Latino Children and Families in the United States

Current Research and Future Directions

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11

The Challenges and Rewards of Conducting Ethnic Minority Research

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The authors of this chapter are clinical psychology graduate students at Kent State University, Kent, OH, who participated in the 2000 Kent Psychology Forum. The views presented in this chapter developed out of discussion sessions with researchers and community representatives doing research and clinical or community work with Latino families and children.

Methodological issues regarding research with ethnic minorities, particularly Latinos, were addressed by many of the presenters during the forum. For example, investigators discussed the use of behavioral observations over traditional paper-and-pencil measures to better capture mother–infant interactions; the use of qualitative designs and methods, such as focus groups, to better assess culturally specific phenomena and behaviors; and the importance of measurement equivalency in research with ethnic minorities. Discussion by those in attendance also emphasized the dissatisfaction with the current state of research on Latinos. There was some agreement among participants that some ethnic minority research is assumed to be of poorer quality than studies on "mainstream" populations. Although irritation with these blanket statements was expressed, there was also acknowledgment of the legitimate criticism of some of the work that is poorly conducted. It was discussed that some of the available research is inadequately designed and executed so that the obtained results may be difficult to interpret. It was acknowledged that although conducting meaningful research with Latino populations is difficult, taking the time to plan and execute a study adequately would ultimately aid in answering the research questions and make a more useful contribution to the literature. Because of the challenges involved in conducting ethnic minority

research, the goal of this chapter is to provide comments and recommendations to other graduate students who, like us, are initiating a career in ethnic minority research. We hope that these comments and recommendations will also prove useful to established researchers who are considering expanding their research programs to include ethnic minority populations.

IMPORTANCE OF ETHNIC MINORITY RESEARCH

The number of ethnic minorities in the United States is significantly augmenting with each passing year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). For this reason, it is becoming increasingly imperative to make efforts to study non-White segments of the U.S. population. A way to understand specific minority groups is to conduct research to uncover normal developmental processes among specific cultural groups. Ethnic minority populations face unique psychological issues that need to be addressed and better understood. Examples of such issues include acculturation and bilingualism, parenting strategies that are based on the culture's specific values and socialization goals, a culture's view of therapy and mental health, varying incidence rates of some types of psychopathology including developmental delays, and culturally specific presentation of psychopathology.

Some researchers think that, for the most part, they do not have to be bothered with issues that concern ethnic minority individuals. Some state that they do not plan on working with minority populations so there is no need for them to learn about such individuals and cultures. Others may shy away from working with these populations because of the difficulties involved. Although it is unfair and unrealistic to expect any researcher to become an expert in working with every minority population in the United States, it is also true that researchers will likely need to include participants from ethnic minority populations in their research sample. To address this issue, one idea that circulated at the forum was that of developing cultural competence. Generally, cultural competence refers to a general attitude or approach in which every individual is viewed within his/her cultural context (American Psychological Association, 1993; Arredondo et al., 1996) The importance of cultural competence in psychology has been further highlighted by the creation of the National Institute of Health Strategic Research Plan to Reduce and Ultimately Eliminate Health Disparities among minority populations (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2000). This plan is designed to address differences in factors such as progression of diseases and incidence of mental health problems among ethnic minority populations as compared to the White population.

Another reason why research with ethnic minority populations is so vital is that many of the variables that have been of interest to psychology historically can be influenced by cultural factors. For example, in a study of Puerto Rican versus Anglo mothers, Harwood, Schoelmerich, Schultz, & Gonzalez (1999) discovered that child-rearing strategies corresponded to specific cultural constructs. Whereas Anglo mothers were more likely to provide children with opportunities that allow them to learn for themselves, Puerto Rican mothers were more likely to teach children through direct exercise of parental authority. These strategies corresponded to the parent's respective individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientation. This study demonstrates that we can gain more understanding of the psychological construct if we study its cultural variation. It is only by studying individuals of various cultural backgrounds that we can truly begin to discover culturally invariant and culturally specific effects.

Ethnic minority research is invaluable not only because it lends to a better understanding of the populations involved but also because it contributes to a better understanding of research methodology in other areas as well. Other researchers may experience some of the same challenges experienced when conducting ethnic minority research. Therefore, the techniques and methodologies that are developed for the study of ethnic minority populations can be successfully applied to other research areas.

