practice closer together will not eliminate the possibility that such a conflict might arise in some contexts, our efforts could refocus attention on the idea that LaPiere recognized that scientific integrity can correspond to the values that give studies like his their relevance.

Conflict of interest: None declared.

References
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‘dark-skinned people’ in both France and England. In what might have had some bearing on the subsequent study, LaPiere also questioned hotel proprietors about their racial acceptance policies and notes a conversation with an Indian student in England who mentioned that he himself had never had much difficulty finding hotel accommodation.

Perhaps as befits someone who produced fiction as well as academic writing, both articles are written in a clear and vivid style. The 1934 article, however, is clearly superior in terms of the narrative skill with which LaPiere weaves together the methodological details of the study and its theoretical importance with the story of the trip and the couple’s reception in the lodgings they encountered along the way. What this narrative also conveys, however, is a sense of the ‘opportunistic’ character of the research and the data emerging from it. LaPiere leads the reader to see how, stage by stage, the trip, the nightly stops, his own role, the responses of hotel staff and the later elicitation of attitudinal data all build together to produce a persuasive picture of the relationship between attitudes and actions, hypothesized and actual.

Methodological opportunism involves the conscious and explicit exploitation of occasions to collect data relevant to a particular research question not necessarily originally envisaged as part of the research design. (Although this is not an issue to be discussed here, it might be supposed that recent trends towards increased prior ethical scrutiny of research are likely to have discouraged work of this kind.) The opportunistic use of data, often through the combination of different methods, and with a preference for behavioural data found or captured in everyday settings, has, of course, been championed by Webb et al. in their writing on ‘unobtrusive methods’. Webb et al. echo LaPiere in challenging the assumption that an understanding of peoples’ actions are, as Allan Kellehear puts it, ‘best gained through talk—a sometimes direct, sometimes subtle, interrogation of experience, attitude and belief’. Putting succinctly the grounds for that challenge, Webb et al. comment: ‘Interviews and questionnaires intrude as a foreign element into the social setting they would describe, they create as well as measure attitudes, they elicit atypical role and response, they are limited to those who are accessible and who will cooperate, and the responses obtained are produced in part by dimensions of individual differences irrelevant to the topic at hand’.6

Just as LaPiere was disturbed by the rapidity with which the attitudinal questionnaire gained ground in the 1930s, Webb et al. in raising a standard for unobtrusive methods lamented what they saw as the ‘overdependence’ of social scientists on interviews and questionnaires. Much more recently, David Silverman has argued that we now live in an ‘interview society’ in which interviewing as a method for eliciting information has become ubiquitous, not just in research but in the media, professional life, employment situations and all kinds of therapeutic encounters. Although one can be sceptical of some claims to the ubiquity of verbal reports, it can be argued that, historically, their privileging of what people say as a preferred form of data is consistent with long-term cultural trends shaping contemporary subjectivities.

Such trends tend to be seen as ineradicable. Indeed, this is usually the justification for resistance to them. In recent years, however, novel possibilities have arisen with the advent of new information technologies. While the research potential of the ‘Web’ is no longer news, newer methods, especially those associated with spatial and mobile technologies, increasingly make accessible new forms and types of data and analytic strategies. They also make easier the management of multiple sources of data. Some of this is likely to encourage a rebalancing of research methods away from an over-reliance on self-report. In addition, the advent of novel sources of data and methods for their management create considerable scope for methodological opportunism. In everyday life, opportunism is hardly regarded as a positive quality. In research, turning opportunity to analytic advantage, as LaPiere did, is a mark of creativity and wisdom.

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References