Linguistic and Cultural Aspects in Migrant Surveys: Introduction and Overview

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Introduction and Overview

Dorothée Behr, Patrick Brzoska, & Alisú Schoua-Glusberg

1 Migration Research

Migration is a global phenomenon; the numbers of migrants[1] across the globe have risen rapidly in recent decades (Font & Méndez, 2013). The current situation in the world, in particular in war-torn countries such as Syria, is only pushing this trend up even further. In Germany, as a case in point, the European "refugee crisis" translated into about 476,000 applications for asylum in 2015 and about 745,000 applications in 2016 (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2017). With the increasing number of people immigrating into host countries and the rising numbers of those being granted asylum, societies need to better understand the processes of acculturation in order to steer and monitor integration with the ultimate aim of ensuring a peaceful and sustainable cohabitation between migrants and the host population. In addition, governments and public institutions need to understand migrants' needs in order to adjust their services adequately. Survey data play an important role in this regard. Such data provide the basis for understanding migrants' realities of life and for devising, evaluating, and potentially revising public (integration) policies and services. The larger the cultural distance between migrants and the majority population of the host countries, the more efforts may be needed in order to understand the respective needs and concerns and to respond adequately (Font & Méndez, 2013).

2 Methodological Challenges

Migration research has to overcome many methodological challenges; these have recently been discussed in quite some detail (e.g., *Hard-to-survey populations,* Tourangeau, Edwards, Johnson, Wolter, & Bates, 2014; *Surveying ethnic minorities and immigrant populations: Methodological challenges and research strategies*, Font & Méndez, 2013; *Methoden der Migrationsforschung: ein interdisziplinärer Forschungsleitfaden*, Maehler & Brinkmann, 2015; *Handbuch Diagnostische Verfahren für Migrantinnen und Migranten,* Maehler, Shajek, & Brinkmann, 2018). Particular attention in these books is directed towards the sam-

1 The term migrants shall be used in an encompassing sense, including *refugees and asylum seekers* (forced displacement) as well as *voluntary migrants,* whether moving to another country for a short time (sojourner) or for good. Furthermore, it includes *established migrants*, who possibly even grew up in the host country, and *new arriving migrants.*

pling of migrants. However, also questionnaire translation draws increased attention. This obviously results from the fact that those not mastering the language of a country[2] need to be surveyed in a language they are proficient in. Translation and, as an extension, linguistic aspects during fieldwork will be the main focus of these proceedings.

Producing a questionnaire for migrants shares many features with producing questionnaires in *cross-national* survey research (which usually also comprises a cross-cultural perspective). The particularities of cross-national research and its impact on data comparability have been summarized by leading scholars in the field – see in particular the chapters on questionnaire design and translation in *Survey methods in multicultural, multinational, and multiregional contexts* (Harkness et al., 2010), *Cross-cultural survey methods* (Harkness, van de Vijver, & Mohler, 2003) or the *Cross-cultural survey guidelines* (Survey Research Center, 2016). The precondition for producing comparable cross-national survey instruments is to thoroughly take into account the respective country-specific cultures, both the "hard" culture, for instance in terms of institutions, and the "soft" (van de Vijver & Leung, 2011) culture, for instance in terms of behavior, norms or values. Migration research adds to the complexity of cross-national research by blurring the cultural boundaries: We no longer juxtapose respondents from different countries and cultures, but request survey information from respondents possibly raised in one cultural setting but now being embedded in another cultural setting. Of course, the latter comes in many shades: Migrants may have been born in the host country or may have come later, and thus they may be more or less familiar with the cultural setting of the host country. Added to the two interdependent cultural frames are the two languages that are typically brought to a survey targeted at migrants, that is, the first language of migrants (usually their 'mother tongue') and, to some extent at least, the language of the host country. The blurring of linguistic and cultural boundaries makes migration research different from cross-national research.[3] Hence, approaches for migration research may partly deviate from what is known in cross-national survey methodology.

In the following, key issues will be addressed which need to be tackled in order to survey migrants in the appropriate way – both culturally and linguistically. In the following, the term "host country" will be used for the country that has received the migrants, the term "country of origin" will be used to refer to the country the migrants originally came from (at least 1st generation migrants).

2 To simply matters, we only speak of 'the language of a country' throughout the chapter, even though there may be several official or main languages used in a country.

3 Other types of cross-cultural or multilingual research not further discussed here are within-country research that includes well established and acculturated linguistic minorities or multilingual research in the different official of main languages of a country.

