RACE-OF-INTERVIEWER EFFECTS:
A BRIEF COMMENT

P. J. RHODES

Abstract   Although 'racial matching' of interviewer and subject may often be appropriate, as a political strategy it risks marginalisation of black researchers and, as a methodological approach, its assumption of a single 'truth' is open to challenge. These issues are explored through an examination of public and private accounts and their relationship to race-of-interviewer effects and a discussion of the author's experience of conducting interviews with prospective black foster parents. The final section explores the role of the white researcher.

Key words: race, interviewing, power, qualitative methods.

The use of black interviewers to interview black subjects may often be appropriate, but as a political strategy it risks marginalisation of black issues and black researchers within the research establishment and, as a methodological approach, its assumption of a single 'truth' or 'reality', in terms of which all accounts are to be judged, is open to challenge. These issues are explored, first, through an examination of public and private accounts and their relationship to race-of-interviewer effects and, secondly, through a discussion of the (white) author's own experience of conducting interviews with prospective black foster carers about their experiences of the fostering application process. The discussion draws on work carried out during 1984 and 1985 in a London borough social services department. The final section explores the role of the white researcher. The paper concentrates on 'race' as opposed to ethnicity, as its central concern is with the effects of racism on the interview encounter. Although intimately related, the two concepts are not interchangeable.

Public and Private Accounts

A distinction is often made in qualitative research between public and private accounts. Cornwell (1984), for example, describes how 'using the "right" words and saying the "right" things' mattered to the working class respondents she interviewed. She attributed this to the unfamiliarity and inequality of the interview situation. Uncertain of their own positions in relation to the interviewer, they resorted to the 'culturally normative pattern'

(Laslett and Rapoport 1975: 973) or 'least common denominator morality' (Douglas 1971: 242). The 'opposite of the public account', according to Cornwell, is the 'private account' which 'spring(s) directly from personal experience and from the thoughts and feelings accompanying it' (1984: 16).

This simple distinction can be challenged on three counts. First, there is an implicit assumption that private accounts are intrinsically superior and more closely associated with a person's 'real' or 'genuine' feelings and opinions than public accounts which are merely a gloss or façade. Second, there is the assumption of a single 'truth' which the research aims to reveal. Third, social life is compartmentalised too rigidly into public and private spheres. If, as Goffman proposes, 'managing appearances' and 'controlling information' are continuous elements of all social interaction, all accounts are in some sense public. People may have available to them a number of levels of interpretation and are capable of holding a variety of opinions about a subject, some of which may appear contradictory but are, nonetheless, 'real' or 'honest' to the person expressing them. Attitudes often serve a social and expressive function and as such are intricately tied to the contexts in which they are formed and expressed.

Cross-racial Interviewing

The idea that some accounts are more 'accurate' or 'genuine' than others underlies many of the criticisms of cross-racial interviewing. The public and private worlds referred to above can be transposed to the 'white' and 'black' social worlds which divide white communities from black. Critics of the practice of cross-racial interviewing argue that racism is an inherent feature of British social life. Black people's mistrust of white people in general will, therefore, be extended to the white researcher or interviewer, preventing access or, if access is obtained, distorting the quality of communication which ensues. The analysis assumes a single 'truth' which can be tapped through respondents' accounts and that the accounts given to a white interviewer will be a distortion of that 'truth'. Accounts are treated as either accurate or distorted representations of a single reality rather than as situated and contingent, creative multiple mappings of a complex and multi-faceted reality or realities.

While recognising that, in a 'racially' conscious society, the colour of an interviewer's skin is likely to influence the way a person responds, it is erroneous to assume that a qualitative difference necessarily implies that one type of account is intrinsically superior to another. Each is interesting and meaningful in its own right. A different account given to a black interviewer does not invalidate that given to a white, although it may well cast it in a new light. The effects of skin colour are, moreover, unlikely to be constant but will vary with the context and topics discussed.

A parallel debate has arisen over the use of male interviewers to interview women. Spender (1980), for example, argues that, although participating in the man-made language of the public domain, women communicate personal experiences through an oral culture untapped by social scientists who are typically men. Similar arguments have been used to explain the dual competence in both the 'black' and 'white' social spheres of black people, who have available to them not only two different modes of expression but 'two mutually incompatible world views' (Harris 1987). The issue is not simply that black people may be inhibited in their communications to a white interviewer or that these communications will be passed through a white cultural filter, but that there are dimensions to black experience invisible to the white interviewer/investigator who possesses neither the language nor the cultural equipment either to elicit or understand that experience. In other words, the lack of an insider perspective precludes the white person from access to the black social world, whereas necessity has taught black people to be competent in both.

