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SAGE Research Methods Cases

Researching race in a White space: negotiating interviews at White-wedding shows in England

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Contributor Biographies

Julia Carter is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her research interests include marriage and relationships, families and personal life, and gender and sexuality. She is particularly interested in intimate relationships and the roles these play in an ever-changing social context. Previous publications have focused on marriage and narratives of love, sexuality and commitment; and living apart together relationships, policy and social change. Her wider interests include gender and popular culture and more recently

Julia has completed research and published work on the topic of weddings: practices, experiences and (gendered) norms.

Anwesa Chatterjee is a Research Assistant at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her research interests are in the areas of medical sociology and race-ethnic relations. She is particularly interested in complementary and alternative medicine, socio-economic status and health disparities, racial disparities in health and the sociology of mental health. She is currently working on two projects on the racial and ethnic health disparities in the use of complementary and alternative medicine and the racial differences in patient perceptions of patient empowerment and direct-to-consumer advertising in the US.

Published Articles

[insert an APA-style reference for any publications resulting from this research]

Abstract

Our research methods case focuses on how, as researchers, we negotiated the topic of race in recruiting participants and conducting interviews for a study about the cultural reproduction of Whiteness at wedding fairs in the UK. Here, we describe some of the challenges and difficulties we encountered in the course of our fieldwork, including: the designing and re-designing of our research tools, negotiating for interviews, and handling difficult interview exchanges. Though semi-structured interviews are commonly used by qualitative researchers in the social sciences, we highlight some of its shortcomings as a tool to investigating issues of race in a White space. Specifically, we draw on the various obstacles that we encountered in conducting this research. These include: dilemmas on condensing interview time and questions and yet gathering substantial information for

analysis; the challenges of recruitment at a busy event like a wedding fair; dealing with challenging behaviour and refusals to participate; challenges of talking about race in a White space; and dealing with outright racist participants. We reflect on our experiences and draw attention to how this project compelled us to introspect on our own assumptions and biases as researchers while exposing the existent racism in a 'colour-blind' society (Bonilla Silva, 2006).

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case students should be able to:

- 1) Understand that responding to peculiar situations and on spot strategizing is key to producing good outcomes for research.
- 2) Understand that challenges might and will arise in conducting research focused on issues of race, therefore, to take into account the unpredictability of research situations and plan for the unplanned.
- 3) Understand that all data is rich data and investigating unexpected outcomes can be as productive as investigating expected ones.

Case Study

Introduction to the project

This case study focuses on a small part of a larger research project which aims to explore the cultural reproduction of Whiteness (Knowles, 2008; Dyer, 2002; Bonilla-Silva 2012) and the exclusion of other racial/ethnic groups at British wedding shows. It is based on our experiences of data collection at one particular wedding fair in a large city in the West Midlands. Due to our commitment to both qualitative (Mason, 2002) and feminist research (Ramazanoglu, 2002; Stanley and Wise, 1990), and to our preoccupation with culture, we

chose qualitative interviews as a starting point for this research. The aim was that by conducting semi-structured face-to-face interviews with sales representatives or owners of local businesses, we could examine the mechanisms through which the cultural elements of Whiteness are reproduced and maintained (Burdsey, 2011). We were interested in both how these individuals represented their businesses through displays, advertising and marketing, and the ways in which they talked about displaying their wedding-related businesses at weddings shows.

For the purposes of collecting data we visited a few wedding fairs around the country, however, here we report on our first experiences of conducting interviews at a wedding show in the West Midlands. This location provides an interesting backdrop for our research since the surrounding area has one of the highest minority ethnic populations in the country. On the one hand, therefore, we expected to see people from a range of ethnicities both attending the wedding show as consumers, and there as business owners. On the other hand, we were also cognisant that where there is a high level of geographical ethnic diversity, there also tends to be a high degree of segregation and racism (Tyler, 2012).

Though there is substantial presence of different ethnic groups in the UK, from our preliminary investigation of wedding show websites, we found that there was no or very little diversity of cultural elements represented at the type of weddings shows we attended; although there were instances of more 'niche' shows that mix 'British' and 'Asian' elements of weddings in one venue (one such example we visited in another city in the North of England). In the majority of cases, however, the larger wedding shows in Britain seem to be segregated by cultural ethnicity.