2.1 The Target Population

As with every survey, the target group needs to be defined clearly. This is even more crucial with migrants because the exact definition of the target group determines the language version and any adaptations to content – and possibly format – of the questionnaire. Questions to be asked are: How long has the target population been living in the host country? Do researchers plan to survey "more established migrants", that is, those who have lived in the host countries for several decades and often also for many generations, or more recent migrants, such as refugees and asylum seekers? These questions determine whether the survey can take place in the language of the host country or whether it should take place in a language the respondent is proficient in (e.g., the language of the country of origin or the language of an ethnic group). As the chapters by Jacobsen and Jesske in this volume illustrate, pragmatic fieldwork decisions may even pave the way for a bi-lingual survey administration (where respondents can decide for themselves which language version of a questionnaire they prefer). The length of stay in a country can indicate familiarity with the socio-cultural context of that country and hence with topics that can be addressed meaningfully and without offense (e.g., without breaking taboos). In addition, the origin of the target population will have an impact on whether surveys and their sometimes peculiar 'survey speak' is known to respondents. Formea et al. (2014), for instance, report on problems related to Likert scales and their possible replacement or extension with graphics or percentages for the Somali population in Rochester, Minnesota (US). Last but not least, knowledge of the target population's literacy level is needed in order to decide on the mode of the survey and whether interviewers will be needed to conduct the interviews.

2.2 Language Particularities

If researchers opt for using the language of the host country, care needs to be taken to make it suitable in style and formality for the level of language proficiency of the target group: While the wording of general population surveys often cannot be adapted, surveys particularly targeted at the migrant population can be improved, for instance, by taking on board criteria of plain or simple language[4] – even though surveys in general should, of course, always be written in as simple a language as possible.

If researchers decide on providing a translation (often in the migrant's first language), it is far from sufficient to choose a language without further specifications on the target population. There are, for instance, many different varieties of the Arabic language. *Diglossia* – that is, the existence of markedly different language variants for different social situations (e.g. informal and formal) – and dialects depending on the country or region where respondents come from will play a role as to which "Arabic" should be used in a given survey (see also Al-Sobh, Abu-Melhim, & Bani-Hani, 2015, for more information on the Arabic language). Surveys for migrants in Spanish face similar, even though possibly not as pronounced challenges. In the US, as a case in point, official surveys in Spanish strive

4 For German, please see: http://research.uni-leipzig.de/leisa/de/ (16 October, 2017); for English, http://www.plainlanguage.gov/ (19 January, 2018)

to match the diverse Hispanic backgrounds of US immigrants, which may be achieved with a Spanish-language common version that allows for country-specific terminologies where differences cannot be surmounted (Martinez, Marín, & Schoua-Glusberg, 2006).

For migration research, there may be instances where a *strict* application of just one language is not advisable. A particularity of migration research exists in the fact that institutions, services, and other elements bound to the host country often cannot be translated, since there may often not be a corresponding equivalent available. Moreover, migrants are likely to be more familiar with their original name than with a more or less equivalent term in translation. Consequently, some terms (e.g., *Gesundheitsamt* – a local public health authority in Germany) may stay in the original language – and possibly be supplemented with a translation or a paraphrase in the migrant language (e.g., Carrasco, 2003; Sauer, 2008; Schenk, Ellert, & Neuhauser, 2007).

When using well-established instruments for which an official translation (and validation) already exists, researchers should carefully consider whether this official translation, as used in the country of origin, is linguistically and culturally suitable also for the migrant population in the host country. Brzoska, for instance, calls for carefully vetting a Turkish translation produced for Turks in Turkey before using it for Turkish migrants in Germany, especially if those have been living in Germany for a long time (chapter in this volume; see also Brzoska, Yilmaz-Aslan, & Razum, 2013, and Brzoska, 2014).

Finally, some languages may not exist in a written form – a use of such languages may then pose challenges for standardizing the instrument. In this volume, Comanaru and d'Ardenne illustrate based on Sylheti, a spoken language in Bangladesh, how researchers may approach the translation task in such cases.

2.3 Questionnaire Particularities

Often, a questionnaire is developed in the language of the researchers before it is translated into the language(s) of the targeted migrant population(s). It is paramount that the different cultural contexts of migrants are taken into account already during questionnaire design, that is, when selecting concepts, indicators, and wordings for individual questions. For instance, some topics may be perceived as taboo topics by migrants and may likely not lead to an honest answer, if an answer is provided at all. As a case in point, questions about whether a child was adopted proved problematic (even offensive) among Korean respondents in the US, since these questions run counter to blood ties being regarded as essential to family organization in the Korean culture (Pan & Lubkemann, 2014). Other topics may assume previous knowledge on a topic that cannot be taken for granted or they may assume, especially in health settings, symptoms that may not be of importance for migrant groups (Glaesmer, Brähler, & von Lersener, 2012). And other topics, again, may require clear instructions and clarity on whether the country of origin or the host country should be referred to. Education questions may be a typical example of questions taking into consideration educational paths in the system of the country of origin, while the rest of the questionnaire may refer to the host country. The particularities involved in measuring education of migrants are discussed by Schneider, Briceno-Rosas, Ortmanns, and Herzing in this volume. Several checklists may help to raise awareness of cultural or linguistic traps that should be avoided. Schoua-Glusberg's Cultural Sensitivity Checklist for Instruments (2017) may serve as a good starting point for developers (see Table 1). It should ideally be worked through in close cooperation with native co-researchers, consultants, translators or interpreters.

