



## The Qualitative Report

Volume 19 | Number 30

How To Article 3

7-28-2014

# Methodological Considerations for Qualitative Research with Immigrant Populations: Lessons from Two Studies

Yu Lu

*Pennsylvania State University, [yxl235@psu.edu](mailto:yxl235@psu.edu)*

Mary W. Gatua

*Clarke University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

### Recommended APA Citation

Lu, Y., & Gatua, M. W. (2014). Methodological Considerations for Qualitative Research with Immigrant Populations: Lessons from Two Studies. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(30), 1-16. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol19/iss30/3>

This How To Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



## Methodological Considerations for Qualitative Research with Immigrant Populations: Lessons from Two Studies

### Abstract

Often, research strategies are guided by principles developed based on mainstream U.S. cultural norms. Immigrants, however, may differ in their cultural backgrounds and previous exposure to research. Commonly adopted research procedures, such as the informed consent process, may be culturally inappropriate for research with culturally diverse populations, and hence require cultural adaptations. Based on two qualitative studies, this paper describes the methodological issues encountered in the field when working with Chinese and Kenyan immigrants, and explains how these issues were resolved. Comparing and synthesizing experiences from the two studies, recommendations for methodological adaptations when working with immigrant populations are provided. Specifically, suggestions on how to prepare the research protocol, recruit participants, obtain informed consent, deal with unanticipated incidents during the research process, and choose the interview language(s) are discussed in depth.

### Keywords

Qualitative Research, Methodological Issues, Cultural Adaptation, Immigrant Populations, Chinese Kenyan

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).



## Methodological Considerations for Qualitative Research with Immigrant Populations: Lessons from Two Studies

Yu Lu

Pennsylvania State University, State College, Pennsylvania, USA

Mary W. Gatua

Clarke University, Dubuque, Iowa, USA

---

*Often, research strategies are guided by principles developed based on mainstream U.S. cultural norms. Immigrants, however, may differ in their cultural backgrounds and previous exposure to research. Commonly adopted research procedures, such as the informed consent process, may be culturally inappropriate for research with culturally diverse populations, and hence require cultural adaptations. Based on two qualitative studies, this paper describes the methodological issues encountered in the field when working with Chinese and Kenyan immigrants, and explains how these issues were resolved. Comparing and synthesizing experiences from the two studies, recommendations for methodological adaptations when working with immigrant populations are provided. Specifically, suggestions on how to prepare the research protocol, recruit participants, obtain informed consent, deal with unanticipated incidents during the research process, and choose the interview language(s) are discussed in depth. Keywords: Qualitative Research, Methodological Issues, Cultural Adaptation, Immigrant Populations, Chinese Kenyan*

---

During the year 2010, nearly 40 million foreign-born people lived in the United States, representing 13% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Immigrants may face a range of maladjustment problems such as poor academic achievement for children (Hill & Torres, 2010), family relationship tension (Suarez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2005), poor psychological well-being (Qin, 2008), and poor health (Espiritu & Wolf, 2001). A great deal of research has spawned examining the causes and consequences of such maladjustment, such as availability of language assistance in education system (Padilla & Gonzalez, 2001), unequal healthcare access (Ku & Matani, 2001), etc. However, less attention has been paid to the research methodology, which is key to the success of any research.

The potential uniqueness of working with immigrant populations should inform research methodology; this is of significance to research because some of the unique challenges that arise when working with diverse populations are not easily overcome. Researchers investigating immigrant populations must be aware that they will be working under different circumstances than those conducting research that primarily involves mainstream native-born European Americans. As a result, adjustments in research methodology may be necessary in order for research within immigrant populations to succeed.

Yet, guidelines on how to properly conduct such research are scarce (Karwalajtys, Redwood, Fowler, & Lohfeld, 2010; Ojeda, Flores, Meza, & Morales, 2011; Suh, Kagan, & Strumpf, 2009). Many researchers may go into the field without knowing what to expect and how to handle emergent issues. The success of the research thus depends on the ability of the researchers to deal with these issues on site. However, without experiences in dealing with

such issues, it is hard to know if the approaches will work or whether the approaches are the best choices under the circumstances. Thus, it is important that researchers of immigrant populations share their research experiences (i.e., what is successful and what is not), so that new researchers can learn from previous research and develop culturally appropriate research protocols at the outset of their work.

This article aims to address some of the most common methodological issues that may be encountered in research with immigrant populations through lessons from two qualitative studies. The examples drawn from these two studies, one with Chinese immigrants and one with Kenyan immigrant women, are used to describe how the researchers encountered and resolved emergent methodological issues. Recommendations on how to address these issues are provided. It is our hope that researchers undertaking work in immigrant communities can benefit from our experiences and be better prepared for their research in the field.

### **Literature Review**

Qualitative inquiry is a common and important tool for immigrant and multicultural research. A large number of qualitative studies have been conducted with immigrant populations (e.g., Eggerth, DeLaney, Flynn, & Jacobson, 2011; Lu, Marks, & Apavaloiae, 2012; Neufeld, Harrison, Hughes, Spitzer, & Stewart, 2001). Qualitative studies attempt to turn the researcher's experience into a series of representation including notes, interviews, conversations and memos (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and then draw conclusions about the topics of study. This requires researchers to suspend pre-existing worldviews and be willing to distribute power in order to attenuate the possibility of marginalizing the study participants. In all, qualitative research affords the opportunity to emphatically represent, involve, and benefit understudied populations by allowing the researcher to enter into participants' worlds (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and express participants' experiences in their own words, not via pre-established quantitative scales (Ponterotto, 2002). Qualitative inquiry thus is appropriate for research with immigrant populations; however, conducting research with diverse populations can present cultural differences that require special attention.

