

By contrast, the Black participants were almost always eager to talk about race. Interviewer-respondent rapport was easily established apparently because of the nature of the research topic. The Black participants always made eye contact when they were addressing the issue of race. These participants assumed that the Black interviewer understood the nature of the race issue within the profession of law; thus, more probing was necessary in order to get complete data.

The literature indicates that social desirability and race of interviewer effects are greater among Whites than among Blacks (Campbell, 1981). These findings seem to suggest that social desirability is still a factor among White participants even when same race interviews are employed in the research design. This suggest that it may not be enough for adult education researchers to use same race interviews when conducting research within the profession on race related topics. In this study, the White interviewer used two tape recorders and would frequently only turn off one of the recorders in the presence of the interviewees, thus allowing them to believe that they were no longer being recorded. It was typically then that these participants would indicate that they were uncomfortable with the topic and in some cases say things (e.g., racially charged statements) that they were previously unwilling to say.

In designing data collection methods for research on race related topics, the use of dual tape recorders or multiple data collection methods is suggested in order to mitigate the effect of social desirability among White respondents when conducting same race interviews.

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