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Racial Matching in Qualitative Interviews: Integrating Ontological, Ethical, and Methodological Arguments

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Abstract: Because of the primacy of color-evasiveness as an ideological and interactional force, researching race and related processes can be an imprecise process. While not the only salient methodological choice, racial matching during qualitative interviewing may impact the robustness of a qualitative dataset's data on race. Researchers across paradigms agree that interviewers' race impacts data collection. Researchers with different ontological orientations, however, differ in how they would wrestle with that impact. In this article, I integrate quantitative and qualitative methodological research with ontological and ethical considerations to understand the benefits and drawbacks of racial matching in qualitative interview studies. I reflect on two of my research studies involving race through these new insights. I conclude with major ethical questions and ontological considerations for qualitative researchers to consider during the design process of their projects.

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1. Introduction

Since the Civil Rights Era in the middle of the twentieth century, the United States has been in a color-evasive era (ANNAMMA, JACKSON & MORRISON, 2017; BONILLA-SILVA, 2006). Color-evasiveness, a term arising out of a critical analysis of the term colorblind, refers to avoidance of identifying racism or race as an explanatory variable in social, economic, and political life (ANNAMMA et al., 2017). While color-evasiveness has implications for how policies are written and how institutions are formed (e.g., RIOS, 2022), it also has implications for the daily interactions of everyday people, including the interactions between a researcher and participant. Individuals will often avoid talking about race, even more than they avoid discussing gender, class, or other social identities. While the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement to protest the police killings of

Michael BROWN, Breonna TAYLOR, George FLOYD, and other unarmed Black people has started fracturing some of the color-evasive trends (DUNIVIN, YAN, INCE & ROJAS, 2022), color-evasiveness is still a pervasive force. It continues to obfuscate the underlying power dimensions of race and to limit analysis of how it operates in naturalistic settings. [1]

Given these contextual factors of color-evasiveness, how should qualitative research studies be designed to optimize the quality of the race-related data corpus? Color-evasiveness is both an ideological and interactional force that researchers interested in race must naturally contend with at many stages of the research process. But as an interactional force, it has unique relevance to the data collection process. In this article, I specifically focus on data developed through interpersonal interaction (i.e., interviews, widely defined), given the interactional implications of color-evasiveness. The primary question of inquiry is: does racial matching during data collection enhance the quality of race-related data produced? To answer this question, I first review literature around race and color-evasiveness (Section 2). I then explore dominant literature from quantitative and qualitative methodologists, including their differing ontological foundations (Section 3), and apply these insights to two of my own research designs. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the ethical implications of racial matching in interview research design (Sections 4-5). [2]

2. Race and Color-Evasiveness

KENDI (2019) defined race as "a power construct of collected or merged difference that lives socially" (p.35). Racial categorization was developed to justify and sustain unequal distribution of economic, political, and bio- power. The idea of race was articulated by Europeans around 400 years ago to create a racial hierarchy, justifying the kidnapping and enslavement of individuals from the African continent, as well as the exploitation, genocide, and colonization of non-European indigenous communities across the world (KENDI, 2019). The term "race" refers to "the concept of dividing people into groups on the basis of various sets of physical characteristics and the process of ascribing social meaning to those groups."[1] In other words, while race has no biological validity, the idea of racial categories has created social—and therefore, material, spiritual, and psychological—realities[2]. This intellectual history shows that power dynamics are inherent in the idea of race. Since race as a social construct has evolved, it has continued to intertwine with other social identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, and class. This intersectionality (CRENSHAW, 2017) reflects the malleability and dynamism of race in modern society. [3]

While in previous epochs individuals were allowed to explicitly name and endorse race and racial hierarchy, the Civil Right Era in the 1960s in the United States dramatically shifted what is socially acceptable (ANNAMMA et al., 2017;

1 Race and ethnicity self-study guide, Washington University in St Louis, https://students.wustl.edu/race-ethnicity-self-study-guide/ [Date of Access: February 15, 2023].

2 About the topic of race, United States Census Bureau, https://www.census.gov/topics/population/race/about.html [Date of Access: February 15, 2023].

BONILLA-SILVA, 2006). Color-evasiveness, as discussed earlier, is the dominant ideological and interactional force related to race in the United States. In the era of color-evasiveness, socially desirable speech patterns include 1. a complete self-censoring of racial topics, or 2. an avoidance of racially explicit language in favor of coded language. First, it forces participants to censor any racialized topics. Individuals will avoid any potentially racialized talk all together. This is particularly true during interracial interactions. For example, evidence from psychological experiments shows that White people are more likely to self-censor around topics of race when paired with a Black partner—*and* that the self-censoring was associated with worse performance on a joint task (NORTON, SOMMERS, APFELBAUM, PURA & ARIELY, 2006). In methodological research, ARCHER (2002), in her study on British South Asian adolescents and young adults, noticed that "the issue of interviewer racism was only talked about with an Asian researcher, which suggests that the 'race' of the white interviewer may have silenced this particular topic" (p.118). This implies that certain topics—namely explicit discussions of race and racism—are completely avoided by some people in interracial contexts. [4]

