

SURVEYS

NBC'S "R.A.C.E." SERIES: GOOD INTENTIONS, POOR EXECUTION: TWO REPORTS

By Eleanor Singer

On September 5 and 6, 1989, NBC aired a two-part series called R.A.C.E., an acronym for Racial Attitudes and Consciousness Exam. The program—modeled on the National Driver Education Test and the Knowledge and Attitudes about AIDS Test (aired last year)—made extensive use of survey questions about racial attitudes in an effort to raise viewers' consciousness. Hosted by Bryant Gumbel (who was also its executive producer and one of its two writers), the program featured six well-known panelists representing different points of view—quarterback John Elway, writer Maya Angelou, Boston University President John Silber, former White House Communications Director Pat Buchanan, film director Spike Lee, and businesswoman Martha Stewart—as well as two social scientists well known for their research on racial attitudes—Tom Smith of the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, and Lawrence Bobo, of the University of Wisconsin's Sociology Department.

The program interspersed questions about racial attitudes and contacts in six areas—work, neighborhood, school, informal social interaction, crime, and politics—with dramatized vignettes about these areas and comments by the six panelists and the host. Most of the questions were classic survey questions about racial attitudes, asked over the years by NORC and other organizations; some were new. All, according to Bobo and Smith, had been asked on a recent national telephone survey, thus potentially providing a base to which the responses of the six panelists and studio audiences in four cities could be compared. But the national survey was neither described in its own right nor (with one or two fleeting exceptions) used for comparison purposes. Thus, there was no way for the viewer to place the studio audience's responses in perspective.

Given the program's intent and format, two kinds of questions are relevant to this review: How effective was it in raising con-

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By Robert B. Hill

"The R.A.C.E." program, designed to gauge the racial attitudes of a cross-section of black Americans and white Americans, was innovative in several ways. It attempted to convey research through the medium of television. It made extensive use of new technology to cover a broad range of issues in a relatively short span of time. And, it replicated many questions that had been used in national surveys of racial attitudes since the 1940s, working with, as its primary respondents, studio audiences in New York, Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and Jackson, Mississippi. The credibility of this survey "test" was enhanced by the on-camera presence of two experts—Lawrence Bobo of the University of Wisconsin and Tom Smith of NORC.

Overall, I believe this program succeeded in highlighting important racial issues in such areas as the workplace, schools, neighborhood, and the home. However, I think it failed to achieve its primary objective—that of encouraging Americans to become more tolerant of persons from other races and more sensitive to racial barriers to black advancement. This failure resulted from a number of shortcomings.

First, the program was inconsistent about the nature of what it was measuring. Although the survey was characterized as an "exam" or "test," host Brian Gumbel repeatedly assured viewers that there were no "right" or "wrong" answers to the questions. Yet, when presenting the results, he conveyed the impression that those who obtained high "pro-equalitarian" scores gave "more accurate" responses than those who obtained low scores. For example, when he asked the celebrity panel how they did, persons who received high scores (or felt that they had "done well") were praised. As a result, persons who received low scores refused to have their scores announced. This practice became so obvious that panelist John Silber asked Gumbel why, if

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consciousness about racial attitudes? And how effectively did it make use of social science methods and findings to advance this objective?

Lacking audience research, we can't answer the first question. We know (because Bryan Gumbel told us) that 13 million Americans watched one or both programs—a large number indeed. The network and the producer are to be commended for dealing seriously and at length with a subject crying out for attention. Whether or not they succeeded in raising the consciousness of viewers—whether or not they attracted viewers who were not already sympathetic to their aims—is simply unknown.

The second question is not easily answered. Again the network and the producer are to be commended for using as consultants and—what is far more unusual, as on-screen commentators—two social scientists with impeccable credentials in research on racial attitudes. But the use to which social science experience and knowledge was put raises a number of questions.

In the first place, unlike the National Driver Test or the AIDS Information Test, attitude surveys have no correct answers. Nevertheless, the emphasis of the discussion during the second hour was on people's scores on a scale formed by summing responses to all the attitude questions. That created the paradox picked up by Silber: If in fact there are no right or wrong answers, what is the scoring system based on? Not only did the program give no satisfactory answer to this question, but the process by which some answers came to be defined as "pro-equality" was not addressed at all. And yet the process must have raised questions among some members of the audience. For example, on a question asking whether black children are more capable, as capable, or less capable in school than white children, those responding "more capable" and "as capable" were both awarded a point, even though the former answer might strike some viewers just as biased racially as "less capable."

Second, the program revealed the scores of the individual panelists—presumably with their consent—and even their responses to particular questions. For a survey researcher, this raises concerns about the candor of re-

spondents who know ahead of time that their answers may become a subject for public debate. (If they did not know this ahead of time, that raises other concerns, about confidentiality and informed consent!) Since the socially desirable responses to these questions are not all that difficult to figure out, anonymity or assurances of confidentiality would seem essential to get honest answers.

Third, the program presented no discussion of response error. Admittedly this is a difficult subject, but when questions about crime are preceded by a dramatized holdup of a white store owner by a black customer, and questions about interracial social contacts are preceded by a dramatized interracial marriage ceremony, the question of response effects is not exactly academic. Responses of the studio audiences and of the viewing public (but not those of the national sample) may very well have been affected by their seeing these vignettes. The fact that the interviewer, Gumbel, is black may also have affected responses.

Perhaps most important of all, discussion of the issues raised by the survey questions had to be sharply curtailed because of the press of time. In my view, the consciousness-raising aim of the program would have been better served had there had been less discussion of individual scores and even, perhaps (heretical thought!) fewer questions—and more discussion of the social, ethical, and political issues that these questions raise. Surveys of racial attitudes are useful in monitoring the trend of race relations. But in my view, the R.A.C.E. program was not a helpful application of such a survey.