A recommendation made at the forum was to use qualitative research techniques to increase our understanding of the cultural issues that affect psychological phenomena. Sometimes the importance of qualitative design is overshadowed by quantitative methodology, as shown by the smaller number of qualitative research publications. However, when working with ethnic minority populations, relying on purely quantitative designs might not be enough because cultural effects on psychological constructs may still be misunderstood. For example, in test construction one must understand the construct as it is manifested in a particular population before an instrument can be developed to measure the construct. Qualitative techniques could prove useful in exploring such under-researched constructs.

Many of the qualitative methods discussed at the forum are not taught in psychology graduate programs. Because of their importance in minority research, we have decided to include an overview of some of these methods here in order to provide a starting point for those considering using them. Specifically, we present a summary of Morgan's guidelines (1997) for focus group research and a description of translation methodology. These two methods were described on various occasions throughout the forum owing to their relevance to the issues we have just described. Focus group methodology is useful in exploring under-researched areas. Translation methodology is important because ethnic minority populations may not speak English.

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is a structured, moderated interview that relies on interaction and sharing among group members to generate data in the form of ideas, insight, and perceptions about the topic supplied by the researcher (Morgan, 1997). Such data would be less accessible in an individual setting. An easier

way to understand the purpose of focus groups is to think of them as lying between naturalistic observation and individual interview techniques. In general, focus groups serve several purposes. They can be used to elicit information about new topics, explain unexpected results, generate new hypotheses, evaluate instruments or programs, develop survey items, or explain, in-depth, the attitudes and beliefs of a specific population (Asbury, 1995; Dawson, Manderson, & Tallo, 1993; Morgan, 1997). Thus, the focus group methodology is invaluable when researching cultural issues in psychology, especially if these have been under studied.

The Function of a Focus Group

There are three basic uses for a focus group. First, it can be a self-contained method that has the ability to generate data as a sufficient body of knowledge. In this capacity, the focus group serves as the principal source of data similar to an individual interview. Second, focus groups can be used as supplementary sources of data in studies using primarily quantitative methodology. For example, the focus group data may help to generate instrument items or assist in outcome evaluation. Finally, focus groups can be used as part of a multimethod qualitative study in which there are no primary methods of gathering data. In this capacity, focus groups add to the data that have been gathered via other qualitative techniques such as participant observation or individual interviews. All of these were acknowledged in different conversations at the Kent Forum.

The strength of the focus group, as compared to quantitative methods, is the reliance on group interaction to produce concentrated amounts of data. Focus groups allow for an unbiased presentation of participants' points of view without the investigator leading them or imposing his or her own point of view. The group interaction offers insight into complex behaviors and interactions in a more time-efficient manner as compared to, for example, individual interviews (Morgan, 1997). Other strengths of the focus group technique include the ability to stimulate group communication and the flexibility to explore new attitudes that emerge during the group process that were not anticipated by the researcher (Dawson et al., 1993). Focus group research may be indispensable when attempting to understand relatively unstudied populations. Such research allows investigators to explore constructs that may be culture specific or to clarify any preconceived ideas regarding a particular ethnic group. Furthermore, a focus group's "flexibility" makes it central to increasing the quality and interest of ethnic minority research.

Although it may appear that focus groups could be the research tool of preference in ethnic minority research, researchers need to be aware that the use of focus groups is not without its problems. Some weaknesses of this method include the likelihood that socially desirable responses are elicited, the inability to explore private attitudes that may be socially stigmatized, and

the possible controlling influence a person or persons in the group might have on other participants' abilities to discuss issues freely (Dawson et al., 1993; Morgan, 1997).

Although there is discussion of focus groups in the literature, there seems to be limited sources of how to plan, conduct, and analyze focus groups. The following sections will discuss these.

Planning a Focus Group

Researchers who have discussed this stage of the method (Côté-Arsenault & Morrison-Beedy, 1999; Morgan, 1997; Seal, Bogart, & Ehrhardt, 1998) state that to plan for a focus group there has to be a clear statement of the study goals. These will determine the questions or topics to be discussed in the group. Ethical concerns, such as the confidentiality of recorded data, and logistical and budget preparations also need to be considered at this stage. Of particular importance at this stage is the discussion of recruitment strategies. These issues range from recommendations for over recruitment, to control for cancellations and no-shows to reminders to participants.

