

THE USE OF A NEIGHBORHOOD SURVEY TEAM IN THE EVALUATION
OF A YOUTH EMPLOYMENT PROJECT

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Techniques for maximizing the quality and quantity of interview response from "non-middle class" populations are in need of development. Past research has pointed out some of the sources of bias resulting from the use of interviewers of the same and higher class and caste status.

A description is given of a study using a team of indigenous interviewers designed to overcome some of the inadequacies of procedures used in the past to interview ghetto populations. The team was composed of individuals matched to respondents in such characteristics as age, sex, social class, residence, and past experience. Methods of team recruitment, training, and management are described with references to differences between the operation of this team and surveys using professional interviewers. A typology of team members and their differing contributions to the research effort is presented.

An evaluation of the success of the indigenous interviewers in producing quality interviews and in locating respondents is presented along with suggestions for new directions and refinements.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the use of an experimental technique for interviewing other than "middle" and "upper" class populations. This technique -- the creation of a Neighborhood Survey Team (NST) staffed by individuals similar in background to those being interviewed -- was developed and tested to interview black and brown youth who had participated in an anti-poverty employment training program.

Although using the NST seemed to us to be a good idea from several standpoints, our main research task was to evaluate a youth training program and not to test the NST idea in any formal or systematic way. In light of this fact, this paper does not contain a statistically elegant treatment of validity resulting from use of indigenous interviewers (a subject of interest to survey statisticians and amenable to statistical analysis), but rather reports on some tentative lessons learned as a result of employing this technique. Although the experience with both the black and the brown team was substantially similar, only the Mexican-American (brown) team, which was in existence longer and completed more interviews, will be discussed here.¹

¹There is some question as to the degree to which our results with the Mexican-American community can be generalized to a black situation. The problem is discussed in a study by B. P. Dohrenwend [1]. Although this study found stylistic discrepancies in responses and differing

The paper is divided into the following sections:

Interviewing the Ghetto Resident: Theory
Description of the NST
Conclusions

2. INTERVIEWING THE GHETTO RESIDENT: THEORY

Some of the difficulties encountered by recent survey efforts in ghetto areas have included poor location rates for respondents, poor quality of response, and high community antagonism to interviewing procedures. Hypotheses have been advanced that individuals not socialized to middle class values may not consider the interviewing situation one deserving of full attention and seriousness.

In order to compensate for these factors tending to limit the validity of interview response, researchers have investigated the use of interviewers "matched" more closely to lower class respondents on a number of characteristics. As an example, the interviewing bias resulting from blacks being interviewed by whites has been well documented.²

Whether higher response validity from non-middle class respondents can be obtained when interviewers are matched to respondents in other dimensions such as socio-economic status, age, and area of residence has been investigated but the conclusions reached have often been contradictory.

The Los Angeles Riot Study recruited interviewers from the curfew area, i.e., the central black ghetto portion of the city.³ However, the majority of the interviewers finally used were black housewives in the 30 to 50 age range. Although these women lived within the black community they tended to be of somewhat higher social status than most of their respondents.

Response bias was examined in detail in this study. Although there were significant differences in responses obtained by different interviewers, these differences disappeared when age was controlled. The researchers concluded that any bias introduced was not a result of personal bias of the interviewers but rather of sampling bias introduced by the interviewers due to the fact that older interviewers systematically interviewed older respondents. The magnitude of bias was small and a final conclusion was that the sampling bias exerted a "negligible effect on the total data pool."⁴

tendencies towards bias in a comparison of responses of blacks and Puerto Ricans, its conclusions suggest that our findings concerning the Mexican-American team will be of similar utility for interviewing black populations.

²See Hyman [2, p. 159]; Pettigrew [5, p. 50]; and Price and Searles [6, pp. 211-221].

³Tomlinson and Ten Houten [7].

⁴Ibid., p. 12.

