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An Ethical Frame for Research with Immigrant Families

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Abstract

In this introduction, the editors give an overview of the ways the volume addresses the growing individual and institutional calls for increased clarity and rigor in methodological, ethical, and practical research policies and guidelines for conducting research with immigrant individuals, families, and communities. In addition to summarizing the volume’s purpose, background on the U.S. immigrant population is given, followed by delineation of the five major issues contributing to the field of immigrant studies research and entering the “field” and engaging with immigrant families and communities: heterogeneity and history, documentation status, research pragmatics, research lens and bias, and influence on policy. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
I store my data in Canada because I’m afraid that ICE [US Immigration Customs Enforcement] will issue a subpoena and force me to reveal my participants’ contact information. Not that they would be able to put it together because I use codes, but . . . [This researcher expressed no confidence that her NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) certificate of confidentiality would sufficiently protect her participants.]

I can’t count the number of times I’ve walked into a crisis situation. And what am I going to do, say, “Sorry your son doesn’t have his asthma medicine and can’t breathe. Can you fill out this survey? On a scale of 1 to 5 how important is . . .”? That would be ridiculous. So I spend half an hour on the phone with the pharmacist, acting as an interpreter. And what am I supposed to say when the pharmacist asks, “What is your relation to the patient?” Meanwhile, I am wondering if I am making some kind of ethical violation by learning about the child’s health records. What are the boundaries?

These are a few of many examples shared during a 2006 Society for Research on Adolescence meeting to discuss methodological and ethical issues in studying immigrant families, hosted by the editors of this volume. Despite its early morning timeslot, the room was filled to capacity with scholars anxious to share resources and gain support in navigating the channels and challenges of research with immigrant families. Out of the range of experiences shared rose universal themes: an urgent need for practical, methodological, theoretical, and interpretive standards upon which researchers, institutions (including review boards), and policy-makers can draw when conducting research on immigrant-origin families.

This volume builds upon the release of the Crossroads, the APA Task Force Report on Immigration (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012; chaired by Carola Suárez-Orozco), highlighting the many remaining methodological challenges in studying immigrant children, adolescents, and their families. The report’s recommendations (now APA policy) emphasized the importance for researchers to give special consideration on how to formulate, recruit, and conduct studies across immigrant populations, including undocumented participants. The report stressed the importance of taking appropriate steps to protect participants and recommended developing culturally valid and reliable constructs that combine etic and emic methodological approaches in data collection and analysis. Finally, the task report recommended the recognition of the importance of awareness of power dynamics between the researcher and an immigrant participant especially when the participant may be undocumented or less educated.

This volume is an attempt to establish a guide for researchers to meet these policies in ways that are practical and ethical. Central tenets of these best practices include the need to ensure the safety of research
participants, retain the integrity of their experiences, and uphold methodological rigor. Many of these practices are applicable to ethnic minority families in general; this volume elaborates upon the special considerations required for implementation of these practices to research with individuals and families specifically affected by immigration to the United States (although Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco do discuss immigration beyond the United States in Chapter Two). Not all immigrants have ethnic minority status in the United States, though many do. In addition to shared challenges due to ethnic minority status, researchers must attend to qualities and contexts that uniquely define immigrant families including vulnerabilities related to documentation status, linguistic heterogeneity between and within immigrant groups, variations in migration histories, and the impact of those histories on current physical and psychological states of health and well-being. The contributing authors address different approaches to retaining methodological and interpretive ethics when conducting research with immigrant families and suggest practical and paradigmatic shifts for the field.

**Background**

Immigration to the United States has reached historic proportions in terms of sheer numbers: Currently 38.5 million (12.5%) people residing in the United States are foreign born (Passel & Cohn, 2012). As the foreign-born population has grown over the last few decades, so has the number of their children. Today, one in five persons residing in the United States is of first- or second-generation immigrant origin. Children of immigrant origin are now the fastest growing sector of the child population in the United States: Nearly 24% of children under the age of 18 (16 million) have an immigrant parent and this is projected to grow to one in three by 2020 (Mather, 2009). In parallel with the shifting demographics of the United States, research on individuals and family units from immigrant backgrounds has steadily increased (APA, 2012), and research questions and methods have become increasingly sophisticated.

Despite the expansion in scholarship, there remain scant resources providing guidance and support on how to navigate research with immigrant children, adolescents, and their families in ways that are ethical and protective of a population that has multifaceted vulnerabilities: documentation status, economic vulnerability, mental health challenges related to the process of migration or flight from home countries, as well as the sheer youthfulness of the population. These vulnerabilities require scholarship that is epistemologically and pragmatically protective of participants—in the portrayal of their experiences and of their identities and communities.

