# Can We Really Have a Conversation about Race? Investigating Race-of-Interviewer Effects in the Contemporary South

Christopher N. Lawrence
Department of Social Sciences
Texas A&M International University
Laredo, Texas 78041-1960
Email: c.n.lawrence@gmail.com

Scott H. Huffmon
Department of Political Science
Winthrop University
Rock Hill, South Carolina 29733
Email: huffmons@winthrop.edu[*]

January 7, 2010

**Abstract**

In this paper, we expand the existing research on interviewer effects in telephone surveys by investigating the interacting effects of interviewers' race and gender on responses to a survey of African-American southerners conducted in February 2009 by Winthrop University and South Carolina Educational Television (ETV) on questions regarding topics such as

respondents' political knowledge, attitudes toward Barack Obama's presidency, and beliefs about race in southern and American society.

Survey research in the social sciences has long been recognized to feature a number of challenges to researchers who attempt to understand the mass public from a survey administered to a sample from that public. Textbooks of American politics are replete with examples of naïve efforts to understand the public mind, such as the widespread use of "straw polls" and mail surveys based on non-random sampling approaches (including the notorious *Literary Digest* poll of the 1936 presidential election), problematic wording in survey questionnaires, and problems of non-response bias (see e.g. Warren, 2002 and Asher, 2007).

Another long-recognized problem is related to the process of survey research itself; except in the case of mail and Internet surveys, public opinion research is usually conducted using an interview technique, necessitating the involvement of two parties—the respondent, whose opinions we are interested in determining, and the interviewer, whose role is expected to simply be an instrument presenting prompts and recording the responses to the survey. Interviewers themselves, however, appear to influence the way in which survey respondents answer questions,[1] a problem that has been recognized since the early era of mass surveys (Stock and Hochstim, 1951; Boyd and Westfall, 1955; Singer et al., 1983). Given recent scholarship on the nature of public opinion and the survey response (Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Zaller, 1992; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002), moreover, we might not just be concerned that interviewers are causing respondents to (intentionally or otherwise) give misleading responses that do not reflect their opinions, but rather that interviewers are influencing the process by which interviewees arrive at their opinions in the first place. In Zaller's model of the survey response, this would be a form of sampling bias in

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[1]We leave aside the possibilities, also of concern, of interviewers either going "off-script" or producing fraudulent data to meet quotas or appear to be working.

and of itself, as the process of sampling from the relevant considerations (attitudes, beliefs, and values) to form opinions might reasonably be influenced by characteristics of the interviewer in addition to the questions themselves.

Despite these concerns, however, research designed to uncover the presence of interviewer effects has not always identified their presence. Tucker (1983), who examined telephone interviews conducted by the Gallup organization on behalf of media clients, found that interviewer effects were modest at best; Groves and Magilavy (1986) similarly studied interviews conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan over a six-year period, finding only very modest effects that were further reduced by the introduction of CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) at the SRC.[2] These findings would suggest that we might reasonably discount the importance of interviewer effects in survey research.

# 1 The Intersection of Interviewer and Interviewee Characteristics

While researchers have been unable to identify *generalized* interviewer effects, more specialized studies have suggested that social stratification may have significant effects on survey responses. Dohrenwend et al. (1968) advanced a generalized argument that survey respondents may be less forthcoming with interviewers with dissimilar social and ethnic backgrounds, but might also not be completely candid with interviewers perceived to be of the same socioeconomic status either. Their argument suggests that some degree of "social distance" is necessary to minimize bias, as interviewers who are *too* similar to respondents

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[2]The use of CATI and similar techniques like CASI and web-based interviewing has of course become the standard approach to public opinion research, except in mail surveys and exit polls, as of this writing.

may not maintain enough interpersonal distance to get unbiased results.

The findings of Dohrenwend et al. are to some extent a generalization of an earlier line of research that was particularly concerned about interviewer effects among African-American respondents. Hyman et al. (1954), for example, noted that the responses of blacks to interviews by whites were markedly different to blacks' responses to African-American interviewers in the Jim Crow south; Lenski and Leggett (1960) found similar effects in Detroit, suggesting that the maintenance of legal segregation was not the only factor that might discourage black respondents from giving the same answers to white and black interviewers.

