

Using Culturally Sensitive Methodologies when Researching Diverse Cultures

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The purpose of this article is to introduce additional information in the ongoing conversation about using culturally sensitive research methods with diverse research populations. Research, including evaluation research, examining ethnic minorities, international, tribal members, and individuals within diverse cultures should be performed within a context of cultural understanding. Several methodological examples will be presented, expanding the discussion of contemporary research with diverse cultures.

The demographics of the United States population are growing more diverse with each approaching year. According to the 2000 Census, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001) 75% of the population is White, 12.5% Hispanic, 12.3% Black, 3.6% Asian, 0.9 American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.1 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 2.4% More than one race, and 5.5% Some other race. Population projections estimate that the non-Hispanic White population will decline in size while the minority population will double or triple, with the highest rate of increase occurring among Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Increases in

diversity call attention to the need for more culturally diverse and culturally sensitive research on minority groups in the U.S.

Culture can be defined as the language, history, religion, common traits, race, geographical location, art, music, agriculture of a common people (Bodley, 1994). Culture can also be a collection of what a group of people think, feel and do based on commonalities. With respect to these definitions, culture is a subjective term that distinguishes the shared experiences of groups of people from those of other groups. These differences deserve individual research attention and should be included when studying diverse groups.

Previous research identifies special populations as those groups whose members are incompetent and/or may be easily coerced during the research process (Neuman, 2006). These include youth, prisoners, physical, mental and/or emotionally disabled, students, homeless, etc. Although, groups who have received minimal attention and those who are difficult to reach, should be considered a part of the special population list. Research with culturally individuals is widely underrepresented and often based on convenience samples (APA, 2002). Therefore, particular attention needs to be devoted to these groups.

Culturally Sensitive Research

Culturally sensitive research places a consideration of culture and its impact on human behavior at the forefront of the research process. Culturally sensitive approaches identify ethnicity and culture as the foundation for understanding non-European groups. Tillman (2002) reported that culturally sensitive research should address: (a) specific knowledge, language and world views, (b) shared orientation

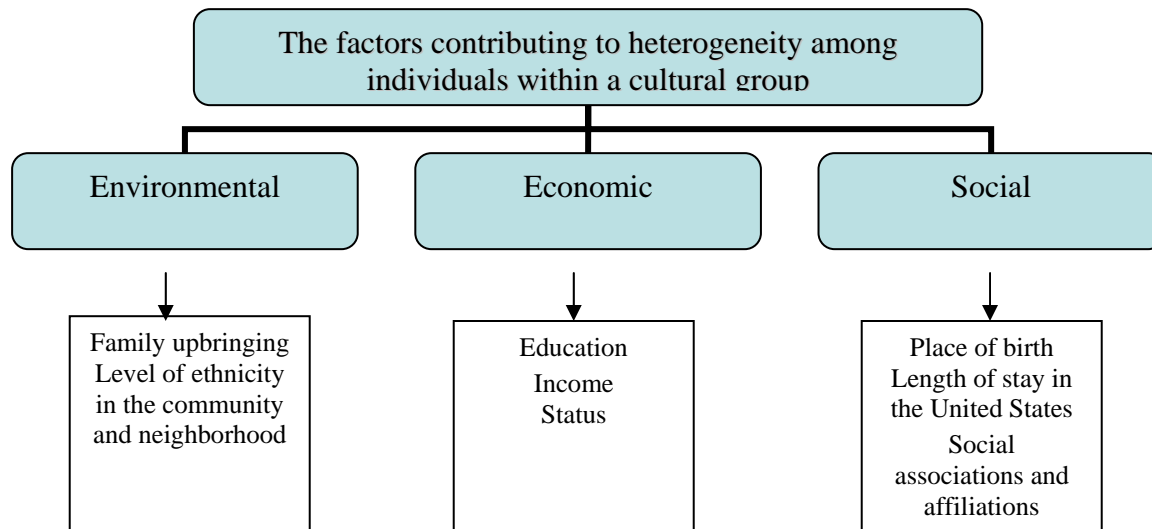
based on cultural, historical, and political experiences, and (c) specific behaviors that determine cultural distinctiveness. These methods have been previously applied to African and African American cultures, Native Americans and Hispanic Americans, although this article suggests that they should include members of any diverse culture.