A thorough study of bias when interviewing non-middle class populations has been conducted by Carol Weiss.⁵ In a survey of black welfare recipients the number of truthful answers for several factual questions was obtained by comparing the responses given to interviewers with information available in existing public records (e.g., registration and voting lists, school records). Respondents with a middle class orientation were found to be more likely to bias their answers in a "socially acceptable" direction. However, the extent of the bias was influenced by the interviewer's social status and by the degree of "rapport" present in the interview (as reported by the interviewer). Both variables affected responses in the opposite direction from that which might be imagined. Interviewers of similar social status tended to receive slightly more biased responses, and interviewers reporting high rapport got much more biased responses on some questions. Rapport seemed a more important factor, which tended to either wash out or confound the bias from social status similarities. An example of the effects of the two variables is found in Table 1.

Table 1

Net Bias in Reporting Voter Registration⁶

Rapport	Interviewers Similar SES	Interviewers Dissimilar SES
High	28%	24%
Low	16	11

When obtaining information on voter registration, low rapport decreases the response bias for interviewers with social status both similar and dissimilar to that of the respondent. However, for the questions concerning school performance, interviewers of like social status with high rapport received the least biased answers of all groups.⁷

Other studies have investigated the issue of bias for non middle class samples. Williams⁸ found that when a middle class interviewer interviews a lower class respondent on items which the respondent might find "threatening" (i.e., items calling for expression of attitudes or admission of behavior contrary to middle class norms), the respondent is significantly more

likely to give socially acceptable responses in cases where the respondent is black and the interviewer white or when the respondent is of a lower social class than the interviewer. He theorizes that bias is affected by differences in status between respondent and interviewer, by differences in perception of norms relevant to the interviewing session, and by the degree of adequacy of the role performance, especially on the part of the interviewer.

Lenski⁹ mentions two undesirable effects leading to bias when lower class respondents are interviewed by interviewers of a higher class. One is the fact that the respondent is likely to exhibit a more general reticence in this situation. The second is that the respondent may see the norms of social deference as applying even to the extent that he may passively agree to contradictory items rather than express any disagreement with the interviewer.

Further research is necessary to determine the more subtle similarities and dissimilarities between interviewer and respondent which may affect validity. Such factors might include measures of the three factors mentioned by Williams as well as measures of the similarity of attitudes and values of the interviewer and the respondent which cannot be inferred from straightforward measure of social class differences.

In reviewing the studies mentioned above as well as others, the conclusion is reached that while there are definitely variables in operation which are affecting response validity, they have not been adequately conceptualized or measured to allow for the formation and testing of hypotheses sufficient to explain the bias found.

After considerations of the pitfalls inherent in the use of either middle class or indigenous interviewers for poverty populations, the decision was made to use carefully trained indigenous interviewers.

3. THE NEIGHBORHOOD SURVEY TEAM (NST)

As part of a RAND research effort to develop methods for the evaluation of manpower training programs, the decision was made to gather new data in an experimental manner from several local manpower training programs. RAND's use of a Neighborhood Survey Team (NST) composed of indigenous staff was based on the desire to examine the following hypotheses:

1. That closely matching the respondents and interviewers on such variables as age, social class, and residence when interviewing a non middle-class population might largely avoid obstacles such as inaccuracy of response that middle class interviewers from outside have often encountered in the ghetto.
2. That using people indigenous to the ghetto neighborhood in the search for respondents would decrease the high nonresponse rates that ordinarily plague surveys in these areas.

⁵Weiss [8].

⁶Ibid., p. 64. The net bias is the measure which indicates responses biased in a "socially acceptable" direction. This measure is constructed by taking the total number of cases where the interviewer obtained a response different from that in the public record and subtracting those cases where the respondent reported "non-socially acceptable" behavior (such as not being registered to vote) when this was not true. The response biased to present the respondent in a more socially acceptable way was that hypothesized to be affected by the variables of rapport and similarity in social status of respondent and interviewer.

No measure of statistical significance are reported. Although the exact N for this table is not given it is probably around 500 cases.

⁷Ibid., p. 65.

⁸Williams [9].

⁹Lenski and Leggett [4].

