

QUANTIFIED DISPARITY

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This narrative portrays the experience of a white male social work researcher unexpectedly encountering quantified racial disparity in his research. Processing a reflection written at the time of the encounter, the author expounds on the impact this finding had on him and his teaching.

Introduction

In November 2006, a research project exploring what factors predicted recidivism for criminal offenders in rural prerelease centers in my state was nearing conclusion. I was in the data analysis phase of the project and preparing the final written report for the funder (Conley & Schantz, 2006). As a quantitatively minded researcher, I had several hypotheses to test. This narrative addresses my reactions to a statistical outcome I had not anticipated at all and explores why this was so surprising. It was written—at the urging of a colleague—within a week of the findings, and I have had sufficient time to process it and incorporate it into my professorial life in a meaningful way. The narrative, with only grammatical editing, is presented in full followed, by reflection.

Quantified Disparity

Carol says I have to write this. I have been finding ways to put it off since last Wednesday; it's Monday now. It does not feel good. But perhaps it will feel better after I have written it. I don't really know who I am writing for. For me? For her? For the next quantitatively minded white guy who gets blind-sided by an unexpectedly strong finding of race in his research?

The whole experience seemed to unfold in a haze of fatigue, deadline, and statistics. I was looking to support a hypothesis that mental illness predicted return to institutional status for pre-release center prisoners. But one by one, the predictors fell. Five days later, the results all presented to the management at the State Department of Corrections (DOC), I have this weird image

in my mind of cowboys and Indians. But, it is the cowboys who are riding in a circle around a lone Indian who is standing in the swirling dust, sun setting large, and the cowboys are just firing their guns in the air, slapping their horses, and whooping. They, like me, want to make him go away, but nothing will; the Indian is here to stay. He is significant. Statistically significant.

Last Wednesday I was driving myself to run the numbers to “stoke” the report to the DOC. It was the 14th month of the program, and the first-year report was due in five days. The university suddenly switched licenses with my statistical program (SPSS), and I lost my advanced regression models software without warning. A frantic email resulted in a distant colleague across campus letting me use his office for three hours: his older computer still had the models. I had run the frequencies, I had run the chi-squares. I had not run a multivariate predictor model—the holy grail of my work for the past year.

So there I sat in this colleague's office, surrounded by strange stuff, running binary logistic regression equations. “Return to institutional status/not return to status” was the outcome. So I started stepping in the predictors. Length of stay itself was significant. Length of stay and a dummy variable of Native American/not Native American were both significant. The Beta value, or predictive power of the Native American variable, was huge—my first indication of what was to come. I stepped in more: education (not significant), age (not), number of previous felonies (not), first sample wave or second (almost - but not); mental illness (not). The

only thing left standing as significantly predicting recidivism after 43 trial models was being Native American. I couldn't believe that mental illness was not significant. I wanted being Native American to be not significant. It was like being in the twilight zone. I couldn't make it go away. I was only aware in retrospect (about three hours later) how obsessively I had been trying. Sitting in this strange office on an exhausted Wednesday night, far from my native Boston, I was fighting the Indian.

I put more cowboys in the model. I created interaction variables of Indian x felonies (maybe it was the felonies...); Indian x education (maybe it was the uneducated ones...); Indian times almost everything, but none of them claimed the predictive power of being an Indian alone. I started taking some cowboys out, but it wasn't fair (bad statistics) and, besides, I had to take them almost all out to get even length of stay to become significant ($p=.04$). Also, the Beta value for the Indian was ridiculous: for every 100 non-natives returned to institutional status, 150 Indians were—all other things being constant. Even if time in the pre-release centers was significantly predicting something, it wasn't holding a candle to the sun behind that Indian.

I finally had to leave my colleague's office. I had to go home. I had to teach the next day. I felt sick to my stomach; more queasy than anything. I wanted badly to call my old buddy from Boston College who opened his dissertation defense with the ominous words: "Racism is an outcome..." He proceeded to present a model just like mine, showing that kids were bounced in and out of foster care with greater frequency for no other reason than being black. I sent him an email and a copy of the model.

It was 11 p.m. on the East Coast. I walked to my truck and called Carol. She is an Ojibwa Indian and a powerful scholar in social work with whom I had developed trust during the past two years. We were not on the phone for one minute when she was welcomed to the short list of people with whom I share my tears. The sick feeling in my gut came out through my eyes and in my spit. I was sort of compulsively blubbing about not being able

to make it go away and then hating myself for having spent two hours trying to do just that, almost without realizing it.