### **Challenges in Conducting Research with Immigrant Populations**

The immigrant population in the U.S. represents a great deal of diversity in race/ethnicity, social class and cultural origins including people from every region of the world (Rumbaut & Portes, 2005). Rumbaut and Portes call this a new immigrant population, one that is "overwhelmingly non-European in composition" (p. 5). Therefore, research guides developed for working with European Americans or European immigrants may not work well with these new populations (Pernice, 1994), which may pose challenges to researchers.

Various research challenges have been identified and discussed in the literature. Such challenges include accessing and gaining trust of potential immigrant participants as well as understanding language and cultural differences (Karwalajtys et al., 2010). Immigrant populations may be reluctant to participate in research because of unfamiliarity with research, prior experiences of being exploited or deceived for research purposes, concerns about language fluency, or fears that the information they provide for a study will be reported to immigrant authorities (Ojeda et al., 2011). In addition, "there are some cultures, settings, and relationships in which it is not appropriate or productive to conduct interviews, or even to ask questions, as a way of gaining information" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93). Moreover, qualitative interviews are usually recorded and then transcribed for data analysis. However, this common procedure may not work with a population who is unfamiliar with scientific research

procedures (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and who may perceive recording as potentially threatening. Unless qualitative studies are conducted in a culturally sophisticated manner, there could be many threats to the rigor of the research (Suh, Kagan, & Strumpf, 2009). Poorly executed and insensitive approaches can lead to questionable and possibly misleading findings (Ojeda et al., 2011).

### **Adjustment of Research Methodology When Working with Immigrant Populations**

Scholars have explored issues and strategies in conducting culturally appropriate research with immigrants (Karwalajtys et al., 2010; Ojeda et al., 2011; Pernice, 1994; Suh, Kagan, & Strumpf, 2009). Karwalajtys and colleagues (2010) conducted focus groups with immigrant women from five ethnic groups (Canadian, Arabic, Chinese, Somali, Afghani, and Latina) and their research experiences showed that, relationships with community-based organizations and inclusion of members of the target immigrant group are essential in building trust and recruiting participants. They further pointed out the need for flexibility and innovation in conducting research with immigrants and ethnic minority groups because of potentially unforeseen needs for methodological modifications.

A few other scholars noted the importance of cultural adaptation and stressed cultural competence in qualitative research with particular immigrant groups (e.g., Latino and Asian immigrants). Ojeda and colleagues (2011) focused on Latino immigrants and suggested having bilingual and bicultural, culturally competent research team members, who not only understand the worldviews of the participant group, but also are aware of personal biases researchers bring to interpreting participants' cultures. They highlighted the importance of using innovative recruitment methods, especially utilizing the target community and community members, and discussed a range of strategies in handling informed consent procedures, compensation, choice of time, location, and language(s). Suh and colleagues (2009), on the other hand, targeted Asian immigrants and contributed greatly to researchers' understandings of the process of translating interview data (e.g., transcripts) when the interviews are conducted in a language other than English but the research findings are presented in English. They suggested that, compared to translating before or after data analysis (i.e., coding), translating during analysis makes it possible to capture implicit and explicit meanings from the data as well as cultural specific expressions and concepts, and hence may be a more favorable method for research conducted in a language other than English. However, the execution of the strategy would require a bilingual transcriber and coder. The importance of having or becoming "insider" of the participant group was also highlighted for the Asian immigrant group.

Previous literature exploring methodological issues of conducting research with immigrant populations has provided valuable guidance for research projects with immigrants, including the two studies described in this article. However, despite the usefulness of previous work, the guidance is by no means thorough enough to cover all possible issues researchers may encounter in the field, neither are they appropriate for all immigrant populations or situations. The two researchers both encountered unexpected issues and had to adjust research designs even though both studies were carefully designed based on existing guidance provided in the literature. Our experience and discovery hence contribute to the existing literature by adding to the list of possible issues researchers may encounter in the field and provide much needed guidance on how to deal with them. We first introduce the two studies and then discuss our discovery of necessary research methodology adjustments based on our experiences.

## **Overview of the Two Studies**

Our experiences are drawn from two independent qualitative studies, one with Chinese immigrants and the other with Kenyan immigrant women. The Chinese immigrant population is of research significance due to its size, and the Kenyan population is one of the fastest growing yet understudied immigrant groups in the U.S. Moreover, little research has explained culturally appropriate ways of conducting research with either group. The methodological adjustments we discuss in this article are made to adapt to the unique culture of each immigrant group, and as a result, are valuable for researchers targeting these two specific population groups.

Moreover, the implications of our experiences are not limited to Chinese and Kenyan contexts only, but may apply to other immigrant populations, as well. We compare and synthesize our experiences from the two studies, discuss the occasions and reasons for the needed adjustments, and make suggestions for methodological adjustments based on the research occasion (e.g., research topic, participants' characteristics), which are questions to take under consideration in research with any immigrant group. The following section describes in detail the two studies.

### **A Grounded Theory Study with Chinese Immigrants**

The first author conducted a grounded theory qualitative study with Chinese immigrants in Atlanta, Georgia in 2013. The purpose of the study was to understand the smoking decisions of Chinese immigrants. Chinese immigrants represent the second largest immigrant group in the U.S. and the largest Asian/Pacific Islander ethnic group. By the year 2010, there were about 1.8 million Chinese immigrants residing in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2010) and the number is still on the rise. In comparison to other immigrant groups, Chinese immigrants are less likely to live in poverty and more likely to have a college degree or higher; however, they still face various challenges. About three out of four Chinese immigrants reported a need for further English training (2010 American Community Survey) and they are more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to be without contact with a health professional within the past 12 months (Yu, Huang, & Singh, 2004). Moreover, Chinese immigrants suffer from health disparities, such as high smoking rates and high rates of lung cancer (McCracken et al., 2007). The unique characteristics of this population group and the issues they face call for further research.

