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## Preventing Paralysis in Culture-Based Research: Negotiating Obstacles

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### ABSTRACT

This response to the commentaries continues the dialogue regarding the importance of conducting prevention research with traditionally understudied populations. Using the commentaries as a starting point, this article discusses three points typically raised as obstacles for researchers considering research that attempts to address cultural elements: (a) Culture is a construct that is impossible to define, (b) appropriate assessment instruments do not exist, and (c) it is too difficult to recruit participants. Overall, the author emphasizes that researchers can make meaningful contributions to the literature while at the same time effectively negotiate these obstacles.

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As has been noted by others, considerable gaps exist in our understanding of the mental health needs of many cultural groups, both within and outside of the United States. Despite the fact that conducting research that incorporates culture is not easy, it is desperately needed, and finding ways to make this research more appealing to a greater number of psychologists is critical. The two studies presented in this volume ([Cardemil, Reivich, & Seligman, 2002](#); [Yu & Seligman, 2002](#)) are important first steps in the advance of prevention work with understudied populations and hopefully will serve as a reference point for future research. The four commentaries thoughtfully elaborate on this research and make important recommendations for advancing the science and improving future prevention research that addresses culture. I continue this dialogue by discussing three points that are

typically raised as obstacles for researchers considering conducting cultural research. Throughout this article, I emphasize that researchers can make meaningful contributions to the literature while at the same time effectively negotiating these obstacles.

## **Culture Is Impossible to Define**

One common complaint of culturally based research focuses on the belief that culture is an all-encompassing construct that cannot be adequately defined. For example, many possible cultural influences can be considered, including race, ethnicity, country of origin, class, sex, age and their many different interactions. Lee, Ottati, and Guo (2002) note that sociocultural and historical factors can also play a significant role in individual psychology. Moreover, Mattis (2002) and Lopez, Edwards, Ito, Pedrotti, and Rasmussen (2002) make the important point that within-group differences may be larger than between-group differences. Acculturation is a good example of a variable that might produce significant within-group differences. How then might investigators include samples and instruments that allow for analysis of all of these variables?

Researchers should certainly think carefully about the different ways that culture could be measured in their samples before conducting their research. However, it is not necessary that every possible cultural variable must be perfectly measured before research can begin. Considerable benefit can be gained by research programs that address at least some cultural elements. For example, as was pointed out by Lopez et al., both of the studies in this issue could have addressed within-group variation more effectively (e.g., acculturation, class). And although these criticisms are wholly valid, it is difficult to imagine any single study accounting for every possible cultural variation. However, that goal should not necessarily be expected of any study in isolation. Rather, accounting for different elements of culture should be the broader goal of a line of research that builds on itself in an iterative manner, with each subsequent study addressing the neglected questions of the previous ones.

There is a risk of becoming paralyzed when researchers feel pressured to comprehensively address every possible variable relevant to culture. In such cases, cultural considerations may be neglected altogether. Rather than focus on culture in its entirety, researchers would do well to make efforts to identify specific elements of culture that they want to investigate, acknowledging the limitations in the elements that are not addressed or measured.

## **It Is Too Hard to Find Appropriate Assessment Instruments**

A second reason that many researchers eschew considerations of culture is the belief that well-validated assessment instruments simply do not exist and that it is too difficult to develop novel instruments that would be valid. Finding and developing well-validated instruments is extremely important; however, research can continue in the absence of instruments that have published records attesting to their validity and reliability. Some assessment of the internal validation and reliability of the instruments can (and should) take place in the study itself. Lopez and colleagues suggest examining the data for outliers and then conducting replicatory factor analyses as a way to confirm that the measures are cross-culturally comparable.

This strategy is an important one. But what should researchers do if the measures emerge as

unreliable in some way? Or, more complicated, less internally consistent than in the population with whom the measure has been normed? No clear guidelines exist in regard to when a measure might have some utility in a study and when data should be ignored.

One way that researchers can gain confidence in the findings of their results is to use multiple outcome measures that go beyond self-report measures. Muñoz, Penilla, and Urizar (2002) emphasize the limitations that can be made from using cutoff scores to represent clinical significance. Moreover, assessments (both interview-based and self-report) that include family members of the participants can provide a rich source of information that has not yet been understudied. Finally, assessing more than just symptoms is also crucial, as preventive interventions may have effects on concepts like quality of life, and social-occupational functioning.

## **It Is Too Difficult to Recruit Participants**

Finally, a common complaint about conducting cultural research is that it is extremely difficult to recruit participants. For a variety of reasons, many members of minority communities are less willing to engage with research institutions (e.g., Miranda, Azocar, Organista, Muñoz, & Lieberman, 1996), and, thus, researchers must find novel ways to engage communities and its members in this research. Strategies of flyer distribution or mass mailings are generally inadequate to recruit sufficient numbers of racial-ethnic minority participants.

Both the Cardemil et al. and Yu and Seligman studies presented in this issue were remarkably successful in recruiting participants for a variety of reasons. First, the research teams were diverse in their composition, a strength that helped the teams in their preliminary conceptualization of the modifications needed to adjust the prevention program to their respective communities. In addition, it is likely that the diversity of the research team helped to access the community population. For example, the ability to communicate in the language of the community (e.g., Chinese in the Yu & Seligman study and Spanish in the Cardemil et al. study) was certainly a factor that allowed the studies to take place.

Second, both research teams made it a priority to engender trust in the communities by being very transparent about the goals of the research. Significant time was spent meeting with principals and teachers in regard to the intervention, in addition to meeting with parents of the children in the schools. Moreover, community members were provided with access to all materials prior to and during the execution of the research, and they were encouraged to communicate with the research teams when any questions arose. Lopez et al. (2002) make a very cogent argument that community involvement should take place at all levels of any prevention research, a tactic that would indubitably increase rates of participation.

Third, it is likely that these research programs were highly effective in recruiting participants because they were prevention studies. Although basic research is important, well-designed prevention research is likely to be more appealing to communities than basic research because of the potential benefits to participants. It may be that prevention research is the best way to engage participants at first. The fostering of trust between the community and the research team can then lead to future collaborations that build on the previous research studies, perhaps increasing the willingness to then participate in basic research studies that address the limitations of the prior prevention work.

## Conclusion

Expanding the populations that researchers study is critically important, particularly given the rapidly changing demographic composition of the U.S. and throughout the world. Also, although conducting this research has inherent challenges that cannot be ignored, it is surprisingly feasible, practical, and just as important, welcomed and valued in the communities that are included in it. Thus, finding ways to get more researchers excited about developing theories that attempt to understand the interplay among culture, depression, and its associated variables is incumbent on those researchers among us who already have this passion.

In this response to the commentaries, I have tried to make the point that many of the typical obstacles that arise when conducting this research are indeed surmountable, especially when they are viewed in the context of programmatic research. From this perspective, the two studies presented in this issue are just a beginning, and they clearly demonstrate both the strengths and limitations of conducting prevention research that attempts to consider culture. I am hopeful that they can serve as a springboard for future research programs that more precisely address certain cultural elements.

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