The American Psychological Association (2002) suggests that culturally sensitive research should utilize culture as an explanatory variable in research with diverse populations. The impact of culture has often been seen as a spurious or tertiary variable to be examined in relation to other variables, or after relationships have been established. Culturally sensitive research suggests that culture is viewed as the focal point, that which describes the relationships to other variables.

Previous research also often ignores within group differences between members of a specific culture. There is a “great within group heterogeneity between the racial and ethnic groups represented in the United States” (UDSHHS, 2001) which suggests a need for more culturally sensitive measures. Tribal affiliations, time of migration, and ethnic identifications must be taken into consideration when researching these diverse groups. A particular ethnic group can be very heterogeneous and hence segmented (see Figure 1). This heterogeneity can be based on many elements. The three major factors that determine variation among a cultural group’s members are: environmental, economic and social (Guion & Chattaraj, 2004).

Figure 1

Factors Attributing to Heterogeneity Among a Cultural Group



Researchers should also be aware that there are different levels of ethnicity within a cultural group. These levels can be classified as high, medium, and low (Guion, 2003).

High degree of ethnicity (strong ties with their original, native culture)

- Generation: Newcomers, first generation.
- Length of Stay: Have grown up outside America.
- Language: Not fluent in English. Speak mostly the ethnic language.
- Accent: Heavy.
- Location: High-density ethnic areas.

Medium degree of ethnicity (belong to both worlds)

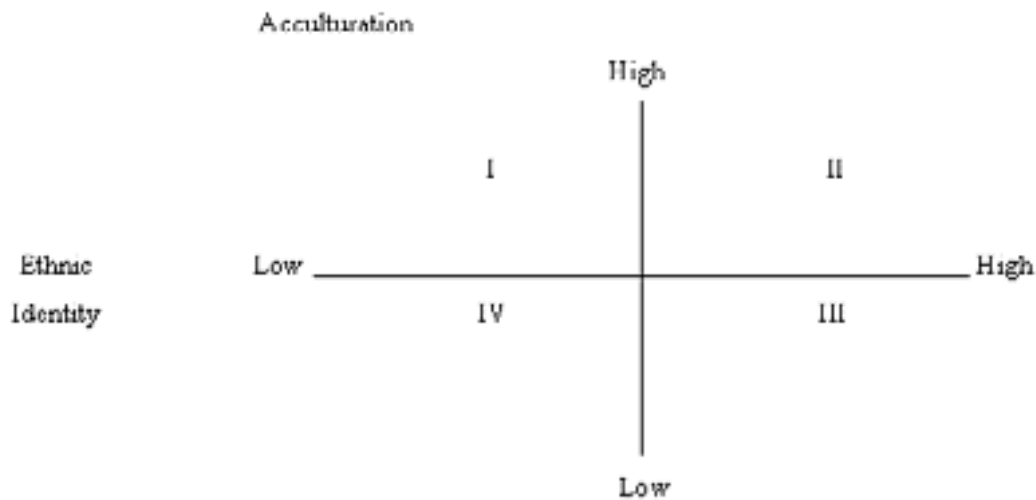
- Generation: Second or acculturated first.
- Length of Stay: One fourth to half of their lives spent in America.
- Language: Proficient in two languages. Bilingual (native language and English).
- Accent: Not very heavy.
- Location: Moderate ethnic density.

Low degree of ethnicity (weak ties with original culture)

- Generation: Second generation onwards.
- Length of Stay: Born and brought up in America.
- Language: Bilingual. Prefer English.
- Accent: Neutral.
- Location: Low ethnic density.