Second, color-evasive speech patterns may also force participants to engage in coded racial language. Often, individuals rely on coded language—either using socioeconomic, geographic, cultural, or other cues to implicitly indicate certain racial groups (BERTRAND, 2010; WELSH, WILLIAMS, LITTLE & GRAHAM, 2019; YOUNG, 2016). Researchers interested in race have had to make difficult and creative arguments that certain coded language is talk about race. For example, in a 2023 article, my colleague and I used community-specific demographic knowledge of a predominantly Black high school to make arguments that teacher comments about low-socioeconomic status (SES) and disengaged parents are coded racial language (MARCUCCI & ELMESKY, 2023). Other researchers have pointed to certain geographic names as coded racialized language (BERTRAND, 2010; HURWITZ & PEFFLEY, 2005). [5]

These two interactional implications of color-evasiveness obscure how race acts as a mechanism of power in the United States and other color-evasive societies. By denying individuals—either lay people or researchers—the opportunity or language to analyze explicitly patterns of racialized power, color-evasiveness serves to uphold the status quo of racial hierarchy, namely that in which Whiteness is dominant. While Black activists in the United States and others have pushed the national conversation to more explicitness (DUNIVIN et al., 2022), color-evasiveness remains dominant. [6]

While not the only negative individual-level outcome, color-evasive norms exacerbate racial anxiety. Racial anxiety refers to "concerns that often arise both before and during interracial interactions" (GODSIL & RICHARDSON, 2017, p.2235). For people of color, this can include anxiety about potential discrimination, given the disproportionate power ascribed to Whiteness. For White people, racial anxiety can include anxiety about committing or being perceived as committing racist behaviors, which is real but has fewer long-term economic, spiritual, or psychological impacts than people of color experiencing

discrimination (SANCHEZ, KALKSTEIN & WALTON, 2022; TRAWALTER & RICHESON, 2008). AMODIO (2009) revealed self-reported and neuroendrocinal evidence of racial anxiety for White participants interacting with a Black interviewer about their racial attitudes. While not explicitly looking at research interactions, TRAWALTER and RICHESON (2008) found behavioral evidence (i.e., facial rigidity, leaning towards or away, gestures, etc.) for both Black and White participants when they had an interracial interaction, though interestingly when the conversation turned to race-explicit questions, evidence for racial anxiety *increased* for the White participants and *decreased* for the Black participants. The presence of racial anxiety, as well as other individual-level outcomes of color-evasiveness further complicates how data about race can be gathered in qualitative studies. [7]

3. Methodological Literature Review

Methodologists from diverse paradigmatic and ontological backgrounds have wrestled with how to contend with color-evasiveness, particularly how it impacts data collection (e.g., ARCHER, 2002; DAVIS, COUPER, JANZ, CALDWELL & RESNICOW, 2010; ELLISON, McFARLAND & KRAUSE, 2011). One methodological choice is racial matching between interviewer and interviewee. Racial matching has the potential to shift if and how interview interactions elicit race-explicit conversations. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologists have questioned when and how racial matching impacts the data collection interaction. In this section, I overview both quantitative and qualitative methodological literature related to racial matching in interviews. [8]

3.1 Insights from quantitative methodologists

There are certain limitations when using quantitative methodological studies to shed insight on qualitative research design. First and most important, the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative research are often (though not always) different (DIERONITOU, 2014). Positivist research paradigms, which most quantitative researchers ascribe to, forefront objectivity as a marker of rigor, with an underlying assumption of a singular, objective truth that the research process is trying to uncover (SCHRAG, 1992). In positivism, any bias, including social desirability bias (a.k.a., the tendency of respondents to skew their answers to what would be seen as more socially appropriate; KRUMPAL, 2013), is seen as undermining the rigor of the research process. Positivist researchers must neutralize any biases within themselves or the research process in order to uncover the "objective truth." [9]

Any insight from the quantitative methodological field, therefore, has relevance to qualitative researchers who must speak to positivist audiences or qualitative researchers who identify as positivist (VARPIO, AJJAWI, MONROUXE, O'BRIEN & REES, 2017). Race-of-interviewer effects, otherwise referred to as racial concordance or racial matching, have been studied for decades by quantitative methodologists, particularly in survey research (e.g., ANDERSON, SILVER & ABRAMSON, 1988a; SCHUMAN & CONVERSE, 1971; WILLIAMS, 1964).

