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## Working Paper Series

### Doing Research in an Understudied Population: Methods of Obtaining and Retaining Samples

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**Doing Research in an Under-Studied Population:  
Methods of Obtaining and Retaining Samples**

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## **Abstract**

Drawing on two studies of community-based samples of Puerto Rican youth, this paper describes strategies to increase volunteering and retention in research on disadvantaged populations that are essential for the external validity of results obtained in longitudinal studies. These strategies are to employ researchers publicly affiliated with the community being studied at all levels—most importantly, at the top of the decision-making hierarchy; to engage in community relations; to employ and train lay people similar in demographic profile to the population being studied for collecting interview data; and finally, to have a research rationale that resonates with the community's goals.

## **Doing Research in an Under-Studied Population:**

### **Methods of Obtaining and Retaining Samples**

The population of the U.S. is becoming increasingly more diverse with respect to its racial and ethnic composition. Wetrogan (1988) has estimated that in 2010 minority children will be the majority of those under age 18 in seven states: Hawaii (79.5%), New Mexico (76.5%), Texas (56.9%), California (56.9%), Florida (53.4%), New York (52.8%), and Louisiana (50.3%).

Research on child and adolescent development has not kept up with these demographic realities in that most of what is known about normative development comes from the white population (see Graham, 1992; Hagen & Conley, 1994; McLoyd & Randolph, 1985), with studies of minority children and adolescents making up the bulk of the studies on "at-risk" youth (Erkut, Szalacha, Alarcón, & García Coll, in press). The net effect is that there is little scientific knowledge on the growth and development of minority children, especially about those who do not come to the attention of social service or public safety agencies. Consequently, information obtained from Caucasian youth and at-risk minority youth are over-generalized to all youth from minority communities.

Why is there not more research on minority populations? The fact that federal funding agencies in the behavioral sciences, social sciences, medicine, and education require a separate discussion of minorities' (and women's) inclusion in study samples for the grant application process is recognition that without deliberate effort and incentives

and also sanctions it does not happen. The explanations of why it does not happen as a matter of course include the conjecture that researchers have found it easier, and also more important, to study samples who look like them white, middle class. It has been suggested that minority populations are hard to recruit (Ward, 1992) and hard to retain in longitudinal studies (Call, Otto, & Spenner, 1982). Cause, Ryan, and Grove (1998) have examined these claims in light of recruitment and retention rates reported in published research on minority youth. They have concluded that with appropriate planning and budgeting, racial and ethnic minorities can be recruited and retained in developmental studies at rates comparable to and even surpassing Caucasian youth. In this paper are presented strategies used in two case examples of culturally sensitive research on Puerto Rican youth living on the mainland (Alarcón, Erkut, Garcia Coll & Vázquez García, 1994; Erkut, Alarcón, & García Coll, 1999) that support Cause and her colleagues' conclusion.

We used four basic strategies to meet the challenges of maximizing the volunteering rate among those eligible for the research and to maximize retention among those who volunteered: We (1) created a research team that included Puerto Ricans at all levels; (2) engaged in extensive community relations; (3) trained community-based lay people to become interviewers; and (4) defined the rationale for the research in terms that resonated with the community's values. Whereas the first two strategies are well known (see Cause, Ryan, & Grove, 1998; Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1997; Pletsch, Howe, & Tenney, 1995; Office of Research on Women's Health, 1995), if imperfectly practiced, the last two, using trained lay interviewers and having a rationale that the community supports, are relatively novel.