3. That using interviewers closely matched to respondents would help the researchers understand better how to elicit and evaluate information obtained in the survey.

4. That as a by-product of this project the training received by the indigenous interviewers would increase their understanding both of their own community and of the goals of research, possibly stimulating them to put some of this new-found knowledge to use in later pursuits.

5. An additional instrumental goal was to test a method of group organization which would promote a high level of commitment and involvement, a low absenteeism rate, a low degree of friction among team members, and a low drop-out rate for the team as a whole, overcoming many of the disappointments that have occurred in past efforts to organize ghetto residents to perform tasks usually believed to require extensive training.

RECRUITMENT AND COMPOSITION OF THE NST

The NST was composed of age, sex, ethnic, social class, and residential peers of the respondent group of past participants in an anti-poverty job training program. This program is a fairly complete manpower program offering a variety of services -- general counselling, basic (remedial) education classes, prevocational classes, Neighborhood Youth Corps job slots, placement in skill training in other programs, and job referral -- to ghetto youths aged 16 to 22.¹⁰ Team members were recruited by asking staff persons in community agencies to recommend young persons of average or above average intelligence who resided in the target area, belonged to the ethnic group predominating, and who were considered articulate, literate, responsible, and assertive enough to conduct interviews. These nominees were contacted and interviewed by a young black nonprofessional who proved quite skillful in establishing rapport with young adults and selecting good team members. This point is given some emphasis since it is commonly believed that professionals or other specially trained persons are necessary for the selection of interviewers; however, only one of the 20 team members chosen was terminated for disciplinary reasons. Most team members were recruited through the Community Service Organization (CSO), a local self-help Mexican-American group. A number of the youths had previously participated in an OEO-funded summer project through CSO, which included some unsophisticated neighborhood survey work. Half the team were males and half females, ranging in age from 17 to 24. The average age was 18. Most were high school students; the remainder were dropouts and part-time junior college students.

¹⁰Although our detailed finding concerning the effects of this program on the later job behavior of its participants are not yet available, a brief summary report has been issued. Holliday [3].

TEAM OPERATIONS

The team operated week nights from 4:30 to 8:30 or 9:00 p.m. and on Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Preliminary data showed that most ex-enrollees of the project could not be found at home during normal working hours, regardless of their employment status.

The interviewers worked in pairs (generally one boy and one girl), for reasons of security on the ghetto streets at night and to facilitate the interviewing process. (If one member found communication with the respondent difficult, the other generally would not.) One person conducted the interview while the other recorded responses -- allowing for a smoother, more spontaneous interview. It was also hypothesized that interviewing in pairs would assist the interviewers in maintaining a sufficiently professional interviewing atmosphere and in this manner reduce bias associated with the establishment of excessive social rapport.¹¹

Team members received two dollars an hour; they were not paid on a piecework basis. Typically, they assembled in the afternoon. Some immediately went out for prescheduled interview appointments; on days when interviews had not been scheduled for the entire team, members who had no appointments might go out to hunt for respondents who had no phone. Most team members averaged around 20 hours of work a week.

Absenteeism, tardiness, and other manifestations of irresponsibility remained at a low level throughout the project.

The NST operated geographically in the heart of the target area. We were offered and accepted free office space in an agency centrally located in the area under study. While economical, this windfall proved to have certain drawbacks. Interaction between agency staff and the NST tended to distract both and the high noise level and poor acoustics common to ghetto agencies hampered meetings and telephoning for interview appointments.

After some experimentation, we found that, for optimum effectiveness, an NST should have a team leader and a clerk. For this team, the leader was a nonprofessional skilled in interpersonal relations and able to relate well with young people from the ghetto. The leader became familiar with the purpose of the questionnaire and its contents as well as with the filing, paper-flow system, and payroll procedures. The clerk, a team member under the direct supervision of the team leader, was responsible for routine clerical work, the scheduling of interview appointments, and utilizing files, directories, and other sources of information on the current addresses and phone numbers of prospective respondents.