Insights from this body of quantitative literature may help justify, nuance, or complicate methodological choices. The two main takeaways from this quantitative, positivist literature base are that 1. the nature of the question (race-explicit, political, or highly sensitive) matters as to how vulnerable the question is regarding race-of-interviewer effects, and 2. most of the researchers interrogate the Black-White binary of racial categories with limited attention to diversity outside of that binary and within those categories. [10]

One of the big takeaways from quantitative methodological literature is that the race-of-interview effect seems most relevant for race-explicit, political, or highly sensitive survey questions (SCHAEFFER, 1980). First, race-explicit questions are highly impacted by race-of-interviewer (e.g., ANDERSON, SILVER, & ABRAMSON, 1988b; COTTER, COHEN & COULTER, 1982; ELLISON et al., 2011; HILL, 2002; REESE, DANIELSON, SHOEMAKER, CHANG & HSU, 1986; SCHAEFFER, 1980). For example, in an analysis of data from the General Social Survey from United States in the 1970s, SCHAEFFER (1980) found that Whites were more likely to rate their racial liberalism higher when interviewed by a Black interviewer. In the same study, Black respondents were less likely to report potential problems arising from an interracial marriage or an integrated workplace if they were interacting with a White interviewer. Other research confirmed that racially explicit questions often have moderate to large race-of-interviewer effects (COTTER et al., 1982; ELLISON et al., 2011). [11]

Race-of-interviewer effects also matters for politically charged survey questions (e.g., ANDERSON et al., 1988b; DAVIS, 1997; FINKEL, GUTERBOCK & BORG, 1991; SAVAGE, 2016). For example, FINKEL et al. (1991) found that when asked in a pre-election poll for a gubernatorial race in Virginia, White respondents were more likely to express support for the Black candidate when surveyed by a Black researcher. In addition, SAVAGE (2016) discovered that

> "(1) black respondents were more likely to voice disapproval about whether the police can strike a citizen trying to escape when speaking to a black interviewer, and (2) white respondents were less likely to voice approval of police striking an adult male citizen in the presence of a black interviewer" (p.142). [12]

SCHAEFFER (1980) revealed similar results for a question about welfare on the General Social Survey. She argued that welfare—as with SAVAGE's focus on police brutality—likely has "racial associations" (SCHAEFFER, 1980, p.413), particularly in the United States where this research was conducted. Finally, questions with high levels of sensitivity are impacted by race-of-interviewer effects (e.g., DAVIS et al., 2010; ELLISON et al., 2011; SAVAGE, 2016). SCHAEFFER (1980) referred to this category of questions as "those with social desirability or prestige implications" (p.407). These types of sensitive questions may include questions about health, religiosity, or other personal topics. For example, in a face-to-face survey of 161 African American women who had recently attempted suicide, respondents reported higher rates of daily interpersonal violence, higher rates of overall life stress, higher rates of victimization, and stronger endorsement of physical or non-physical interpersonal

violence when surveyed by a Black researcher (SAVAGE, 2016). ELLISON et al. (2011) extended these same hypotheses around sensitive health experiences to older African Americans' self-reported levels of religiosity. When asked about their nonorganizational religious activities and about certain subjective measures of religiosity (e.g., feeling close to God), older African Americans had higher scores when they were interacting with White interviewers than when they were interacting with Black interviewers (ibid.). ELLISON et al. suggested that other types of sensitive questions with social desirability or prestige implications may be impacted by race-of-interviewer effects in quantitative research, in addition to racially explicit and politically charged survey questions. [13]

The second main takeaway from the quantitative methodological literature focuses on the Black-White binary. It is implicit in the above takeaway section that most of the research in this area focuses on a Black-White racial distinction, often from the United States' gaze (e.g., ANDERSON et al., 1988a, 1988b; DAVIS & SILVER, 2003; ELLISON et al., 2011; HOLBROOK, JOHNSON & KRYSAN, 2019; SAVAGE, 2016; SCHAEFFER, 1980). For example, DAVIS (1997) used ordinary least squares analysis on data from the National Black Election Study from the United States. DAVIS found a race-of-interviewer effect on certain questions, and interpreted these results through the lens of "masking": "the race of interviewer effects involve a form of sophisticated ‘masking' in which African-Americans become competent actors with an acute sense of what might satisfy the interviewer" (p.311). In other words, the African American respondents strategically used "protective" measures with White interviewers, which ultimately influenced their answers to certain types of questions. [14]

White respondents to surveys are also influenced by having Black interviewers. Many researchers have concluded that Whites are particularly subject to race-of-interviewer effects with race-explicit and political questions, highlighting how social desirability may be an important force for some White respondents. For example, in early research from the mid-twentieth century, White respondents were less likely to say that property values decrease when Black individuals move to their neighborhood if they were interviewed by a Black researcher (ATHEY, COLEMAN, REITMAN & TANG, 1960). HATCHETT and SCHUMAN (1975) found that White respondents were more likely to give a pro-Black rating and support interracial marriage when interacting with a Black interviewer. They determined that with more education, this race-of-interviewer effect increased for White respondents, further confirming the salience of social desirability bias. Further, FINKEL et al. (1991) discovered the strongest race-of-interviewer effects among White democrats or Whites uncertain of their vote: when interviewed by a Black researcher about a gubernatorial race in Virginia, White respondents were more likely to express support for the Black candidate. [15]

That said, a few authors have acknowledged diversity within the Black and White racial constructions and/or looked at racial categorizations beyond American constructions of Black and White. First, while outside the scope of this article, there has been some use of skin color, rather than racial categorization, to bring a more nuanced understanding of the diversity within racial categorizations (e.g.,