In order to "adequately capture the heterogeneity in the population" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 89), a purposive sample of both women and men with different smoking status (i.e. never, former and current smoker) were recruited and interviewed. Both in-depth individual interviews and focus group interviews were conducted to gather information. Fifty-four Chinese immigrants were interviewed individually about their personal experiences with smoking and smoking decision-making. Three focus group interviews with 18 Chinese immigrants were conducted for cross-validation purposes.

The described research design worked well with the targeted Chinese immigrants. The participants were willing to share and comfortable with sharing their personal stories. Some even shared stories that they considered private and specifically asked the researcher to keep secret, indicating established trust. Some participants also developed personal relationships with the researcher such that they expressed willingness to participate in future studies and maintain personal relationships.

The success of the research, however, could not have been achieved with the initially planned research protocol. The research design was substantially different at the proposal stage, and the process of the study demonstrated a reflective process during which the

research design was continuously assessed and modified to fit the environment (i.e., the community and immigrants' lifestyles). Those modifications are explained in our later discussion of methodological adjustments.

### **A Narrative Inquiry Study with Kenyan Immigrant Women**

The second author conducted a qualitative interview study with Kenyan immigrant adult women in the summer of 2010. African immigrants are one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the U.S. with their numbers increasing from 881,300 in 2000 to 1.6 million in 2010 (Immigration Policy Center, 2012). Kenyans are the fifth largest African immigrant group in the United States as of 2010 (the top four are Nigerians, Ethiopians, Egyptians, and Ghanaians). The majority of Kenyan immigrants come to the U.S. for educational purposes, and Kenya is the 19<sup>th</sup> leading place of origin for international students in the U.S. (Wamwara-Mbugua & Cornwell, 2009). Kenyan students, due to their African origin, are reported to experience more discrimination in the U.S. than international students from other parts of the world (Hanassab, 2006). As a result, they face academic, economic, and psychosocial challenges, and their ability to integrate and cope well in school are frequently at risk of being adversely affected (Kanu, 2008). In addition, many Kenyan immigrants face adjustment difficulties because their English accent is different from the "standard American accent" and they have trouble in adjusting to the new meaning of "being black" (Wamwara-Mbugua & Cornwell, 2009). Moreover, lack of high-speed Internet availability and high technology cost in Kenya make it difficult to communicate with family members (Wyche & Grinter, 2012), posing psychological stress. Overall, Kenyan immigrants are an understudied but fast-growing population (Nyamwange, Owusu, & Thiuri, 2001) who are drawing increased research interest.

The purpose of the narrative study was to understand and make meaning of the educational and socio-cultural experiences of Kenyan women pursuing higher education in the United States. Following narrative inquiry research guides (Creswell, 2008), the study gathered data through collecting stories of seven women's individual educational and socio-cultural experiences and how they negotiated their multiple identities to provide a framework for conceptualizing and understanding Kenyan women's educational experiences. The participants were recruited from a pool of Kenyan immigrant women who had studied or were studying at one public land-grant university situated in the U.S. Rocky Mountain region. Purposeful sampling was used with a rationale that it would lead to the acquisition of information-rich stories from participants whose life experiences fit the topics being studied. Participants who met the criteria were Kenyan women over 25 years of age who had studied at this university within the last ten years (either recent alumnae or current students), who were currently residing in the U.S., and had lived here for at least one year. In-depth semi-structured interviews were carried out twice with each of the seven adult women.

### **Juxtaposition of the Two Studies**

Asian and African immigrant populations are often compared to mainstream Americans; however, little research has included both populations. Yet, Chinese and Kenyan cultures share a lot of similarities. They are both collectivistic cultures, and people from both cultures possess a strong sense of ingroup (Lee, 2001). Similar to Chinese culture, in African cultures such as in Kenya, self-concept is primarily based on social connectedness and interdependence (Brewer & Chen, 2007). Taking into consideration such cultural characteristics in research, it may be helpful and important to incorporate ingroup members in conducting research with both Chinese and Kenyan immigrant groups.

The two studies discussed in this paper both employed interviews and the researchers are both members of the immigrant communities from which participants were recruited. Other than that, the two studies had different research designs as described earlier. Chinese immigrants with diverse backgrounds (e.g., profession, age, gender, smoking status, social status, immigration status, etc.) were recruited in a large city. The Kenyan immigrant study, on the other hand, focused on women recruited from one college community, a more homogeneous sample. As a result, the researchers had varied experiences in the field, which informed our identification of certain methodological adjustments that we recommend for researchers who are about to go into the field and conduct research with immigrants.

### **Lessons from the Two Studies**

The methodological lessons we learned from conducting the two studies include issues related to preparation of research protocols, recruitment, informed consent, interview language(s), and interview processes.

#### **Preparing the Research Protocol**

Careful design of the research protocol is necessary to make sure that research is smoothly executed (Guyatt, 2006). This is particularly true with immigrant populations; in preparing research protocols, researchers need to take into consideration the cultural uniqueness of the targeted group. Preparation of research protocols can be done in different ways, such as conducting pilot studies or consulting expert panels. The Chinese immigrant study conducted a pilot study while the Kenyan immigrant women study utilized experts' opinions. We will now discuss the two ways separately.

#### **Pilot Study**

A pilot study is necessary when any facet of the study design needs clarification and many features of the design cannot be determined without prior exploratory research (Light, Singer, & Willett, 1990). In immigrant research, researchers often are unsure of whether the designed research protocol will work effectively due to cultural differences, and thus a pilot study may be necessary. A pilot study was conducted in the Chinese immigrant study in order to discover potentially neglected aspects in the study design, and to ensure the appropriateness of the interview questions. Participants in the pilot study were asked to share their thoughts after completing the interviews in order to identify and guide necessary modifications to the research design. As a result, the pilot study led to some substantial changes to the final study design.