The existence of alternative and often incompatible or competing forms of discourse does not, however, preclude communication. Opening a window onto another's social world depends not only on the language and forms of communication but on the respective parties' willingness to grant access. Although it may often be appropriate to place greater emphasis on one type of account than another, the mistake is to assume that one is intrinsically superior. Alternative forms may be shaped out of social exclusion by the dominant group, but may also serve as a defence against intrusion by the preservation of a sphere of experience to which members of the dominant group are denied access.

The relationships of power in the exchange may not always be in the direction expected. The interviews in the foster carer study, for example, took place in respondents' homes, on their own territory in familiar surroundings. The interviewer was 'invited in' on terms largely imposed by the interviewee who decided in which room the interview would take place, where the interviewer and they themselves would sit, whether and how to answer the interviewers' questions, and so on.

Race-of-interviewer Effects

There has been little discussion of these effects in the British literature, unlike the American. Most American studies agree that responses to items dealing directly with race attitudes to an interviewer of the opposite race are almost always more congenial than to one of the same race (Schaeffer 1980). These effects spill into related questions but are, here, occasional rather than typical, and smaller in magnitude than for direct racial questions. The literature suggests that the categories of items most likely to show

race-of-interviewer effects are those with explicit racial content, social desirability or prestige implications, or about support for established political and economic institutions (*op cit.*). It is also widely believed, although on little empirical evidence, that response rates are higher with same race interviewers.[1].

The most common explanations refer to the structure of race relations. The argument is that black people calculate responses to white interviewers in ways determined by the imbalance of social and political power between black and white people (Hyman *et al.* 1954). Alternatively, task norms are displaced during an interview by interpersonal norms: potentially hostile answers to an interviewer of opposite race are restrained out of politeness (Schuman and Converse 1971). The literature refers mainly to survey research and the results are not clear-cut, which makes it dangerous to extrapolate. Far less has been written about qualitative ethnographic interviewing where it is recognised that all accounts are dependent on the contexts of their production and the personal biographies of informants, factors which tend to be suppressed in conventional survey research. Rather than treat colour and ethnicity as potential contaminants of 'the natural setting', it is often more productive to consider them as additional dimensions which can influence the interaction and quality of communication in varied and interesting ways.

Closeness of identity and, in particular, shared racial identity is generally presumed to promote effective communication between researcher and subject and, conversely, disparate identity to inhibit it. High value is placed on the production of an harmonious interchange and, by implication, a negative value on anger, disagreement or conflict. In the foster carer study, however, the interviewer's 'whiteness' did not always have the inhibiting effect expected.

Interviewing in a Cross-racial Context

In determining appropriate interviewers, it was hypothesised that skin colour would influence the ways people responded. It was assumed that:

(a) a black interviewer would be more likely to share the experience of racial prejudice and discrimination with a black informant who would, therefore, feel more comfortable discussing these issues than with a white person;

(b) black people's mistrust of white people in general would be extended to a white interviewer and inhibit effective communication;

(c) if the view that all white people are, consciously or subconsciously, racist is correct, a white interviewer would be likely to conduct an interview and interpret the data in a prejudiced manner;

(d) the use of black interviewers would circumvent the social power differential which exists between white and black people and which may be reinforced in the interview encounter.

For these reasons, two Afro-Caribbean interviewers were engaged to work alongside the author. Both were women local to the area from working class backgrounds similar to the majority of respondents. This strategy incorporated black people into the research process as co-investigators as well as subjects. Respondents were approached first by letter and then, where possible, by telephone. The interviews took place in their own homes and were tape-recorded. Contrary to expectation, the differences, as assessed by the black and the white interviewers, between the accounts given to them were not marked. This may have resulted, in part, from respondents' conception of the potential audience for the research. They may have been speaking, through the interviewer, to a wider (predominantly white) audience. This paper focuses, however, on the experience of the cross-racial encounter.

