

HOWDY OR G'DAY? INTERVIEWER ACCENTS IN CROSS-CULTURAL RESEARCH

Tracey Harrison-Hill, School of Marketing and Management and CTHMR, Griffith University

Abstract

Methodological issues relating to the design and implementation of research techniques across country boundaries have been an important part of the cross-cultural literature. An area though, that has not received much attention is that of interviewer accent and call-origin within telephone interviewing. It was hypothesised that interviewer accents and call-origin of an interview may cause socially desirable response bias within tourism destination research. A simple 2 by 2 experimental design was tested with fifteen interviews within each cell. The results show that those respondents with an Australian accented interviewer gave more favourable perceptions of Australia as compared to those respondents with an American accented interviewer. The call-origin of the interview did not significantly impact upon the perceptions, it did however significantly increase the response rate.

Introduction

Conducting research in an international setting leads to distinct problems related to cultural and language differences. Much of the literature within cross-cultural research methods expands on the processes that, in order to achieve equivalence of a research instrument across cultures, should be adhered too. It is often seen as an arduous and time-consuming process. Indeed authors have suggested that the process itself is a major reason why more cross-cultural studies are not conducted (Dimanche 1994).

When considering the published research, language translation is the process most often discussed and implemented. Yet in some instances, English is being utilised where respondents are known to have fluency within the language. This however, leads to other concerns for the cross-cultural researcher including conceptual understanding and interviewer bias (Hurtado 1994).

A significant amount of research has been conducted over the past 50 years on response bias and particularly socially desirable responding (SDR) (Paulhus 1991). More recently there has been a renewed focus upon SDR within "sensitive issues" research (Presser and Stinson 1998, Morris Barnett and Wideman 1997, Mick 1996, Catania Binson and Canchola 1996) and within interviewer-race/ethnicity effects (Morris et al 1997, Davis 1997, Hurtado 1994). Amid this body of research, very little has been said or investigated on the influence of interviewer accent on socially desirable responding. DeRosia (1991) did however express the view that a telephone interviewers' accent influences respondent participation. The article, while not empirical, drew on experience to conclude that listeners form mental impressions of people who speak with accents, and that these impressions may either cause a refusal to be surveyed or may bias the responses. This paper intends to focus upon this issue of interviewer accents and the wider issue of the influence this has upon responses.

Socially Desirable Responding Literature Review

Socially desirable responding is the tendency for respondents to present themselves favourably. Mick (1996) added that when answering researchers' questions, people present themselves in accordance to current cultural norms. This view highlights Paulhus's (1984) view of "impression management". This was defined as respondents' purposefully shaping their answers to create the most positive social image (Paulhus 1991, p.21). Another factor, self-deceptive positivity, has also been identified in the literature.

Unlike impression management where the respondent is essentially lying, self-deceptive positivity is an honest but overly positive self-portrayal that is linked to personality. The identification and separation of these two factors has advanced understanding of the varying impact of SDR, especially in areas where positive self-portrayal may actually be a legitimate aspect of the construct being measured. Previously, high correlations between SDR and constructs were usually interpreted as a deficit in the survey instrument. Indeed positive self-portrayal tends to be reflected in respondents' response style, whereas impression management can often be isolated to a response set.

Where respondents are temporarily motivated to respond in a certain manner due to the situation it is regarded as a response set (Paulhus 1991). This is where interviewer bias may be apparent. A guiding assumption of survey methodology put forward by Hurtado (1994, p.77) is that "similarity between interviewers and respondents on important social characteristics increases the validity of the information obtained in the interview." This view has been illustrated in a number of studies of the impact of interviewer race and respondent race upon socially desirable responses (Davis 1997, Cotter Cohen and Coulter 1982, Weeks and Moore 1981). This phenomenon is somewhat similar to Mick's (1996) view of SDR where respondents' answer in line with current cultural norms, but also adds a perspective of social exchange specific to the interviewer.

The process of asking a prospective respondent to take time and effort to complete a questionnaire has been viewed as social exchange. The theory

of social exchange asserts that the actions of individuals are motivated by the return these actions are expected to bring from others. If the motivations of prospective respondents are to please interviewers and receive gratitude from that interviewer then when asking questions about a subject that is obviously close to the interviewer, bias in the direction of providing what is perceived as pleasing answers for the interviewer is likely to occur.

Cross-Cultural Studies in Tourism

As transport and communication technologies have improved, tourism has become a truly international phenomenon. Yet there is a distinct lack of cross-cultural research within the marketing and tourist behaviour literature. In a study of articles published within the *Journal of Travel Research* it was found that while many articles originated from countries other than North America, few contained cross-country research (Burnett, Uysal and Jamroz 1991). As noted by these authors, "serious study of travel and tourism eventually involves detailed consideration of international concern" (p.49).