Other research has highlighted the role that the relationship between acculturation and ethnicity (see Figure 2) plays in the diversity between members of a culturally diverse group. Individuals can be grouped into four categories based on their level of acculturation and ethnicity (Kitano, 1989).

Figure 2
Categories of Acculturation and Ethnicity



Category I	High Acculturation – Low Ethnicity
The Conformists	Individuals are born and brought up in America or have been in America a very long time. They follow the typical mainstream culture.
Category II	High Acculturation – High Ethnicity
The Biculturals	Bicultural and bilingual. Individuals adapt themselves to different cultures.
Category III	Low Acculturation – High Ethnicity
The Conventionalists	Generally the newly arrived or those who want to preserve their conventional cultures.
Category IV	Low Acculturation – Low Ethnicity
The Mavericks	Individuals who have isolated themselves from both traditional and mainstream cultures.

Culturally Sensitive Research Methods

Current literature has focused on using an Afrocentric approach when examining African and African American cultures. Afrocentricism uses African values, traditions, and understandings as a guide for investigating people of African descent. Based on African principles, Afrocentric approaches outline appropriate culturally sensitive research methods for use with African people (Reviere, 2001). This method suggests that immersion into the African culture, “as opposed to the scientific distance”, is the best method of examining the cultural phenomenon of African people (Mkbela, 2005, pp.179).

Other diverse minority groups have been studied using culturally appropriate methods. Although the Afrocentric method has been suggested for use with African tribes, it can also serve as a blueprint for examination of other tribal groups. In working with tribal communities, researchers must: (a) develop relationships and reaffirm them often, (b) use methods that may not be conventional for use with White populations, and (c) identify collaboration by allowing the community to participate and provide input during all stages of the research process (Leticq & Bailey, 2004).

Participatory action research has been outlined as a method for use with Native American tribal groups such as the Tribal Participatory Research (TRP) Model. The TRP is a framework for building successful research programs with tribal communities (Fisher & Ball, 2002). This type of research highlights the connection between the research process and social action (Babbie, 2004). Individuals being studied take part in every aspect of the research process (Huer & Saenz, 2003; Mkabela, 2005; Tillman, 2002) and research outcomes are used to promote action

in the community. Utilizing a participatory action approach, the Comprehensive Indian Resource for Community and Law Enforcement (CIRCLE) sought to address crime prevention and other social issues among a tribe of Native Americans (Robertson, Jorgensen & Garrow, 2004). The researchers created and evaluated a program in order to disseminate knowledge that was significant for the members of the community under examination.

Other qualitative research methods such as interviewing, case studies, focus groups, and observations including participatory observations, have also been suggested for use with diverse subjects. These methods allow researchers to access those factors that describe the everyday experiences of diverse cultures (Tillman, 2002). For qualitative researchers, three main foci have been outlined (Berry, 2002) to guide culturally sensitive research. First, instead of using the individual as the unit of analysis, culture that drives human behavior is the main focus. Second, the relationship between changes in behavior and contact with culture should be addressed. Finally, researchers should note the difficulty in comparison data because behavior is distinct for that culture under examination.

Other research highlights both qualitative and quantitative methods tailored to specific cultures. Quantitative research instruments such as the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure -MEIM (Phinney, 1992); Africentrism scale – AFRI (Grills and Longshore, 1996); Racial Identity Scale (Helms & Parham, 1996); Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (Sellers, et al., 1997); The Nidanolitization scale (Taylor & Grundy, 1996) have been created and tested with diverse populations.

Conclusion

It is important to make research culturally sensitive in an ever increasing global society. Future discussion on conducting scholarly inquiry using global themes will enhance our effectiveness in studying diverse cultures (Huer & Saenz, 2003). This article has attempted to continue the conversation on methodological issues that face researchers working with diverse populations. More conversation is needed in order to create methods and techniques to support research that is appreciated by the members of diverse and/or indigenous communities (Robertson, Jorgensen & Garrow, 2004).

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