

Conducting Research That Makes a Difference

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Introduction

Can research make a difference in bringing about social change? My answer is: it depends on how well it is done. The purpose of this article will be to offer suggestions as to what to do, and what not to do, to increase the chances of research making a difference, and to provide examples of success or failure.

Doing good research has a particular meaning in this article. It is not necessarily the best design, most appropriate statistical analysis, or largest number of participants that is most important. Issues such as understanding your audience, asking the right questions, and choosing methods of communication are critical.

Understand Your Audience

This should be the first question posed by the social action researcher. Who do I wish to influence with my study? Is it university faculty? welfare recipients? state legislators? children? One would likely perform different kinds of studies, yielding different results, and present them differently to each of these audiences.

Let us use the topic of reducing prejudice as an example and discuss ways research has influenced the above audiences. As part of understanding an audience, one should appeal

to its self interests and choose data that will move the group in what you regard as a positive direction.

University faculty generally regard themselves as scholars and often are uncomfortable as social workers helping without an intellectual component. I have had success influencing faculty with scholarly, published research that demonstrates their racial attitudes in a way that meets rigorous challenges as to method, statistics, etc. (Sedlacek, 1994, 1995, 2004a). Publishing and presenting at meetings as "one of them" will increase the chances that most faculty will consider curricular change, better advising for students of color, or changes in campus activities.

Welfare recipients are not likely to be impressed with methodological issues but they are more likely to be influenced by examples and case studies of people like them. Thus, training counselors to provide individual or group counseling by using specific examples of other welfare recipients who followed certain paths can increase the chances that the clients will make the desired changes in their behavior. Changes such as following new welfare guidelines or securing employment are possible goals for the client. Such counseling could be seen as teaching welfare recipients to handle the prejudice that has been directed toward them by politicians, employers, and the general public. Learning to handle racism has been correlated with success for groups who experience prejudice (Sedlacek, 1996, 2004a,b).

State legislators are commonly influenced by what voters in their districts feel about an issue. By detailing popular support on an issue and by illustrating those positions with examples drawn from their constituents, legislators can be influenced. If possible, arrange

it so that politicians can take credit for being out in front on an issue and/or in initiating legislation. An example would be the recent concerns about affirmative action. Surveying constituents about being fair to all citizens and helping those who deserve a chance, combined with examples of people who have benefited in a given district, may influence legislators. Here, direct contact with legislators and dramatic examples will likely work best.

Children are often influenced by their peers and by what they see rather than by what others tell them. To reach this audience, a community theater group and a research office in a school district combined in an innovative program that made a difference. The research office checked the literature and did surveys in the elementary schools about the types of prejudice that were most likely to be seen and felt by the students. The theater group then developed skits and short plays around those themes. Students at various schools were recruited and included in the troupe. Students at each school where performances took place were also included. Surveys taken immediately afterward and some months later indicated that prejudice was reduced. Needs assessment and follow-up evaluation have been shown to be important parts of reducing prejudice in schools (Sedlacek, 2004a,b; Sedlacek and Brooks, 1976).

Define Research Broadly

Research can be defined as any systematic inquiry into a topic. The methods can be quantitative or qualitative, statistical or impressionistic, involving paper and pencil techniques, computer technology, interviews, artistic perspectives, or naturalistic observations. I would recommend using what works best given your audience and

available resources. If you have access to certain resources (e.g., a college research office, computers, financial resources) by all means use them. If not, use what you have.

One technique I like to employ with research students is to ask them to pose a research question and then give them one week to make observations in the school, community, campus etc. that they are studying and report back to the group on their conclusions.

One such student wanted to study community violence and its causes. For a week he chose to observe the events taking place in a part of the community where people often congregated. He made observations about the events preceding hostilities between groups and developed some preliminary answers to his question, which he used to devise additional studies on the topic. His method limited him to certain kinds of data and certain answers to questions, but he was engaging in research.

Focus your Research Question(s)

While we want to think broadly about our definitions of research, we want to be very specific about the question(s) we wish to answer. Generally, it is better to have only one or a few questions to be answered as opposed to trying to do too much in a single study. A clearer answer to one question is better than vague answers to many questions. Other studies can be done to answer other questions. Concentrating on fewer questions helps sharpen our goals and delineate what we want to learn.