The first case example was a longitudinal investigation of 13- and 14-year-old Puerto Rican youth and their primary caregivers living in the greater Boston area (Erkut, Alarcón & García Coll, 1999). The focus of the Puerto Rican adolescents study (PRAS) was on normative development growing up as a Puerto Rican adolescent on the mainland. Both adolescents and caregivers were interviewed, one-on-one in their homes by a bilingual/bicultural interviewer, in the language of the interviewees' choice. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. Adolescents and caregivers were paid \$10 each for their participation. The interviews were repeated once a year for three years. The second study was launched 15 months after the first in the same geographic area with a focus on the mental and physical health and growth of Puerto Rican children. This project, referred to as CHILD by the staff, was a longitudinal study of school-aged children in grades 1–3 and their primary caregivers who were interviewed once a year for three years. The methods of data collection were identical to those used in PRAS except that the children were given an age-appropriate book and crayons instead of money as a token of our appreciation for their participation.

#### (1) Composition of the research team

Studying an immigrant, linguistic and cultural minority group such as Puerto Ricans on the mainland falls within the realm of intercultural studies. Gergen, Gulerce Lock and Misra (1996) warn that an ethical concern arises when researchers from one culture or dominant group impose their vision of the proper focus of research and its methods on other cultures or among cultural/linguistic minorities in their own country. Substantive problems can also occur due to an unexamined transfer of concepts from one

culture/language system to another. These can introduce serious biases into intercultural research compromising the scientific integrity of the results. To avoid these biases, a highly recommended strategy for an intercultural research project is to incorporate horizontal collaboration (see Sinha, 1984) with researchers from indigenous cultures as full and equal members. The collaboration among equals on a research team — most of whose members are bilingual/bicultural and which includes researchers indigenous to the cultures being studied — is a safeguard against the ethical concern about cultural hegemony when Western/Anglo theories drive the research questions posed in the study of other cultures.

We have taken these adages to heart and have further argued that research implemented by a bilingual/bicultural team whose members are not only experts on the cultures but also on the subject matter being studied, minimizes the chances of obtaining invalid results due to the lack of correspondence in concepts and the lack of equivalence in the wording of data collection protocols. To this end, we have developed the dual-focus approach to developing bilingual measures (Erkut, Alarcón, García Coll, Tropp & Vázquez García, 1999) which was used to construct the Spanish and English versions of the data collection instruments for PRAS and CHILD.

More to the point, having indigenous researchers at the top of the hierarchy not only guards against ethical and substantive pitfalls in intercultural research; it is also an effective recruitment strategy. It lends credibility to the research in the eyes of the community being studied. In both PRAS and CHILD, two of the three co-principal investigators, one of whom is a Puerto Rican, were known to the local Puerto Rican

community — one was known through her previous research, the other through her professional involvement with the community as a health care provider. Moreover, the project's field coordinator and research assistant were Puerto Rican community leaders well known in the school system. The presence of Puerto Ricans among the directors and staff lent trustworthiness to the project's claim of being a serious program that would benefit the community rather than one that would use the community with no tangible benefit to them.

## (2) Community relations

Community relations have become a cornerstone of recruitment in minority communities. Some researchers have advocated creating partnerships with community organizations and have recruited gatekeepers and decision-makers from the community to serve on advisory boards (see Cauce, et al., 1998; Office of Research on Women's Health, 1995). Our research team has viewed creating goodwill and name recognition in the local Puerto Rican community as both a culturally respectful and a methodologically prudent first step in doing research with minority populations.

The co-principal investigators and other project staff were interviewed on local Latino television and radio programs. We visited agencies that dealt with Puerto Rican and other Latino groups; we wrote articles in local Spanish language newspapers; and we distributed informational leaflets throughout the Latino community. In addition, we sent personalized letters to all Latino community leaders and professionals, for whom we could locate an address. These communications described the study and asked for help in recruitment, notified them that we would be calling or stopping by to post recruitment

flyers in their offices, and invited them to share their thoughts and observations about Puerto Rican youth. This last strategy was designed to let community leaders know that we respected them and acknowledged they had valuable information to share with us, and indeed, some contacted us to share their views.

### (3) Selection of interviewers

The only reference we could find in the literature on employing lay people from the community was for using community volunteers to recruit additional female study participants (Elder, McKenna, Lazieh, Ferreira, Lasater & Carleton, 1986). Elder et al. have observed that volunteers' awareness and knowledge of the cultural environment can provide credibility, and access to the focal population. In our case, we went a step further by employing community members as recruiters and interviewers.