¹¹Hyman finds that interview validity increases with increased "task involvement" (i.e., commitment to producing good interviews for the sake of research goals). Validity does not increase with high social involvement in which the interviewer establishes high social rapport with the respondent for other than research goals (the "hen party" situation.) Hyman [2, pp. 138-150].

The leader and the clerk worked in the neighborhood base of the NST and were on call to answer interviewers' questions and coordinate team activities.

The roles of team members and the informal leadership patterns of the team were not imposed from above but grew spontaneously from the team members themselves.

TASK ORIENTED SENSITIVITY SESSIONS

The cohesiveness and dependability of the NST appeared to be largely a function (apart from good team selection) of the deliberate encouragement of a group interaction process in which supervisor-employee relationships were informal and candid. In group discussions which might be described as "task oriented sensitivity sessions," personal and administrative problems were openly discussed. Racial and economic concerns, behavior of supervisors, and questions of RAND's and OEO's motives were also topics of discussion -- breaking taboos sometimes found in organizations, survey or otherwise. By handling these issues openly, the loyalty and esprit de corps of the team were enhanced. The interviewers were encouraged to offer comments and questions regarding the questionnaire and the interviewing process. This provided both a valuable source of feedback to the professionals and increased the interviewers' sense of participation and of their own stake in the overall project.¹²

The many sources of bias (for example those resulting from interviewers "labeling" participants in either a favorable or an unfavorable way) were examined, and the ways in which an interviewing pair could guard against such tendencies were explored. Although it was stressed to the interviewers that their ability to break through and establish rapport with respondents was crucial, commitment to the larger task goals of the research project was continually reinforced.

The organization of the interviewers into a team and the frequent, open discussion among team members and between the research staff and the team helped immensely to foster understanding and commitment to abstract research goals. This procedure would appear to be especially crucial when employing young ghetto residents who would be less likely to have developed task involvement through previous jobs in the area of interviewing. It is likely that less time would be needed to discuss with professional interviewers the goals of a research project. However, in any study requiring a group of interviewers to function as a team, as well as in survey operations where personnel conflicts arise, these group discussion sessions could prove useful.

TRAINING OF THE NST

Training began with a brief presentation of the nature and goals of the RAND research project.

¹²The Los Angeles Riot Study used somewhat similar techniques to discuss issues concerning the research project and the job of interviewing. "Human relations groups" were held on both a formal and an informal basis during the study. Tomlinson and Ten Houten [7, p. 8].

ect. The presentation was forthright and informal, and questions were encouraged. Following this, there was a discussion of the training program to be investigated from the viewpoint of the team members¹³ and in terms of the goals of evaluation research. A considerable period was devoted to "icebreaking" -- getting acquainted and stimulating informal interaction between participants. The proposed questionnaire was distributed, read through, and discussed. An item-by-item "run through" of the questionnaire, which in this study was constructed to obtain primarily factual rather than attitudinal data, was undertaken so that the interviewers could gain familiarity with it. The initial orientation-training sessions ran from three to four hours.

The next step was to organize the team into pairs. Some of these pairs remained intact throughout the project, while others were reassembled in light of experiences after actual field work began. The most effective method of teaching interviewing proved to be actual interviews between pair-partners in dry-run sessions. After such an interview, a debriefing was held in which a staff member and a pair discussed the interview item by item.

Accuracy, clarity of response recording, and completeness were checked and reinforced. Questions were encouraged in order to clarify concepts, develop techniques to overcome reluctance to respond, and to learn non-directive ways of clarifying or restating questions.

During the initial interviewing period a close check was maintained on interviewer performance, especially in filling out the questionnaire correctly. Continued group and individual training sessions were held as required.

INTERVIEWER TRANSPORTATION

It was discovered that many of the interviewers were not proficient at first in using street maps and guides to locate respondents, but they learned quickly through experience. It was the usual practice for two or three pairs to ride in one car to the general area in which a group of respondents were located. Here again, a certain amount of time was spent in training the team member-driver to plan his trip efficiently.