Conducting a Focus Group

Several rules of thumb have been proposed for conducting focus groups (Morgan, 1997). First, groups should be composed of strangers who share characteristics of importance to the research. Strangers are chosen over acquaintances because of possible confounding effects that might be present in groups composed of friends. Groups should then be segmented or divided in regard to different demographic variables (e.g. sex, age, ethnicity) in order to allow relevant between-group analyses. The language used in the interview is also of importance, especially with a Latino group. The researcher should divide groups based on language abilities and preferences to account for differences in bilingualism. Spanish-speaking moderators should be available to conduct groups when the participants are not fluent in English. Spanish-speaking groups should always be presented as an option in order to ensure that participants feel open to communicate and feel as comfortable as possible.

Second, the group moderator should be highly involved and flexible while also providing a relatively structured interview. There are times when less structure is appropriate, especially if the goal of the focus group is one of topic exploration. Third, groups should be composed of 6 to 10 participants. Discussions may be difficult to sustain if groups have less than six participants. Groups of more than 10 participants may be difficult to control. Finally, it is recommended that there be a total of three to five focus groups per project to allow for between-group analyses.

The interview content should be organized into a guide prior to the group (Morgan, 1997). One common approach is to base this guide directly on the

questions that will be discussed. It is recommended that two broad questions or topics be used in more unstructured groups. Four or five topics or questions with preplanned probes are recommended for use in more structured groups. As previously mentioned, even though adherence to the guide is recommended, the moderator should be flexible enough to probe into areas as needed. The total duration of a focus group should be set at 90 minutes, but two hours should be allowed in case the discussion lasts longer.

Several steps should be taken at the initial phase of each focus group (Morgan, 1997): The group should begin with an introduction by the moderator that includes a general overview of the focus group goals and a description of the ground rules (e.g., one person speaks at a time; no side conversations). Icebreakers should be used after the introduction in order for everyone to feel at ease, get to know each other, and set the mood of the group. Discussion starters should be used next. These are questions that everyone should be able to easily respond to that present the basic topic of the focus group and open the discussion for the group as a whole. Discussion starters give each participant the chance to provide some short, meaningful response or opening statement. After all participants have given their responses, the first substantive question or topic should be presented.

Coding the Data

After the focus group is completed, the moderator should take field notes of the interview. These will be used in addition to transcripts of the session as the source of data that will be coded. Morgan (1997) stated that it is important to understand that the unit of analysis in focus group coding is composed of an interplay between what individuals do in the group and the group as a whole. He explains that the three most common ways of coding the data are (a) coding all mentions of a given variable (b) whether each individual participant mentioned a given variable; and (c) whether each group's discussion contained a given variable.

Knodel (1993) recommended four steps in the development of codes once the transcripts are ready for review. The first step is to develop an initial set of codes that correspond to the focus group guide. Secondly, the researcher should develop codes for topics that arise and are of special interest but were not mentioned in the guide. Third, a list of non-substantive codes that will be of particular help in the analysis and a write-up should be developed. Examples of these are codes that mark a reaction to the moderator that appear to bias participants in later discussions. Finally, after the first three steps are performed, another detailed and more specific set of codes should be developed. This set will consist of shorter text segments that became more relevant to the analysis during the first code mapping. Once the codes are constructed, the data can be analyzed qualitatively by exploring the themes that emerged or quantitatively by counting the codes.

TRANSLATIONS

Another important issue in conducting research with ethnic minorities is language translation. Paying closer attention to the language that we use in our test constructions/translations is vital because inaccurate language translations can misconvey information and lead to erroneous conclusions. Thus, accurate language translations are part of the eternal quest for good science. In addition, among Latinos, accurate language translation is needed because this helps ensure that individuals who represent the range of acculturation levels in the United States will be recruited. That is, if a measure is only administered in English, the variability of the Latino sample that is recruited is reduced and generalizability of the results to other Latinos, who may be Spanish dominant, is limited. Furthermore, in the absence of reliable translations, obtained differences may be erroneously attributed to cultural variations, instead of dissimilarities in the translation (Erkut, Alarcón, García Coll, Tropp, & Vázquez García, 1999). Thus bias, defined as an unwanted source of variance, can be introduced and subsequently cannot be disregarded as random error (Malpass & Poortinga, 1973).