I think I was trying to protect my race, to protect us from being the way we are. The people doing the returning are almost all white. The outcome is so irrefutable, so quantitative, so everything I have come to value so highly as a social work researcher. There was no surprise from Carol at either my finding or its strength. It would be so cliché to say she honored my tears, but Carol is the one who insisted I document this process. She is a qualitative researcher—an ethnographer really. It is all about the process and nuance for her. What I was going through as a white guy stumbling on this finding was as important to her as the finding itself was to me.

I wrote up the egregious finding in a separate report to give it the new director of DOC as a separate finding, not part of the official report. If he knew about it, I reasoned that he would have to do something about it—commit resources he did not have—and his political enemies (who had just broadsided him in the press) would make hay of this. After sleeping on it, I realized I was caught in a race-driven compulsion to conspiracy to repress the truth I *so* did not like about myself and people like us. Segregate the Indian. Oh, that's so predictable! The day before I took the report to the state capital, I lost the data stick. Of course I had it backed up, but my subconscious mind wanted to leave it behind.

The presentation was painful for the director and his team. The ugly term "racism" came up, but I tempered it for them by stating that quantitative methods are reductionist and don't always appreciate the context. In some cases it *may* be overtly conscious racism; however, Native American return to institutional status is an outcome for which they do not have a full explanation. Some probation officers tell me that the Native Americans don't defend themselves when charged with a violation. Perhaps it needs to be looked at from more than one angle.

Putting the Experience into Perspective

Ultimately, I double-checked the results with a biostatistician, and they were validated;

the models were correct, and the findings went to the DOC. For them, the biggest impact of this study was that it established a baseline prevalence rate of mental illness in the pre-release center population. Nonetheless, my hypothesis that having a mental illness predicted return to institutional status was not validated. While this caused considerable consternation at first, I later came to the conclusion that the case managers at the prerelease centers were doing a good enough job of securing mental health services in the community for their mentally ill offenders, that they were essentially leveling the playing field. It was in the context of exploring this primary hypothesis that the finding of disparity with regard to Native Americans became manifest.

More recently, my research assistant and I hit the literature to seek a larger context for this experience. Discussing Miller's (1982) work, Pinderhughes (1989) notes:

Those in positions of power can also develop a tendency to deny their own personal pain and ignore their experiences of powerlessness. This stance can be costly in terms of its potential for distorting reality and for denying and devaluing one's own feeling. This is a commonly accepted consequence associated with the role of men" (p.123).

It certainly was my first inclination to deny the emotional pain and powerlessness associated with these findings. Fortunately, I had accumulated over 15 years of direct practice experience across diverse social work settings. This background, and the rapport with an understanding colleague, afforded me a process by which to reflect on, and make meaning out of, this experience.

With regard to the findings, least surprised of all were members of the Native American community; to a degree, they were surprised that I was surprised (Conley, 2008). What of my training at the MSW level? Shouldn't I have been prepared for this result? While I was equipped with the academic knowledge to process this in an objective fashion, in this

case, knowledge was not insight. My emotional and gut reaction to what had happened clouded my intellect. I knew that people of color are overrepresented in the corrections population, but I was not aware of how much more difficult it is for them to exit the system. In retrospect, my training at the MSW level would seem to have prepared me to encounter manifest feelings of racism in individual relationships, one-on-one encounters, perhaps even groups, but not in a research context. . . . a context where I came to dwell after earning my Ph.D. Even at the Ph.D. level, where I again took a course designed to instill in me critical self-consciousness with regard to issues of race, ethnicity, and power, I was not prepared to encounter this in a research context to the same degree as in a clinical context. However, I was prepared to engage in a process of self-reflection as a method of meaning-making.

In a provocative essay developed for his own teaching, Michael (personal communication, December 17, 2008) questions if researchers are seeking truth and/or promoting racism. He comments on Trepagnier's (2001) work by noting that:

Researchers must be willing to follow the facts wherever they lead, even if the results are contrary to one's cherished beliefs. Unless one's goal is pursuit of truth, there is no unique and distinct reason for undertaking research."

In the three years since this experience, I have incorporated my *Quantified Disparity* narrative into teaching a graduate-level research course, where I use it to demonstrate one way in which white men can be vulnerable to a tendency to suppress findings of oppression in order to avoid the discomfort associated with encountering them. By providing a powerful first-person narrative of the social and ethical value of turning inward to one's own discomfort—and not away from it—this experience has improved my ability to conduct and teach research. Students are more familiar with instructors processing their own internal feelings about direct social work experiences in practice courses. By using my

quantified disparity experience as an example, I am able to introduce this clinical element into my teaching about the research process.

The cowboys circled and the Indian stood - that was the truth of it. It is commendable that the funder in my case accepted these findings. By disseminating and not suppressing the results, by processing and not repressing my feelings, this work has become a meaningful ongoing experience for myself, my colleagues, and my students.

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