In target areas like East Los Angeles, where distances are great and public transportation is very poor, it is essential that roughly half the team members possess reliable cars in order to avoid unreasonable travel time to interviews. This may be a less troublesome problem in cities that have high population density and good public transportation.

¹³As a number of team members had been at least minimally exposed to the training program, it was felt to be important to discuss this issue thoroughly. The possibility of any bias resulting from this exposure was fully discussed and hopefully controlled.

THE OPERATION OF THE NST VS. THE USE OF PROFESSIONAL INTERVIEWERS

The general operation of the team was markedly different from the operation of a survey group using professional interviewers. Due to the youth of this group and the initial lack of commitment to research goals, the interviewers were consciously welded into a group to facilitate reinforcement of the new norms and attitudes to which they were being exposed. The task oriented sensitivity sessions were also aimed at achieving this goal. These techniques might prove useful for any survey operation where young and/or inexperienced interviewers are employed.

TPOLOGY OF TEAM MEMBERS

After a period of time, the youths on the interviewing team seemed to fall into three general categories.

The first group was composed of ideologically oriented youths who were strongly motivated to make a positive contribution to their community. This group generally formed the leadership of the team. They were interested in political and social issues, held many of the same questioning attitudes found among more middle-class youths on subjects such as war, pacifism, and racism, and were anxious to discuss broad issues at abstract levels. They contributed to the questionnaire by suggesting hypotheses, interpreting the responses of the sample to the interviewing situation, and questioning the validity and utility of the entire enterprise in a manner which proved most insightful for the research staff. Over time this group seemed to grow in influence, and their mannerisms and ideas were to some extent copied by the rest of the team. They showed the greatest amount of energy and enthusiasm of all team members but did not have the highest productivity of interviews. This group seemed proud of their ethnic identity and at the same time were able to identify with militant segments of the non-Mexican-American population.

A second group was composed of more task-oriented youths. This group comprised the "workhorses" of the team, bringing in more than their share of the interviews. This group did not seem as comfortable with their minority-status identity and often exhibited typical "anglo" (i.e., non-Mexican) tastes, patterns of speech, and behavior. Members of this group contributed to the questionnaire in a very specific way by pointing out logical inaccuracies in the unrefined early editions of the questionnaire. These contributions indicated their serious approach to interviewing per se, and their contributions seemed nearly always to arise from difficulties they might have encountered in categorizing the responses of a given respondent rather than from ideological or political principles. The task-oriented group seemed to move by choice to their "workhorse" positions and accepted some banter about this display of responsibility from the other team members. These youths seemed to be slightly afraid of being identified by the researchers

as typical of the people they were interviewing. They were, for example, less likely to admit to speaking Spanish.¹⁴

A third group contained a number of youths who seemed to be unsure of their identities. They had not aligned themselves with either the ideologically oriented group (whose identity revolved around a positive minority image and an identification with disaffiliated elements of the non-Mexican youth culture) or the more traditionally "middle class" oriented group. In general, this group seemed more apathetic and uninvolved than either of the other two. The three types were distributed equally across sex, age and educational groups.

The fact that group members fell into these categories holds implications for team recruitment, organization, scheduling of interviews and control of bias. Both the first and the second group mentioned provide important inputs to team functioning. Future research should include systematic tests of bias in responses to attitudinal and factual questions obtained by interviewers in the different groups.

3. CONCLUSIONS

EVALUATION OF THE NST AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. Team members, by their own report, established good rapport with respondents. They claimed they were able to sense when a respondent was not completely candid. They remedied this situation by a direct confrontation of the respondent with their awareness of his evasion and a plea to begin again and give honest answers. Task involvement was stressed with the interviewers in order that rapport might contribute to increased rather than diminished validity.

In order to test possible bias resulting from the use of the NST as interviewers, reinterviews were made on 20 randomly selected cases by a different type of interviewer, the team supervisor, at this time a non-Mexican in her mid-twenties. Responses were obtained to a subset of questions from the original questionnaire. The responses were virtually identical on the factual questions, with the exception of questions dealing with police contact, perhaps the most "threatening" asked in the reinterview.

