# MODERNIZING COMPARATIVE COMMUNITY RESEARCH ON RACE RELATIONS: A STRATEGY

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The recent history of social research on the urban community is permeated by a strategic dilemma. Extensiveness, comparability, and generalization on the one horn are opposed to depth, completeness, and validity on the other. The problems posed by this dilemma are quite visible in the torturous path to publication and dissemination of comparative studies of community politics. Adrian and Williams' study, Four Cities,[1] began in 1948 but was not published until 1963. The formidable study of Agger, Goldrich, and Swanson[2] was ten years in the making. We would contend that one of the major reasons for such lapses of time is the fact that the researchers were caught on the horns of this dilemma.

However, if social scientific understanding of community systems--especially community political systems--is going to keep pace with the development of social theory and the demands of public problems and public policy--especially the question of civil rights and racial equality--then more efficient empirical solutions to this dilemma must be found. This paper describes our use of one such solution--a method we call "comparative case studies." The key concern in developing the research strategy outlined in this paper was pragmatic--to balance the cost and completion time of the study with the desire for valid and fruitful comparative data. We think that the solution of this practical problem is a necessary condition to the development of theoretical understanding of communities.

Our strategy was intended as a maximum solution to the problem of doing an intensive comparative study of decision-making in school desegregation

issues in fifteen southern and northern cities in order to discover simultaneously how different kinds of large cities respond to the demands made upon them by civil rights leaders, who is influential in such decisions, how a more comprehensive survey of school system response to civil rights demands can be done, and how more extensive comparative research activities can be executed.[3]

Thus, although the conflicting demands of our study posed unique problems of research design, enough of the solution of these problems is applicable to other research that it seem worthwhile to summarize and describe our day-to-day problems. We hope others benefit from our errors.

What follows is, first, a descriptive account of the study design and the experience of carrying out and modifying the various elements in that design and, second, the presentation of two important findings from the study which would not have emerged under a different strategy.

In 1964 a study was proposed to and funded by the United States Office of Education to compare the responses of different cities to the demands of the civil rights movement for school desegregation. The plan of the study was first to select a sample of cities that would be representative of cities in a specified size range (over 250,000 and under 1,000,000 in population in the North, over 100,000 in the South) and representative of the controversies that had arisen over school desegregation since 1960. The first criterion of size range was also intended to limit the study to communities where the issue was relevant: Cities with less than 10 per cent of their population Negro were automatically excluded from the sample. Cities were selected in pairs from the two regions in an effort to increase the comparability of the results.[4] For the northern cities, the matching was done on the basis of size of city,

region of country, metropolitan status (primary or secondary city in a SMSA), and proportion of the population Negro. The southern cities were matched on the time of de jure desegregation, the nature of compliance with the Brown decision (voluntary or compulsory), and the question of violence (whether or not there was violence associated with desegregation).

The next step was to document the school desegregation controversies which had taken place in these cities and other characteristics of the government, politics, economy, and social composition of the city. Newspaper accounts of school desegregation were read and summarized for each of the cities. (Reviewing these accounts was part of the sample selection procedure for the southern cities.)

The collection of original data--the next step--was done in each city by two or three staff members (advanced graduate students in sociology, political science, and education) who spent a week to ten days in each city interviewing participants in formal decision-making positions--those identified by newspaper accounts, those named by the formally authorized decision-makers, other influential members of the community, and informed observers. The interviews were partly informal and partly formal. Although the process of data collection was easily outlined a priori, the actual field work was not so simple.

The plan that was more or less adhered to was to contact the education reporter of the local newspaper on arrival, along with any informal observers we had already learned of. We hoped to reconstruct the plot and the cost of characters from this/interview. On the basis of this first interview, appointments were then made with civil rights leaders, school board members, the school superintendent, and other involved parties. These interviews dovetailed

into other interviews with involved parties. An attempt was made to schedule key school board members and civil rights leaders at the very beginning and very end of the field period so that we would avoid too many blind alleys in the beginning and would have respondents who were able to correct contradictions and misconceptions.