CERNAT, SAKSHAUG & CASTILLO, 2019; HILL, 2002). Second, racial categorizations beyond Black and White in the United States (i.e., Latinx/a/o, Asian, Native American) have had limited attention. Studies about race-of-interviewer effects among the diverse Latinx and/or Hispanic populations have been mixed. HOLBROOK et al. (2019) used the 2008 Chicago Area Study to compare responses from Black, White, and Latino individuals (they excluded anyone falling outside of those three categories). Because Latinidad identities often overlap with mainstream American constructions of Blackness or Whiteness, they identified three categories: non-Latino White, non-Latino Black, and Latino. HOLBROOK et al. found that an interviewer's *perceived* identity was more biasing than their actual identity (i.e., the respondent's *perception of* the racial/ethnic identity of the interviewer is more important than the *actual* racial/ethnic identity of the interviewer). In older studies, WELCH, COMER and STEINMAN (1973) tested the effects of race of interviewer in a "Mexican-American" and "Anglo-American" comparative sample, but they found no effects in their final model. REESE et al. (1986) discovered similar non-effects in Mexican-American populations when questioned by "Anglo" interviewers, though interestingly, Anglo respondents did change their answers about deference to Mexican-American culture when interacting with a Mexican-American interviewer. Additionally, KAPPELHOF and DE LEEUW (2019) conducted an analysis of data from the Netherlands using Dutch constructions of minoritization (which the authors identified as Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, and Attillean). They found that when matched with an interviewer with a shared ethnic background, respondents were more likely to express a stronger ethnic identity and have more responses that aligned with the socially desirable expected answers of that ethnic minority group. [16]

Despite ontological constraints in using quantitative methodological research to inform qualitative research design, the methodological inquiry into race-of-interviewer effects holds some relevance, particularly to those who identify as positivist or must speak to a positivist audience. The major takeaways from this literature are: 1. that race-of-interviewer effects are most salient for race-explicit, political, and highly sensitive questions, and 2. that most research focuses on Black and White constructions of racial identity, with limited investigation into diversity within and outside of those categorizations. [17]

3.2 Insights from qualitative methodologists

Unlike quantitative methodologists, who study race-of-interviewer effects as a taken-for-granted problem, some qualitative methodologists have ontological objections to the concept (ARCHER, 2002; RHODES, 1994; TÖRNGREN & NGEH, 2018). In broad strokes, most of the qualitative researchers who have written about this topic have relied on a constructivist understanding of truth (ARCHER, 2002; VASILACHIS DE GIALDINO, 2009; RHODES, 1994). As discussed earlier, researchers with objectivist ontologies (often aligned with quantitative methods) assume that there is one objective truth that the research process uncovers (SCHRAG, 1992). Some qualitative researchers disagree. For example, RHODES (1994), a White qualitative sociologist, argued that one type of account should not be seen as "more 'accurate' or 'genuine' than others" (p.548). Further, she stated that, "rather than treat colour [sic] 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" (p.550). RHODES's argument was not that race-of-interviewer effects do not exist, but that there are multiple, overlapping truths, all co-constructed by actors within unique social contexts. In that line of thinking, the "truths" that are constructed in a cross-racial dyad would be as valid as those constructed during an intra-racial dyad. [18]

Practically, this ontological underpinning allows for more flexibility in racial matching during data collection but demands more analytical sophistication during the analysis of data. This position assumes that most qualitative analysis can and should investigate the effects of the racial identity/ies of the researcher. Qualitative researchers have used self-reflexivity in interesting ways to wrestle with how researcher positionality impacts the data context, collection, and analysis (LOKOT, 2022). This is particularly true of qualitative research that has fore fronted race as the object of study (MACBETH, 2001; PALAGANAS, SANCHEZ, MOLINTAS & CARICATIVO, 2017). Because the focus of this article is on race-related research, I will leave it to other methodologists to decide how to use reflexivity on researcher race for qualitative research not directly related to race. The concern is likely that there is not sufficient room to interrogate the racial dynamics of the interview dyad in research that does not explicitly focus on race. [19]

A constructivist ontology suggests that the research interaction itself is a site of racial identity creation and negotiation. As there is no one singular truth, neither are there singular and fixed racial categories. In fact, the racial categories that society use are both clumsy and malleable. The perspective that a researcher-participant interaction can produce nuanced, context-specific racial identities shows how qualitative researchers allow for truths—particularly truths around race, racialization, and racism—to also be nuanced and context-specific. Because of the malleability of racial identities, the research interaction—which an interview is (DEPPERMANN, 2013)—becomes a moment of racial identity construction and negotiation. For example, ARCHER (2002), a White British researcher working with British adolescents and young adults of South Asian

ancestry, analyzed interviewer matching along both ethnic and gender dimensions. She argued:

> "I was particularly questioned about my understanding and knowledge/experience of 'Asian culture' and Asian friends' 'lifestyle'. This questioning of how much I might 'understand' suggests that the women were not constructing whiteness as a monolithic identity that intrinsically precludes cross-cultural understandings" (p.120). [20]