Interviewers were recruited from the communities from which the sample was to be drawn. The selection criteria were being bilingual and bicultural, familiarity with the Greater Boston Puerto Rican community, and an ability to commit 15 to 20 hours a week to the project. We did not insist on Puerto Rican ethnicity,<sup>1</sup> rather we selected Latinos knowledgeable about the local Puerto Rican community and who had "neutral" Spanish accents. Interviewers underwent intensive training, and because they had not been selected for previous experience with research or interview techniques, they took part in biweekly supervision meetings throughout the data collection period.

Since most of the interviewers came from the same social milieu as the sample, they experienced similar financial and residential instability. Over 4 years of data collection with the two overlapping projects, we had to absorb 80-90% attrition among

our interviewers. Moreover, the attrition was not random. We experienced greater attrition among the better-educated, more upwardly mobile interviewers. Many left because they found other, more lucrative jobs, and college students found part-time interviewing too difficult to schedule at a time mutually convenient to themselves and the family. The interviewers who remained were exceptionally productive and stayed with the project to the end. We strongly believe that the tenacity of the remaining interviewers made it possible for us to have the high retention rate we obtained among the sample respondents. In a few cases, it took more than 5 home visits to obtain one interview. Also, we suspect that similarity in the social class backgrounds of the remaining interviewers with the respondents was a factor in creating rapport between them. Same gender and same race or ethnicity, and of course, same language have long been touted as critical to building a positive working relationship between interviewers and respondents (see Caucé, et al, 1998). To this list we add social class background as an important dimension of similarity, perhaps even more important than same gender and race/ethnicity. At this time, the importance of similarity in social class remains a hypothesis that needs to be tested in future research.

The interviewers that remained with the research reported that sometimes participants would run into them in the neighborhood and ask, "When are you coming to interview me?" The interviewers then asked if the family still lived at the old address. On other occasions, when a family had just been interviewed, they'd say so-and-so who is also in the study, just moved to the next block. Most of the attrition occurred between the first and second year. We lost very few families between Year 2 and 3.

Our interviewers were personable and had good listening skills, which are key qualities for successfully recruiting and retaining minority samples (see Cauce, et al., 1998). In our case, we were concerned that these same qualities may be problematic for maintaining confidentiality because the interviewers were recruited from the same communities as the respondents. To guard against breaches of confidentiality the interviewers were specifically trained in procedures for maintaining proper professional boundaries. These procedures included the following rules: (1) Interviewers could refer personal acquaintances to the study, but they were not allowed to interview their relatives or friends. (2) We acknowledged that interviewers may want to bring up, in their personal lives, information they became aware of through the interviews. The instruction to the interviewers was to strongly avoid that temptation. (3) Interviewers were given formal opportunities for debriefing in cases where they needed to get “information off their chest.” These included, in ascending order of urgency, filling out a “concern” form that is filed with the completed interview protocol for staff to follow up, bringing up the concern at the bimonthly supervision meetings, and calling one of the project directors immediately after the interview. This last option was mandatory if information obtained in the course of the interview indicated that a minor was in danger because of her/his actions (suicidality) or the actions of others (abuse), or if the minor posed a threat to others.<sup>2</sup> (4) If the interviewers were to bring up even minor confidential information in their daily conversation, the instructions were to heavily disguise any identifying information in such a way that if respondents overheard what was being said, they would not know that the information was from their interview. These precautions worked well

in that out of more than 550 families interviewed in the two studies, only one brought to our attention a breach of confidentiality. The interviewer implicated was dismissed immediately upon verification of the complaint.

(4) Study rationale responsive to community values.

