

Who's Asking?

Answers may depend on it

By Robert M. Worcester and Kully Kaur-Ballagan

Last fall, MORI was commissioned by *Eastern Eye*, a weekly newspaper aimed at the Asian community in Britain, to survey members of this group on their attitudes toward the terrorist attacks of September 11 and subsequent military action in Afghanistan. In a spin-off from the survey that offers an instructive demonstration of the interviewer effect, we found respondents more likely on many questions to give “don’t know” answers to interviewers who were not Asian than to those who were. They were also more likely to give Asian interviewers answers that might be perceived as being at odds with the mood of the general public.

There have been a number of studies conducted on the extent of the interviewer effect. One done in the 1920s described a survey of destitute men, in which one of the two interviewers—a prohibitionist—tended to pick up respondents who felt their condition was a result of excessive drinking, while the other—a socialist—found respondents who blamed their condition on the social and economic climate.

Since then, many more studies of the phenomenon have been carried out both in the United States and in Britain. Several show that race does make a difference: where the races of inter-

viewer and respondent are matched, the responses yielded are different from those where they are not. These studies also suggest, however, that the interviewer effect tends only to be important when the subject of the survey is sensitive.

British Asians who participated in the face-to-face, November 10-14, 2001, MORI survey were identified as those whose ethnic origins were Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan. When asked whether they approved or disapproved of the way Prime Minister Tony Blair was handling the response to the terrorist attacks, 13% said “don’t know” where the interviewer was Asian, compared with 20% where the interviewer was not (see Figure 1). Asked if they supported or opposed the military strikes in Afghanistan in response to the attacks, 11% gave a don’t know answer to Asian interviewers, compared with 18% to non-Asian interviewers.

When respondents did express an opinion in answer to these questions, the results suggested they were more comfortable giving views that might go against the perceived national mood to interviewers of the same ethnicity as themselves. Forty percent told Asian interviewers that they disapproved of Blair’s actions, compared with 31% who said the same to non-Asians. Respondents were also more likely to say they opposed the military strikes if the interviewer was Asian, although the difference here was not significant—49% vs. 44%—given the relatively small sample size of 554.

As to whether the military strikes constituted a war against Islam or terrorism, respondents were significantly more likely to say to non-Asian interviewers that the war was against terrorism (62% vs. 51%). Again, this may suggest a higher level of comfort and confidence about giving honest opinions to someone of a similar ethnic background.



Further evidence of the interviewer effect was seen in an apparent reluctance on the part of British Asians to acknowledge tensions within their own communities to non-Asians. When asked if the events of September 11 created divisions within the Asian communities of Britain, 53% said they had where the interviewer was Asian, compared with 39% where the interviewer was not.

But not all differences in responses conformed to this pattern. Asked whether they thought the

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British Muslim community had done too much, too little, or the right amount in speaking out against the views of extreme Muslims, 27% told non-Asian interviewers that the right amount had been done, compared with 17% who said the same to fellow Asians. However, in contrast to earlier suppositions, respondents were more likely to give don't know answers to this question to Asian interviewers than to non-Asians—38% compared with 25%.

There were other deviations from the pattern, as well. When British Asians were asked how loyal they were to Britain, there was no significant difference in the answers given. And, in contrast with the supposition that respondents felt more comfortable giving views that might go against the mood of the general public to interviewers of their own ethnic background, this group was significantly more likely to say to Asians that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were unjustified than they were to non-Asians.

While it is difficult to draw any hard and fast conclusions given this small sample, it is clear there are grounds to believe that matching interviewers and respondents by ethnicity may give more robust results to surveys involving questions of public policy. Some

analysis shows that British Asians are more likely to express an opinion or give an answer that is less in keeping with the perceived national mood when speaking to an interviewer of a similar ethnic background.

On the other hand, some findings of the poll challenged this supposition, with the ethnicity of the interviewer having no effect. Therefore, it may be that the focus of the question has a greater impact than the ethnicity of the interviewer on the responses people are likely to give. And, of course, race or ethnicity may not be the only significant differentiator—demographic characteristics such as the younger age profile and socioeconomic status of minority groups in Britain could also be at work.

We would argue that these findings have potentially important implications for research conducted among minority populations. More rigorous piloting may be required to ensure that the focus of the question determines responses, rather than the ethnicity of the interviewer.

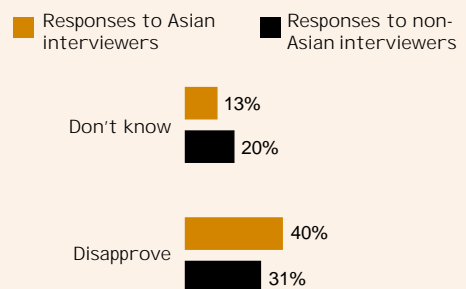
Not only does this apply to research among British black and minority ethnic groups, but also, as the previous studies on the interviewer effect suggest, to polling that asks respondents of any group about sensitive or contentious topics.

Figure 1

More—and Perhaps More Honest—Opinions Expressed to Fellow Asians

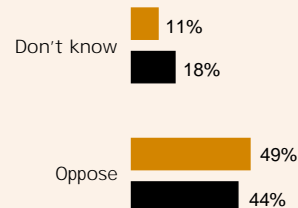
Question:

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Tony Blair is handling the British response to the terrorist attacks on 11th September?



Question:

The US and Britain launched military strikes against Afghanistan in response to the terrorist attacks on 11th September. Do you support or oppose taking military action against Afghanistan?



Note: Asked of British Asian adults, ages 16 years and over.
Source: Survey by MORI for *Eastern Eye*, November 10-14, 2001.

Methodological Note

MORI interviewed 554 British Asian adults aged 16 years or over. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, in street or in home, in 38 parliamentary constituencies with an Asian population of greater than 9%. Thirty-six percent of the interviews were conducted by Asian interviewers. The ethnicity of the interviewer was recorded on each questionnaire.