First, the study was initially designed to utilize focus groups without individual interviews. After the pilot study, a modification decision was made to conduct primarily individual interviews with fewer follow-up focus groups to explore similarities/differences among individual perspectives (Morgan, 1988). This decision was made because of the concerns and unwillingness the participants in the pilot study expressed about interacting with strangers in groups on a potentially uncomfortable topic (i.e., smoking). In addition, it was difficult to arrange for individuals to gather together at one location. Although the difficulties, such as transportation, were anticipated before the pilot study, they became more obvious during the pilot study; specifically, there were a large number of dropouts. Note that the pilot study was conducted in a smaller college town where transportation is relatively easy compared to the large city where the main study was to be carried out. Indeed, difficulties were encountered later during the main study with the three focus groups that



many participants were unwilling to participate in focus group discussions and four participants (out of 20) who agreed to participate in focus groups did not show up. The modification made data collection possible.

### **Expert Panel**

The Kenyan study took a different method and utilized experts' opinions in developing and modifying the research protocol. The researcher first developed an interview protocol and guide based on her review of the literature. The task of an expert panel is to keep the researcher honest by probing for biases, seeking meaning and clarifying the interview questions. For this study, the researcher sought experts who knew a great deal about both the substantive area of inquiry and the methodology. The experts -- having extensive experiences with multicultural research and experiences with African culture -- provided advice for culturally appropriate ways of framing the interview questions. This advice led to modifications such as changing the wording of interview questions to make them as open-ended as possible to allow for narratives to emerge. The researcher was also reminded about her possible biases as a Kenyan woman who went through U.S. education herself; she needed to avoid over-interpreting the information gathered during interviews, especially when it was similar to her experience. In addition, coming from the same academic community as the participants, and having previous knowledge of some of the stories the participants shared in the interviews, the researcher was reminded to focus on the participants' account of the stories, and to be careful of her existing biases.

Both the pilot study and the expert panel worked effectively for preparing the research protocol, based on our experiences. The choice between utilizing a pilot study or an expert panel may depend on the scale of the study and available funding. An alternative way to reduce the cost of a pilot study -- but in the meantime maximize the effectiveness of an expert panel -- is to bring in people from the target population, such as a community leader, to participate in the panel discussion. Being members from the community and knowing the people, insiders can speak from the local culture's perspectives and anticipate possible methodological issues.

### **Recruitment**

The recruitment of immigrants into research may be challenging as the participants may have language barriers and unique cultural experiences deterring them from participating (Domenech-Rodríguez, Donovick, & Crowley, 2006). Different recruitment methods were used in the two studies; here, we share lessons learned from them regarding the effectiveness of various types of recruitment methods, and how cultural nuances can affect recruitment effectiveness.

#### **Choose Appropriate Recruitment Methods**

The Kenyan study recruited Kenyan immigrant women who were studying or studied at U.S. universities. Prospective participants were identified through the researcher's academic networks and personal contact list. They were then contacted by e-mail to ascertain their willingness to participate, followed up by a formal email providing them with a copy of the consent form. Participants who agreed to do face-to-face interviews handed in their consent form on the day of the interview. Participants living out of state were interviewed through the phone and transmitted their signed consent form via e-mail. A total of twelve Kenyan women were contacted; two contacts declined to participate and two did not respond

to the email. Eight agreed to participate, but one withdrew prior to scheduling the interview. A final number of seven women participated in the study.

The Chinese study used multiple recruitment strategies guided by the literature (Karwalajtys et al., 2010; Ojeda et al., 2011). Participants were recruited electronically, face-to-face, through fliers, and snowball sampling. Recruitment emails were first sent out to the email listservs of two of the largest Chinese community associations in Atlanta. Since emails from community associations may sometimes get ignored, participants were also recruited face-to-face at the associations' meetings. In order to reach people who do not participate in community associations, flyers were also placed and distributed at various locations in the Chinese community, such as in Chinatown (a plaza where the Culture Center, which houses most of the local Chinese cultural events, and a few popular Chinese restaurants are located) and popular Asian grocery stores, restaurants, and hair salons in Atlanta. An electronic version of the flier was also posted on the two most popular Chinese community websites in Atlanta. Potential participants were instructed to contact the researcher either by phone or via email. Snowball sampling was also used. All of the recruited participants were asked at the end of the interview if they had friends or acquaintances to refer to the study. Seventy-Six people were recruited in total, four of whom could not participate due to time conflicts. The remaining 72 participated in the study. Among the different recruitment methods used in the Chinese study, snowball sampling worked the best in recruiting the largest number of participants. In contrast to the low response rate of other recruitment methods (i.e., email, face-to-face, fliers), most people who were contacted by friends or acquaintances responded favorably. One participant said during a casual chat after the interview, "I participated only because Kevin (pseudonym) sent me the email. Had I heard about the study elsewhere, I would be like, 'Who cares?'"

Based on our experiences, utilizing personal network for recruitment (e.g., contacting participants in researcher's personal network and contact list, snowball sampling and word of mouth) seemed to work effectively for the two immigrant populations because of the established trust between people who are familiar with each other; this is similar to what other scholars (Ojeda et al., 2011; Suh et al., 2009) have found. However, personal network recruitment method also presents its limitations. The biggest one is probably related to concerns about homogeneity of samples. If all participants are friends or acquaintances of a couple of key informants, it is possible that their experiences and/or worldviews are quite similar. As a result, diverse points of view may not be captured well in the study. For studies targeting a relatively small and homogeneous population, like the Kenyan immigrant women study, this would not be an issue, and snowball sampling is recommended. However, for studies in which the targeted population presents much heterogeneity (like Chinese immigrants in Atlanta), our recommendation is to utilize different recruitment methods in combination with snowball sampling, such as posters and fliers, contacts with community organizations, online websites or forums, etc. Although the response rate of these recruiting methods may be lower compared to snowball sampling, it is worth the effort for the purposes of gathering quality data.