Subsequent to the Civil Rights Movement and the decline of legal segregation, researchers continued to find significant variation in responses based on interviewers' racial backgrounds; Schuman and Converse (1971) found that black interviewees in the 1968 Detroit Area Study tended to respond differently to black interviewers than white interviewers, particularly in response to questions with a racial dimension where the prompt requested an opinion rather than factual information. Hatchett and Schuman (1975) subsequently reported similar effects among white respondents to the 1971 Detroit Area Study.

Research in other settings tended to reinforce these findings; Cotter et al. (1982), in a survey of adult citizens in Alabama, found that race-of-interviewer effects persisted even when interviews were conducted by telephone without a visible racial cue, rather than in person, while Campbell (1981) found that Atlanta-area high school students, who presumably had been socialized in a more racially egalitarian era, nonetheless persisted in responding differently to interviewers of a dissimilar race. In general, similar patterns emerged as in the research based on the Detroit Area Study: respondents demonstrated little or no difference in how they answered questions *except* when those questions had a racial dimension.

More recent research based on national samples has also been generally

consistent with these findings. Anderson et al. (1988b) suggested that research that used surveys from the SRC/CPS National Election Studies series that failed to account for race-of-interviewer effects may have overestimated change in racial attitudes among the American public over time; they had earlier found (Anderson et al., 1988a) that race-of-interviewer effects also extended to increasing the likelihood of voting among African-American respondents who had been interviewed by a black interviewer. Davis (1997a) suggests that some respondents in the 1984 National Black Election Study moderated their views of white political figures and the Republican Party in an effort to accommodate the views of white interviewers; in further research on the 1984 NBES, Davis (1997b) indicated that a measure of black racial consciousness was biased—leading to a decrease in its estimated effect on support for Democratic presidential candidate Jesse Jackson—because it failed to account for blacks' accommodation to white interviewers in responding to the questions that formed the racial consciousness scale. In addition to the racially-associated questions identified in previous surveys, the measurement of political knowledge also appears to be influenced by race-of-interviewer effects as a result of "stereotype threat" (Davis and Silver, 2003).

Researchers have also considered the possibility that race-of-interviewer effects might have contributed to the 1980s phenomena known as the "Bradley effect" or "Wilder effect," in which pre-election polls suggested that an African-American candidate for public office would gain a larger share of the vote than he actually ended up receiving. Demonstrating this effect, Finkel et al. (1991) found a significant decrease in the willingness of white respondents to declare their support for Republican candidate Marshall Coleman in the 1989 Virginia gubernatorial contest when interviewed by blacks. While Democratic candidate Douglas Wilder did win the 1989 election (unlike Tom Bradley in the 1982 California governor's race), he did so with a much narrower margin than

the polls had predicted during the campaign.

Researchers have also tried to study race-of-interviewer effects beyond the traditional telephone and in-person interview settings. Krysan and Couper (2003) conducted an experimental study of race-of-interviewer effects in which they found that using a video recording of an interviewer had similar effects as having the interview conducted face-to-face by the same interviewers, suggesting that interviewer effects are not driven by any conscious effort to please the interviewer by the respondent. In a followup study, Krysan and Couper (2006) attempted to replicate these findings with a random sample based on an Internet-based panel using a still image of a supposed "interviewer" to produce a racial cue to respondents, but were unable to do so—perhaps, in part, because the racial cues used in the Internet-based study were much less pervasive than in their 2003 study.

Interviewer effects are not confined to African Americans and whites; they have also been identified among Hispanics and non-Hispanics (Reese et al., 1986; Hurtado, 1994), between men and women (Huddy et al., 1997), and among Native Americans and Chinese-Americans (Weeks and Moore, 1981). While these effects would not all be considered to be "racial" in character, nonetheless the mechanism appears to be very similar in all of these cases.