Research questions can be categorized into one of three areas. Generally, results in one area do not answer questions well in the other area, and confusion on this point often works against the social action researcher.

The first research area is *information*. Anything factual such as demographic information, frequency counts of events, or correct answers to test items would fit here. The change agent often needs information to identify the issues or to know which way to go. At one time, learned people felt that earth, wind, fire, and water were the four elements in nature. Without research we would have no reason to think otherwise.

Sometimes information is compelling and results in immediate change. This is seldom true, however. The people and systems we are trying to change can often ignore or rationalize facts. Blacks prefer to live in certain neighborhoods, women cannot handle management responsibilities, welfare recipients are lazy, etc. Sound familiar?

Researchers have often assumed that the facts speak for themselves. Galileo assumed that once he presented his observations about the earth not being the center of the universe, the church would accept them. It did, but it was some 350 years later! Most of us would prefer a quicker response.

The second area for research questions is *attitudes*. Here any affective data concerning feelings, opinions, or perspectives is the focus of research and change. The link between attitudes and information is complex. Presenting information generally does not change feelings, but as part of a larger strategy the two may be linked. For example, in the stages of eliminating racism, colleagues and I have shown that information on cultural and racial differences and racism, followed by attitude measurement can lead to the desired reductions in racist or sexist behaviors (Sedlacek, 2004b; Sedlacek and Brooks 1976). But if you are interested in changes in feelings, do not confuse that with information or behavior. When one is trying to change attitudes among groups, several conditions are

required. First, all groups should view the negotiating conditions as favorable. Also, there should be equal power among the groups to affect the outcome and conditions for continued positive feelings should be developed (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). Doing assessments of feelings to determine the status of each of these conditions would be important in any attitude-change process. There is a method of measuring prejudice (Situational Attitude Scale) that can be applied to a variety of situations, using experimental and control forms of a questionnaire, and which can be useful here (Sedlacek, 1996, 2004a,b; Sedlacek, Troy and Chapman, 1976).

The third area of focus for research is *behavior*. Here is where we often wish to concentrate, but it is an area where it is difficult to get change, and where information and feelings commonly do not lead to behavior change. I feel it is best to concentrate on reinforcing people to engage in the desired behavior without necessarily getting them to understand the information behind it or to feel good about it. If you get legislators to sponsor legislation which will help your cause, let the legislators do it for their reasons, not yours. If a university can increase its population of students of color by using different admissions procedures, do not worry about school officials not understanding the issues. Concentrate on research which will achieve the desired behavioral outcomes.

Thus, in developing research question(s) one should generally pick one of the three areas (information, attitudes, or behavior), focus the question(s) to be answered, and not look for change in other areas. It is very difficult to answer questions in more than one area in one study.

Control the Turf

One valuable function research can serve in achieving social change is to control the area(s) where you wish to hold the argument or debate. Too often, counseling professionals react defensively to conditions set up by others. We are told that the situation is a certain way and we feel that we have to counter what those in control of the system have set forth. By doing research, we can gain some power and put those in charge on the defensive by causing them to respond to our results. For instance, by providing information on how early detection of HIV/AIDS can save governments and insurance companies money, one can increase the chances of better treatment for the individuals involved.

An important part of social change is defining the issues one wishes to argue. Research can help do this.

The Long Term View

One use of research is to provide an examination of issues over time in some relatively constant manner. Longitudinal studies involve following the same people or organizations over time to see how they change. This allows the change agent to avoid emotional context or "a quick-fix" which may not solve the problem. For example, I have done longitudinal studies of university students before and after matriculation. This has allowed me to observe the development of students of different races and groups and to provide others with some ideas on how developmental needs vary by race, culture, and gender. This has led to broader concepts and approaches to understanding student needs which are not apparent in an immediate crisis (Sedlacek, 1996, 2004b). I have also used this approach to study a university over time to see how it has reacted to issues (Sedlacek,

1995). Without an historical and a projected futuristic context, it is easier to overreact to immediate concerns. If we do not understand the past we are "condemned to repeat it".

Here is a place where quantitative and qualitative methods are useful. We can track numbers of students, their attitudes, graduation rates, etc., quantitatively, but we can also qualitatively explore the stories and issues behind the numbers. Public radio in the United States has used a qualitative approach to helping us understand the Civil Rights Movement by presenting smaller, more intimate stories of heretofore mostly unknown people who made contributions to civil rights. The program was called "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" Most of the bigger stories and quantitative information have already been available. This should deepen our understanding of the issues and help those concerned with change in this area to be able to increase their chances of making deeper, more lasting changes in the future.