### **Considering Cultural Nuances**

Another discovery we had about recruitment is the importance of considering and incorporating cultural values. The Chinese researcher tried to recruit participants face-to-face by talking with people she met in the Chinese community. Everyone she talked to declined to participate. One key participant in the study, however, did the same face-to-face recruitment with strangers to help the researcher out, and successfully recruited a few participants. He

reflected on his thoughts about the reason for the distinct outcome, and related it to Chinese culture,

*You probably should have said it in another way. When you ask others if they could help you with research and offer them \$25 compensation, it is more intimidating. It's easier for me because I tell them I am helping ANOTHER PERSON for research, and whether they could help. Emphasizing the HELPING aspect is important, because Chinese people want to help others. Next time, you could probably ask them if they have anyone else to introduce to your study first, and then at the end of the conversation, casually ask if they themselves would participate. They may say "yes" that way.*

This comment included two important elements. First, instead of focusing on the rewards (i.e., compensation), appealing to the cultural value of "helping" was productive. Second, indirect requests for help seemed to be more culturally appropriate and effective. Due to the novelty of research to most Chinese immigrants, requesting to help a third person (not the person in need) probably made it less intimidating and threatening. Researchers should pay attention to these cultural nuances to increase the chances for success in their research.

### **Informed Consent**

Informed consent has been described as one of the most frequently encountered problems in accessing and working with immigrants (Karwalajtys et al., 2010). Since some immigrants may not be familiar with research procedures, they may worry about their immigration status and be reluctant to sign any form to consent to releasing personal information. The two studies described in this paper had different experiences with the informed consent procedure, which informed our guidance for future studies.

The Kenyan study did not encounter any problems with informed consent. It followed standard procedures: sending a recruitment email, obtaining agreement to participate, and lastly requesting a signature on the consent form. The recruited participants did not express any concerns or hesitation in signing the consent form and in agreeing to participate. However, the Chinese study was a different case. Guided by the suggestion that verbal consent might be both appropriate and more comprehensible to participants (National Council on Ethics in Human Research, 2010), the study obtained approval from IRB to acquire audio-recorded verbal consent. No signature was required, which greatly reduced the difficulty in obtaining informed consent. However, the recording of the verbal consent still posed concerns on cultural appropriateness, which was unexpected.

Although most of the participants agreed to have their interview recorded, two of the interviewees expressed explicit concerns about the recording. One participant called off the recording 37 seconds after verbal consent was granted because she did not feel comfortable. In response, the researcher explained again the purpose of the recording and emphasized the privacy protection actions. The participant insisted that the conversation should not be recorded, and the researcher decided to stop the recording and took notes of the interview as an alternative solution. Among those who did consent to recording, many showed hesitation and discomfort when giving the verbal consent. A few noted that this was unfamiliar and "strange". On the other hand, people who had previous experience with research or interviews seemed to be more comfortable with the procedure. For example, one participant who was a journalist indicated that she did the same thing when she interviewed people, so she understood the procedure. Another participant who had worked as a research assistant

doing data collection shared that she was comfortable, but had experience with participants who were ambivalent about the procedure.

It was interesting to observe that the participants' comfort level seem to greatly increase after the interviews were completed. For instance, participants, even those who were unfamiliar with research, showed a high level of comfort after the interview when signing the receipt for compensation -- even though they were providing their full names and addresses as the grant supported project required. This was probably because, after personally experiencing the research and hearing all the questions, their initial concerns about answering unexpected questions or encountering unwanted incidents was relieved. This was evident when a number of participants expressed their surprises upon completion of the interview and asked, "That was it?!" Some even told the researcher to ask more questions because the interview questions were much "easier" than they expected. One participant took the initiative and spoke for another half an hour after he was told that he had answered all of the interview questions. He explained to the researcher that he was holding off his answers during the interview because he was afraid that the researcher was going to ask him to further explain things he did not want to talk about, but when the interview ended, he felt he could give the researcher more details that he did not mention during the interview. The researcher thus asked for his consent to restart the recording. In the second recording, he spoke more in depth about personal experiences and thoughts. For some of the stories, he asked the researcher for assurance that his name would not be mentioned in the research report, a sign of him being comfortable in sharing personal information that he would not normally share and having trust in the researcher and the research. Hence, it seemed that when the uncertainty about the research reduces when participants have completed participating in the research, their comfort level with the research increases.

One possible explanation for the quite different experiences with Chinese and Kenyan immigrants in the two studies is participants' previous exposure to research. Participants in the Kenyan study were recruited from an academic environment, where the amount of research exposure is high. Thus, they seemed cognizant of research protocols and appeared comfortable consenting to participation. The Chinese study was conducted in the Atlanta Chinese community where few prior research projects have been based. Therefore, much of the targeted population had little, if any, previous research experience. There was much hesitation and uncertainty about research participation. For example, one participant reflected, "When Chinese hear 'research,' we immediately think of white rats in laboratories. We do not know what you are going to do to us." Another participant expressed her concerns before the interview, "I am not sure if I have the answers for your questions because I do not know much about smoking." She was assured that she could answer all the questions but she still was one of the participants who were surprised upon completion of the interviews that the questions were "so easy". This incidence demonstrated a possible gap between the real research procedure and the participants' expectations when they are inexperienced with research. Our experience with the Chinese immigrants in this study may indicate that the concerns and worries some immigrants have for signing consent forms may alleviate significantly when an interview ends, because of the interviewees' increased understanding of research procedures and reduced uncertainty. Therefore, we propose another alternative way of obtaining informed consent, for those contexts in which it may be useful and appropriate. If a prior approval could be negotiated with the institutional IRB, it may be helpful that researchers obtain an unrecorded verbal consent at the beginning of interview and get the signature as the last step of the study. This may be more appropriate for the participants as well, especially for those who have no prior experiences with research, that they would be less uncertain about what they are giving consent for.