In general the existing research would suggest that interviewers may prime respondents to answer questions differently where that priming effect is activated by the question itself. It is unclear, however, what the motivating factor is for respondents to respond differently to dissimilar interviewers; it has been suggested that social desirability or the spiral of silence effect (Noelle-Neumann, 1993) might explain this behavior by interviewees.[3] We might also consider the

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[3]It is also unclear whether respondents are being *more* or *less* honest with interviewers of the same race; Davis (1997a) suggests that black interviewees are giving their genuine opinions to black interviewers, but it is certainly conceivable that black respondents might be socially pressured to express opinions that conform to norms of racial solidarity and group consciousness to black

possibility, based on Zaller and Feldman's model of opinionation, that the interviewer's presence is otherwise influencing the considerations that are sampled by the respondent in formulating his or her response: rather than respondents concealing their opinions from dissimilar interviewers, they are forming *different* opinions as a result of being exposed to the dissimilar interviewer. Regardless of the cause of interviewer effects, however, they do appear to be present, at least in past research.

## 2   Does Race Matter Today?

With the exception of the studies by Krysan and Couper (2003, 2006), research on race-of-interviewer effects since the 1980s appears to be limited. Although it may be reasonable to assume that race-of-interviewer effects are an established fact, it may also be reasonable to believe that social and political circumstances have significantly changed since the 1980s. For example, despite fears that a "Bradley effect" or "Wilder effect" might emerge in opinion polling for the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries or the 2008 general election, presidential candidate Barack Obama's support at the polls differed very little from the support level we would have projected from pre-election surveys. On the other hand, controversies about race have hardly receded from the public consciousness, as evidenced by the role of controversial statements by Rev. Jeremiah Wright in Obama's 2008 campaign, accusations of racial insensitivity aimed at George W. Bush in the wake of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, and the 2009 statement by U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder that "average Americans simply do not talk enough with each other about race" (Barrett, 2009). Despite the relative lack of recent scholarly interest in this question, nonetheless it appears worthy of investigation.

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interviewers.

# 3   Hypothesis, Data, and Methods

In line with the existing research, we consider whether race-of-interviewer effects persist in telephone surveys, with particular attention to questions that would appear to have a clear racial dimension.

Our primary research hypothesis is that respondents will be more likely to indicate that racism is a less serious problem to non-black interviewers than to black interviewers, and to be less likely to divulge socially undesirable opinions related to race to non-black interviewers than to black interviewers.

To test this proposition, we use data collected by the Winthrop University/South Carolina ETV Poll in February 2009. This 69-question survey, part of a series of public opinion polls conducted by the Winthrop/ETV partnership, consisted of CATI-based telephone interviews of 659 African Americans from eleven southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) conducted by the Social and Behavioral Research Laboratory at Winthrop University, with interviews taking place between February 6 and February 22, 2009 (approximately 2–5 weeks after Barack Obama's inauguration as president). The primary motivation of this survey was to identify the reactions of African-American southerners to the 2008 presidential contest, as well as investigating blacks' attitudes toward the state of the economy, racial relations in America and the South, and politics in general.

The interviewers were primarily undergraduate students at Winthrop University, recruited either as paid employees of the lab or as students in classes taught by one of the co-authors. The interviewers included both men and women; the vast majority of interviews were conducted by either white or African-American interviewers, with 303 interviews being conducted by whites

and 297 by blacks.[4] While respondents were not consciously randomly assigned to interviewers as in a "pure" experimental model, the CATI system effectively randomized the assignment of interviewees to interviewers.

In addition to the randomization noted above, the survey instrument embedded a random assignment to one of two questions designed to identify whether African Americans engaged in socially desirable behavior around whites; respondents were randomly assigned to this condition.[5]

The research hypothesis will be tested for various items using Pearson's chi-squared test of association; the independent variable is the interviewer's race (black or non-black),[6] while the dependent variable in each test is the response to a survey question.[7]

# 4   Results

We present in the accompanying tables the results of our hypothesis tests for eleven of the survey items that appeared to be racially-connected items or otherwise similar to questions that other researchers had identified as demonstrating race-of-interviewer effects. Many, but not all, of the items exhibited the effects expected by the hypotheses; several items failed to meet

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[4]Twenty-one interviews were conducted by interviewers of other ethnicities or races; these interviewers are classified as non-black.

