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Q&A: Educator Pedagogical Approach

Research Methods in Minoritized Populations

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What sparked your interest in research methods with minoritized communities? Was it part of your own preparation as a scholar?

The issue of addressing research methods for minoritized populations has been important to me since I was a PhD student at the Brandeis University Heller School of Social Policy in the mid-1990s. I had the luxury of coming in with a cohort of seven PhD students of color including myself (out of about 28 students). As a cohort of students of color, we met informally in the first year of the PhD program, organizing regular potlucks and get-togethers that really allowed us to become family to each other and provide the all-important social support.

I had the opportunity to conduct research on Latinos and recruit a Latino sample for a National Institutes of Health study of aging caregivers of adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities, which would eventually become my dissertation. Very early on, however, my two Latina colleagues, who were also interested in conducting research with Latino populations, and I observed that the research methods courses offered at the Heller School did not address how these methods may be different for different underrepresented groups. We decided to develop our own syllabus as an independent study course and enlisted the one faculty member of color in the Heller School at the time to be the faculty sponsor. This experience of engaging in readings and discussions relevant to research methods in diverse communities helped to guide my dissertation work, as I was finding that many “conventional” ways of doing research did not fit the population I was attempting to engage in research.

My experiences conducting research for my dissertation became the topic of my first publication, which addressed strategies for research in Latino communities. What I found was that involving the community in many aspects of the study is critical to ensure that the community benefits, strengthen the

scientific integrity of the research, and facilitate sample recruitment (Magaña, 2000). I revisited this content area after I received tenure in the School of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I proposed developing a course, Research Methods in Communities of Color, which was to be offered in the social work doctoral program and doctoral programs in other colleges and departments. I had such fun developing the course in collaboration with faculty members of color in other disciplines (including counseling psychology, curriculum and instruction, and human development and family studies). We met regularly to think through the topics of the course. The course was offered the following year as an elective for PhD students in social work and other social service disciplines.

What are your thoughts on how a course on research methods with minoritized populations can be integrated into social work programs?

Schools of social work across the country are engaged in discussions about the inclusion of curriculum that focuses on antiracism and racial justice. This discussion is beginning to take place among our PhD programs and committees. All social work research is engaged in improving the lives of people from underserved communities and in important topic areas such as mental health, aging, child welfare, and youth empowerment, for example. Yet our research methods courses do not reflect how research methods themselves should be culturally relevant and should address racial and other inequities. In my field of study, understanding families of children with autism and developing interventions for these families, most research is conducted with middle-class families. This is true for many of the fields we study as social work scholars. Even in our areas of study within social work, race/ethnicity and other minoritized identities are often an afterthought or used only as control variables.

It is important to give students an understanding about how to consider formulating research questions, conceptual frameworks, measures, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings in the context of race/ethnicity and minoritized groups. How should these stages of research vary depending on the group you are studying? What ways of considering race/ethnicity may be harmful to those communities? How do we keep our own biases in check in qualitative and quantitative research?

This year the PhD committee at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work at the University of Texas at Austin, where I teach, decided to make the course a required course for our PhD students. This was an important decision in the right direction. An alternative approach may be to integrate this content into the

usual research methods courses, which some instructors do very well. This approach, however, may mean that the inclusion of this content in a substantive way may vary by instructor. There are advantages to a third alternative, offering this course as an elective, in that PhD students of color who are very interested in studying diverse populations tend to enroll. Having students who are enthusiastic about the topic can make the experience of the course very fulfilling.

Reference

Magaña, S. (2000). Mental retardation research methods in Latino communities. *Mental Retardation*, 38, 303–315.



[Sandy Magaña](#), PhD, MSW, holds the professorship in autism and neurodevelopmental disabilities at the [University of Texas at Austin Steve Hicks School of Social Work](#). Dr. Magaña is a leader in research on the cultural context of families who care for children and adults with developmental disabilities. She is currently investigating racial and ethnic disparities among children with autism and developmental disabilities and developing culturally relevant interventions to address these disparities. Her work has helped advance the development of effective culturally relevant interventions.