The hypothesis that more accurate information was given the NST was supported by the fact that more respondents admitted police contact (N=6) to the NST. Three of these respondents denied police contact to the team supervisor on the second interview. By contrast there was no changed response among those reporting no police contact the first time (N=12).

Replies on the attitude questions, however, were less consistent and differences in response

¹⁴Through discussion sessions, the information emerged that all members of the team spoke sufficient Spanish to conduct an interview in that language.

did not exhibit any discernible patterning. An examination of the differences in response to these questions indicated that rather than tailoring their answers to present a more conventional facade to the supervisor, the respondents were simply unable to accurately recall what their attitudes had been at an earlier time.

More research is desirable in the area of bias as it occurs in factual and attitudinal questions. For the factual questions the method of the Weiss study seems most appropriate.

Further investigations of the effects of status and personality variables on bias of interview results as well as differences in response to the interview situation as a function of race or ethnicity are also necessary.

2. Although we were satisfied with the quality and the lack of bias in the interviews obtained by the NST, and with the fact that the interview refusal rate was extremely low (about 1%), the team as a whole did not demonstrate great expertness in the initial location of respondents. Part of this may be attributed to the lack of proper organization by the research staff. Although the team was well suited for obtaining information once the interview began, it would have profited from the addition of a separate group of slightly older youths who could have been regularly sent to locate the hard-to-find cases. While it is important that the respondents does not identify the interviewer with the usual bureaucracies (e.g., police, welfare, collection agencies), nevertheless a person appearing to be of slightly higher status (someone to be respected but still a compatriot) may find it easier to secure initial entry into the interviewing situation. The one slightly older male (aged 24 years) on the team was excellent in tracking down hard-to-find cases by making contacts in the neighborhood.

Future studies might experiment with the advantages and disadvantages of a variety of other techniques to increase tracking ability. Interviewers interested in tracking might receive piecework pay for locating difficult cases. The use of slightly higher status trackers or even professional tracking agencies might be tried. If the respondent's address is known at one point in time, a system of postcards for reporting changes of address, perhaps offering monetary rewards, might prove successful.

3. In addition to the main research goals discussed above, the NST did offer significant training and interesting employment to most members. Informal evidence indicates that interest in community issues seemed to be stimulated in nearly every case. At the end of the interviewing period, one interviewer announced that he had constructed a questionnaire on attitudes about prejudice, expanded from our questionnaire, and was administering it in his neighborhood in order to write a paper for his high school civics class. Other team members were placed in contact with various funding programs that make available scholarships and loans for local colleges and universities, and a number of the group expressed the desire to become social scientists. Later contact with group members indicates that most

are continuing their education, and that many are moving into positions of community leadership.

The names of ex-team members have appeared in the media as being active in various community organization efforts. Team members are quick to give credit to their experience on the NST as being instrumental in helping them to move in these directions.

Our experience with this team suggests that future teams might be fruitfully organized on a semi-permanent basis, making themselves available for many different interviewing jobs in ghetto areas. Existence of readily available teams would greatly decrease research start-up costs.

4. Team members obtained a vast array of additional information that respondents volunteered during the course of the interview. Some of this information resulted in development and modification of later editions of the questionnaire. Discussions with team members proved to be a valuable source of insight to the research staff.

5. At the instrumental level, the techniques of management employed resulted in maintenance of a high level of group commitment and interest during the entire course of the project. The continuing use of the informal discussion sessions between the staff and the team was crucial in this respect.

6. As this effort was managed, the operation was not low-cost. One reason for the high cost was the long start-up time required, which was to a large extent a function of the inexperience of the research staff as well as of the NST. For example, higher costs were incurred due to the fact that the hiring of the team took less time than anticipated and the perfection of the questionnaire and drawing of the sample longer. Another factor contributing to high cost was an overestimation of the number of interviewers who could be effectively utilized at one time (this fact led to a reduction in staff about half way through the project).

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