[5]In question 43 of the instrument, half of respondents were assigned the question "Do you think that African Americans sometimes need to *think and act 'white'* in order to get ahead in American society?"; the other half were assigned, "Do you think that African Americans sometimes need to *play down their racial identity* in order to get ahead in American society?" (emphasis added).

[6]Existing research suggests that the race-of-interviewer effect should vary based on in-group versus out-group membership by the interviewer, rather than another pattern (black versus white, for example). Similar results are expected if interviewers who are neither white nor black are excluded.

[7]In a future iteration of this research, we expect to control for respondent factors, given that interviewer assignment may not have been truly random, to bolster the external validity of the findings.

Question 9: Do you feel that the Republican Party is currently working to attract African American voters?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 34.5 | 26.1 |
| No | 51.9 | 60.0 |
| Not sure | 13.7 | 13.9 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 617, \chi^2 \approx 5.374, p \approx 0.068$.

Question 31: … marriages between blacks and whites. Is that acceptable or unacceptable?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
|---|---|---|
| Strongly acceptable | 67.4 | 76.8 |
| Somewhat acceptable | 22.4 | 18.1 |
| Somewhat unacceptable | 3.1 | 0.7 |
| Strongly unacceptable | 4.3 | 1.7 |
| Don't know/Not sure | 2.8 | 2.7 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 615, \chi^2 \approx 11.346, p \approx 0.023$.

Question 37: Some people say that since the 1960s there has been a lot of real progress in getting rid of racial discrimination against blacks **in the South**. Others say that there hasn't been much real progress for blacks over that time. Which do you agree with more?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
|---|---|---|
| A lot of real progress | 46.3 | 54.6 |
| Hasn't been much real progress | 47.5 | 35.8 |
| Not sure | 6.2 | 9.6 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 617, \chi^2 \approx 9.392, p \approx 0.009$.

Question 38: Some people say that since the 1960s there has been a lot of real progress in getting rid of racial discrimination against blacks **in America**. Others say that there hasn't been much real progress for blacks over that time. Which do you agree with more?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
|---|---|---|
| A lot of real progress | 52.6 | 65.5 |
| Hasn't been much real progress | 39.9 | 28.3 |
| Not sure | 7.4 | 6.1 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 616, \chi^2 \approx 10.740, p \approx 0.005$.

Question 39: What about for other minority groups? Would you say there's been a lot of real progress getting rid of discrimination **in America** or hasn't there been much real progress?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
|---|---|---|
| A lot of real progress | 40.1 | 44.2 |
| Hasn't been much real progress | 48.4 | 40.8 |
| Not sure | 11.5 | 15.1 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 614, \chi^2 \approx 4.127, p \approx 0.127$.

Question 40: Do you think that the election of Barack Obama as president will lead to more real progress in getting rid of discrimination in America?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 75.6 | 69.6 |
| No | 13.6 | 18.4 |
| Not sure | 10.8 | 11.9 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 617, \chi^2 \approx 3.215, p \approx 0.200$.

Question 41: How comfortable do you think most people feel when they do have conversations *about* race with someone *of another race*?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Very comfortable | 12.1 | 10.5 |
| Somewhat comfortable | 34.6 | 38.4 |
| Somewhat uncomfortable | 41.9 | 35.9 |
| Very uncomfortable | 11.4 | 15.2 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 591, \chi^2 \approx 3.870, p \approx 0.276$.

Question 42: Did the 2008 presidential election make it easier or more difficult to have conversations about race with people *of another race*?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Easier | 56.5 | 56.7 |
| Not sure | 20.1 | 23.2 |
| More difficult | 23.5 | 20.1 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 617, \chi^2 \approx 1.483, p \approx 0.477$.

Question 43 (Version 1): Do you think that African Americans sometimes need to think and act "white" in order to get ahead in American society?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
| --- | --- | --- |
| No | 61.3 | 60.1 |
| Sometimes (vol.) | 5.2 | 13.0 |
| Yes | 33.5 | 26.8 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 293, \chi^2 \approx 6.218, p \approx 0.045$.