Our basic goal of documenting what it is like for the average Puerto Rican adolescent to grow up on the mainland has struck a responsive chord among youth, parents, and community leaders. In the words of a Puerto Rican mother who was initially reluctant to participate in the study, our research goals and approach was contrasted with "those others who come and take from us and give nothing back." A feature that appeared in The Boston Globe further cemented this positive relationship with the Puerto Rican community. The article described our findings in the context of debunking the widespread myth of Puerto Rican youth's tendency to engage in risky behaviors. The goals of CHILD, which was to investigate the impact of racism, discrimination, and immigration on the health and growth of Puerto Rican schoolchildren on the mainland, were also well received.

This particular strategy has not been specifically addressed in the literature although it can be assumed to fall under the rubric of culturally sensitive research. On a more superficial level than a project's rationale, researchers have paid attention to avoid giving a public name for their studies that would stigmatize participation. For example, Streissguth and Guinta (1992) refrained from referring to drug use in the title of their research on cocaine use during pregnancy. Instead, they named it the Seattle 500 study referring to the number of respondents planned for the sample. The strategy we are

proposing goes beyond the title or public name. It refers to the social acceptability of the rationale for the research.

Over the years minority youth have been viewed through the lens of the deficit model, with a focus on what is wrong and missing in their lives rather than on what they can contribute to society. Minority communities have understandably become suspicious about researchers whose findings will “show them up” or otherwise embarrass them. If researchers feel they cannot divulge the true nature of the work because it would not be a draw, we suggest they re-think their focus. A rule of thumb could be that if the researchers wouldn’t want their adolescent children to participate, they should reformulate their approach.

#### Recruitment outcomes

The PRAS and CHILD families were recruited using a mixed recruitment-referral strategy. For PRAS, the mixed strategy we employed allowed for recruiting through middle schools by making announcements at PTA meetings, health clinics, and going from door-to-door to recruit families in blocks of heavy concentrations of Puerto Ricans. Networks of Latino professionals, the project interviewers, and study participants were asked to refer potential participants. Recruiting also took place during sports leagues and at area businesses and supermarkets. The project and its telephone number were advertised on local Spanish radio and cable. For CHILD, the recruitment was initiated through obtaining permission from the Superintendent of elementary schools, and the Office of Research and Planning to establish direct contacts in the Boston elementary schools. The outreach was then extended to include parochial schools, community health

centers, colleges and professional organizations. Flyers were distributed at different community locations. Information flyers with prepaid return envelopes were distributed to several of the above locations. Interviewers who had been engaged in the recruitment process also utilized word-of-mouth and door-to-door recruitment. In order to boost recruitment and provide incentive to interviewers to recruit families on their own, they were paid \$10 for each family they recruited in addition to their interviewing fee.

For PRAS, the mixed recruitment/referral strategy yielded a pool of 302 families that met the screening criteria -- an adolescent in the family aged 13 or 14 at the time of the interview who self-identifies as Puerto Rican or has at least one parent born in Puerto Rico, and is able to hear and understand interview questions and able to see and read answer cards. Of the 302 eligible families, 96% volunteered to take part in the study. On the other hand, among the volunteer families, two moved before interviews could be scheduled, and 33 families (11 percent of those eligible) eventually withdrew their consent, actively or passively, after more than 10 missed and canceled appointments. Additionally, we were able to interview either only the adolescent or his/her caregiver in five families. Our first wave sample consists of 245 families on whom we have both adolescent and caregiver data.<sup>3</sup> Thus, we can claim a volunteering rate of 96% and a final, full participation rate of 84% among the volunteers.

The importance of the high volunteering rate among eligible families concerns the external validity of the research. A high volunteering rate suggests that the sample is not self-selected, and lends confidence to generalizing from the results obtained. The lower but still high, full participation rate of 84% was a function of logistical difficulties in

scheduling we encountered which could not be overcome because the necessary rapport between interviewers and respondents had not yet been established. Therefore, the results obtained are somewhat less representative of the population that has highly erratic or changing schedules.