Instead, she argued that this research site became a moment where she constructed and presented her racial identity as a White researcher, *and also* where the participants—young South Asian women—were able to negotiate with ARCHER's identity to decide what and how much to share in the interview space. Similarly, TÖRNGREN and NGEH (2018), two non-Swedish and non-White researchers conducting qualitative interview research in Sweden with ethnic Swedes, were often asked to explain and defend their racial identities during the research interaction. Their participants were trying to negotiate with the authors' racial identities (one East Asian, one sub-Saharan African). The authors noted that while participants shared racist thoughts about other racial groups, they avoided expressing explicitly racist thoughts about the researchers' "in-groups." MIZOCK, HARKINS, RAY and MORANT (2011a) however, found that among Black researcher-White participant dyads, White participants spent time constructing their identities as non-racist, particularly when discussing observed racial differences, even though there was evidence that some of the White participants enacted racist attitudes and behaviors during the interview interaction. In another study, MIZOCK, HARKINS and MORANT (2011b) analyzed the types of off-script interjections interviewers made. Black interviewers were more able to interject to "reduce emotional burden of racism" when interviewing Black participants, while White interviewers expressed empathy to Black interviewees. ARCHER (2002), MIZOCK et al. (2011a, 2011b), and TÖRNGREN and NGEH (2018) showed how malleable racial identities are—and how the research interaction virtually always changes and is changed by the negotiation of those identities. From a constructivist standpoint, forcing a "racial match" will neither enhance nor diminish the quality of the qualitative data corpus. Rather, the negotiation of racial identities should not be understood as a "contaminant" but as a natural part of the data corpus. [21]

On the other hand, some White qualitative methodologists have pointed out that their outsider-status has encouraged research participants with minoritized racial identities to explain what may be assumed is insider knowledge. This violates the typical color-evasive interactional habits found in many interracial contexts. COTTERILL (1992) studied the role of gender and friendship in the interview setting. While not centering race in the analysis, COTTERILL argued that, "respondents may feel more comfortable talking to a 'friendly stranger' because it allows them to exercise some control over the relationship" (p.596). The friendly stranger argument implies that a cross-dyadic research pairing may encourage participants to share insider-knowledge of certain lived experiences or social phenomena. In that way, cross-dyadic pairings, counter to the color-evasive hypothesis, would produce more race-explicit talk. COTTERILL focused on

gender, however, which has different norms around explicit discussion in the United States and other countries. Whereas gender is a socially accepted topic of conversation, race is not. RHODES (1994) did frame the friendly stranger argument for race-specific research. She argued that, "people treated me to information which they would have assumed was taken-for-granted knowledge of an insider" (pp.551-552). Likely, the friendly stranger may have some power to justify some matching or non-matching of interviewer-interviewee dyads, but it cannot be used categorically without attention to the unique contextual factors of each research study. [22]

Recognizing color-evasive interactional habits may suggest that racial matching would be a more optimal route to a rigorous qualitative data corpus around race, however, both constructivist ontologies and the friendly stranger argument complicate this idea. While the friendly stranger argument may have limited applicability, there are many methodological implications for a constructivist ontology. First, while constructivist ontologies do not demand racial matching, they do demand analytical sophistication post-hoc. Second, the constructivist position highlights how racial identities are negotiated within the research interaction. [23]

4. A Comparative Examination of Two Race-Related Research Projects

There is no consensus on the appropriateness and relevance of racial matching in qualitative projects focusing on race, racism, racial bias, and racialization. As a researcher, I have imperfectly negotiated these issues in my own research design. I am a White, cis-hetero woman who grew up in predominantly White communities on the East Coast of the United States. I spent much of my childhood in the 1990s and early 2000s steeped in color-evasive discourse, amid other features of Whiteness as a socializing force. My undergraduate education began my "wide-awakeness" (GREENE, 1977) around Whiteness and structural racism. As a social scientific researcher interested in intersectional understandings of race and racism, I lean heavily on qualitative methodologies (e.g., ethnographic participant observation in ELMESKY & MARCUCCI, 2023; video microanalysis in MARCUCCI & ELMESKY, 2020; and systematic interview/focus groups in MARCUCCI, ROBERTSON, MORGAN, LAZARUS & MITCHELL, 2023). I ideally ascribe to constructivist ontologies, relying on methodologies that embrace research participants as equal producers of knowledge. This paradigmatic approach to research stems from my own recognition of the tension of higher education research: that the scientific and humanistic endeavors of knowledge production can be used to enforce racialized, classed, and gendered patterns of injustice *and also* that they are a critical part of forming a more just world. [24]

Amid these positionalities and perspectives, I have designed several qualitative research studies. In this section, I briefly overview two research studies to critically evaluate if and how racial matching was appropriate for their designs. The first study is the "TTT Study." We examined participants' understandings of

their own motivation and growth within a grassroots antiracist educational program called Touchy Topics Tuesday (TTT). We used convenience sampling to interview (n=29) participants in TTT. The design featured racial matching during the data collection process. The second study is the "SWWS Study." It was an ethnographic study of a girls' mentoring group referred to as Strong Women Will Succeed (SWWS) at a predominantly Black high school. I primarily investigated the use of restorative justice (a philosophical approach to wrong-doing and community-building, gaining traction in many American schools; ZEHR, 2015) within the group, and secondarily, I researched how Black female student leaders were centered or marginalized in the school's transition to restorative justice. I did not use racial matching in data collection in the SWWS study. [25]

