

ScWk 242	San José State University
Spring 2008	School of Social Work
Week 14	Instructor: Edward Cohen

The Transcultural Perspective and Social Work Research Design: Guidelines for Proposals

The transcultural perspective can be applied to research as well as practice. The transcultural perspective embraces five interrelated but distinct dimensions of diversity: 1) Cultural knowledge: recognizing the importance of culture in social work at all levels of practice; 2) Cultural competence: applying principles of cultural competence in practice; 3) Power, privilege and oppression: understanding dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, and structural contexts; 4) Positionality and self-reflexivity: maintaining an awareness of ones own cultural perspectives, values, and beliefs; and 5) Respectful partnership: demonstrating respect in interactions with client systems.

I. Cultural Knowledge

Research with a transcultural perspective requires knowledge of concepts and processes related to culture and how these intersect with social work concerns. This dimension of the transcultural model focuses on the discovery of key knowledge about the construct of culture as well as processes for how to locate knowledge about various cultural communities. Thus, the dimension highlights both knowledge and the process of inquiry. Knowledge of cultures is required in order to ask the right research questions. This is important since the questions drive how we measure constructs and how we interpret the data. Measurement of constructs and the operationalization of variables require cultural knowledge in order to ensure the validity and reliability of our survey questions and scales and minimize measurement error. Survey questions should be translated and back-translated to ensure validity. Knowledge of cultures is also required in order to develop appropriate methods of data collection. Interpreting results requires cultural knowledge. Results from both quantitative and qualitative studies can be ambiguous, and the more cultural knowledge the researcher has the more relevant and accurate the interpretations of the findings.

Summary of key points to address in research:

- Cultural equivalence
- Measurement error
- Validity of measures
- Reliability of measures
- Correct interpretation of findings

II. Cultural Competence

Researchers must be culturally competent. Once valid and reliable measures are developed based on knowledge of cultures, then the processes of data collection should be culturally sensitive and culturally congruent. Some survey strategies and techniques are more effective than others with specific groups of people. For both self response and in-person survey interviews, an

understanding of culturally relevant behaviors, attitudes, and skills are necessary in order to elicit information that is aligned with the constructs the researcher originally intended to measure. Whenever possible research should be conducted in the primary language of the research participants. Cultural norms should be respected and followed regarding the protection of privacy for individuals and groups, permissions from community leaders, family values, and the role of individual participants in the larger familial, group and community contexts. Informed Consent should be obtained in a culturally sensitive and relevant manner.

Summary of key points to address in research:

- Understanding and respect of cultural norms
- Adequate and culturally appropriate informed consent procedures
- Culturally sensitive data collection procedures
- Linguistic matching with target population

III. Power, privilege and oppression

This dimension emphasizes the dynamic of power relations in the larger society and how those dynamics are reflected in the practitioner-client relationship and the ways in which practitioners approach, analyze, and address social work issues, problems, and contexts. The positivist research tradition in the social sciences is also situated in the power and oppression dynamics of our society. A transcultural perspective in research recognizes the imbalance of power that often results from viewing research participants as passive “subjects” of research. Results of these imbalances include, for example, the systematic exclusion of subgroups in sampling, lapses in informed consent procedures that result in disempowerment of individuals and groups, and the . The transcultural approach views the targets of research (individuals, groups, organizations, and communities) as research partners who participate in the development of the research questions and methodologies. Consequently, research is developed that will benefit participants. The perspective encourages community-based research (the proactive inclusion of the target populations in the design, implementation and utilization of relevant research) and thereby ensures its cultural relevance. The use of key informants, advisory groups, cultural experts, and community leaders will minimize the detrimental effects of the traditional power and oppression relationships. In addition, research methodologies that include qualitative components (such as mixed methods studies) will allow perspectives to be represented (given voice) that cannot easily be measured by quantitative methods alone.

Summary of key points to address in research:

- Recognition of power imbalances between researcher, research participants and other stakeholders
- Community-based research
- Qualitative components

IV. Positionality and Self-Reflexivity

This dimension highlights the notion of how one’s social location, or positionality, influences her/his world view, behavior, research practice, and professional action. The researcher should understand how her/his own life experiences and social position can potentially influence the various

aspects of the research process. This is especially important to understand the effects of the researcher's positionality on how she/he frames research questions, to what extent the researcher is able to involve engage participants in the research process, and how findings are interpreted. Such self awareness can influence the extent to which the researcher is honest with her/himself and others about the intentions of the research vis-à-vis the individuals, groups and communities who are targeted by the research. How the researcher perceives others who are different (such as those different in gender, culture, ethnicity, and sexual orientation/identity, among other factors) will have a direct influence on each step of the research process (e.g. development of research questions, sampling, informed consent, data collection, and interpretation of findings). Qualitative research requires the researcher to self-reflexively report issues about their positionality "in the field." For example, the researcher may discuss her/his preconceived assumptions and biases about the target population in order to minimize the disruption of these influences in the relationship with research participants and when interpreting data. Post-positivist approaches to quantitative research do not require self-reflexive reporting, however quantitative researchers are equally as vulnerable to the influences of these biases and must therefore minimize their disruption.

Summary of key points to address in research:

- Researcher's preconceptions, assumptions and biases, and how they might affect:
 - Development of research questions
 - Sampling procedures
 - Research design
 - Data collection procedures
 - Informed consent procedures
 - Interpretation of findings

V. Respectful Partnership

The attitude of continuous inquiry about cultural differences is central to the transcultural approach, and it implies that one that research should be conducted with respectful partnerships with others. Community-based research involves collaboration with those who have a direct stake in the research findings, such as those populations targeted by the research, community leaders, government and non-profit provider agencies, and policy planners. As "research practitioners" researchers should approach their research topics and stakeholders with "cultural humility." This involves including "cultural experts" in the design of the research, being open to feedback about research design at the early stages, and flexibility in rethinking the research design throughout the study based on feedback from research partners. This will also maximize the practical use of research findings, since the study objectives will more closely match the needs of the research partners.

Summary of key points to address in research:

- Research partnerships
- Key informants, cultural experts, and advisory groups
- Incorporating feedback from research partners