The strategy of "comparative case studies" required both the collection of pre-structured data consistent from respondent to respondent and from city to city, as well as the collection of data that varied from city to city depending upon the particular course of events. These requirements demanded techniques of information collection that were structured in part and free in part. It meant that a large area of research strategy was left to the discretion of the researchers in the field.

Interview guides for formal interviews were written for each type of respondent to be interviewed--school board members, school superintendents, civil rights leaders, mayors, and other influentials. Each of these guides requested some information on the respondent's socio-economic and political background, his general political activity, and his involvement in school desegregation, and asked sociometric questions pertaining to influentials in the community. In fact, there was an enormous amount of variation in the extent to which these guides were used in individual interviews. This is not to say that the formal interview guides were not helpful and useful--a great part of the analysis is based on data from these guides. (It was found that much of this data--especially background data--was best collected by leaving the questionnaire with the respondent and requesting him to complete it and mail it to the home office.) But the attempt to acquire both formal, pre-structured information and to pursue in detail the implications of individual

histories put the interviewer in a difficult position. He needed simultaneously to establish rapport with the respondent, to obtain the respondent's description of the history of the issue, to assess the amount and value of the respondent's knowledge, to determine how crucial it was to have the pre-structured information on the respondent, and guess how much time the respondent would give him and to remember when and where his next appointment was. In practice this meant that the interviewer had to be prepared for eight minutes or eight hours.

The dilemma posed by the need for comparability and depth was nowhere more evident nor more vexing than in the decisions which had to be constantly made in the field concerning whether the story of the issue was complete, whether the veracity of respondents had been established, whether explanations perceived were sufficient. The field strategy made this dilemma more acutely experienced by the interviewers but probably more efficiently resolved overall. Let us give a rather detailed example.

One southern city was known to us to have desegregated voluntarily, i.e., without a court order and without violence, although late. This was a quite intriguing city in our sample since the size and socio-economic structure of the city would have led us to predict that it would have desegregated earlier but not voluntarily. (It was the second largest city in the state, which usually means that it will desegregate within a year after the first city. It was also a town of locally-owned industry and highly monolithic control of business enterprises.) When we arrived in the town, we discovered almost immediately that there were fifteen members on the school board--a situation which usually makes for a rather inept decision-making apparatus, especially in controversial issues. It also meant that the mere gathering of

background information on the school board members would be a time-consuming task. Thus, from our arrival in town, we were quite aware of the dilemma we faced.

The first day of interviewing turned up two entirely new dimensions to the story, in addition to fuller details of what had happened. First, we discovered that the schools in the city were desegregated under pressure from the United States Department of Justice, the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and the Department of Defense. The city was in an impacted area, and the federal government accounted for something between 10 and 30 per cent of the school system's budget. The threat of withdrawal of these funds--evidently made quite firmly--was not compulsion according to our definition but was much less voluntary than many court-ordered cases. The second new dimension was our discovery that there was a suit against the school board pending which was due to be decided before the fall when desegregation occurred. Thus, we discovered that there were really two separate stories--that of the local suit and that of the federal government intervention. If we chose to pursue only the former, then interviewing local civil rights leaders became much less important. However, we thought that we could hardly call the desegregation of the schools voluntary and that thus the resistance to the demands of local civil rights leaders and to court intervention was an essential part of the picture of a recalcitrant school board. It was also important to discover whether there was a connection between the suit against the school board and the action of the federal government. This meant that the informal aspect of our interviews would become more elaborate and, thus, that some of the pre-structured background information would probably have to be sacrificed.

The second and third days of interviewing in this city produced data on the process of resolution of the issue. It was discovered that the merged school board was legally required to have eight city members and eight county members. The city members were high status, economic dominants, in the sense that they were the owners of the largest economic enterprises in the area, and tended to be somewhat more liberal than the county members. The county members were small businessmen or farmers, mostly without college education, and quite conservative. The influence of the rural members of the board and the consequent difficulty gaining consensus of such a controversial move as desegregation of the schools could easily explain the resistance offered to the suit filed. At the same time, it would lead one to expect that similar resistance would be offered to the threatened withdrawal of federal funds. One crucial fact in explaining the absence of resistance to such federal intervention is that the financial matters of the board were dominated by the city members--in fact there was an informal policy committee which met before board meetings and was able to provide a united front on policy and financial matters. The policy committee members recognized the benefit of keeping federal funds flowing and thus realized the necessity of desegregation. The problem was in getting the rest of the board to go along. It turned out that this was done in a series of meetings with individual school board members, at which the policy committee and the superintendent persuaded each member of the economic necessity of desegregation. (While it would not have been necessary to get a unanimous vote on desegregation, any division on the board would have made extremely bad press and would have opened the door for mass protest from the segregationists.)

