

**“The Confederate Flag Debacle:
An Examination of Interviewer Race on Respondent Answers
to a Racially Sensitive Subject”**

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Introduction

The Confederate flag was originally an emblem of sovereignty of the Southern states during the Civil War. Today, the flag is a symbol of pride and heritage for some and a symbol of hate and racism for others. In 1962, the Confederate flag was raised on the state capitol in Columbia, South Carolina to commemorate the Civil War Centennial. For reasons not clear, it continued to be flown after this special occasion on the capitol dome along with the State and American flags until last year.

During the 1990's, a movement to bring the flag down began. After much congressional debate, national press, and boycotts of the state by national groups in particular the NAACP, the flag was permanently removed from the capitol's dome on July 1, 2000. A battle flag version of the Confederate flag was then raised in front of the capitol on a brass pole next to the Confederate Soldier's monument. There is ongoing unrest over the presence of this flag and the NAACP vows to continue its boycott of the state until all versions of the Confederate flag are permanently removed from the state house grounds.

Residents of South Carolina are still divided on the meaning of the flag and whether or not it should have been removed from the capitol dome. As part of the South Carolina Fall 2000 Omnibus survey, two questions were included to assess South Carolina residents' opinions as to whether the flag is a symbol of heritage and pride or a symbol of racism and hate. Prior to interviewing, some of the African-American interviewers at the University of South Carolina Survey Research Laboratory expressed concerns that they might be subjected to verbal abuse by respondents who feel strongly about the issue. In fact, several African-American interviewers were so concerned, they declined to work on the survey. Given the stark racial overtones underlying this issue, it presented an ideal opportunity to examine the effect of race of interviewer on public attitudes.

Literature Review

Previous research on race of interviewer effects in (e.g., Sudman and Bradburn, 1974; Anderson, Silver and Abramson, 1988; Edelman and Mitofsky, 1990; Finkel, Guterbock and Borg, 1991) has shown that the race of the interviewer can make a significant difference in the results of a survey. These investigations have demonstrated that survey respondents have a tendency to give “socially desirable” answers and are reluctant to give answers that could be interpreted as “racist” (Howell and Sims, 1991). In general, respondents are more likely to give answers that “defer” to the race of the interviewer; for example, in a pre-election “horse race” question for a race in which a black and a white candidate were competing, white respondents would be more likely to voice support for a black candidate to black interviewers than to whites and, conversely, black respondents would be more likely to indicate support for a white candidate to white interviewers. While much of this research has been based on face-to-face interviews, investigations of race-of-interviewer effects in telephone surveys (Cotter, Cohen and Coulter, 1982; Johnson, Fendrich, Shaligram and Garcy, 1997) have shown that such effects are also evident in telephone surveys.

Previous research has also shown that race-of-interviewer effects are not evident on all questions, but are more likely on questions dealing with racial issues, particularly when the respondent and interviewer are of different races and the question posed refers to the interviewer's race (Campbell, 1981). In the words of Anderson, Silver and Abramson (1988: 319), “race of interviewer comes into play in situations in which there are unambiguous references to race and the perceived threat to the maintenance of a polite conversation between the respondent and the interviewer.” Davis' research demonstrated even more pervasive effects among black respondents. As he reported (1997: 192), “... sensitivity to the interviewer's race begins

almost immediately, affects both racial and nonracial questions, and remains a stimulus to survey respondents to the very end of the interview.” Race-of-interviewer effects, therefore, have been shown not only in instances where this characteristic is obviously salient, but also in cases where the potential impact of race is not so obvious.

Methods

As discussed, the literature suggests that for certain topics, interviewer race may influence respondents’ responses. The interviewers who worked on the study were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire which included standard demographic questions and an open-ended question to allow for the description of any verbal abuse or other situations that may have occurred when asking the general public about their attitudes concerning the Confederate Flag. In addition, the interviewers were asked to provide their own opinion of the flag by answering the same flag topic questions as were asked of the general public, i.e. How much do you agree with the following statements... ‘The Confederate flag is a symbol of racism and hatred’ and ‘The Confederate flag is a symbol of pride, heritage, and honor’. To provide a background to our key question, we first report the results of T-test analyses of respondents and interviewers mean opinion scores by demographics. We then examine the effect of interviewer race on respondent’s answers also using T-test comparison of means.

Results and Analysis

Tables 1a-e provide T-test analysis results of respondents’ mean levels of agreement with the two statements – ‘The Confederate flag is a symbol of racism and hatred’ (N = 253) and ‘The Confederate flag is a symbol of pride, heritage, and honor’ (N = 246) by demographic characteristics. Overall, blacks and respondents age 18 to 44 were significantly more likely than whites and those age 45 or older to agree that the Confederate flag is a symbol of racism. On the other hand, blacks and those age 18 to 44 were significantly less likely than whites and older respondents to agree that the flag is a symbol of heritage and pride. There were no statistically significant differences by respondent demographic characteristics of gender, education or income.