It is also possible to conduct a series of cross-sectional studies to observe change over time: for instance, doing studies of people in a given community every five years. The information they have about recycling their used materials, their feelings about it, as well as their behavior, are all possible uses of research for social change. It is also a reminder that there are many methods that can be used to answer the same question.

We developed a method of dealing with hate incidents on campus in a constructive manner using research information as an important step in the process (Schlosser and Sedlacek, 2001). We found that a common pattern in examples of hate letters, emails, graffiti, speech, etc. was that the incident caused a great upset among some or many for a relatively short period of time but no constructive change emerged, and the next incident

produced similar reactions. To break this pattern we circulated correct information about the incident from sources available such as newspapers, police reports and interviews. This reduced rumors and made use of the information function in research. As a next step we conducted discussions of the incident around the campus in the context of research available from the campus and the larger literature. By doing this we were dealing with the affective and behavioral aspects of research. Thus, we were able to provide a developmental context for helping people to process the incident, decide what actions needed to be taken, and reduce the chances that similar incidents would occur again.

Become the Source

By providing research results over a period of time, one can become a reliable source of data. Part of being a reliable source is to provide data that are fair and honest and not always slanted in a certain direction. As you watch the evening news, whose results are you more apt to trust; a study done by a neutral party or one from a political party or a drug company? You should share results regardless of the outcome. By asking the right questions and putting them in a context useful for the change you wish to bring about, you can give the data the best chance to be used as you wish. However, research that is preconceived as to outcomes means suppressing undesirable results, thus compromising your role as the source of reliable data.

The head of a state counseling association had done a study showing that 25% of elementary school students were interested in some form of counseling. He was trying to influence counseling legislation in the state. However, he considered not using the data since 75% of the students were not interested. However, his advisors suggested he

translate that 25% into actual numbers of students needing counseling, emphasizing the need for state legislators to trust the state counseling association to give them the truth.

The strategy worked and the state passed some favorable legislation.

It is probably more important to be perceived as a reliable source, rather than an unreliable one, whether or not it is true, if one's goal is social change. However, it is possible to have both perception and reality by providing data on a topic that have been useful to your audience over time.

An example of this is provided by research that I carried out at the University of Maryland for many years. When the University was faced with a lawsuit challenging its scholarship program for African American undergraduates (Banneker Scholarship Case), the University administrators looked about for help in defending against the lawsuit. My colleagues and I were the only viable source of long-term information on the racial climate at the school, so I became an "expert witness".

The research provided four major types of evidence to document the University's racial climate. Most of the documentation was available from empirical articles in professional journals and internal campus research reports even before the lawsuit was initiated. The first type of research-generated evidence included numerous descriptive studies on the needs, problems, and interests of African American students on the campus. Many of these studies concluded that African Americans had unique problems and needs, including the need for more African American faculty and staff, and help in dealing with a hostile campus climate. Much of the data here were informational.

A second type of research study focused on retention and identified a series of variables that correlated with the success of African American students. The variables that were identified were "noncognitive" and included an ability to handle racism, developing a racial/cultural community on campus, and engaging in realistic self-appraisal despite the hostile environment. Many of the research articles were behavioral and suggested things that the school could do to reduce racism on campus (Sedlacek, 2004b).

A third type of study examined the attitudes of Whites toward African Americans on campus over a period of years. These studies generally showed that despite increasing numbers of African Americans and programs for them, Whites still had basically negative attitudes toward Blacks which were largely unchanged over the 25-year period (Balenger, Hoffman, and Sedlacek, 1992).

The fourth type of research evidence was an historical analysis of the campus newspaper, again over a 25-year period. Examples of negative incidents involving African Americans were counted and cataloged. The result of this effort showed a continuous stream of examples depicting a negative racial climate for African American students and faculty/staff. The examples provided information, and attitude and behavioral data (Hill and Sedlacek, 1994).

