

Difficulties and Solutions for Surveying Refugees: Bosnians Refugees in St. Louis

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Conducting surveys with populations from a low socioeconomic status, illiterate populations, migrant populations, and transient populations presents many theoretical and methodological challenges to researchers. Refugee populations are such groups, calling for various theoretical and methodological considerations during the process of conceptualization, operationalization, sampling, and data collection. The demographics of refugees have dramatically changed since the breakdown of the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the war in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. More than 50 percent of the refugees who came to the U.S. since that time are Eastern Europeans (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).

While many challenges can be clustered under cross-cultural issues, considering the diversity of these refugees in the U.S., researchers need to address specific difficulties with surveying refugees and solutions for these difficulties. Further, community-based research on refugees requires special attention to ethical issues, which are beyond a scope of the federal regulations on research ethics. Pernice (1994) argued some methodological difficulties of studying mental health issues of refugees, challenging the universal applicability of conventional research methods used by psychologists. Her research was primarily with Indochinese refugees and Pacific Island immigrants to New Zealand. In this paper, we specify several difficulties with surveying refugees based upon our own research on refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina in St. Louis, Missouri.

Difficulties with Surveying Refugees and Solutions

There are five major difficulties with surveying refugees.

Conceptualization of the research topic:

Researchers conduct an extensive literature review on a relevant research topic for the purpose of conceptualization and subsequent hypothesis development. There are cases in which very few references relevant to the research topic or the target population exist. This was the case of the study with Bosnian refugees. Most of the research on Bosnian refugees is related to political and mental health issues. Although there existed a large number of studies on Cuban refugees and Vietnamese refugees who came to the U.S. in the 1960's and 1970's respectively, a question arose whether or not some of these findings are applicable to Bosnian refugees who entered the U.S. in the 1990's. Bosnians' religious background as Muslims and racial background as

Caucasians also made them very distinct in comparison with Cubans and Vietnamese who were racial minorities. Due to the lack of extensive literature available for conceptualization and the ethnic characteristics different from previous refugees, the authors used a 'sequential exploratory method' with a grounded theory method. We specified several concepts which are assumed to explain Bosnians' resettlement processes, based upon qualitative data which were obtained from face-to-face interview with Bosnian refugees, service providers at refugee resettlement agencies, and state and federal officials. Two major concepts emerged from data analysis: Comfort (finding an emotional niche) and Competence (finding a material niche). Bosnians in St. Louis are very resilient, and demonstrate a "sense of coherence," a term coined by Aaron Antonovsky (1979), who studied Holocaust survivors in the U.S. A sense of coherence is different from coping skills in that negative experiences during one's life course lead to a stronger will to survive. In other words, "what does not kill me makes me stronger." Refugees undergo the process of redefinition of their identity and community development as most immigrants do, but their redefinition process differs from that of immigrants because of the refugees' forced migration to a host country (Lam and Lanphier 2002; Warner 1993). Sense of Coherence is one of the contributing factors to refugees' successful integration into a host country, community development, and identity reconstruction, impacting their overall satisfaction with being in America even though it was not their choice. However, this emotional niche is also impacted by the refugees' material satisfaction, especially in the area of securing jobs and consequent occupational status. It was inevitable for refugees who held prestigious jobs in Bosnia to experience occupational demotion because of a lack of English competency and licensing problems. Furthermore, Locus of Control, Spiritual Healing, Social Support, and Experience of Discrimination are also important intervening factors which have impact on Comfort that refugees experience during the process of adaptation to American society. While Locus of Control serves as a buffer between the traumatic experiences in the war and displacement and the life satisfaction in a host country, Spiritual Healing and Social Support contribute to reducing sources of stress, having a positive impact on Comfort.

Operationalization of the concepts and validity of scales: Previous literature on refugees in the U.S. has some limitations because many studies attempt to explain psychological outcomes using only one or two predictor variables. Gonsalves (1992) argues that a large number of individual, environmental, and historical variables need to be in the model in order to explore the refugee resettlement processes. Further, previous studies have used instruments designed for non-refugee populations whose experiences are quite different from refugees' experiences. Additionally, instruments used for immigrant populations might not measure the same construct when administered to refugee populations because these two populations come to the U.S. for different reasons. In order to address this issue, the authors selected the most appropriate scales to measure the concepts and conducted a content validity test of several scales by consulting with experts on refugees. The selected scales were the Sense of Coherence Scale, Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, Impact of Event Scale, Brief Multidimensional Measure of Religiousness and Spirituality, English Competency Scale, and Experience of Discrimination Scale.

The content validity test revealed that many scales, except for the Belief in Personal Control Scale, did not meet the standards suggested by Lynn (1986) and Grant and Davis (1997), suggesting that they needed to be revised before use in research with Bosnian refugees. However, the results of the content validity test showed differences between experts from academic institutions and those from the resettlement agencies and the Bosnian community. A focus group with those who participated in the content validity test was conducted in order to select the most appropriate items from each scale. Although the use of a focus group for the content validity test was not a conventional method, it provided better results in the reliability tests of each scale when the data were collected. All the Cronbach's Alphas were over 0.85 except for the Alphas for the locus of control and the sense of coherence which were about 0.70. This suggests that the use of a focus group provides a solution when the conventional content validity test might not be appropriate because of the lack of knowledge about the target population.