For a destination that is attempting to attract international tourists, knowledge of these target markets, the images they hold of the destination and their decision-making behaviour is paramount. This essentially leads to the need for research within another culture. Many national tourist bodies would simply contract the research to a firm within the target market. However for the purposes of academic research, funding is usually an issue that results in the research being conducted by themselves. As such, knowledge of cross-cultural research procedures is required. Even when cultures and languages are regarded as broadly similar, if respondents' attitudes or images of a destination are sought, then awareness of the possibility of socially desirable responding is necessary. Where face-to-face or telephone interviewing is the data collection method of choice, this has implications for the selection of an interviewer.

The Case of the Australian and US Markets

In 1993 Australia ranked number one among all single countries as the most preferred travel destination by the US market (ATC 1993). Yet the US market at this time was stagnant. Australia's market share was below the pro-rata level and this situation was being exacerbated by a lower than average growth (Faulkner 1997). Australia's failure to convert its position as the most desirable destination into actual visits and become one of the major shareholders of the US outbound market reflects the conundrum within the literature regarding distant destinations. It demonstrates that there is confusion with respect to tourists' perceptions of long-haul travel that requires research attention.

Exploratory interviews were conducted by the Australian researcher. In these interviews of both the American and Australian markets it became obvious that Australian perceptions of long haul travel were somewhat different to American perceptions, although similar factors, including the importance of travel distance and time, were cited as being influential within the destination decision making. This brought about the need for a cross-cultural comparison of perceptions of distance and the influence of those perceptions upon tourist decision making.

Another outcome from the exploratory interviews was an awareness that American respondents were very positive in their assessment of Australia as compared to their general views of long-haul travel and other long-haul destinations. This triggered the need for a study of interviewer accents and socially desirable responding. From this it might be expected that respondents will give more favourable responses to an Australian-accented interviewer as compared to an American-accented interviewer. As the study was to be conducted by telephone from Australia, call-origin also became an issue. The knowledge of where the call is originating from may also influence perceptions of the interviewer and responses.

H1: Responses to questioning about Australia as a tourist destination will be significantly different with an Australian accented interviewer than with a North American accented interviewer.

H2: Responses to questioning about Australia as a tourist destination will be significantly different when Australia is identified as the country of origin of the interview call than when no call-origin is given.

DeRosia (1991) believes that accents not only influence responses but also response rates. "When someone's accent sounds unusual, it makes communication just that much tougher. And when communication is a little more difficult, more people are going to refuse or terminate surveys" (p.38).

H3: The response rate for surveys conducted by an Australian accented interviewer will be lower than the response rate for surveys conducted by a North American interviewer.

Methodology

The survey instrument designed to investigate cognitive distance, attitudes toward long haul travel and perceptions of Australia was utilised for the

purposes of this study. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a convenience sample. Consequently, the questionnaire was modified in wording and scale composition to increase readability and clarity of items. Content validity was established according to the guidelines set forth by Nunnally (1978). A phone survey was employed to collect the data. Respondents were individuals who have travelled internationally. The sample was drawn from a database of 5000 names of west- coast North American residents who were self-reported frequent fliers.

A simple 2x2 experimental design was established with 15 respondents randomly assigned within each cell (Figure 1). Cell one is an east-coast Australian-accented interviewer establishing that the call is originating from Australia. Cell two is a west-coast North American-accented interviewer establishing that the call is originating from Australia. Cell three is the Australian accented interviewer, not giving any call origin. Cell four is the North American accented interviewer, not giving any call origin.

FIGURE 1
Experimental Design for Study

	Australian Accented Interviewer	North American Accented Interviewer
Calling from Australia	Cell One	Cell Two
No call Origin given	Cell Three	Cell Four

Data were collected on 23 items with a common scale that measured five factors including perceived attractiveness, novelty, cost, risk and ease of travel to the destination. For each cell surveying continued until 15 completed interviews were achieved.

Results and Discussion

The first hypothesis concerns the impact of interviewer accent upon responses. .Multivariate analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was conducted using Hotelling's T² to evaluate differences among centroids for the items. Due to the small sample size in each cell, the items were evaluated in their five factorial groupings to ascertain whether the mean differences in the items between the Australian-accented interviewer group and the North American-accented interviewer group were larger than expected by chance. Data were inspected for outliers and homogeneity of the variance-covariance matrices [1]. The means and standard deviations on all items can be found in appendix A.

It was found that statistically significant differences existed between groups on all five factors (Table 1). Hypothesis one is accepted and it can be concluded that interviewer accent did indeed impact upon responses. It should be noted though that with the small sample size the likelihood of type II errors is increased and it is suggested that further research be conducted with larger samples before results are extrapolated to the general population.

TABLE 1
Differences between the Australian-accented Interviewer group
and the North American-accented Interviewer Group.

Factor	Hotellings T ²	Significance of F
Attractiveness	.46579	.004
Novelty	.45070	.000
Cost	.48808	.000
Risk	.42083	.001
Ease of Travel	.35642	.002

The second hypothesis concerns the verbalisation of where the call has originated. It was hypothesised that telling respondents that the interviewer was calling from Australia may have the same impact as if the respondent was to perceive that the interviewer was Australian from their accent. The data was once again analysed using MANOVA within the factorial groupings.