Table 1a. Respondent Gender by Mean Response of All Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
Male	2.34	1.24		3.69	1.34	
Female	2.62	1.33		3.45	1.25	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 1b. Respondent Race by Mean Response of All Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
White	2.13	1.15	***	3.97	1.06	***
Black	3.49	1.13		2.57	1.25	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 1c. Respondent Age by Mean Response of All Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
18 - 44	2.75	1.32	**	3.23	1.31	***
45+	2.21	1.23		3.93	1.27	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 1d. Respondent Education by Mean Response of All Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
≤ HS	2.48	1.26		3.59	1.31	
≥ HS	2.53	1.33		3.56	1.27	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 1e. Respondent Income by Mean Response of All Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
< \$30,000	2.42	1.14		3.63	1.24	
\$30,000+	2.44	1.32		3.63	1.25	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Tables 2a and 2b provide the mean responses of the interviewers who worked on the original study and participated in the self-administered interviewer survey by demographics including race and age (statistical tests by other demographic characteristics are not included due to lack of variation among the interviewer population, i.e. Most of the interviewers are female and almost all have had at least some college education). There were no statistically significant differences by interviewer demographic characteristics of race or age.

Table 2a. Interviewer Race by Mean Response of Interviewers

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
White	4.00	1.00		2.40	0.89	
Black	3.94	1.23		2.50	1.03	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 2b. Interviewer Age by Mean Response of Interviewers

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
18 - 44	3.83	1.27		2.25	0.97	
45 +	4.11	1.05		2.78	0.97	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

We also compared the mean responses of respondents to the mean responses of interviewers concerning their views of the Confederate flag (Table 3). The SRL interviewers (Mean = 3.95) were significantly more likely to report a strong belief that the flag is a symbol of racism and hate compared to the general population of South Carolina (Mean = 2.48). The

SRL interviewers were also significantly less likely than the general public to report a strong belief that the flag is a symbol of heritage and pride.

Table 3. Comparison of Mean Responses of Respondents and Interviewers

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
Resp.	2.52	1.30	***	3.56	1.29	***
Int.	3.95	1.16		2.48	0.98	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Finally, to determine if interviewer race influenced respondents' reported attitudes about the symbolism of the Confederate flag, T-test analyses of means of respondents' answers by interviewer race were conducted. Table 4a shows the comparison of the respondents' mean responses by race of interviewer. Respondents interviewed by a black interviewer (Mean = 2.55) were more likely than those interviewed by a white interviewer (Mean = 2.33) to believe that the flag is a symbol of racism and less likely to agree that it is a symbol of pride (Blacks, 3.51; Whites, 3.58) but the difference was not statistically significant. There were also no statistically significant differences indicated by individual T-test analyses of interviewer race by mean responses of white respondents or black respondents (Table 4b and 4c).

Table 4a. Interviewer Race by Mean Response of All Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
<u>Int Race</u>						
White	2.33	1.30		3.58	1.27	
Black	2.55	1.31		3.51	1.37	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 4b. Interviewer Race by Mean Response of White Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
<u>Int Race</u>						
White	2.06	1.22		3.95	1.06	
Black	2.16	1.15		3.97	1.08	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Table 4c. Interviewer Race by Mean Response of Black Respondents

	Flag is a Symbol of Racism			Flag is Symbol of Pride		
	Mean	SD	Sig	Mean	SD	Sig
<u>Int Race</u>						
White	3.08	1.38		2.15	1.34	
Black	3.55	1.06		2.69	1.21	

** p < .01 *** p < .001

Conclusions

Despite the fears of some of our interviewers that asking of questions concerning the very sensitive topic of personal views of the symbolism of the Confederate flag, there were no reports of harassment or racist remarks made by respondents during a statewide survey of South Carolinians. Although we have had reports of racist remarks made to our interviewers, such abuses are not common and have occurred on studies on a variety of topics. This study suggests that fears of verbal attacks due to questions of a sensitive nature are probably not the norm and fears of such are unsubstantiated. In addition, the results of T-test comparisons by demographic characteristics suggests that although there are significant differences of opinion among blacks and whites, and persons age 18 to 44 and those age 45 and older in the general population, the reported views are independent of interviewer influence. The lack of significance may be due to the fact that opinions of the flag were very strong and divided between black and white respondents and it was socially acceptable to be very ‘vocal’ about ones’ opinion on the topic. As a result, the ‘desirability effect’ one would expect based on the literature was not an issue.

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