Table 1 Schoua-Glusberg's Cultural Sensitivity Checklist for Instruments (slightly adapted from Schoua-Glusberg, 2017, p. 14)

- Is there anything in the questions or the style of asking that might be poorly received or even offensive?
- Do any questions sound strange for the study population context?
- Would any questions be difficult for the study population to answer? Why?
- Are any questions NOT likely to elicit a full answer? If so, why?
- Are there questions that may not yield usable information or collect the intended information?
- If data will be collected in a group setting, such as a focus group, are any questions too sensitive to be answered in front of others?
- Are any questions uncomfortable for interviewers to ask?
- Is the introduction/consent/explanation of the purpose of the interview presented in the best order for the local discourse style?

Other attempts to streamline the problem-spotting process for cross-cultural questionnaires include the revised Questionnaire Appraisal System (QAS-04) that has been enriched by codes for cross-cultural consideration and translation problems (Dean, Caspar, McAvinchey, Reed, & Quiroz, 2007). The earlier problems can be identified (best if before or during the design of the questionnaire), the easier it becomes to remedy those by reconceptualising, rewording or providing background information for teams on adaptation possibilities.

2.4 Translation and Pretesting

Best practice in instrument translation calls for team or committee approaches that bring together translators, researchers, social workers, or other experts – that is, those persons who possess in-depth linguistic and cultural knowledge of the target group, translational expertise, and knowledge of the measurement instrument. The team approach is described in Mohler, Dorer, de Jong, & Hu (2016) in detail. Experience shows that briefing and training on questionnaire particularities is particularly important when translators have not had prior experience with questionnaires (e.g., training on the importance of simple and accessible language, consistency of re-occurring elements or 'scale speak'). Pretesting is an indispensable tool for testing the comprehensibility, the cultural applicability, and the general flow of the questionnaire, thereby finding answers to the following questions: Are concepts familiar to respondents? Are frames of reference clear (e.g., reference to host country or country of origin)? Have an adequate dialect and formality level been chosen (which may be of utmost relevance for languages where different regional or formal/informal varieties exist)? Even though pretesting is a core element of the best practice translation model TRAPD – translation, review, adjudication, pretesting, and documentation (Harkness, 2003) – resource constraints in projects may sometimes prevent its implementation. Goerman, Meyers, and Garcia Trejo, in this volume, provide an alternative solution for ensuring a best possible translation when financial or budget constraints prevent the implementation of a pretest.

2.5 Fieldwork

Fieldwork for migrant groups cannot necessarily be handled in the same way as it is handled for the majority population who speaks the language of the host country. The challenge of finding bilingual interviewers is only one of many. Jacobsen and Jesske in this volume present examples of how to conduct interviews when bilingual professional interviewers for face-to-face interviews are not available. These authors further illustrate what it may mean to deviate from standardized interviewing procedures, for instance by allowing switching between language versions, having interviewers help respondents make their way through the questionnaire, or enlisting the help of an (informal) interpreter. In the same vein, that is, the matter of de-standardizing survey interviews for a migrant population, Pan and Lubkemann (2014) have listed numerous culture-specific examples of interviewers applying culture-specific conversational norms in order to gain access to respondents in the first place and keep up the interview until the end. These latter forms of cultural adaptations mirror the last point of Schoua-Glusberg's sensitivity list (2017), namely, whether local discourse norms have been respected when introducing and explaining the interview to the respondent – and this may also apply to written discourse. Ethnic or gender matching are additional concerns that have been discussed elsewhere (Font & Méndez, 2013).

3 Conclusions and Outlook

Planning and conducting research on migrant groups entails many additional steps beyond the monocultural survey life cycle. These steps do have a major impact on costs, timeline, and persons involved (e.g., Font & Méndez, 2013; Formea et al., 2014), which is why they should be thoroughly considered when planning a survey. Researchers need to ensure, amongst others, the cultural applicability and relevance of the measurement instrument, the language fit for the target population, and the cultural appropriateness of the interview (situation). Particularly in Germany since 2015, migration research has reached new levels with the increased need to understand, assess, and consider migrants' needs as well as to inform, revise and evaluate stakeholders' strategies, policies or programs. In this situation, it is paramount for researchers to be aware of and willing to deal with cultural and linguistic challenges. The present proceedings aim to contribute towards this awareness and encourage researchers to a) critically reflect on their survey strategies, b) to consult the available methodological literature on cross-cultural survey implementation (literature from the US is a prime example), and c) to share their experiences by documenting and publishing own procedures and lessons learned. Subsequent researchers will then be able to draw on existing information. We stand to learn a lot with every survey, and the more open and transparent we are with our own processes that worked but also with those that failed, the more we can contribute to the quality of subsequent studies.

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