4.1 The TTT project

The first study was an interview study of a grassroots interracial dialogue program called Touchy Topics Tuesday (MARCUCCI et al., 2023). TTT was founded by Ms. Tiffany ROBERTSON, a Black woman, after she witnessed the reaction of her daughter to the lack of indictment of Darren WILSON, the White police officer who shot and killed Michael BROWN, an unarmed Black teenager, in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014. Tiffany created an interracial dialogue program that focused on self-reflection and sustained engagement. She requested a qualitative study to understand if and how the program was impacting its participants. Working in collaboration, we designed study objectives to meet TTT's needs. I then designed the interview protocol, data collection techniques, and analysis plan based on those collaboratively designed objectives. The research design, interview protocols, and all relevant details were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Johns Hopkins University. I hired a Research Assistant, who was a Black (Afro-Caribbean) female graduate student and a co-author of the article. Because we now had diversity within the interviewing team, I decided to implement racial matching in interviews. All White participants were interviewed by me while all participants of color were interviewed by the Black co-author. Because of that, the racial matching was imperfect. Some of the participants of color identified as Asian or Asian American; others identified as African American specifically, while my co-author identified as Jamaican American. Given the fact that little research attention has been given to diversity within Black identities and diversity outside the Black-White binary (e.g., ANDERSON et al., 1988a, 1988b; DAVIS & SILVER, 2003; ELLISON et al., 2011; HOLBROOK et al., 2019; SAVAGE, 2016; SCHAEFFER, 1980), the TTT study shows how the diversity of racial identities makes "matching" difficult. [26]

That said, while the goal of TTT was to train individuals to engage in cross-racial dialogue, we felt that some participants would be more open to race-explicit conversation in as close to a racially matched interview dyad as we could provide. This is particularly true given: 1. the interactional implications of color-evasiveness, as discussed earlier, and because 2. the nature of the questions of the semi-structured protocol. As the quantitative literature on racial matching shows, the type of question matters—race-explicit, political, and highly sensitive

questions all are subject to race-of-interviewer effects (e.g., ANDERSON et al., 1988b; COTTER et al., 1982; ELLISON et al., 2011; HILL, 2002; REESE et al., 1986; SCHAEFFER, 1980). The TTT study interviewers asked participants to explore their racial identities and biases before, during, and after the program. For example, the interview included questions like, "When did you first become aware of your racial identity?," "What feelings did you initially have with this new racial awareness?," and "How do you envision your growth in the future as a person with your racial identity?." These questions are both race-explicit and highly personal. [27]

Interestingly, some White participants spent some time establishing themselves as anti-racist within the research interaction, even with a White interviewer. Whether or not they would have done so with an interviewer of color is difficult to say, however, it does reflect ARCHER's (2002) ideas of the research interview as a site of racial identity construction. This is relevant given TTT's focus on antiracism education. This trend among White participants makes sense, given the context of TTT as an antiracist program—which is developing participants' understandings of structural racism. The White participants often constructed their Whiteness as something related to but distinct from the type of Whiteness that is critiqued as supremacist, ignorant, and conservative (i.e., participants spent time highlighting the other antiracist program they had been involved in; using words like "White supremacy" that have political connotations). For example, White participants would problematize aspects of their childhood or earlier life, then explain the steps they took to begin to disrupt that earlier socialization. For example, one White woman explained how she started to bring up racism with her nephew, who lives with conservative parents. Given what psychological experimental literature shows (NORTON et al., 2006), it is possible that the White-White dyadic experience changed the content of the interview. That said, the interview data is neither more or less valid—but just different than it would have been given an interviewer of color. The ontological and epistemological foundations of the project, therefore, did not demand racial matching in the design, though they also did not preclude it. [28]

Nonetheless, there were still emotional benefits to the racial matching design to participants, highlighted when one participant of color explicitly expressed relief that her interviewer was not White. When the interviewer asked if she had any concluding thoughts, the participant shared, "I'm relieved that you are not White," implying a level of comfort because of her interviewer's racial identity. The participant's comment is further supported by analysis of the interview questions, "Before TTT, how comfortable were you discussing race?" Of the 30 interview participants, 12 individuals explicitly said they felt uncomfortable talking about race in general or in interracial settings. A White TTT participant said:

> "Growing up we weren't comfortable at all [talking about race] and that's something we found was that White people kind of beg off on the whole subject. Maybe you'd talk to someone that looked like you about [it] but talking about race just wasn't something that occurred very naturally." [29]

In one interview, a Black participant remarked, "of course, among Black people I was a super comfortable and no problem at all. I've kind of felt like I had to be careful in a mixed environment or among white people." While there were participants of all races that did not express any discomfort (i.e., "I'm very comfortable. It's kind of part of my job," or "I've always been comfortable, even from a little boy"), almost half of the study participants explicitly recognized their discomfort in interracial contexts, aligning with the literature on racial anxiety (e.g., GODSIL & RICHARDSON, 2017). [30]