Translation of questionnaires: When the first language of the target population is not English, the questionnaire has to be translated into an appropriate language. A conventional method of validation of a translated questionnaire is to back-translate the translated questionnaire. In other words, the questionnaire written in English will be translated into Bosnian by a person who is fluent in both

English and Bosnian, then the questionnaire written in Bosnian will be translated back to English by another translator. However, the back-translation method does not apply for words and phrases which have some cultural uniqueness. Thus, it is not always the best method to translate and back-translate the materials mechanically without addressing the nuances of the translated words. Linguistic equivalence may not be enough to detect other nonequivalence of meaning in cross-cultural research (Van Der Veer, Ommundsen, Hak & Larsen, 2003). Further, another challenge of translation is to find a good translator who has both language competency and cultural knowledge.

Many reviewers of IRB protocols have started to realize the lack of efficacy of back-translation. The IRB at the authors' university acknowledges that a translated questionnaire can be used for data collection, as long as it meets the purposes of the survey, without a back-translation (Denis Fuller, personal communication, March 2006). For the study of Bosnian refugees conducted by the authors, an English questionnaire was translated into Bosnian by a professional translator. Then, the Bosnian questionnaire was carefully examined without back-translation by another professional translator. Finally, several Bosnian refugees who were fluent in English read both English and Bosnian questionnaires, providing some minor changes in the usage of words. Finally, the Bosnian questionnaire was proofread by the first translator. Although this method was time consuming, it resulted in developing a sound questionnaire which was culturally adequate.

Recruitment of subjects and gaining trust: Refugee populations are very transient during the first few years after resettlement. Although selecting subjects randomly from a sampling frame is the most statistically sound method, it is difficult to construct such a sampling frame for a refugee population. Refugees normally resettle in a specified city with the assistance of agencies such as the International Institute, Catholic Charities, and Lutheran Refugee and Immigration Services. However, it is difficult to obtain a list of refugees whom these resettlement agencies have assisted because of confidentiality of these refugees' information. Another commonly used method is to recruit subjects from institutions such as religious organizations. Further, gaining trust from potential subjects is also a major difficulty. Refugees are very suspicious about strangers who do not belong to their community, and they are also reluctant to give out their own information. During the process of conceptualization through a grounded theory method, one of the authors got involved with the Bosnian community and became acquainted with

many Bosnians and Americans who had provided assistance to the Bosnian community. She spent almost five years, between late 1999 when she first contacted one of the refugee resettlement agencies in St. Louis and early 2004 when the data collection started. She made herself known to and accepted by the Bosnian community while learning their culture. Additionally, two Bosnian students at the authors' university, who came to the U.S. as refugees, worked as liaisons between the author and the Bosnian community by providing useful information for data collection.

It is inevitable to use a convenient sampling to recruit subjects when studying a transient population. However, the authors used several methods for recruitment: having a radio talk show which featured the study on a Bosnian radio station, distributing flyers at Bosnian shops, a snowball sampling through the author's Bosnian friends, and obtaining Bosnian Muslim names from a telephone directory of the city of St. Louis (almost all the Bosnian refugees in St. Louis are Muslims). The response rate was the highest for those who volunteered participation (100%) and the lowest for those selected from the telephone directory (15%). Although the sizes of the sub-samples vary, the homogeneity of the samples is yet to be examined.

Administering the questionnaire: Face-to-face interview is the most frequently used method to administer questionnaires to ethnic and immigrant groups. This method also yields a relatively higher response rate in comparison with other data collection methods. However, the method requires a group of people who are fluent in both Bosnian and English to study Bosnian refugees. The same problem applies to administering questionnaires through telephone interviews. Furthermore, these interviewers have to have at least a college degree and to be a certified researcher through the Institutional Review Board. As mentioned under 'translation,' it is a challenge to find a person who meets these criteria, thus face-to-face or telephone interviews are not necessarily the best way to collect data from Bosnian refugees. We used a mailing method with business reply envelopes in order to administer questionnaires with incentives of raffle tickets for \$30 gift certificates to a grocery store. Although the data collection was anonymous, trust still remained an important aspect of increasing the response rate. The cover letter of the survey included, besides the PI's name, one of the important female Bosnian figures from the community, who was also on the IRB protocol of the study. The Bosnian questionnaire was printed into various sizes and designs and examined by several Bosnian refugees in order to develop the friendliest

questionnaire so that people from different educational levels and age groups could fill it out.

Conclusion

This paper addressed some of the difficulties with surveying refugees and solutions for those difficulties. The authors recommend the exploratory sequential method in combination with a grounded theory method for conceptualization. We also recommend the use of a focus group for the content validity test of scales in addition to a conventional quantitative method. Translation of the questionnaire and the examination of the final questionnaire by some members from the target population are very useful for the purpose of cross-cultural validation. Finally, we recommend that researchers spend a reasonable time in the refugee community to be accepted by the target population and to gain trust.

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