Our dilemma is evident. In order to characterize the decision-makers as empirically defined, we would only have to obtain background information on the policy committee. If we obtained information only on the more liberal, higher status, urban members of the board, we would be portraying a biased picture of this city's school board and the way it reacted to the demands of the civil rights movement. Further, we had to know more about the civil rights movement and negotiation processes in order to compare the relationship between the civil rights movement and the white political system.

No decision can resolve a dilemma such as this. Rather, a series of decisions must be made at each step to emphasize one or another of the two horns. The important consideration is that the field situation be sufficiently open to allow the interviewers to respond to unique aspects of a particular situation, but structured enough to assure comparability. In our study, the openness of approach was built into the outline of analysis, which called for sections dealing with the detailed story in each city. Although it was apparent that there were difficulties in selecting the respondents according to a neat *a priori* system, we hoped that comparability or consistency would result from the sample selection, respondent selection, and the structured half of all interviews.

The data obtained in this study can usefully be categorized as that based on the questionnaires, that contained in the documents collected, and that which was otherwise picked up by the field staff. The problems involved in an analysis of such diverse bodies of data are certainly many and complex, and the methodological decisons made in this study must be considered merely a first step in overcoming these problems. The two most pressing questions were: What is the best way to codify the data? and, What are the most

appropriate techniques of measurement? These questions had to be asked both for the case studies and for the comparative analysis.

In order to deal with these and other related questions, the analysis was planned in two major stages, conforming to our concern for preserving the peculiar aspects of each case study and ultilizing as much data as possible in the comparative analysis. This plan was dependent on the results we anticipated from interaction based on staff division of labor. There were three ways in which the entire staff was organized: (1) the field staff was distinguished from the office staff; (2) the field staff was grouped by teams (per city); and (3) responsibilities were divided according to subject area in the comparative analysis state--e.g., school system, civil rights movement, or socio-economic structures.

The first step after each field period (i.e., after each team returned from a particular city) was the debriefing of the field staff. While being recorded on tape, the field team would "tell the story" of school desegregation in a particular city, and then answer questions which served both to supplement the information given in the story and to test the data collected for completeness and depth. A very important goal of this process was the preservation of the impressionistic information collected by the field staff.

After the debriefing session, each case went through three stages which allowed methodological checks on the analysis and which resulted in a draft report on the field work. The first stage was the writing of the field report draft by the field team. Since this was not always done immediately after returning from the field (as was considered optimal), the debriefing tape proved in some cases to be a valuable document in retaining the immediacy and flavor of the field experience. Even the jokes told about each city which were preserved on tape added to this process.

The methodological check at this stage was that the field teams either had to agree on a field report or provide evidence for contradictory points of view, although the latter was not usual. The most interesting cases of this were the southern cities for which the interviewer in the Negro-civil rights areas was usually Negro and the other interviewer white. It seems fairly obvious that two interviewers going into a southern town with such a division of labor would collect bodies of data not always in agreement. Normally this problem was more severe in the field, and could more easily be overcome in the sheltered world of the research center.

Each field report was then read by the office staff and subjected to questions and criticisms, usually in writing, and always in conference. This interaction between the field staff and the office staff constituted the second check on the analysis, and proved to be most helpful in building defensible positions with the collected data. If we had characterized a civil rights organization as weaker than another one, we had to employ any available evidence to support this assertion. (It is equally important to note that we recognized a great amount of variance in terms of objectivity and comparability of data.) If we had not been able to interview all of the members of a school board and needed to characterize the internal political sociometry of the board, any data which suggested clique associations (e.g., partners in a law firm, voting behavior, ethno-class identity, source of electoral support) was employed to support an argument which might have originally been developed on impressionistic grounds.