So what happened in the case? The University eventually lost the case after two rounds in the circuit and appellate courts (Sedlacek, 1995). However, here is where an understanding of audience was useful. While I would have liked to have seen the University win the case, I was also trying to change the University. By the University using the research on racial climate and acknowledging the existence of the issues

affecting African American students, I had achieved a goal that I had been working on for many years. As one top administrator put it after the University had won a round in court; "I was glad we won but I wish we didn't have to admit we were racist to do it."

Such thinking has led the University to assume more responsibility for programs in the scholarship and diversity areas which may not have been possible before the case.

Up the Conceptual Ladder

Research can help move conceptions of the problem to a higher level. An example, in which a community solved a pollution problem, might be illustrative.

A town was struggling with the quality of its water supply; several years of trying different treatments was not working. After some research, it was clear that the pollution was being caused by factors outside the community, including industrial waste disposal upriver, runoff of chemicals from farms, and soil leeching from timber-cutting policies. Armed with data from their studies the researchers were able to influence some politicians from several states to adopt some regional programs. Without these broader concepts provided by data there was little hope of understanding what needed to be done to provide clean water in the town.

In the Banneker Scholarship case discussed above, theories of racial identity (Helms, 1992) and eliminating racism (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976) were used to organize the information in the case to show how types of data influenced one another. The arguments in the case included some concepts that were more likely to result in change as opposed to presenting the issue as a molecular series of unrelated incidents. The scientific

principle of induction suggests that we integrate the information we have into the broadest concepts to explain the results.

Stick to Your Principles

It is easy to lose track of one's goals when engaging in social change research. I have a colleague to whom more than one person has told that they were confused by her positions on certain issues. They thought she was "on their side." She usually explains that she tends to go where the data take her. Sometimes there is agreement with a position of a given person, sometimes not. If we start supporting people or organizations, rather than issues, we are less likely to accomplish our social change goals.

In the Banneker Scholarship case, I worked out a set of principles to guide my activities in the case and explained them to the lawyers and University officials involved.

The first principle was to be helpful to the lawyers. Rather than to be self-righteous or guided solely by what any change agent with this unique opportunity might like to say, I attempted to put the research in a context that would be optimally useful to the lawyers. Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) noted that it is important for a social change agent to concentrate on what works, not what one would like to see work.

This principle was followed by concentrating work on the most salient issues for the case. It was tempting to comment on many issues not directly raised by the research, but an approach that focused on key research results seemed to have a better chance of being helpful to the lawyers and of making my contribution count.

For instance, there was evidence available indicating problems for students and faculty in racial/cultural groups other than African Americans or Latino/as (e.g., Arabs, international students, Jews, women, gays). Rather than to try to tie together issues affecting these groups into broader issues, I focused on the more narrow issues in the case.

The second principle was to use the opportunity to reduce the racism against African Americans at the University. Racism was defined as policies or procedures (formal or informal) in an organization that result in negative outcomes for members of a certain group (e.g., African Americans) just because they are members of that group (Sedlacek, 2004b; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). Results, not intentions, are what mattered using this definition. The lawyers would have preferred a less forceful term to describe the problems faced by African Americans at the University, but adhering to this principle required defining racism and using the term in reports to the court.

Presenting the research in language the lawyers and a judge could interpret in legal terms while adhering to the second principal was a challenge. In reports to the court, I followed the second principle by concluding that there currently was racism against African Americans at the University and that there had been for some time. I also concluded that the scholarship program should be maintained exclusively for African Americans since it would take several, if not many, generations for African Americans to see the University as a comfortable place for them and their children to attend. Recruiting and retaining successful African American students was an important part of that process. The

University needed to show its commitment to this goal by sticking with its programs, not by backing off under pressure.

The third principle was that racism against Latino/as be reduced at the University. Many Latino/as resented what they perceived as more attention to the problems of African Americans rather than to those of Latino/as on campus. Latino/as also struggled with racism and prejudice from non-Latino/as (White & Sedlacek, 1987). Many Latino/as watched with suspicion as they waited to see how the University would respond to the case.

I followed the third principle by calling for more University programs, including scholarships for Latino/as, in order to counter all forms of racism. Latino/as have unique needs and should not be lumped together with other groups or students in general. Research on campus had shown that a major difficulty for Latino/a students was deciding when to seek out programs for Latino/as and when to use general programs (Fuentes, Sedlacek, & Westbrook, 1989). Helping students in that process could be an important counseling/advocacy service to offer.