Given these grave ramifications, what steps can we take to ensure an accurate translation? The first step is to collaborate with a competent translator(s) who is bilingual and bicultural. That is, a native background ipso facto cannot be assumed to be indicative of bilingualism and biculturality. Thus, efforts are needed to identify truly bilingual and bicultural translators. For example, specific questions should be asked about the number of years of language instruction and previous translation experience. In addition, a sample of previous work should be obtained, as well as a list of references. To assess biculturality, the researcher may choose to administer one of a number of new scales that have been developed to assess level of acculturation (Cortés, Rogler, & Malgady, 1994; Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995).

However, because of the time and cost involved in these ventures, many will be tempted to avail themselves of a friend, family member, or another graduate student to perform the translation in lieu of a professional translator. Yet, remember that the quality of the translation will only be as good as the quality of the translator, and that at the very least, the person's translation skills, level of vocabulary, and grammatical skills should be informally assessed. In addition, given these requirements, it is also recommended that the investigator not serve as her/his own translator because this may introduce bias. However, if this is the only option available, the investigator should forward the translated work to be checked for the reliability of the translation, grammatical errors, and ease of understanding.

Once a translator has been identified, the investigator should explain to the translator the purposes of the study, clarify the hypotheses, and discuss with the translator the constructs that he/she is trying to assess. This is because a number of decisions will be made regarding the translation, and, thus, it is essential

that the translator understands the rationale of the study (Brislin, 1973). The translator, in conjunction with the investigator, may then opt for a direct or concept-driven translation.

Direct and Concept-Driven Translations

In a direct translation there is a literal transcription of the text. Although on face value, this would appear to be the most accurate translation, and indeed it is the most frequently used translation method (Sperber, DeVellis, & Boehlecke, 1994), this method has a number of problems. For example, although a word might be directly translated from one language to another, there is no guarantee that the two words convey the same meaning or that the desired construct is assessed (Erkut et al., 1999). Therefore, although direct translations can be technically accurate they can inadvertently introduce bias (Brislin, 1973).

Instead, translated words should be chosen because they are comparable in meaning, affect, and familiarity (Erkut et al., 1999). This, however, may be difficult to achieve. Translators may be reluctant to use everyday language in their translations because they wish to produce a flawless, and technically accurate, document. As a result, more refined forms of speech may be chosen that may inadvertently introduce an education bias (Erkut et al., 1999). For example, although welfare benefits may be translated in Spanish as *beneficios del gobierno* (government benefits), it is more readily recognizable, at least among low-income participants who receive this service, as *welfea*. This is particularly true among urban Puerto Ricans. This word should then be chosen over the more grammatically correct *beneficios del gobierno*, or at the very least should be placed in parentheses and used as a clarifier in the text (for other examples, see Erkut et al., 1999). That is, efforts should be made to translate materials into everyday language with the knowledge that regional and ethnic differences will affect what constitutes such language. For example, although among Mexicans the word *horita* means "now," it means "later" among Puerto Ricans.

Because of the stated problems associated with direct translation, concept-driven translations have grown in popularity. In concept-driven translations, the emphasis is on creating a translation that conveys the constructs assessed. Yet, because concept-driven translations are not as precise as direct translations, some investigators are reluctant to choose this method. Once the investigator has chosen the type of translation that will be done, direct or concept driven, the following two methods may be used to perform the actual translation.

Back-Translation

By far the most popular method employed has been back-translation (Brislin, 1970, 1973; Werner & Campbell, 1970). With this strategy, one person, or a team, translates the measures from the source language (usually English) into the target language. During this process, meticulous notes are made regarding the translation process. For example, Brislin (1973) recommended

that translators identify which items were difficult to translate, which were modified to obtain cultural rather than linguistic equivalence, which required grammatical modification, and which contained idioms. Once this initial translation is completed, a different person or team translates this version back into the source language. Discrepancies between the two language versions are resolved through decentering.

Decentering is a process whereby the source and target versions are modified to ensure a reliable translation such that no vernacular language is the center of the translation (Brislin, 1970). Pilot data may also be gathered to ensure the validity of the translations. Back-translation with decentering is thought to be better than direct translation (Erkut et al., 1999). Brislin (1970, 1973) presented suggestions for a successful translation when choosing or creating a measure in the source (English) language that will be translated into a target language. Some of these include the use of short simple sentences that are no more than 16 words long, the use of the active voice and avoidance of the passive tense, and the repetition of nouns instead of pronouns since pronouns may be difficult to translate.