Once a revised field report was prepared in the form of a first draft of the case study, it was sent to the key actors in the case study for their review. This particular step raises many of the traditional ethical questions

confronted by research social scientists who tackle research or controversial policy matters. Our approach was simple and pragmatic. The drafts were sent to our key actors in hopes of having them challenge aspects of our report (sins of omission or commission) and then presenting evidence to support their argument. This, we anticipated, would have substantially helped our research project. At the same time, we were fully prepared to alter the drafts to conceal anyone's identity, if they so wished, or to remove any statements which might legally or otherwise be considered libelous.

The results of this procedure were mixed, with some applause and a few threats, but generally the results were in the direction of helping the study. One of the valuable results was that respondents had a chance to understand the meaning of lines of questioning which had not been clear to them during the interview. And once having read the report, several respondents were able to supply supplementary information which proved to be quite helpful.

In sum, the case studies went through three preliminary phases. The initial field report was the product of the field staff, inclusive of both the objective materials and their subjective impressions usually preserved on the "debriefing tape." The methodological check was the degree of consensus developed by the field staff. The second phase, resulted from the office staff's review. The field staff revised their report on the basis of criticisms and questions raised by the office staff. The particular emphasis here was the evidence presented to support an argument or interpretation. The final phase involved sending the report to the actors involved in the situation, and repeating the process of searching for the most substantial evidence to support any statement or proposition contained in the case study.

The comparative analysis of data from all of the cities in our sample cuts through most of the problems confronted in analysis by case studies, or at least the problems are confronted in a slightly different way. The first problem was to plan the entire analysis, i.e., develop a conceptual scheme which would imply a series of needed information, a time table, and a staff division of labor. This is a process which is as much political as it is "rational"; people on the staff had interests they wanted to pursue, and the client funding the project had certain expectations. But this came as no surprise, since the staff was recruited in such a way as to match personal interests with what was a fairly accurate estimation at the beginning of what would be our priority needs during the final analysis.

Our plan was to view the city (community) as a set of social systems, each of which had outputs which we viewed as input to the overall analysis of school desegregation controversies. For example, the demands of the civil rights movement could legitimately be studied as the dependent variable of the civil rights movement and elsewhere looked at in terms of an independent variable (an input factor) in a "total" analysis of the controversy. So the initial breakdown looked at the school system, the civil rights movement and the Negro community, and the total "political style" of the city (the characteristics of the normal process of community management, or traits of the total set of systems).

The first phase in the comparative analysis was the preparation of the major variables for the analysis, specifically the naming and operationalization, and method of measurement for each of the major variables. This process had two distinct (and logically complementary) parts. The staff person charged with the analysis of a given area would prepare a seminar report and moderate

a discussion aimed at listing and defining the variables. Central to this would be the input variables for the "total" analysis, though the moderator had the full content of the area as his interest.

Let us now present two findings which we think would not have emerged under other methods. Each of these findings involves a rather complex pattern involving a number of variables which were in part "discovered" in the empirical process and thus could not have been found simply by manipulating these variables.

Probably the first thing that became clear to us was that the Hunter model of the "power structure" did not fit our data. In cities of this size we were unable to find unity within the elites, dominance by a small segment of the elite, nor strong influence exerted in the school desegregation decisions by the elite. We found quite simply that crucial school desegregation decisions either for or against were made in practically all cases by the school boards--the legally designated decision-makers. However, when we extended the analysis to the question of what kinds of decisions were made and what explained the differences observed, the importance of the economic elite reentered. The dependent variable in this case was the degree to which the school boards acquiesced to the demands made by the civil rights movement. The one variable which was most highly associated with the degree of acquiesence was the socio-economic status of the school board. High status school boards were much more acquiescent than low status. It was quite apparent to us that high status school boards existed in certain kinds of cities--those with relatively active economic elites. We also knew that in only some cases of cities with high status school boards was the economic elite actively involved in the recruitment of school board members. In others, the recruitment of high status school board members had seemingly become a matter of tradition without the necessity