Question 43 (Version 2): Do you think that African Americans sometimes need to play down their racial identity in order to get ahead in American society?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
| --- | --- | --- |
| No | 65.2 | 53.8 |
| Sometimes (vol.) | 5.8 | 12.3 |
| Yes | 29.0 | 33.8 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 285, \chi^2 \approx 5.440, p \approx 0.066$.

Question 47: Thinking about the economy, do you think things are better for blacks than other groups, about the same for blacks, or worse for blacks in the current economic environment?

|  | Non-Black Iwr | Black Iwr |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Better | 9.2 | 6.2 |
| Same | 47.8 | 57.1 |
| Worse | 43.0 | 36.7 |

Entries are column percentages. $n = 589, \chi^2 \approx 5.631, p \approx 0.060$.

traditional levels of statistical significance.

Four questions in particular seem to have exhibited effects that are opposite to those we might have expected. Question 31 of the survey asked respondents about their attitudes towards interracial marriage; contrary to expected norms in the African-American community, black respondents were generally more supportive of interracial marriage when interviewed by a black interviewer than a non-black interviewer ($p \approx 0.031$). It is possible that respondents, as suggested by Davis (1997a), might be attempting to accommodate the views of (possibly racially conservative) white interviewers; it is also possible that the presence of a non-black interviewer might have "primed" the idea of cross-racial interaction in a way that the presence of black interviewers did not.

Responses to question 47 of the survey, which asked respondents to evaluate the effect of the state of the economy on African Americans, also seem to have performed differently than we might have expected. Respondents who were paired with black interviewers were somewhat less likely to think the economy was worse for blacks than non-blacks. While the effect only approaches traditionally accepted levels of statistical significance ($p \approx 0.071$), nonetheless it is difficult to explain, although it is possible that a similar "cross-racial interaction" effect may have heightened blacks' group consciousness in response to this question.

Respondents to questions 37 and 38 also seemed to display an unexpected response pattern, with those interviewed by blacks being more likely to indicate that there had been "a lot of real progress" in eliminating racial discrimination than those interviewed by others, both in the South ($p \approx 0.009$) and America as a whole ($p \approx 0.006$). It is possible that the interaction with black interviewers reminded respondents of racial progress in some way; another possibility is that the respondents felt pressure to downplay the amount of racial progress in America and the South to non-black interviewers, lest the interviewers be led to

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believe that racial discrimination had been eradicated completely.

The embedded experiment that varied the question wording on an item on "acting white" or playing down one's racial identity also had a notable effect, with respondents more likely to volunteer that they "sometimes" felt a need to downplay their racial identity when interviewed by fellow African Americans; respondents were also generally more likely to suggest that playing down their racial identity was sometimes needed in response to black interviewers.

Other items seem to have performed as we might expect, with black respondents presumably being less candid with non-black interviewers, although not all of the items reached traditional levels of statistical significance.

# 5    Conclusions

In this paper, we considered the persistence of race-of-interviewer effects in telephone surveys, using a survey of southern African-American adults conducted in February 2009. Our findings suggest that race-of-interviewer effects continue to persist in responses to racially-valenced questions in public opinion surveys, although the direction of these effects is sometimes inconsistent with the findings of previous research. The findings are also generally consistent with the contemporary models of opinionation (Zaller and Feldman, 1992; Alvarez and Brehm, 2002) that suggest that opinions are generally generated "on line" in response to survey questions rather than being formed prior to the interview, suggesting that race-of-interviewer effects are largely operating at a subconscious or unconscious level.

These findings also suggest that further research on race-of-interviewer effects is needed, in part to determine whether the conventional wisdom remains true for groups other than African Americans. Given the seeming disappearance of the "Bradley/Wilder effect" among white voters, it is possible that

race-of-interviewer effects have also decreased or diminished. The increasing proportion of Americans who are of Hispanic and Asian origin also suggests a need for further investigation of interviewer effects beyond the traditional black/white dichotomy in American politics.

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