## Interviewing Language

Choice of interview language is a well-known issue for research with immigrant populations (Ojeda et al., 2011). In conducting research with non-native English speakers, sometimes their language proficiencies will prevent them from sharing their whole experiences (Koulourioris, 2011) and thus, participants' first language(s) are usually preferred since it facilitates participants' representing their sense of self and worldview (Shimpuku & Norr, 2011). Yet, not all researchers would have the language skills in the target population's first language(s), posing challenge for data collection (Temple & Young, 2004). Beside language proficiency, another reason for researchers to pay attention to interview language choice is that languages are value laden and rarely equivalent to each other (Temple & Young, 2004). Furthermore, bilingual/multilingual people may exhibit different personalities using different languages (Ramirez-Esparza, Gosling, Benet-Martinez, Potter, & Pennebaker, 2006). Therefore, the chosen language may impact the interview process, the data collected, and thus the research findings. However, this consideration is rarely discussed in the mainstream social science research, and recommendations for approaches to respond to linguistic differences when interviewing bilingual/multilingual participants are scarce. Usually, researchers decide on interview languages based on their personal inclination or on participants' language preference(s). How those language choices might affect the interview process and the data obtained is one question that remains to be answered. Our experiences with the two studies described in this article provide some insights to answer these questions, as well as providing recommendations on interview language choices.

In the Chinese study, all participants were given the option to be interviewed in either English or Mandarin Chinese, and the final language choice was based on the participants' preferences. Forty-seven out of the 54 individual interviews and all three focus group interviews were conducted in Mandarin because participants expressed that they had higher proficiency in their first language. Four participants preferred English since they came to the U.S. at very young ages and commanded the English language more fluently than Chinese. Three other participants were fluent in both languages and code-switched between Mandarin and English during the interview because they wanted to speak Mandarin with the Chinese researcher but sometimes an English word expresses their thoughts better or occasionally they had difficulty in finding the Chinese words to express their meaning. The bilingual participants reflected, because the research topic, smoking, is not a topic that is commonly discussed in their daily conversations, especially in Chinese language, and the smoking information they acquire are usually from sources in English (e.g., anti-smoking campaigns on Facebook), they would be more fluent in English when talking in depth about smoking, and hence the code-switching was necessary. In all, the interview language(s) were determined by participants' language preferences, which were mainly based on their self-perception of language proficiency. No concerning signs or interesting phenomena were observed related to the interview language choice.

The Kenyan study was a different case with more interesting observations because of the more complicated sociopolitical language situations in the country. There are over 40 spoken languages in Kenya including English, Swahili and many local and regional languages, and the use pattern of languages is quite unique. Although English, as a colonial language, is not commonly spoken in homes, it is the language of instruction in Kenyan schools -- taught from the onset of schooling -- and most Kenyans who have attended formal schooling speak the language fluently (Dhillon & Wanjiru, 2013). English is thus used for formal occasions, such as school purposes or official meetings. Swahili, another national language in Kenya, which all Kenyans speak fluently, is used in less formal occasions, such

as casual conversations with people from different regions (e.g., when interactants do not share a local language). Local or regional languages are used in the least formal settings -- with family and friends. The existence of large numbers of local languages in Kenya makes the use of those languages in interviews challenging because not all Kenyans speak and understand each other's local languages; however, the interviewees still had two choices for interview languages: English and Swahili. All interviews were conducted in English as participants indicated they were fluent and more comfortable with English for "professional" interviews than Swahili or other local languages. Given the language use pattern in the Kenyan culture, this is a sign that the interviewees perceived the interviews as a formal occasion to use English, which may impact the interview process. Indeed, as it turned out, some of the participants were reluctant to answer all the questions in the second interview and indicated that they had "already shared too much of the personal lives in the first interview". The question remains whether participants could have been more revealing or provided more in-depth information if the interviews were conducted in Swahili or their local languages, that is, in a situation where the interviews may have been considered less formal and more conversational.

Synthesizing the lessons from the two studies, we distinguish two types of situations for qualitative interviewers to consider when choosing an interview language. First, for a relatively novel topic or for a monolingual population, as shown in the Chinese immigrant study example, the language choice may not present many dilemmas. As the Chinese participants indicated in the interviews, smoking is a topic that they rarely communicate with others about, so the choice of language would not have an impact on the content of the interview. Furthermore, all of the participants had clear language preference based on their self-perceived language proficiency. As a result, the interview language choice was simple and straightforward. The second type of situation is when a targeted population consists of multilingual immigrants (e.g., Kenyan immigrant women) or when the topic is a familiar one that participants frequently interact with others about, such as education experiences. The language choice could then greatly influence the data gathered based on how participants usually communicate in the chosen language and which language they usually use to talk about the topic. Thus, when different languages or dialects are used at different occasions or for different topics in a target culture, we recommend that researchers carefully analyze the possible impact of the chosen language on the study and acknowledge possible impacts of the language choice when reporting the research findings.