of direct influence being exerted by the civic elite. Thus, the puzzling problem was whether there were characteristics of the community which were uniformly associated with high status school boards and participation of the economic elite in civic affairs or whether a series of discrete explanations would have to be offered. The traditionally used variables of economic structure --dominance, centralization, local ownership--and of social structure--socio-economic level of the population, heterogeneity of population--did not provide an explanation. However, we had almost casually noticed that in some cities the names of the owners and managers of the largest firms were dismissed from consideration because they lived in the suburbs. We guessed that participation of the civic elite and the socio-economic status of the school boards might be a function of the concentration of the economic elite within the central cities with which we were dealing. A simple index--the ratio of those earning more than $25,000 a year living in the suburbs to those living in the city--was found to be almost perfectly associated with participation, with school board socio-economic level, and hence with acquiescence of the school board to the demands of the civil rights movement. The path of associations from the suburbanization of the economic elites to the acquiescence of the school board to the civil rights movement was indeed tortuous, but we think worth the effort. It was a path that could not have been followed by another method.[5]

Another finding of this study illustrates the usefulness of the method. An often-invoked hypothesis is that the militancy of the civil rights movement is enhanced by the competition for leadership among civil rights leaders. Competition for leadership forces the escalation of issues as leaders vie for the scarce resources of publicity and people. This hypothesis made sense to us but the problem in testing it was to elaborate what characteristics of a

community would be associated with competition and thus with militancy. In attempting to do this, it became quite apparent that there were two quite different types of competition--individual competition for control of groups or organizations and organized competition between groups and organizations. Individual competition is characteristic of cities with a relatively high socio-economic status Negro community which does not have clear interdependent relations and has a weak internal prestige structure. Organized competition is characteristic of cities in which there are quite distinct bases for status, prestige, and influence. Organized competition occurs if and only if one faction has access to resources independent of an appeal for mass support and another faction can successfully appeal to the masses for its power. It would not have been possible to achieve this elaboration with a rather specific knowledge of the competition process and the general political organizations in each of the cities studied. There is unfortunately neither time nor space to fully describe this knowledge. Finally, it should be pointed out that both types of competition are associated with the militancy of the civil rights leaders but with obviously different root sources.[6]

While this paper has been mainly descriptive of the course and contents of one study, we hope that the presentation of this description of our method, along with the findings that are dependent on that method, itself argues a central point: that there is much yet to be achieved in discovering the variables and the patterns that are important explanations for the operation of community political systems and that discovery requires a much different method than following the map of known variables. We hope this one method will be a stimulus to the development of others.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Oliver P. Williams and Charles R. Adrian. Four Cities. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963.

[2]Robert E. Agger, Daniel Goldrich, and Bert E. Swanson. The Rulers and the Ruled. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1964.

[3]Two results of this study aside from the substantive analyses have been the development of a Permanent Community Sample at the National Opinion Research Center and the funding of a follow-up study of school desegregation in 95 northern cities. The Permanent Community Sample includes 200 cities over 50,000 population. The development of this sample was financed by the National Science Foundation. The Carnegie Corporation has generously supported the follow-up study of the politics of school desegregation.

[4]For a complete report of the findings of this study see: Robert L. Crain, Morton Inger, Gerald A. McWorter, James J. Vanecko. The Politics of School Desegregation. Forthcoming. Chicago: Aldine Press, 1967.

[5]For a fuller discussion of this set of findings see: James J. Vanecko. "Community Structure and the Influence of the Economic Elite in School Desegregation." Paper presented at the annual meetings of the American Sociological Association, Miami Beach, 1966, and Robert L. Crain and James J. Vanecko. "Elite Influence in School Desegregation." Forthcoming in James Q. Wilson (editor). City Politics and Public Policy. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1967.

[6]For a fuller discussion of this set of findings see: Gerald A. McWorter and Robert L. Crain. "Sub-Community Gladitorial Competition: Civil Rights Leadership as a Competitive Process." Forthcoming in Social Forces.