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there were no right or wrong answers, some scores should be called "high" and others "low." Horizontal ratings should have been employed, rather than vertical scores, and the activity should have been depicted as an exploratory exercise, not a test.

Second, the program suffered from question overload. There were 51 items on racial attitudes and 19 on number and form of interracial contacts. Many questions were made to appear superficial and trivial, since respondents were asked to provide "yes" or "no" answers to many complex issues in a short span of time. Since only the 51 "attitude" questions were used in the final results, the contact questions could have been omitted entirely. (Gumbel in fact asked the researchers why the contact questions were administered at all. Smith responded that the degree of racial contact is often a good predictor of equalitarian attitudes. Yet, responses on attitudes and contact were never related during the program.) Or, the total number of questions might have been cut in half, and the remaining attitude questions correlated with contact questions. (I have the impression that some such correlations were actually made—but ended up on the cutting floor because of time constraints.)

Third, although the program effectively used staged vignettes to at least elucidate various racial interactions, some of the clips were confused, and perhaps even in conflict with the program's purpose. For example, at the outset of the show, a vignette was used to assess attitudes toward affirmative action. It began by showing a black male giving instructions to a white female secretary. A white male interrupts the black male supervisor to ask if his report is completed. Finally, a second black man, "Mr. Dawson," appears and is warmly greeted in a deferential manner by both of the other men. The relationship of this scene to affirmative action is unclear. Were viewers supposed to believe that one or both of the black men obtained their positions through affirmative action? If so, the clip would reinforce the popular stereotype that most, if not all, blacks in high-level or supervisory positions obtained them not because of their abilities but because of affirmative action mandates.

Similarly, a subsequent video clip designed to assess attitudes toward crime showed two male customers entering a store. The second, a black man, robs the white male store owner at gunpoint and flees with the money. The survey tabulations revealed that both blacks and whites viewed this incident much the same way: in negative terms. However, since black men are often perceived as more "criminal prone," this video clip reinforced the stereotypes and fears many whites have about black criminality.

This video clip was shown on the first evening. Gumbel admitted on the second evening that a companion vignette had been prepared depicting a white criminal robbing a black storekeeper—but was not shown because of technical difficulties. If the second vignette could not be viewed, the first should have been left out as well. Since a major objective of the program was reducing popular racial myths, surely special precautions should have been taken to avoid feeding them.

Fourth, although the views of noted black and white personalities on various racial issues enhanced the show's impact, some of the video clips minimized contemporary prejudice and discrimination. For example, the reminiscences of Congressman Bill Gray and National Urban League President John Jacob focused on racial incidents that had occurred during their childhood—some 40 years ago. If a key purpose of the program was to encourage viewers to become more sensitive to racial inequities *today*, some of the black personalities should have been asked to provide examples of contemporary racial experiences—especially more subtle occurrences. The absence of recent episodes might lead many viewers to conclude that negative racial events are mainly of the past. If contemporary racial insensitivities are indeed rare, then why are such TV programs necessary?

Fifth, the program exhibited much ambivalence in its treatment of responses from blacks. Since most of the items on the R.A.C.E. test were designed to assess the "pro-equalitarian" attitudes of whites, blacks in general scored higher than whites. Thus, it was somewhat awkward to have blacks—such as Maya

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Angelou and Spike Lee—praised for receiving very high scores. At one point, Lee asked what he would get for “winning.” Moreover, the inclusion of black responses in the totals tended to overstate the liberalism of Americans. Some of the findings that were presented for all respondents should have been presented only for whites, for whom the items were designed.

THE NBC NEWS/WALL STREET JOURNAL POLL By Lois Timms-Ferrara

The *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News have hired Peter Hart and Associates and the Coldwater Corporation, headed up by Robert Teeter, to conduct their polling. The two major media firms have been conducting polls together since 1985. Until this summer NBC News had maintained a fully-staffed polling unit, but cost cutting has prompted the network to pursue other avenues.

Robert Teeter is best known for his work with Republican politicians, and Peter Hart with Democrats. The pairing of two pollsters of different partisan backgrounds to conduct research for a major television news network and national newspaper is unprecedented. According to Albert R. Hunt, Washington Bureau Chief at the *Wall Street Journal*, either firm could have been selected independent of the other. The choice to invite both firms was made to guard against any public perception of political imbalance in the *WSJ/NBC* polls. A spokeswoman for Coldwater Corporation said that Teeter was approached and asked if he would consider working on a joint effort with Hart. She added that their partisan differences would have little impact on the work they do together. Hart said he thinks the arrangement will work well, and that his political differences with Teeter will merely bring another positive dimension to the work.

As for the mechanics of the new collaboration, representatives from NBC News and the *Journal* will meet with Teeter and Hart to discuss the content of upcoming surveys. The two pollsters will then develop the questionnaire together. One of the firms will conduct all of the interviews for a particular survey and compile the numbers. Teeter and Hart will again meet to analyze the data and report on the results.

Hunt says to expect much of the same type of subject coverage in the new venture as in the earlier collaboration, with a slightly greater tilt toward economic questions. In addition to conducting polls that cover the fast-breaking news stories and some core questions that will be regularly monitored, NBC News and the *Journal* will be doing quarterly studies that concentrate on basic questions of economics, politics, social issues, and cultural-lifestyle matters.

The first Hart-Teeter survey was done September 16-19, with Hart responsible for the data collection. This study focused on the drug question and how Americans view various proposals to deal with it. Other subjects touched on by the survey included abortion, ratings of the president, ratings of Congress (performance and ethics), and views on professional sports betting.