## **Interviewing Process**

Working with immigrants with diverse communication styles, there may be unexpected incidents during the interview process -- such as the length of interviews, as experienced in the Kenyan study. Narrative inquiry was utilized for the study because of the particularly important role storytelling plays in Kenyan society. Although narrative is universal, it is probably even more important in Kenyan culture; it includes an elaborative communication style compared to the exacting style tends found among European Americans (Neuliep, 2009). In Kenya, large numbers of stories such as myths, legends, folk tales, riddles, proverbs exist in most of the ethnic groups, and young people learn about their illustrious ancestors through storytelling. "Folktales are a significant part of African orature, hence of the verbal art of women" (Sougou, 2008, p. 26); storytellers are often women. This was not different from the women who were interviewed. For example, one participant articulated how she negotiated her identity within two cultures by saying that "one doesn't want to be the hyena on the split road, because you are going to split up". She further went on to explain that the hyena, in attempt to follow the fragrance of meat, put his left leg on a left-

leading path, and his right leg on a right-leading path. As the two paths continued to veer in different directions, he split in two. Using this parable, the participant was determined to explain the importance of seizing opportunities, but also making choices that force one to drop what is significantly treasured. Even though such elaboration is rich in culture and crucial in explaining behavior and interpreting different phenomena, many of the interviews ended up lengthier than the scheduled 60-90 minutes, and some even went over 2 hours. As a result, the data analysis became challenging -- in part because of the unanticipated length of the interviews.

The experience from the Kenyan study is one example of how a culturally specific communication style can affect the interview process. Such surprising incidents may not be limited to only communication styles, but may occur in other aspects of the research process. Researchers should always be prepared for such incidents and be flexible in their adjustments.

### **Conclusion**

Methodological issues encountered in research with immigrant population were drawn from two interview studies, one with Chinese immigrants and one with Kenyan immigrant women. Reviewing the processes of the two studies, we provided recommendations to address methodological concerns in working with immigrant populations, including preparing the research protocol, recruitment, informed consent, choice of language, and interview process.

We suggest that researchers should carefully prepare the research protocol by conducting a pilot study or getting input from experts. The personal network recruitment method seemed to work well for recruitment, especially for a homogeneous targeted group like in the Kenyan women study; however, when the population is heterogeneous, utilizing a variety of recruitment methods is not only important to increase the response rate, but also to ensure data quality. For informed consent, we suggested that in appropriate contexts, it might be worthwhile to negotiate with IRB for an approval to get verbal consent at the beginning of study and obtain signatures at the end. This might not only reduce the difficulties researchers face in obtaining informed consent but also increase participants' comfort level in taking part in the research. We also suggest that the choice of interview language should not only consider participants' proficiency level but more importantly, take into consideration which language is normally used in discussing the research topic outside of the research project among the participants, as well as the impact of the language on the study. Researchers many need to discuss and acknowledge in the research report if possible impacts of language are anticipated or observed. Lastly, cultural nuances, such as cultural values and the targeted population's lifestyle, should all be considered in order to conduct the research in a culturally appropriate manner.

This article is among the first to explore methodological issues of research with Kenyan immigrants and one of the few to look at immigrant populations across different groups (i.e., Asian and African). Our discussions contribute greatly to the existing literature that some of the issues encountered in research with immigrant groups we discussed have not been mentioned in literature, and we provided much needed recommendations. However, one thing to note is that it is difficult to anticipate all possible issues before undertaking research. No matter how well we are prepared; there are always unanticipated issues in the field (e.g., the prolonged interviews in the Kenyan study). Researchers should always keep in mind the uniqueness of the immigrant populations they are working with, and be flexible to adjust their research designs in the field.

## References

- American Community Survey. (2010). *Integrated public use Microdata series: Version 5.0*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
- Brewer, M. B., & Chen, Y. (2007). (Who) are collectives in collectivism? Toward conceptual clarification of individualism and collectivism. *Psychological Review*, *114*(1), 133-151.
- Creswell, J. W. (2008). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Dhillon, J. K., & Wanjiru, J. K. (2013). Challenges and strategies for teachers and learners of English as a second language: The case of an urban primary school in Kenya. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, *3*(2), 14-24.
- Domenech-Rodríguez, M. M., Donovanick, M. R., & Crowley, S. L. (2006). Parenting styles in a cultural context: Observations of “protective parenting” in first-generation Latinos. *Family Process*, *48*(2), 195-210.
- Eggerth, D. E., DeLaney, S. C., Flynn, M. A., & Jacobson, C. J. (2011). Work experiences of Latina immigrants: A qualitative study. *Journal of Career Development*, *39*(1), 13-30.
- Espiritu, Y., & Wolf, D. (2001). The paradox of assimilation: Children of Filipino immigrants in San Diego. In R. G. Rumbaut & A. Portes (Eds.), *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America* (pp. 157-186). Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 191-215). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Guyatt, G. (2006). Preparing a research protocol to improve chances for success. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology*, *59*, 893-899.
- Hanassab, S. (2006). Diversity, international students, and perceived discrimination: Implications for educators and counselors. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, *10*(2), 157-172.
- Hill, N. E., & Torres, K. (2010). Negotiating the American dream: The paradox of aspirations and achievement among Latino students and engagement between their families and schools. *Journal of Social Issues*, *66*, 95-112.
- Immigration Policy Center. (2012). *African immigrants in America: A demographic overview*. Retrieved from <http://www.immigrationpolicy.org/just-facts/african-immigrants-america-demographic-overview>.
- Kanu, Y. (2008). Educational needs and barriers for African refugee students in Manitoba. *Canadian Journal of Education*, *31*(4), 915-940.
- Karwalajtys, T. L., Redwood, L. J., Fowler, N. C., Lohfeld, L. H., Howard, M., Kaczorowski, J. A., & Lytwyn, A. (2010). Conducting qualitative research on cervical cancer screening among diverse groups of immigrant women: Research reflection challenges and solutions. *Canadian Family Physician*, *56*, e130-e135.
- Koulouriotis, J. (2011). Ethical consideration in conducting research with non-native speakers in English. *TESL Canada Journal, Special Issue*, *5*, 1-5.
- Ku, L., & Matani, S. (2001). Left out: Immigrants' access to health care and insurance. *Health Affairs*, *20*(1), 247-256.



