

Investigating Race and Ethnicity on Data Collection and Analysis

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Abstract: This paper details the research methods an introductory qualitative research class used to both study an issue related to race and identity, and to familiarize themselves with data collection strategies. Throughout the paper the authors attempt to capture the challenges, disagreements, and consensus building that marked this unusual research endeavor.

Qualitative methods courses in the College of Education have typically involved action learning, with individuals or small groups identifying the problem, creating research questions, developing instruments, collecting data, and analyzing the data. Rarely is there enough overlap in interest or background to create a large project, but in the spring of 2005, a rare group of individuals gathered to study qualitative methods. The students were ethnically and racially diverse, evenly divided between Blacks, Hispanics and Whites. In early discussions, the group coalesced around an interest in how the race and ethnicity of researchers impact the research process. A decision was made to conduct research within the class, with each student acting as a participant researcher and participating in designing the study, collecting data and analyzing the data, while also journaling their anonymous thoughts on the process. The authors were all participants in the class.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the process involved when a class takes up a research project. The paper will begin with the background of the problem and explain how the group finally agreed to the purpose statement. The discussion will then turn to the method used by the participant researchers to collect and analyze the data. Finally, there will be a discussion of the process with an attempt to capture the challenges, disagreements, and consensus building that marked this endeavor.

Once the class had reached a consensus about participant research and the general topic of racial and ethnic bias and its influence on the research process, a review of the literature was conducted. A task force was then created to focus on creating the purpose statement and crafting the research questions.

There is a great deal of scholarly literature about race of interviewer effects, especially when the research focuses on measuring political or racial attitudes, dating back to the early 40s (Davis, 1997). The topic of race relations has an even longer history, going back to the 1700s (Alderfer & Tucker, 1996). The race of an interviewer affects interview responses: respondents adjust their responses to satisfy the perceived expectations of the interviewer. This effect can result in response bias, whether in a survey, focus group, or interview (Davis, 1997). Krysan and Couper (2003) investigated how the answers given to an interviewer of one race differ from those given to the interviewer of another race, finding that the answers by both African Americans and Whites were influenced by the interviewer's race. Blacks tend to be cautious about what they disclose to Whites as a consequence of racism (Alderfer & Tucker, 1996). White men also tend to feel pressure to be politically correct when discussing racial issues (Taylor, 1992). Some social scientists have limited the influence of bias by matching interviewers and respondents by race, though this has not been decisively shown to produce more valid data (Alderfer & Tucker, 1996). Recently, as demographics of the United States have changed,

researchers have begun analyzing and comparing a tri-racial order, especially as Hispanics have emerged as a growing minority, especially in concentrated geographic regions (Bonilla-Silva, 2004).

Potential for bias exists both for both researchers and participants (Sherman, 2002). This can be detrimental to the integrity of the research, as individuals may feel pressure to conform their answers to accommodate the interviewer, or to exaggerate relationships between measures (Davis, 1997; Sherman, 2002). Yet, frequently researchers still act as if their hidden biases are irrelevant (Alderfer, 1985).

The diverse demographics of this class offered an opportunity to probe both interviewer effects and participant bias, while offering the class members an opportunity to discuss and reflect on the possible biases and attitudes each person brings to the research endeavor. The class agreed that this was an important topic, and that the research design would have to address issues within and across race and ethnicity.

Purpose

The original purpose statement was crafted and adopted by class consensus: The purpose of the study was to investigate the influence of race and ethnicity on data. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the process.

Method

The setting of this study was a graduate qualitative methods course. The course began with a structured syllabus designed to provide students with experiences in the various forms of data collection and analysis. After speaking to one of the student groups about their research topic, the instructor brought this topic to the class asking if the class might be interested in pursuing the question. The members of the class seemed unanimous in their agreement to become participant researchers pursuing one research question.

We agreed to investigate the influence of race and ethnicity on data collection and analysis, using a phenomenological case study. “Phenomenology is concerned with examining entities from many sides, angles, and perspectives until a unified vision of the essences of a phenomenon or experience is achieved” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). The essences are the “core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced” (Patton, 2002, p. 106). To uncover the essences of the students’ experiences of collecting and analyzing data, we examined the class as the primary case with multiple embedded cases within the class. This section will discuss the participant research process, data collection, and global analysis.

Participant Research Process

The students in the class were participant researchers since they were the researchers and the participants. The instructor, as the inquiry facilitator, supported group cohesion and collective inquiry (Patton, 2002). The class discussed and agreed on every design decision and implementation issue. Students, individually or in small groups, took primary responsibility for a specific task such as designing the instruments, monitoring the process, and overseeing all other aspects of the study. The instruments designed were profiles, journal questions, and the interview guide. Monitoring the process involved tracking instrument completion, storing the completed instruments and transcripts, and organizing the data into triads to send to the researchers. All issues and aspects of the study were discussed in class or through electronic mail until consensus was reached. Documents or processes were then revised and returned to the group for feedback. If major issues were again raised, they were discussed during a class session; minor issues were addressed by the group responsible for the task.