The plan

We were both novices in this field of research: for one researcher the subject of race as a focus of study was new, for the other, researching weddings was a first. Neither of us had attended a wedding show before or conducted qualitative research at such an event. This case study, therefore, focuses on how our experiences in the field changed our approaches to data collection as our knowledge of the mechanics of the events improved. This is also a reflection on how our own positions as researchers- two young(ish) women, one White British, one Indian- can influence and change the course of a research project. Before we get to this, our initial plan is outlined below.

As our project aimed to explore aspects of cultural reproduction of Whiteness at wedding shows, we started by reading around critical race theory, Whiteness studies, postcolonial theory and sociological studies of weddings. Our background search of the literature revealed that there were few or no studies examining our particular research questions. We deliberated and reasoned that to gain a better understanding of issues related to the cultural reproduction of Whiteness and apparent exclusion of other ethnic categories at wedding fairs, it would be appropriate to conduct face-to-face interviews with sales representatives and owners of local businesses who were presenting stalls at the wedding shows. We rationalized that this would enable us to understand how race is thought about, or not thought about, while presenting and being present at such an event. The aim was to provide some insight into the ways in which Whiteness is revealed and hidden at these fairs- both metaphorically and literally.

Following extensive research, we narrowed down three weddings fairs to attend around England. To enable useful comparisons, and to account for population density, ethnic diversity, regional differences in business opportunities, and general cultural differences, we selected weddings shows that were arranged by the same organizers in three different locations in the South East, West Midlands and North West of England. We anticipated some

differences to emerge in perceptions and approaches adopted by businesses at wedding fairs in different regions and locations around the country. Once we had decided on the wedding fairs we would attend, we next had to decide on when and where we should conduct the interviews.

This was one of the hardest decisions: we knew the shows would be busy and stall holders unlikely to be keen to give up a significant amount of their potential selling-time to talk to a couple of social researchers. However, the alternative option of taking down the contact details of willing participants to contact at a later date also raised issues around follow-up response rate and practical concerns of travel costs and time. We decided to target specific times of the day where the wedding show would be quietest- first thing in the morning and the hour before the show closed (neither of us having actually attended a wedding show before, we were more hopeful than expectant that this would work). The idea being that participants would be happier to give up their time in periods where the chances of making a sale were also greatly reduced.

Based on these assumptions, we developed a research proposal, an interview guide, an informed consent form, an ethics checklist and an information sheet for submission to the ethics committee at our University. Once, we received ethical approval from the University, we were ready to start the active research process.

Problem 1: The interview context

We arrived at the wedding fair in the West Midlands with the intention of engaging in face-to-face qualitative interviewing. Our interview guide submitted to the ethics committee comprised of ten open ended questions and we expected to be flexible in our approach to enable free-flowing conversation and to make requisite changes in question wording and question order depending on the progress of interviews. From our research we knew that this

was a very busy wedding show and we anticipated the busiest day to be Saturday. Before arriving at the show, therefore, we decided to interview stall holders in quieter periods on the Friday.

We arrived at the show within the first half hour of opening and already it was busy with many people milling about and approaching the different stalls. We agreed at this stage that in this setting it would be difficult to engage in interviewees for anything more than 10-15 minutes. Despite being designed with flexibility in mind, our original interview guide with 10 open ended questions seemed rather extensive and somewhat ambitious at this point. So, in response to the constraints of the situation at this particular fair, we decided that rather than try to work through the entire interview schedule, we would ask one or two broad questions in line with our research aims. This new approach was also designed to be more appealing to interviewees, who might be reluctant to engage with researchers with a page full of questions, while conducting business at a busy wedding show. Depending on the answers, we could ask follow up questions and probe as required.

After an initial conversation with participants which included introducing ourselves, the research and asking them some warm-up questions (such as if this was their first wedding show) we followed-up with a very broad question and followed this with additional probing questions. In all interviews the opening question was: 'do you think this wedding show is a multicultural space?' followed by: 'why/why not'. Having explained the project to participants, this question did not seem to faze them. The rationale behind choosing this question was that a) using the term 'multicultural' is typically understood in British vernacular to stand for 'race', 'ethnicity' or ethnic diversity and, while certainly a problematic term sociologically (Keval, 2014) it is a term used in policy documents and elsewhere to discuss racial segregation and 'integration' (Favell 1998; Bleich 2005; Pitcher, 2009). And b) by not asking directly about race, we deliberately left the question open to

some interpretation by the interviewees (Plummer, 1995). The intention was that this question would broadly capture the issues in which we were most interested in as short a time as possible. We also agreed that we would have to forego asking for demographic details, as it would require more time and might make some people uncomfortable in this setting. As there were two of us, we decided that we would individually make a note of our perceptions of each interviewee's age, sex, race/ethnicity and class background and then compare notes between ourselves before we recorded it. Asking for this information early on in an interview or where little rapport has developed can disrupt the interaction and, moreover, this is not always the best way to gather information about social class, for example (Savage et al., 2010).