4.2 The SWWS project

The second study was an ethnographic study of a girls' mentoring group at a predominantly Black high school in the United States, referred to as "Strong Women Will Succeed" (SWWS) (MARCUCCI, 2021; MARCUCCI, SATCHELL & ELMESKY, under review). The SWWS project was part of a larger collaborative research partnership between university researchers and a predominantly Black high school (e.g., ELMESKY & MARCUCCI, 2023; MARCUCCI & ELMESKY, 2016, 2023) designed around transformative and decolonized research ideals (MERTENS, 2010; PARIS & WINN, 2013). After three years of ethnographic engagement in the high school community, I was invited by the head of an in-house school non-profit to co-facilitate SWWS. The goal of the SWWS study was to understand how restorative justice principles and practices were enacted and if and how the district centered Black female students as leaders in its restorative movement. The research design, data collection techniques, and all relevant details were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Washington University in St. Louis and later, Johns Hopkins University. The SWWS students all identified as Black or biracial/Black, and my co-facilitator of the group also identified as a Black woman. With the ethnographic research design, I was the predominant data collector. Therefore, the study did not rely on racial matching, even though it had secondary objectives related to race. Because of the embeddedness of myself as a researcher, however, the SWWS built up a strong culture of trust. I communicated frequently to the students that my role as their mentor outweighed anything related to the research project. Additionally, my co-facilitator engaged in what I conceptualize as a pedagogy of politicized caring (MARUCCI et al., under review; McKINNEY DE ROYSTON, MADKINS, GIVENS & NASIR, 2021). There were frequent and explicit displays of affection between myself, my co-facilitator, and the SWWS students. Not only was affection displayed physically and verbally, but my co-facilitator and I aimed to both "nurture and protect" the students. [31]

This culture of trust and affection allowed us to tease with the norms of color-evasive talk, inviting some of COTTERILL's (1992) and RHODES's (1994) friendly stranger argument, even when it would have been untraditional. Race was an undercurrent during the data collection, both explicitly discussed and implicitly negotiated. In one example, the group once had an organic and educational restorative circle on Black hair. The restorative circle was designed to discuss intersectionality more broadly, with prompts like,

> "Do you talk about race with your friends or family?"
>
> "We learned about the concept of intersectionality—that identities like race and gender are linked. So, for example, I identify as White and a woman, so the world treats me in a certain way because I am a White woman. What are your initial thoughts about that? Do you agree/disagree? Do you think the world treats you a certain way because of how your race & gender intersect?" [32]

In response to some of these prompts, some of the students began an in-depth discussion about Black hair. I was the only White person in the room, and the students used some of the space to talk with each other but other parts to explain certain aspects of their hair care routine. In this way, the interracial interaction produced more race-explicit data. The mis/matching of data collector-participant produces new and different types of explicit data around race. [33]

While I can point out moments when cross-racial interaction produced race-explicit talk (via the friendly stranger hypothesis), it is more difficult to point out when cross-racial interaction limited or censored race-explicit talk, though this undoubtedly happened. For example, one of the SWWS students was describing a conflict she had with a student in one of her classes. As she was describing the other student, she looked at me (the only White person in the room) and apologized before describing him as White: "No offense, but a white boy." The student's apology for describing a fellow student as White perhaps suggests that she felt partially censored by my presence but decided to continue with the race-explicit talk anyway. The student and I continued to have meaningful interactions throughout the course of her time in SWWS. What is unique about my relationship with the SWWS students was its extended nature. Many qualitative research designs, particularly interview studies, do not allow for such prolonged engagement and trust-building between researcher and participant. Without having a comparison to a Black researcher in the same context, it is difficult to exactly pinpoint where race was censored. Again, because of my ontological and epistemological assumptions, I take my data within SWWS to be equally worthwhile to interrogate, despite the racial mismatch between myself and the students. [34]

Given the non-matching context, I engaged in regular self-reflection on racial dynamics and my unconscious biases that emerged during research interactions. Race is by definition a mechanism of power distribution (KENDI, 2019), so this reflection practice allowed me to study racial power in the data collection process. Because Whiteness (particularly in research settings) has been weaponized to harm Black individuals and communities (WASHINGTON, 2006), I found this regular and vulnerable self-reflection helpful in minimizing how any unconscious biases impacted my behaviors. [35]

5. Ethical Concerns of Racial Matching

Based on all the literature from quantitative and qualitative methodologists, plus my own reflections on previous research designs, there are some ethical questions that have arisen. If scholars insist on racial matching in some instances, there are two major ethical concerns. First, as seen in ARCHER (2002) and RHODES (1994), as well as the imperfect racial/ethnic matching in the TTT study, research interactions are sites of racial identity construction. When researchers insist upon racial matching, they risk pathologizing racial categories, rather than understanding them as fluid, context-dependent, and constructed. For example, did my co-author of the TTT study, an Afro-Caribbean woman, best "match" with the Asian American participants? Or, in a hypothetical example, a mostly white-passing mixed-race person or a light-skinned Middle Easterner do not fit clearly within the clumsy American constructions of racial identity. Even if research teams pursue matching based on a *perceived* identity, borrowing from quantitative research by HOLBROOK et al. (2019), the research process then risks harming or micro-aggressing interviewers by denying their identities. [36]