- Lee, Y. T. (2001). Ingroup preference and homogeneity among African American and Chinese American students. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 133*(2), 225-235.
- Light, R. J., Singer, J., & Willett, J. (1990). *By design: Conducting research on higher education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lu, Y., Marks, L., & Apavaloiae, L. (2012). Chinese immigrant families and Christian faith community: A qualitative study. *Family and Consumer Sciences Research Journal, 41*(2), 118-130.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- McCracken, M., Olsen, M., Chen, M. S., Jemal, A., Thun, M., Cokkinides, V., Deapen, D., & Ward, E. (2007). Cancer incidence, mortality, and associated risk factors among Asian Americans of Chinese, Filipino, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese ethnicities. *A Cancer Journal for Clinicians, 57*, 190-205.
- Morgan, D. L. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.
- National Council on Ethics in Human Research. (2007). Section 2: Free and informed consent. In *Tri-council policy statement: ethical conduct for research involving humans*. Ottawa, ON: National Council on Ethics in Human Research. Retrieved from, [www.ncehr-cnerh.org/en/](http://www.ncehr-cnerh.org/en/).
- Neufeld, A., Harrison, M. J., Hughes, K. D., Spitzer, D., & Stewart, M. J. (2001). Participation of immigrant women family caregivers in qualitative research. *Western Journal of Nursing Research, 23*(6), 575-591.
- Neuliep, J. W. (2009). *Intercultural communication: A contextual approach* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Nyamwange, M., Owusu, T., & Thiuri, P. (2001). Analysis of selected geographical aspects of Kenyan immigrants in the United States. *Middle States Geographer, 34*, 63-72.
- Ojeda, L., Flores, L. Y., Meza, R. R., & Morales, A. (2011). Culturally competent qualitative research with Latino immigrants. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 33*(2), 184-203.
- Padilla, A. M., & Gonzalez, R. (2001). Academic performance of immigrant and U.S.-born Mexican heritage students: Effects of schooling in Mexico and bilingual/English language instruction. *American Educational Research Journal, 38*(3), 727-742.
- Pernice, R. (1994). Methodological issues in research with refugees and immigrants. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practices, 25*(3), 207-213.
- Ponterotto, J. G. (2002). Qualitative research methods: The fifth force in psychology. *The Counseling Psychologist, 30*(3), 394-406.
- Qin, D. B. (2008). Doing well vs. feeling well: Understanding family dynamics and the psychological adjustment of Chinese immigrant adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 37*, 22-35.
- Ramirez-Esparza, N., Gosling, S. D., Benet-Martinez, V., Potter, J. P., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2006). Do bilinguals have two personalities? A special case of cultural frame switching. *Journal of Research in Personality, 40*, 90-120.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Rumbaut, R. G., & Portes, A. (2005). Ethnogenesis: Coming of age in immigrant America. In R. G. Rumbaut & A. Portes (Eds.), *Ethnicities: Children of immigrants in America* (pp. 1-19). Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Shimpuku, Y., & Norr, K. F. (2012). Working with interpreters in cross-cultural qualitative research in the context of a developing country: Systematic literature review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 68*(8), 1694-1706.

- Sougou, O. (2008). Transformational narratives: Hearing/reading selected Senegalese folktales of young women. *Journal of Research in African Literature*, 39(3), 26-38.
- Suarez-Orozco, C., Todorova, I. L. G., & Louie, J. (2005). Making up for lost time: The experience of separation and reunification among immigrant families. In M. M. Suarez-Orozco, C. Suarez-Orozco, & D. B. Qin (Eds.), *The new immigration* (pp. 179-196). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Suh, E. E., Kagan, S., & Stumpf, N. (2009). Cultural competence in qualitative interview methods with Asian immigrants. *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 20, 194-201.
- Temple, B., & Young, A. (2004). Qualitative research and translation dilemmas. *Journal of Qualitative Research*, 4(2), 161-178.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2010). *The foreign-born population in the United States: 2010*. Retrieved from, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/acs-19.pdf>
- Wamwara-Mbugua, W. L., & Cornwell, B. T. (2009). A dialogical examination of Kenyan immigrants' acculturation in the United States. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 8, 32-49.
- Wyche, S. P., & Grinter, R. E. (2012). "This is how we do it in my country": A study of computer-mediated family communication among Kenyan migrants in the United States. Paper presented at Session: Across the Globe: Cross-cultural Studies.
- Yu, S. M., Huang, Z. J., & Singh, G. K. (2004). Health status and health services utilization among US Chinese, Asian Indian, Filipino, and other Asian/Pacific Islander children. *Pediatrics*, 113, 101-107.

#### Author Note

Yu Lu is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication at Pennsylvania State University. Her research areas include intercultural communication, health communication, and research methods.

Mary W. Gatua, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor in Social Work at Clarke University in Dubuque, Iowa. Her research areas include cultural competencies, diversity issues in higher education, social justice, cross-cultural studies, and qualitative research.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yu Lu, 234 Sparks Building, University Park, PA 16802. E-mail: [yx1235@psu.edu](mailto:yx1235@psu.edu)

Copyright 2014: Yu Lu, Mary W. Gatua, and Nova Southeastern University.

#### Article Citation

Lu, Y., & Gatua, M. W. (2014). Methodological considerations for qualitative research with immigrant populations: Lessons from two studies. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(How To 16), 1-16. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/lu16.pdf>

---