As the white interviewer, I had the advantage of a certain 'stranger value', not so much in the sense of being less likely to take for granted phenomena familiar and, therefore, unremarkable to those inside the group, as in respondents' perceptions of, and consequent reactions to, me as 'an outsider'. Fostering applicants divided the world into social workers and non-social workers and, in this respect, related to me as one of themselves. On the other hand, as a double outsider who was, not party to the assessment procedure either as social worker or fellow applicant I was assumed to be less judgmental than an insider would have been. I did not live in the area and was not a member of local social networks. In other words, secure in the knowledge that I was neither part of social workers' nor the local community's moral spheres, respondents could give their accounts their own moral gloss. The interview afforded them an opportunity to give their side of the story. A one man remarked:

> I wouldn't discuss these things with my neighbours. People that live round here have a big mouth. You tell one and soon they all know. You got the whole lot know your business.

The interview allowed people to vent a sense of injustice and anger which they felt unable to express to social workers for fear of jeopardising their chances of acceptance as foster carers.

In terms of 'race', my status as 'outsider' was, in some senses, forced into prominence by the nature of the issues discussed. But, even when discussing such sensitive subjects as racism, being white was not always the handicap expected. Many people were prepared to talk openly at length about their experiences and opinions and several confided that they would not have a similar discussion with another black person. People treated me to

information which they would have assumed was the taken-for-granted knowledge of an insider. As one woman in her twenties explained:

> I wouldn't have had a talk like this with another black person. I can discuss these sorts of things more easily with you. With a black person, you would just take it for granted.

In these discussions, I adopted the equivalent of a pupil role with the informant as teacher.

People spoke to me as a representative of white people in general and treated the research as a vehicle through which they could convey their views to a wider (white) audience. The guarantee of anonymity afforded a protection and, thus, an opportunity which is normally denied. In these encounters we were speaking as a black person to a white person: the significance of skin colour became paramount, but as a stimulant rather than a block to communication. When they spoke to me it was not as an individual, but as a representative of white people. The following comment, for example, was from a woman in her sixties:

> A white person wouldn't know a black person's ways or understand a black family properly because *you* have been brought up differently.

On other occasions, people may have felt more at ease talking to another black person, although, when asked, no one admitted this, even to the black interviewers.

The significance of skin colour was rarely the same from start to finish of an interview and more was gained from considering it as an interactive factor in the dynamic context of each interview than from attempting to isolate it as a variable. Skin colour, moreover, was not the only 'social signifier' and its significance to participants waxed or waned according to the topics discussed. Ethnicity, gender, class, age, education and non-professional or, more specifically, non-social worker status all emerged as dimensions of differing significance during the course of the interviews. The assumption that 'race' will dominate and will necessarily override other dimensions of differentiation or of affinity is not always warranted. As others have pointed out, the analytical separation of 'race' is both artificial and misleading. ' "Race", gender and social class have all to be theorised simultaneously' (Phoenix 1991: 46).

Similarly, the pattern of responses to the black interviewers was not always in the direction expected and, on occasion, contradicted the assumption that black people will be less suspicious of the motives of a black than a white researcher. Some people were wary of talking to a black person. Two refused to co-operate when a black interviewer called, but were willing to talk to a white person. Both were opposed to a policy of 'same race' foster placements and were afraid of expressing these views to a black interviewer whose opinions they assumed would be different.

The often complicated relationships between the different layers of meaning which structure people's accounts were illustrated by respondents' answers to a question about whether or not they would prefer to be assessed by a black or a white social worker. A majority claimed not to care either way. Class antagonism often emerged as a more forceful theme than racial antagonism or cross-cultural misunderstandings, as the following extract from a conversation with a black foster father illustrates:

> You get a middle class social worker going into a black person's home, they wouldn't know how to assess that black family. It doesn't matter if they are black or white. There is some black people who is not in touch with their own kind.

Some people appeared to put ideological (or public) beliefs above personal (or private) preferences and, for many, it was not so much differential treatment in itself to which they objected as the fear that different meant inferior. Respondents foresaw the dangers of creating a second class service marginalised from mainstream provision and warned of the dangers of approving foster carers merely because they were black, or of restricting black social workers to work with black clients. They were suspicious of social workers' attempts to impose differentiation and wary of asserting a cultural distinctiveness which had been used against them in the past. They appealed, instead, to class and to economic and material considerations in interpreting their circumstances and many explicitly rejected social workers' cultural diagnosis. In other words, present responses were conditioned by past experiences.