Participant Researchers

Convenience sampling was used because we were a class and intensity sampling was used because the class had “information-rich cases that manifested the phenomenon intensely” (Patton, 2002, p. 243). As a minority-serving institution, the likelihood of representation from different racial and ethnic groups was high; however, having equal representation was serendipitous. One instructor and 18 students (10 female and 8 male) participated in the study. Ethnic and racial groups were equally represented: six White students, six Black students, and six Hispanic students.

There was discussion about the self-classification of participants into the three racial and ethnic groups due to the wide degree of variance within each group. For example, one participant of Hispanic and White origin did not look Hispanic, yet he classified himself into the Hispanic group. The diversity within each group included: (a) the White group with five participants of European descent and one of Russian descent; (b) the Black group with one Haitian American, two African Americans, one Afro Caribbean, and one Jamaican; and (c) the Hispanic group with three Cuban Americans, one Puerto Rican, one Mexican American, and one person of Uruguayan parentage. The 15 doctoral students and 3 master’s students were from the middle class and between the ages of 25 to 56.

Triads as Cases

The participant researchers were divided into 12 small groups called triads. Two forms of triads were used: intergroup (mixed race/ethnicity) and intragroup (same race/ethnicity). The six intergroup triads contained one Hispanic, one White, and one Black student. The six intragroup triads consisted of two White, two Black, or two Hispanic groups. The participants belonged to both an intergroup and an intragroup triad. Each person rotated through the roles of observer, interviewer, and interviewee with someone of the same race/ethnicity and someone of a different race/ethnicity. Data collection through the triads enabled us to observe whether there were differences in behavior when participants interacted with people of a same or different race.

Data Collection

Data collection involved students e-mailing their data to a specific student in the class. Students were given a code number to label their data. Only the keeper of the codes (one participant researcher) knew everyone’s codes. All of the documents were stored on the computer within the six intergroup data set files.

Data Sets

A data set included all data generated by a triad: six interviews, six observations, three profiles, and thirty-three journal entries. Each member of a triad conducted two interviews (one same race, one different race), two observations of interviews (interviewer and interviewee, same race and different race), one profile, and 11 journal entries.

Interviews. The 33 questions on the interview guide dealt with how race, ethnicity, identity, and bias affect journaling, observations, interviews, and the analysis of data. The same interview guide was used in the interview of same and different race participants. The interviews took between 20 to 60 minutes and were held at locations and times convenient to the participants. The interviews were audiotaped and each interviewer was responsible for transcription.

Observations. Observations of the same and different race interviews were conducted within the triads. Observers first took both *emic* and *etic* notes while observing and then the notes were later typewritten. When a researcher takes *emic* notes, he/she describes what is being observed directly, whereas *etic* notes involve writing feelings about what is being observed (Gay

& Airasian, 2003). An example of emic note taking is recording that the participant is wearing a buttoned up, red shirt and a blue skirt. Etic notes about the same participant could be that the researcher felt that the participant looked stiff and uncomfortable. Recording both emic and etic notes gave us a rich description of what took place during the interviews.

Profiles. Each person completed a profile with questions grouped into four categories: (a) identity; (b) family/marital status; (c) residence/background; and (d) program of study/project inquiry. The 10 questions in the identity category dealt with age, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and race. The family/marital status category contained 15 questions pertaining to such topics as marital status, number of children, and quantity of interracial relationships. The residence/background category had 12 questions pertaining to citizenship, county of residence, languages spoken, religious practice, and socioeconomic status. The last category, program of study/project inquiry, contained eight questions covering such topics as program of study at the university and enrollment status (full or part-time). The 46 questions on the profile were e-mailed to each participant, and they were given two weeks to fill them out and e-mail them back to the sender.

Journals. Each participant kept reactions to five class discussions and six open ended prompts in a journal, making 11 entries. The six open ended prompts included (a) who am I, (b) how do you think others identify you, (c) how do you want others to identify you, (d) describe an incident relating to identity, (e) what are your reactions to the interview process, and (f) what are your reactions to the overall project? The eleven journal entries were collected over an eight-week period.

Data Analysis

The two forms of triangulation used in this study were multiple forms of data and researchers (Denzin, 1978). Interviews, observations, profiles, and journal entries served as the data sources. Each form of data was analyzed separately and then compared to each other. Additionally, multiple researchers analyzed the same data to come up with codes. Each case was analyzed by three researchers who had the same race or ethnicity and then by another three researchers with differing race and ethnicities (see Figure 1). Codebooks were turned and one final intergroup triad analyzed all of the codes to look for themes (see Figure 2).