### Retention Outcomes

To maximize retention, we followed the standard procedure of obtaining extensive information from the caregivers regarding their kin and friendship network to be able to find them in the case of a move. Our "tracking" form asked for both work and home address and telephone number of the youth's other parent if non-resident, the caregiver's current partner, three closest relatives, and three closest friends. Additionally we asked for the name of the school the youth would attend the following year. The informed consent form asked for permission to find the family through these contacts in case of a move without sending us a change of address card. What may have been novel in our tracking form is that we also asked for everyone's nick names (or street names). This piece of information was essential for identifying our sample and their contacts in the social network of the local Puerto Rican communities.

It turned out that there was not a large residential mobility problem in our sample, especially no substantial circular migration back to Puerto Rico. Over the three years of PRAS only 5 out of 251 original families moved to Puerto Rico; and 10 out of 291 families in CHILD. What made retention a challenge was the telephone connection. Whereas most families had a telephone apparatus, having telephone service was not guaranteed. We found out that in Massachusetts, the telephone company can shut down

the service for non-payment but cannot disconnect a family from emergency access to the police or the fire department. So all families had telephones on which they could call 911 and also any 800 numbers since those are free to the caller. We immediately obtained an 800 number for the office and publicized it to the families in the sample through the mail

The U.S. Post Office also helped in other ways. When we sent out "Thank you," birthday and holiday cards using first class mail, undelivered mail would be returned to us. This then alerted us to begin tracking the families through their extended network even before it was time to for the follow-up interview.

The retention outcomes for PRAS are 91% between the first and second wave and 96% between the second and third wave. In CHLD, we were able to achieve a 93% retention rate between the first and second waves of CHLD, and 95% during the second and third waves of data collection. These rates match or exceed the retention rates reported by Cauce et al., 1998. Moreover, our analyses have shown that there is no systematic pattern in attrition with respect to child's or adolescent's gender and age, family income, family size, and receiving public assistance.

These high rates retention are a protection against the threat of differential attrition bias that can also threaten external validity. Had we lost more families, we would have been restricted in our ability to generalize. However, given the very high volunteering, high full participation, and the very high retention rates, we can have confidence that our findings are generalizable beyond the type of people who like participating in research studies and stay put for the interviewers to find them year after year.

## Conclusion

We have highlighted four strategies to account for the high recruitment and retention rates achieved in two studies of Puerto Rican youth. The first two of our strategies — the research team included Puerto Ricans at all levels and we engaged extensively in community relations — are widely acknowledged, if not uniformly implemented, as effective culturally sensitive research methods. The latter two strategies - - our interviewers were community-based, lay people and we made sure our research rationale was similar to the community's goals — are more novel.

Overall, we made it logistically easy for the youth and caregivers to participate in the research. The interviewers went to the respondents' homes at a time that was mutually convenient. And if there was no one home, in spite of having confirmed the time by telephone or stopping by the night before, the interviewers went back again and again until the interview was completed. We also made it culturally comfortable by allowing the respondents to choose what language they wanted to be interviewed in and having interviewers who were similar to them conduct the interviews.

We agree with Cauce, Ryan and Grove (1998) that minority adolescents have been unfairly stereotyped as difficult to recruit and retain. Our recruitment and retention rates show that it is possible to accomplish these goals with forethought and diligence. Even if they were very difficult to implement, we would recommend these culturally sensitive procedures because the scientific benefits of increased external validity outweigh the costs of limited generalizability due to the selection bias. We suggest that making participation of minority youth in a research project easy, pleasant, and beneficial to community goals

is an important way to increase the scientific validity the study of their growth and development.

In conclusion, culturally sensitive procedures contribute to the cumulative scientific enterprise of expanding the knowledge base by making it easier for researchers to carry out studies of under-studied groups. For any given study, culturally sensitive procedures yield increased volunteering and retention rates thereby increasing the external validity of the results obtained. With more scientifically valid studies of minority youth's growth and development, results obtained on Caucasian samples and samples of at-risk minority youth are less likely to be over-generalized to the lives of all minority youth.

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