In the research interviews, respondents were more concerned with issues of representation, power-sharing, and access to decision-making and policy formulation, than with technical debates about social workers' intercultural skills. Concern with the interpersonal dynamics of managing the face to face interview encounter was, here, interwoven with political concerns and an awareness of the potential audience for the research.

A Role for the White Researcher?

It might be suggested that an appropriate role for the white researcher is that of 'informer' on other white people, in other words, a strategy of covert research. Apart from the ethical implications of an approach which seeks to obtain information through misrepresenting or concealing its intentions, there are practical limitations. Irrespective of common skin colour, white people are no less likely than black to be mistrustful or hostile if they suspect the researcher's intentions. Moreover, working on the assumption that 'once bitten, twice shy', even if initially successful in maintaining cover, such an approach may close the field to future investigators.

The intention of this paper is not to suggest that white researchers' competence to carry out 'research on black people' is equivalent to that of black researchers. To restrict such research to black investigators, however, is to risk a form of academic marginalisation, which parallels the relegation of black social workers to work with black clients. Not only does it risk marginalisation within the profession, but a devaluation of black workers' skills and a marginalisation of the subject group and of 'racial' and cultural issues. There is a danger that, rather than being routinely tackled as an important dimension of all social research, 'racial' and cultural issues will be restricted to specific projects or simply 'tacked on' and treated as discrete elements which are analysed independently of other issues. The practical and analytical separation of black people from mainstream research reinforces their status as an exotic or, worse, alien group in society. As members of the 1990 BSA conference workshop on 'Anti-Racism and Research' concluded:

> research conducted by whites cannot justifiably leave black people out on the grounds that white researchers cannot contribute an insider perspective. This simply reproduces the 'normalised absence' situation. 'Race' is a structural feature relevant to British society – a contextual feature whether or not black people are being studied (Phoenix 1991: 45).

Neither ethnicity nor 'race' are biological givens or fixed social categories but socially constructed and negotiated identities which can be accepted, rejected or denied, defended or resisted depending on the context (Wallman 1979). Although constructs of history, they are negotiated anew in each new encounter. Fieldwork relationships, as others have noted, can be negotiated and are not wholly assigned (Atkin et al. 1990: 9).

Ardener (1976) suggests there are 'dominant' and 'muted' modes of expression reflecting, and generated by, the wider power divisions within society and that, since the dominant mode expresses the relation of the dominant group to the social world, it fails to capture the relations through which the experiences of the muted group are mediated. Discussions of public and private usually refer to the different ways in which men and women's lives are structured (Graham 1983) and several writers (for example, Rich 1980; Spender 1980), as already noted, have argued that these gender divisions have their equivalent in language. The problem is not simply one of understanding the differences but of expressing and rendering them visible in the first place.

Similar arguments may be applied to the white interviewer – black respondent encounter and to the language and concepts of 'white' social research as it is applied to black people. Concern with the 'truth' or 'accuracy' or, perhaps, completeness of accounts would, therefore, be better directed towards analysis of the relationships of power within which they are produced and challenge to the bases of knowledge which underpin the discourses within which they are framed. Although an advantage of this approach is to

give people usually devalued in social research a voice, this, in itself, is insufficient without challenge to the pre-constructed framework of accepted knowledge. By attempting to make explicit the values which underpin research we can provide the tools for deconstructing it (Phoenix 1991).

In conventional survey research, the interview questions and language are determined by the researcher. Using qualitative, ethnographic techniques, the content and language are more open to negotiation. A more interactive approach can give interviewees greater power in negotiation of the pace and content of the interview, to direct the flow of conversation, and to ask questions themselves. Where interviews take place in respondents' homes, familiar territory generates confidence, the interviewer is invited in as a 'guest' and the balance of power is more likely to tilt in the interviewee's favour. A conventional protocol may obscure the degree to which the investigator is dependent on the participation and co-operation of the res-pondent. With a less formal and more open approach, this dependence may be more readily exposed. But, no matter how egalitarian the terms of the encounter and how much room informants have to express themselves in their own terms, the interpretation usually remains that of the researcher. As such, it is inevitably subject to a white cultural and, as some would argue, intrinsically racist filter. Partial resolution can be achieved through the incorporation of black researchers as co-investigators, but the problem of how to interpret the experience of one group and transmit it to an audience from another remains. In the process of communication, the material is inevitably transformed. An additional filter is introduced through the mediation of an interviewer. This triad of researcher, interviewer and interviewee is struc-tured by a complex of power relationships and offers the opportunity for the making and breaking of alliances – between researcher and interviewer and, even more so, between interviewer and interviewee.