The decision about whom we would approach to take part and how we would go about recruiting them also required some deliberation as there were many exhibitors from a range of business types: from individual cake-makers to international brands. After speaking to a few of the sales representatives from the largest companies at the show, we decided to rule them out since they were less invested in the wedding show space and had little experience of exhibiting at such events. Again, after approaching a number of stalls, we reasoned that photographers/videographers and cake-makers would make suitable participants as they were likely to be representing themselves and would have more of an interest in the space in which they were exhibiting. Furthermore, because of the strong emphasis on displaying images in photography stalls and the importance attached with cakes in British White weddings (see Charsley, 1992), we thought these individuals would be particularly interesting to interview and to ask about representations of race in the wedding show. Besides these two categories, our remaining sampling criteria were based on convenience which included quiet-ness of their particular stall and willingness to participate. We also aimed to talk to a mix of men and women, from different age groups and ethnicities.

We draw on this issue as recruiting participants is always one of the most challenging elements to a research project. In this case, we had a problem of plenty; there were many people at the wedding fair whom we could potentially recruit. In certain situations, therefore, it is necessary for researchers to rely on their instincts and to be responsive to changing situations. At the wedding show it was necessary to read certain cues in potential interviewees and stall holders that demonstrated openness to talking; cues such as demeanour, body-language, talkativeness, smile, and so on.

Problem 2: Talking about race

We received a number of refusals to take part in the research after explaining the aims of the project- around a quarter of everyone we approached. While this is likely to be partly due to the problems of the setting, as discussed above, it is also possible that potential participants were somewhat reluctant to enter into a conversation about race- this is still a difficult conversation and tricky to navigate (Tyler, 2012). Again, this is one of the reasons why we chose the term 'multiculturalism' to ask in our question rather than 'race' or 'ethnicity' as this is often used as a stand in for these more politically-charged terms. What was intriguing for us as researchers was how this question was interpreted by participants with some refuting racism, being vague or evasive in their responses, or saying what seemed to be a prepared response to questions about 'race'.

Our first impression of the wedding fair was that it was extremely White not only in terms of the cultural products that were being sold, but also in terms of the people attending and selling the products. However, four out of a total of six participants (of mixed gender, class, age and ethnic groups) who agreed to speak to us at this wedding show, said the wedding fair was a multicultural space, it was a very inclusive space, there were people from all cultures attending. Two business owners who were both photographers argued that it was

definitely a multicultural space, one going even further to suggest that the representation was 50% White and 50% other. We highlight this not as one of our findings but as a methodological point: what they were saying did not reflect the 'reality' of what we saw ourselves. The question is, how do we interpret these findings in the context of our own observations?

If the photographer had been correct, it would be an ideal representation of the population of this region in the West Midlands, which is 53% White and 47% other racial/ethnic minority groups (ONS, 2016). However, our own observations of the space did not come close to meeting this expressed ethnic diversity. On reflection what this taught us is that by asking people about race, you can sometimes learn more from what they do not say than what they do say. And that research on race is always about how race is constructed, deconstructed, is a process in action, rather than a fixed category or entity. In this case, by asking about the 'multicultural space', we found out not about the space, but about individuals' interpretations and own orientations to issues of race, segregation and integration in White British society. This experience has taught us that asking about racialized spaces in the context of weddings will actually produce information on race relations and the politics of representation and multiculturalism.

This is both a consequence of Britain's history with race relations (including Britain's involvement in the slave trade and colonialism) and of the participant's need to provide a politically-correct, socially desirable response. Face-to-face interviews always involve some negotiation: of power, of subject positions, of turn-taking. Thus, when we asked participants about the presence of any racism or discrimination at wedding shows, 3 apparently White participants said something along the lines of: 'I haven't seen any racism; I treat all human beings as equal'. The repetition of this type of statement was particularly intriguing, highlighting social-desirability and subscribing to the 'colour-blind' nature of White culture.