As often happens in a lawsuit, both sides decided to focus on a more limited legal point. Consequently, the Latino/a issue was dropped from the case. The lawsuit concentrated on whether to continue the scholarships for African Americans or to open them to all students. By indirectly avoiding the issue of Latino/as, this outcome could be interpreted as a racist position by the University. For example, the University could be seen as concerned with African American issues only, and that Latino/a issues were not important. This could have negative consequences for Latino/as seeking to reduce the

racism engaged in by the University against them. Nevertheless, I did raise this issue in reports to the lawyers and the University, and the institution has initiated plans for several new programs for Latino/as.

The final guiding principle was maintaining personal integrity. The probability of encountering serious role-conflicts was very high. It was important to make decisions based on the best course, rather than what was politically correct or expedient.

This principle was implemented by avoiding opportunistic behavior and by concentrating on doing what seemed best overall. The University was going through a series of budget reductions at the time and was anxious to improve its relationship with the citizens in its state. Departments within the University were vying for favor with the administration by suggesting that they were the diversity "experts" or that they had something special to offer African Americans, Latino/as, the University in general, or the case in particular. By putting the goal of social change first, I hoped that I would have the best chance of contributing to the reduction of racism at the school in the long run.

Patience and Persistence

Any social change activity requires time and persistence. If one thing does not work, try another. The research component in social change also requires time and many attempts. As noted in many of the examples above, change took place slowly with help from many studies. Do not be discouraged by this. See each study as standing on its own and supporting key points you wish to make. However, also view that research as fitting into a mosaic -- as one piece of a larger puzzle. Bigger gains can sometimes come from

interconnected studies. However, smaller gains lead to bigger ones. Do not go for it all too soon; be content with a smaller gain that moves your issue forward. Those who follow you can benefit from your work. Small victories attract allies and deter opponents (Weick, 1984).

In the Banneker case, I, students and colleagues did research for many years that came together in that case. A number of those earlier studies resulted in changes in student services and academic programs, including admissions policies, counseling programs, cultural activities, and multicultural courses offered (Sedlacek & Brooks, 1973; Roper & Sedlacek, 1988; Sedlacek, 2004a,b). The culmination of the studies affected the University in a broader way and moved its leadership to see diversity as one of the school strengths, with resulting program funding.

The Gates Millennium Scholars (GMS) program set out an ambitious and socially important series of goals for itself. Scholarships are provided to financially needy African Americans, Native Americans, Latino/a Americans, or Asian Americans who are, or will be, studying mathematics, science, engineering, education, or library science. Applicants are required to be eligible for Pell Grants as a way of determining that they are in financial need, and awards cover all educational expenses at whatever institution the student is attending. It is a one billion dollar program funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation covering 20 years. Scholars are selected on their academic potential by demonstrating their abilities in ways other than the more traditional standardized tests and prior grades. The noncognitive variables mentioned above, which were developed in numerous studies conducted by me, students, and colleagues over more than 35 years are

used as the primary method of selecting Gates Millennium Scholars (Sedlacek, 2004b). When one of my students asked me "How did you get a gig like that?" I answered "Because we had completed and published the research on noncognitive variables that were fairer to students of color than traditional measures. Therefore, when the Gates Foundation was looking for some alternative measures that fit their program, they were available." Previously, that same student had expressed doubt that doing research ever seemed to make a difference in changing anything. At this writing, over 7,000 GMS students are attending more than 900 different institutions in the U.S. with a Grade Point Average of 3.25 on a 4 point scale (Sedlacek, 2004a,b; Sedlacek and Sheu, in press,a,b). That skeptical student has now finished school and is actively engaged in research. Patience and persistence.

Conclusion

I have attempted to discuss how research can play a vital role in social change. Research alone can not bring about change, but dedicated professionals armed with good goals, good data, and some guiding principles can make a difference. We face many problems in our society, and there are many things that counseling professionals can do about them. Let us continue.

There are a number of references available in this publication and elsewhere on doing various types of research. References I would recommend that were not discussed above include: Denzin and Lincoln (1994), García, Hudgins, McTighe Musil, Nettles, Sedlacek, & Smith (2001), Isaac and Michael (1995), LaMahieu, Gitomer, & Eresch (1995), and Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, Sechrest and Grove (1981).

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