The relationship between white researcher and black interviewer, em-ployed or supervised by the researcher, has its own power dynamic based on a history of exploitation of black people by white. This may influence the elicitation of information during the interview, as well as its subsequent presentation to the researcher. Each party may bring different agenda to the interview process but, although the researcher may be in the dominant position in terms of colour, research skills and experience, it is the inter-viewer who mediates the flow of information. The researcher may believe, with Berger and Luckman, that 'he who has the biggest stick has the best chance of imposing his definition of reality' (1972: 127) but, given the pivotal mediatory position of the interviewer, this role may actually be the more potent.

Those who argue that white researchers should not involve themselves in research on black people, on the grounds that they lack an insider's per-spective, are often in danger of confusing cultural misunderstanding with the unequal power relationships constructed around racial differentiation. As

Atkin argues, the prevailing discourse embedded in white western cultures derives from a humanist concern with social integration and functional harmony. Minorities are seen as alien first and distinct second. As 'strangers', they become distributed, categorised and manipulated around a particular white norm (1991: 44). Difference becomes equated with inferiority, deviance and pathology and social policies are designed to reintegrate individuals into a regulated civil society. This fundamental inequality in black-white relations underpins the practice of racism and often finds expression, unacknowledged, in the terminology of cultural difference.

Sensitivity to the relationships of power which exist between researchers and the subjects of research should be an integral part of all research, as should an awareness of the possible uses and abuses of the final product. No research takes place in a social, economic and political vacuum, which means that investigators will often be faced with the problem of managing their superior power in relation to those who are the subjects of the research (Atkin et al. 1990). Although cross-racial encounters usually take place in a context of differential power where the white person is better placed to impose his or her own definitions and interpretations, this need not always be so. Such encounters can expose the taken-for-granted assumptions of white cultural discourse and open up to challenge the researcher's own 'assumptive world'.

Conclusion

Arguments for the exclusion of white researchers from research with black people as subjects assume a congruence of interests between black researchers and subjects which disguises internal conflicts and suggests an artificial harmony. The only significant dimension of exploitation is assumed to be that between white investigator and black subject. Other dimensions of social inequality may often be more significant to participants. As one informant commented in relation to black social workers:

> There's some blacks who just step on the others and wouldn't care so long as they got the good jobs, and black people like that are worse than some white people.

By assuming, or having thrust upon them, sole authority for interpretation of black experience, black researchers risk exposure to similar criticisms. Moreover, the argument assumes that the relationship of power between researcher and researched is always unidirectional. This ignores the researcher's dependence on subjects' co-operation in the research process and the often complex negotiation which occurs during the course of any exchange.

Preventing the access of white researchers to certain fields and samples may be an effective measure of self-defence against the imposition of the

assumptions and interpretations of dominant 'white' discourses. In certain circumstances and historical periods, this may be the only practical measure open to disempowered groups. As a political expedient, however, it should not be confused with a misconceived methodological concern with an intrinsic hierarchy of accounts, evaluated in terms of their 'truth status'. The process of exchange, the language(s) and discourse(s) employed, and the negotiation of moral status, may prove to be more fruitful avenues for exploration than the interview content itself.

In certain circumstances and for certain research questions, the 'racial' matching of interviewer and respondent may be appropriate; but, as a long term strategy for gaining access to the research establishment, it risks promoting the very marginalisation and devaluation of black people and their concerns which it seeks to redress. Since interviewers are usually at the bottom of the research hierarchy, the practice of 'racial' matching may even reinforce this historically exploitative relationship. Black researchers must be encouraged to participate at all levels in all aspects of research and to have control of input into the whole research process from the initial proposal to writing up, regardless of whether or not the subjects are black. This does not mean being employed simply to legitimate the data-gathering process when black people are being studied (Phoenix 1991); nor does it entitle black researchers to an unchallengeable authority in relation to research concerned with black people; nor does it preclude black people from interviewing white people. 'Race', like gender, is a contextual feature of all social research, irrespective of the 'race' or gender of its subjects.

Notes

1. Tom W. Smith. Senior Study Director, National Opinion Research Centre, Univ. of Chicago personal communication (1987).

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