

DOES THE PERCEIVED RACE OF A TELEPHONE INTERVIEWER
AFFECT THE RESPONSES OF WHITE SUBJECTS
TO AN ATTITUDES TOWARD NEGROES SCALE?

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The problem of interviewer bias is generally referred to with regard to the face-to-face interview, rather than the telephone interview. Age, sex, race, social status, physical appearance, and behavioral mannerisms on the part of the interviewer are all factors which may influence the responses in an interview situation (2:384-5). Obviously, all of the above factors, except for sex, are difficult, if not impossible to ascertain over the telephone.

The current study attempted to determine whether the perceived race (Negro or Caucasian) of a telephone interviewer would significantly affect the responses to an attitudes toward Negroes scale. Most of the research conducted in this area deals with face-to-face interviewing. Several studies have found that a Black interviewer will elicit significantly different responses than will a white interviewer. Many studies have dealt with differences in the responses of Black respondents (6:159, 13,7,8). Other studies have focused on the differential responses of white subjects (1,5,10). Weller and Luchterhand (12) used Black and white respondents, crossed with Black and white interviewers. The interaction effect which they found indicated that white interviewers obtained responses of higher quality (judged by amount and relevance of material) from Black respondents than did Black interviewers. There was no significant difference in the quality of responses of white subjects. McClelland (9) found no such interaction effect.

Dohrenwend, Colombotos, and Dohrenwend (4), and Dohrenwend (3) believe that interviewer bias can be the result of either too much social distance between interviewer and interviewee, or too little social distance, i.e., too much rapport. If this is the case, then one would have no reason to expect to find interviewer bias in a telephone interview. Certainly, the problem of "over-rapport" is unlikely. Also, any interviewer-interviewee social distance which might exist is not as readily discernible on the telephone.

The authors believe interviewer bias to be caused in part by the respondent's wish to give the socially acceptable answer. The subjects may feel as though they are being evaluated by the interviewer on the basis of some hidden criteria. Consequently, they attempt to select the appropriate response. If this is the case, this type of interviewer bias should manifest itself even in the

telephone interview situation, one which is independent of interviewer visibility.

METHOD

A random sample was taken from the telephone directory of a northern New Jersey town. This town was chosen since, according to the latest census, the town's population of Blacks is approximately .3%. Thus, it was possible to assume that the respondents were all non-Black.

The same person (Thomas M. Dinapoli) conducted all the telephone interviews. The trained interviewer sometimes identified himself as "John Richardson," using his normal speaking voice (which, a pretest showed, is relatively free of any ethnic identification), and sometimes as "Leroy Jefferson," assuming a Black-American voice pattern. Of course, there is no single Black-American dialect. However, in a pretest utilizing 30 New Jersey college students, 80% felt that the (taped) voice belonged to a Black-American. Another pretest conducted on the perceived ethnicity of various names, using a convenience sample of 73 New Jersey residents, found that 90.4% identified "Leroy Jefferson" as Black. "John Richardson" was identified as Black by only 4.1% of the respondents; 68.5% identified it as a WASP name, while 12.3% could not identify this name with any particular group. The remaining responses were divided among various white ethnic groups such as Irish, German, etc.

In order to ensure that the experimental manipulation did, in fact, work, a subsample of the subjects used in the study was asked by the interviewer at the conclusion of the telephone interview, "What ethnic group do you think I am a member of?" Four choices were given: Caucasian, Oriental, Hispanic, and Negro. Of the subjects who believed that they were speaking to "Leroy Jefferson," 16 out of 16 thought the interviewer was a Negro. Of the subjects who believed they were speaking to "John Richardson," 18 out of 19 thought the interviewer was Caucasian.

The subjects were asked for the extent of their agreement with 16 statements in an attitudes toward Negroes scale. Attitude was measured by means of a standard 5-point Likert scale. The 16 statements were those used by Warner and DeFleur (11). For example, two of the statements used were:

- (1) Negroes seem to learn a little slower than whites.

(2) I would be willing to have a Negro as my supervisor in my place of work. According to Warner and DeFleur, this scale has a split-half reliability coefficient of $r = .84$. The coefficient is $.97$ after application of a correction factor, the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula.

Scores for each item ranged from 1 (strongly agree with a bigoted statement or strongly disagree with an unbigoted statement) to 5 (strongly agree with an unbigoted statement or strongly disagree with a bigoted statement). Thus the possible total scores ranged from a low of 16 (bigot) to a high of 80 (non-bigot).

RESULTS

As Table 1 demonstrates, the perceived ethnicity of the telephone interviewer did not cause the response rates for the two groups to differ significantly (36.2% for "Jefferson" and 38.5% for "Richardson"). The average response rate for the study was 37.4% (92 subjects responded out of a total of 246 who answered the telephone). This is lower than expected for telephone interviews, in general. Based on previous interviewing experience, the authors feel that this low overall response rate may be due to the fact that the interviewer identified himself as a college student.

Table 1
Rate of Return by Name Used

	Responded		Did Not Respond		Totals	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Jefferson	42	36.2	74	63.8	116	100.
Richardson	50	38.5	80	61.5	130	100.
Totals	92	37.4	154	62.6	246	100.

$$\chi^2(1) = .14 \quad p > .50$$

Mean scores on the attitudes toward Negroes scale were 61.55 for the "Jefferson" group, and 50.78 for the "Richardson" group. The variances were 36.45 and 128.13, respectively. The z-value for the difference between two sample means was 5.81 ($p < .00001$). Apparently, when the interviewer identified himself as "Leroy Jefferson," responses were less bigoted. Even the range of total scores was considerably narrower for the "Jefferson" group than for the "Richardson" group, as indicated by the significantly lower variance for the former group ($F_{49,41} = 3.52, p < .01$). Whereas no subject in the "Jefferson" group had a low total score, 19 subjects in the "Richardson" group had attitude scores lower than 48.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate

that interviewer effects attributable to the perceived race of the interviewer can be observed even over the telephone. White respondents will exhibit less prejudice toward Blacks if they believe that they are speaking to a Black interviewer. The "white" interviewer elicited a wider variety of responses, representing the broad range of attitudes which are held toward Blacks in the white population.

Rather than try to reflect reality, this study was designed to shed additional light on the possible causes of interviewer bias. Obviously, Black telephone interviewers do not make a point of announcing their ethnic background by choosing a "Black" name and deliberately employing a "Black" accent. This study does imply that interviewer bias may occur as a result of the subject's attempt to give the "correct" answer to the interviewer.

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