Discussion of the Process

As a Black, White, or Hispanic participant researcher, each class member organized with his/her perspective intergroup and intragroup to fulfill the objectives of gathering data through interviews. This aspect of the class project proved to be challenging for several reasons, including conflicts of scheduling and various levels of dedication to the class project. Each triad needed to meet a minimum of two times outside of class: once to collect data and a separate time to find themes in coded data. By the end of the class term, only 6 out of 12 groups had completed these tasks. The long-term dedication to the class project was further demonstrated given that the comprehensive analysis of the limited data submitted was delayed and ultimately left to three class volunteers, an intergroup triad, who worked independently past the end of the course term to turn out project findings.

Another data-collection challenge was exposed as we considered the prior experience of each participant researcher in assuming the various roles. Although most students could find familiarity in their roles as part of some racial/ethnic group, for some the participant-researcher role was a new experience, and therefore a challenge. Some students had never conducted interviews, been interviewed, or developed enough skills to thoroughly record an observation.

Therefore, reliance on assigned and supplemental readings became central to the quality of these triad interactions and to the validity of the data.

Quantity of Codes

The codebooks which were ultimately analyzed by the final intergroup triad proved to be quite revealing. We recall that the themes which resulted from this final intergroup triad were based upon the final codebooks submitted by the six triads. Each codebook reflected the efforts of the triads to identify common codes in the data set (i.e., journals, interviews, observations, and profiles). Analysis of these codebooks offered a more comprehensive revelation of the class project experience and materialized the project purpose.

The codebooks first revealed a tendency of intergroups to use greater quantities of codes than intragroups, specifically 38 compared to 26. The final analysts proposed that the intergroups arrived at this number because of their inability to accommodate the varying opinions being expressed in the mixed groups; opinions were much more varied. Intragroups, however, may not have found such difficulties given that they had greater success in coming to a consensus.

Code Descriptions

The triad of analysts also compared all intergroup codebooks to all intragroup codebooks, recognizing a differentiation in word usage. Intergroups tended to use more tempered language for their codes such as *uncommon ground*, *altered answers*, *challenged*, and *empathy*, whereas intragroups tended to use more judgmental, negative, or racy codes such as *discrimination*, *discomfort*, *racial hostility*, and *prejudice*.

Triad Interactions

A matter which surfaced in the data, which was scarcely given attention to in class as compared to other issues (e.g., method, purpose, and objectives), was the complexity of the triad interactions. In journals and observations, for example, there were references to the all-but-neutral dynamics of an ethnically/racially labeled individual placed in ethnically/racially mixed or similar groups to ask and answer questions pertaining to race and ethnicity. Particularly among intergroup (mixed) triads, participant researchers noted a lack of candor or willingness to express themselves without inhibitions. One observer noted such suspicions: "I felt the participant researcher did not wish to say the wrong things and be considered biased, prejudiced, or racial." An interviewer mentioned that he censored what he wrote in the journals because of fear of negative feedback from others who would read his thoughts.

Final Thoughts on the Process

The student researchers gained incredible insight into the amount of time and effort that is required to conduct qualitative research. They also were able to uncover some important interpersonal issues that are related to race and ethnicity. Specifically, the closer one's race and ethnicity is to the person being observed or interviewed the more likely the truthfulness of the responses. Therefore, one's race or ethnicity certainly seems to have an impact on data collection and analysis activities.

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Figure 1. The Intergroup and Intragroup analysis of each data set.

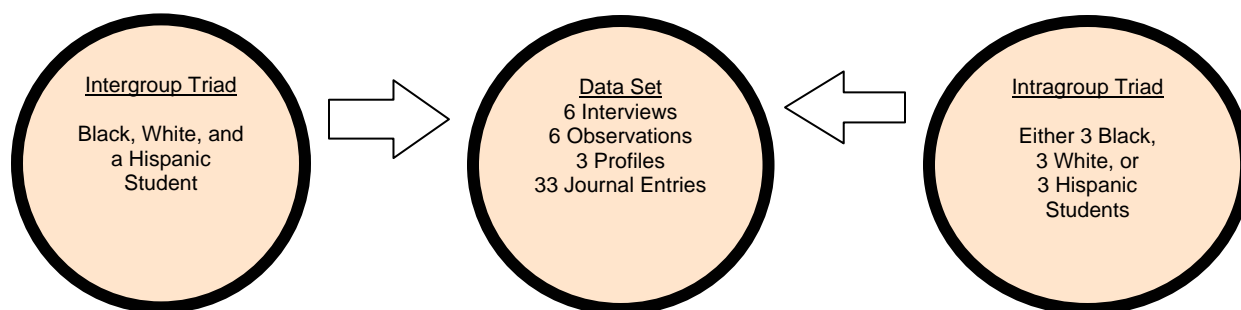


Figure 2. The Intergroup's analysis of the codebooks.