Second, at the same time, scholars risk overburdening researchers of color, and insisting that much of their work be focused on race. Researchers with racially marginalized identities should very well be at the forefront of inquiry into racism, but so too should they be at the forefront of other scientific and humanistic endeavors. If scholars insist upon racial matching in any qualitative interview study that focuses on race, they limit researchers of color energy and time to dedicate to research where race is a secondary, tertiary, or even lower presence. White/European American social scientists also have an obligation to use the research process to document and disrupt processes surrounding race and racism, particularly as dominant forms of racism and racialization stem from White communities. [37]

That said, if scholars do not prioritize racial matching in qualitative data collection focused on race, there are two ethical considerations that arise. First, when racial matching in the research design is not prioritized, do researchers risk centering White voices and interpretations? Academia has a history of both racial exclusion and segregation[34] (HINRICHS, 2016). As such, academic research has privileged the voices of White social scientists, to the marginalization of the voices of social scientists of color (KWON, 2022). While there are empirical and ethical arguments supporting the need of White scholars to investigate race, racism, and racial bias, White researchers also need to make sure that they are making space for scholars of colors. Creating research designs that prioritize the

3 Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada, 305 U.S. 337 (1938), https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep305/usrep305337/usrep305337.pdf [Date of Access: October 25, 2023].

4 Sipuel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma, 332 U.S. 631, (1948), https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep332/usrep332631/usrep332631.pdf [Date of Access: October 25, 2023].

expertise and work of researchers of color is one specific strategy to accomplish that. [38]

Second, when scholars do not prioritize racial matching in the research design, do they risk the emotional safety of the research participants? This idea was borrowed from psychological experimental literature on racial anxiety (SANCHEZ et al., 2022; TRAWALTER & RICHESON, 2008) and identified in the review of my own research design in the TTT study. If the standard of research ethics is that researchers minimize harm to participants, and racial anxiety is considered a type of harm, scholars can argue that same-race dyads in interviews explicitly discussing race may reduce harm. When asked to 1. engage in interracial interactions that may be counter to their typical day-to-day lives, and 2. to violate the color-evasive norms of modern dialogue in many communities, racial anxiety may increase for participants. If scholars encourage interracial interview dyads, this may heighten racial anxiety for some folks. Some level of discomfort is natural and ethically acceptable in research settings, however, it must be recognized. [39]

6. Implications and Conclusions

Given the ethical, ontological, and methodological reflections above, there are several main implications for research practice. First, qualitative researchers must be transparent with themselves about their ontological assumptions. There is both space and need for qualitative research stemming from multiple paradigms. The race-of-interviewer literature base from quantitative methodologists may be particularly relevant to those qualitative researchers who operate from a positivist standpoint. This is not to say that qualitative researchers must explicitly declare their ontological underpinnings in each article (that is often obvious based on the journal or specific research design), but a brief evaluation of the research team's paradigmatic approaches to research may help guide the most appropriate decisions around racial matching in data collection. [40]

The second major implication is that the research team must explicitly discuss and accommodate how racialized power shifts interactional patterns during an interview. Race, by definition, is a mechanism of power distribution. At the least, researchers of any paradigmatic approach must understand that power. With practice and reflexivity, it will allow researchers, particularly White researchers, to identify and adjust when the interview interaction risks discriminating or harming participants of color. As PILLOW (2003) claimed, this practice must be "uncomfortable"—in other words, uncomfortable reflexivity is "a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous" (p.188). While I used systematic self-reflexivity in the non-matching study (the SWWS study), it could also be helpful in matching contexts, given the limitations and clumsiness of racial matching. [41]

The third major assumption is that an interviewer's race should almost always be disclosed in the analysis, if not specifically addressed with some analytical depth. This more in-depth analysis of interviewer race is natural in methods like

ethnography, where longer narratives and author reflexivity are standards in the method (e.g., LOKOT, 2022). It may not be natural among qualitative researchers who engage with objectivist ontologies, particularly from the health sciences which must make qualitative research palatable to scientific audiences who are positivistically inclined (EAKIN & MYKHALOVSKIY, 2003). The general trend among quantitative survey methodologists is similar. In a chapter called "The Past, Present, and Future of Research on Interview Effects," OLSON et al. (2020) argued that "at the bare minimum, an anonymized interviewer ID variable on data files would allow analysts to estimate interviewer variance components" (p.3). The same can be said of objectivist qualitative researchers. [42]

In this article, I discussed multiple sources of thinking, including diverse methodological thinking, research philosophy and ethics, and psychological experimental literature, to show the nuanced arguments for and against racial matching in qualitative research around race. Given the primacy of color-evasiveness, race is a difficult topic to study. Researchers must make certain methodological choices during the design to ensure robust qualitative data about race. Given the diversity of qualitative research, no one clear path will work for all studies. Researchers must debate ontological, ethical, and logistical questions when deciding whether to use racial matching in the data collection process. [43]

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