This can tell us something very important about White privilege and the ability of the White subject to not have to notice racial inequalities, differences or segregation (Said, 1978; van Dijk 1992; Dalton, 2012). And of the power politically-correct discourse has in shaping everyday speech and interactions (Pitcher, 2009). In terms of method, this is clearly not an appropriate tool to understand the operations of race, which is why ethnography is favoured in such studies. While we can use this data in a limited way to analyse how race is (not) talked about, combining these interviews with a sustained observation of the weddings shows would undoubtedly produce more detailed data regarding the difference in treatment and experiences of ethnic minority group participants at wedding fairs.

While this is not necessarily the type of information that we set out to obtain, therefore, it is by no means unrelated or unimportant to our overall objectives. These responses provided us with rich information on how race operates at a wedding fair at the level of assumed diversity, inclusivity and representation which simultaneously makes invisible the exact lack of those qualities. This is what Bonilla Silva might refer to as a 'colour blind' society (Bonilla Silva, 2003). We found that people irrespective of their ethnicity provided a desirable response to questions of race rather than responses that reflected the 'reality' of the situation, as we saw it as researchers. There is, of course, a question here about researcher power and we are aware that as researchers we are in the position of power to define a situation. Even taking this into account, the difference between participants' responses and what we observed was striking.

And this poses a challenge to a researcher, particularly one coming from a feminist tradition of empowerment of research subjects, standpoint epistemology and trust. What can you do with data that contradicts your own senses? You have to interpret it in context: look behind the data and see the situation and context in which the response was framed, constructed, produced- to whom, about whom, where, when and why. It is clearly a challenge

to interview people regarding issues of race and the outcome might often be opposite to what one expects or sees but that should not dissuade people from pursuing such topics, as any data can ultimately tell a compelling story.

Problem 3: Refusals and racism

It was around lunch time, during one of the many fashion runway shows that the stalls become a little quieter and we decided to make some attempts at approaching potential interviewees. Our very first attempt at recruitment ended up in a strongly dismissive refusal and left us apprehensive regarding the fate of our interviews. We were stood around discussing and strategizing on how to go about conducting the interviews when we saw that there was a stall where a couple of staff from the wedding show organizers were handing out free magazines and goody-bags. We thought it might be interesting to interview them, as they were coming into contact with almost everyone visiting the show and also they were able to observe the show from a more distanced position. We approached them and explained that we were social researchers who were conducting a study on aspects of race and ethnicity at wedding shows. One of them showed interest but asked us to talk to her supervisor as she would be able to answer questions better. We tried to explain the research to her supervisor and took out our information sheet and informed consent form and said that she could go through the details and if she agreed we would be audio-recording her. As soon as we mentioned the consent form and audio recorder, however, we noticed that she lost interest. We emphasized that all responses would be anonymous and confidential and destroyed after the project. However, after glancing at the informed consent form she turned away and said to the other staff members 'don't bother' and looked away. Not only were we disappointed that we did not get an interview, we were also rather surprised by the way in which the refusal took place (perhaps since we are both new to this type of 'cold-call' style interview

recruitment strategy). This felt like a set-back and it took some time, discussion and reflection on the process to find the confidence and resilience to start approaching new individuals.

In another instance, we approached a visible minority ethnic cake baker who had some interesting cakes, which were a little different to traditional white wedding cakes. She was approachable and we explained to her that we were social researchers, talked to her about confidentiality, gave her the information sheet and informed consent form, but just as she heard the topic of our research and read more on the consent form she said something vague about keeping 'those things separate'. We took this to mean keeping her race-identity separate from her profession and the reason she was at the wedding show: as a cake maker. Perhaps she felt singled out by us in that setting as not being White British and felt uncomfortable discussing her views on issues that might be personal in a setting where she expected to be treated as a business-person, not a raced-person. On reflection, this is worth bearing in mind for our future research: asking White people about race is interpreted as asking them about 'others'; asking racialized-othered people about race is interpreted as asking them about themselves.