Despite the popularity of back-translation, a number of criticisms have been leveled against this method (Bontempo, 1993, Olmedo, 1981). Specifically, because the concepts and wording of the scale are principally developed in the source (English) language, measurement equivalence—the extent to which the language versions assess the same underlying construct—cannot be assumed. In addition, this method can be cumbersome with multilingual studies (Sechrest, Fay, & Hafeez Zaidi, 1972). Furthermore, although the semantic structure of Indo-European languages (e.g., Danish, French, German, Italian, Spanish) may be similar to English, this is not true with other languages (e.g., Hebrew, Japanese) (Hulin, 1987), and thus back-translation may be difficult with these languages.

Dual-Focus Approach

Because of these problems, a new method has recently been developed (Erkut et al., 1999). The dual-focus approach draws from Triandis' (1976) distinction between etic (universal) and emic (culture-bound) constructs and suggests that in constructing a translation, etic concepts are operationalized in each culture using emic concepts whose validity may be culture bound (Erkut et al., 1999). The steps for this type of translation are (a) the collaboration of research teams (ethnic and nonethnic members) to jointly define the problem for investigation; (b) an investigation, from an etic and emic perspective, of the concepts to be studied; (c) the creation of specific items to measure these concepts; and (d) the initiation of focus groups, both bilingual and monolingual, to finalize the translations. Once such steps are completed, the measure is evaluated for psychometric proprieties. With this method, English and Spanish become the target languages, and the translators and community members in the focus groups are an inherent part of the study.

This procedure, however, is much more labor intensive and more concept driven than back-translation.

Whichever method is chosen, measurement equivalence must be demonstrated once the data has been collected. For a description of how to evaluate the equivalency of measures for use in diverse populations, the reader is referred to Chapter 8 of this volume. In summary, it is no longer sufficient to have a simple direct translation performed by a close associate and expect this translation to serve as an official translation. As researchers, we must make sure the proper steps are followed when asked to translate scales and when we begin to devise our own measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS

Researchers could take several steps to gain the skills to conduct culturally competent research. The following are some recommendations we have based on discussions at the forum and our own experiences.

One recommendation is additional education and training in areas that could increase our understanding of different cultures. For example, given that Latinos will soon become the largest minority population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) and that many of them are not fluent in the English language, it might be prudent for researchers to take Spanish lessons. Furthermore, researchers might take cross-cultural anthropology courses or history courses to educate themselves on these particular cultures. This kind of knowledge is useful not only to conceptually ground study hypotheses but also to establish relationships with ethnic minority populations. Education on particular cultures might prove useful in the rapport-building process any psychologist studying or treating ethnic minority populations needs in order to work effectively with those minority populations. Researchers may also learn more about qualitative research techniques that could prove useful in ethnic minority research. If these are not available in their own academic department, it might be prudent to go outside the department to learn these techniques. In addition, researchers might benefit a great deal from establishing a network of professional associations not only with psychologists who study cultural issues but also with other types of professionals who are interested in the topic, such as sociologists, anthropologists, statisticians, or physicians.

Graduate student and researcher concerns about publishing were discussed at the forum. Specifically, can we get our work published if we conduct ethnic minority research? Publishing could be easier if one was not working with an ethnic minority population. Difficulties encountered while conducting minority research, such as inaccessibility to minority community samples and the need for adaptation and translation of research instruments before studies can be conducted, might delay submissions for publication. In addition, because some journal editors and reviewers are less familiar with ethnic minority research, the review process may be lengthened. Because of these factors, publication of research of this nature may require greater perseverance, time, and effort. Ethnic minority researchers might benefit from making community contacts and nurturing these so as to have availability to participant pools. Another option is to have discussions with department heads about research challenges so that the faculty become more aware of the particular needs of students doing minority research and make the needed resources more readily available. One should also put great effort in attempting to get some publications in mainstream journals. This will increase the visibility of the ethnic minority research program. In addition, it is important that researchers highlight the psychological phenomenon that is being studied and how culture plays a role in the manifestations of the phenomenon. First and foremost we are psychology researchers, not just ethnic minority researchers. Our research might prove to be more attractive for publication if we think of it in this manner.

This chapter has highlighted some of the issues and challenges that face professionals who are interested in the study of culture and its effects on psychological issues. Yet, despite these challenges, conducting research with Latinos and other ethnic minorities that is simultaneously informative and of sound quality is feasible. Such research is not only beneficial to the studied population but it also can be a rewarding experience for the researcher, including the graduate student investigator.

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