Surprisingly there was no statistical difference found between the group that was told the origin of the calls and the group where no origin was verbalised. This was true across all five factors (Table 2). As such hypothesis two has been rejected.

TABLE 2
Differences between the Australia Verbalised as Call-origin group and the No Verbalised Call-origin Group.

Factor	Hotellings T ²	Significance of F
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Attractiveness	.03896	.955
Novelty	.03461	.753
Cost	.01066	.964
Risk	.00411	.972
Ease of Travel	.00917	.972

The third hypothesis concerns the response rate between groups. The results within this small study support the literature in finding that accent does appear to reduce the response rate. Of interest is the finding that verbalising the call-origin as Australia has also improved the response rate. As these are small group samples, it is suggested that further research with larger samples be used to confirm this finding before extrapolating the results to the general population.

TABLE 3
Response Rates for Groups

	Contacts Made	Completed Interviews	%
Cell 1 Aust Interviewer, No Call-origin	24	15	62.5%
Cell 2 Aust Interviewer, Aust Call-origin	22	15	68.2%
Cell 3 US Interviewer, No Call-origin	19	15	78.9%
Cell 4 US Interviewer, Aust Call-origin	16	15	93.7%

Conclusions

This study found mixed but interesting results. The literature on socially desirable responding and social exchange suggested that similarity between interviewer and respondent will bring more validity to data collection. The findings from hypothesis one generally support this in terms of utilizing an American-accented interviewer for a North American sample. The desirability of this was reinforced in hypothesis three where response rates for familiar sounding interviewers were higher. DeRosia (1991) went further to suggest that cultural accent is not alone in influencing responses, but that intra-country accents, which are especially evident in North America, also impact upon responses. This is a subject that has not received a great deal of attention within the literature and deserves further attention.

The second hypothesis yielded unexpected but interesting results. Through mentioning that the interviewer is calling from an international destination increased the response rates yet demonstrated no significant bias upon the responses received. From the social exchange theory, it may be concluded that respondents felt that if the interviewer was making the effort to call from such a distance, then the least they could do was complete the interview. The conundrum of why call-origin did not bias responses requires more qualitative investigation.

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Appendix A
Means and Standard Distributions for items within the groups.

	experimental cell							
	Aust interviewer, No call-origin		Aust interviewer, call-origin given		US interviewer, No call-origin		US interviewer, call-origin given	
	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation
AUSACC	2.93	1.03	2.67	1.11	3.07	.70	3.00	.76
AUSACT	4.60	.74	4.47	1.06	4.13	.99	4.00	1.07
AUSADV	5.07	1.22	5.20	1.26	4.73	.88	4.60	.99
AUSCLIM	4.13	.83	3.80	.94	3.40	.74	3.27	.59
AUSCOST	4.20	1.15	4.13	1.19	3.53	1.51	3.47	1.55
AUSCULT	4.93	.96	5.07	1.03	4.13	.99	4.07	.96
AUSENV	5.47	1.13	5.53	1.13	5.00	.65	4.80	.77
AUSEXP	5.73	.59	5.67	.62	5.13	.52	4.80	.56
AUSFAC	5.13	.83	5.00	1.00	4.27	1.10	4.13	1.06
AUSFAME	5.07	.88	5.13	.99	4.07	1.33	4.00	1.31
AUSFARE	4.93	.70	4.87	.64	3.80	1.26	3.73	1.22
AUSFLT	3.87	1.06	3.73	1.22	4.47	1.19	4.33	1.29
AUSIMA	4.47	1.25	4.53	1.51	4.20	1.21	4.07	1.22
AUSKNO	5.40	.74	5.53	.74	4.87	.83	4.73	.96
AUSLAG	3.47	1.41	3.40	1.45	4.20	1.52	4.13	1.46
AUSLOCL	4.93	.59	4.73	.59	4.00	.76	4.00	.76
AUSORG	5.00	.65	4.73	.59	4.07	1.10	3.93	1.10
AUSPRED	5.20	.86	5.20	.86	4.87	.64	4.73	.96
AUSPRIC	4.20	.94	4.27	.80	3.73	1.16	3.80	1.21
AUSREC	4.60	.99	4.53	.99	4.07	1.03	4.00	1.00
AUSRISK	5.27	.80	5.13	.92	4.67	1.29	4.60	1.24
AUSTELL	5.53	1.06	5.60	1.06	5.27	.59	5.20	.56
AUSTIME	2.67	.90	2.53	.83	3.67	1.05	3.60	1.12
AUSTOG	4.20	1.01	4.13	1.41	3.60	1.45	3.33	1.29
AUSVALU	4.80	.94	4.67	.90	4.27	.59	4.20	.68

[1] Since sample sizes were equal the Box M test of homogeneity was disregarded.