The reason we highlight these cases of refusal is to draw attention to real scenarios where it can be difficult to deal with rejection, whether this is delivered rudely, brusquely or politely. As a researcher approaching people 'cold' can embolden individuals to respond as though to a 'cold caller': negating feelings or emotions that the person at the other end of the line, or right in front of them, might have as a result of their behaviour. At these times, it is normal to feel disappointed and dejected, but it is also important to persevere and not give up because of a few bad experiences. It is important to keep telling oneself that not every approach is going to end up in rejection as there are always people who are receptive to researchers. And it is always worth reflecting on your own practice and trying to understand why different people will respond differently to you in a given situation.

Dealing with a Racist Participant

Certain situations might arise during data collection which might be very demeaning for a researcher but at the same time can contribute immensely to the research itself. During our recruitment and interview phase, we encountered just such a situation. The participant, an older White British man, when approached to participate in the research, agreed quite willingly. However, during the interview he spoke only to the White British researcher while turning his back to and ignoring the presence of the Indian researcher. We were shocked by this response (again, perhaps naively) and yet it was very telling because he went on to make some stereotypical, bordering on racist, comments about British Asians, while totally disregarding the presence of an Asian researcher.

We highlight this scenario to emphasize that uncomfortable situations like this might arise during an interview. However, it is very important for the researchers involved to stay calm, not react or show disapproval, which can often be very hard to do. We know that the interview with this particular participant provided rich data that has many layers for future analysis; this is data that would not have been available had we reacted differently in that situation. Of course, it is not always possible to remain impassive or passive in such situations, especially if you as a researcher are threatened. Again, this is something that has to be negotiated: ensuring the quality of data, while maintaining the integrity of the researcher, balancing personal politics and emotional responses.

Reflections and moving on

Reflections from Anwesa Chatterjee

Extract from my reflections on our interview with a photographer: - Asian Man 30s.

Middle class. When asked by Julia if he thought the Wedding Show was a multicultural

space, replies yes and then points to me and says Anwesa here is Asian and Julia here is White and you both are here and we (he and other sales reps) are here and we have made friends with our neighbouring stalls (who are White)... .. *It seemed to me like he was using my presence as a justification for his claims that the wedding fair was a multicultural space.* As a researcher, I remained stoic even though I was taken aback by his decision to use me to bolster his claims. On reflecting about it, I think he was under pressure to be politically correct because Julia was there as a White researcher and we were in a white wedding fair and maybe he was looking to receive some support from me as a fellow minority group member.

Reflections from Julia Carter

Extract from my reflections on the problematic interview just after we finished: White older man 60s-70s. Middle class. Asked what we did, I said academics researching weddings. As soon as I mentioned multiculturalism he had a lot to say so I asked him if I could record him and he agreed. The whole time – 3 minutes – he talked just to me. He acknowledged that Anwesa existed as an object but not as a subject- he excluded her physically- just talking to *me, as well as in what he was saying: ‘they’ stick to themselves’.* He sought tacit approval by directing this at me and by ‘othering’ Anwesa. Even though his company offer and host a lot of Asian weddings, everything was directed at me, including the approach. Anwesa feels horrified- she has experienced a lot of racism here.

As researchers we must be aware of our own position in the research process and how that is entangled in the process of data collection and interpretation; participant responses will always be contextualised within the field of experience of the researchers. But more than this, how you are responded to, the assumptions made about you as a researcher by participants

and the assumptions you make about others are all also embedded in the research process, especially when recruiting in this manner.

In this case, when undertaking a method that involves ‘cold’ recruitment, it is important to have resilience, confidence and persistence – not to be put off. Experience helps you to deal with difficult situations such as interview refusal, and discussion and reflection help to overcome difficult encounters such as racism. Talking about race is hard and it is important to think about how to approach potential interviewees without, in that process, making them feel singled out and ‘raced’. But being adaptable and flexible in the research setting is very important in terms of altering your approach to potential participants, responding to changing situations, to challenging interviews and negotiating a research topic that is mired in tensions.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

- 1) We highlight the challenges of conducting semi-structured interviews on issues of race at a wedding show. What other method could we have used to investigate these issues? How could it / these have added more value to our research?
- 2) What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of conducting semi-structured interviews on sensitive topics like race/ethnicity?
- 3) We took challenges in our stride and made on spot changes to our original action plan. What do you think of our strategies? Can you think of other ways in which we could have overcome the hurdles?

- 4) We talk about a participant who was racist in our view. Do you think we were right not to raise any voices against him? Can and should a researcher take a stand on issues of racism with a participant?
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Further Readings

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Web Resources

[insert links to any relevant web resources here]

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