The remainder of the introduction outlines five predominant issues to which we are ethically obligated to attend as scholars of immigrant populations: (a) the heterogeneity and history of immigrant populations; (b)
the researcher lens, bias, and influence; (c) research pragmatics (e.g., obtaining consent, human subjects approval); (d) undocumented immigrants; and (e) framing research findings and effects on policy. We discuss the chapters in this volume that elaborate on these topics and address some of the challenges in attending to these issues.

Context: Heterogeneity and History

Ethnic group membership is often a proxy for immigrant status with Latino, Asian, and Caribbean ethnic identities often having presumed immigrant status. Yet the immigrant experience is diverse and individuals of immigrant backgrounds have much between- and within-group heterogeneity. Migration history (including refugee status), emigration background (e.g., history of the sending community), documentation status, indigenous identities, and linguistic differences all vary across and within immigrant groups. Attention to this heterogeneity is essential for accurately capturing and interpreting the diverse immigrant experience. For instance, immigration policy in the United States will affect family relationships differently for individuals who may have parents with undocumented status compared to those whose families have been issued residency and have experienced the trauma of war.

Nearly every chapter in this volume will address considerations of context and intragroup heterogeneity. In Chapter Two, M. M. Suárez-Orozco and C. Suárez-Orozco provide an in-depth examination of these issues and provide historical context for the field that includes the influence of home and host country history, migration or immigration goals and experiences, and political histories. They further present a comparative cultural framework as a means to explore the contribution of these contextual and historical settings upon underlying developmental processes. These contextual and historical lenses provide an important perspective that frames the lived experiences of today’s immigrant-origin children and families as well as research approaches.

Researcher Lens and Bias

As research on immigrant families falls prey to scientific trendiness, there is a need to cast a critical and socially responsive eye upon the research and examine one’s own role in accurately representing the experiences of immigrant populations that are often marginalized both societally and in research. In Chapter Three, Mahalingam and Rabelo continue the discussion of immigrant group heterogeneity and examine additional forms of diversity, including physical embodiment. The authors discuss the role of researcher identity and privilege in shaping process (e.g., research conception, design, and interpretation) and the need for accurate representation of the immigrant experience. They propose a cutting-edge research
technique that will not only capture the authentic experiences of the population but also shift the power of scientific inquiry from outsiders to the underrepresented populations themselves.

**Pragmatics of Research**

In the current climate of anti-immigrant sentiment prevalent in the popular culture and our policies of increased enforcement and deportation, extra precautions must be taken to shield the identities of participants and to ensure that the data obtained are valid and reliable. The strictest ethical standards must be upheld to maintain the trust of the community, to ensure the research participants are not at risk, and to report results that support the authentic experiences and sociocultural viewpoints of participants. These ethical standards must be met while retaining methodological rigor demanded from the field. Moreover, human subjects review boards must create institutional policies and procedures that support scholars in accessing and studying these groups.

Ethical practices and policies associated with protection of vulnerable participants has become a more significant topic of conversation between scholars and some institutional review boards. As recently as March 2013, the Society for Research on Child Development published a social policy report addressing the very sensitive issue of responsibility for conduct in research with children (Fisher et al., 2013). These policies pertain to any prospective research participant who could potentially experience harm as a result of a breach of confidentiality. Not discussed are issues unique to the protection of immigrant populations with multiple vulnerabilities including undocumented status, high rates of poverty, state and national anti-immigrant policies and sentiment, language barriers, understanding of the function of research and expectations as a research participant, and prospective incentives as coercion. Most important, as some portion of any first-generation sample may include undocumented participants, researchers must attend to this unique vulnerability.

In Chapter Four, Hernández, Nguyen, Casanova, C. Suárez-Orozco, and Saetermoe detail recommendations for ethical and methodological standards in studying immigrant populations. The authors address practical logistics including study design, human subjects approval, recruitment and consent, data management, and translation. These recommendations are guided by the contextual and ethical considerations outlined in Chapters One and Two.

**Undocumented Immigrants**

Immigrants in the United States without federally documented authorization are a uniquely vulnerable population, often living on the unacknowledged margins of society (Suárez-Orozco, Yoshikawa, Teranishi, &
Suárez-Orozco, 2011). The impact of unauthorized status on children and families is an important part of the narrative on child development. Inclusion of these populations in scientific studies, however, is fraught with challenges, from recruitment and retention to the very essential protection of confidential data and identities.

Chapter Five provides an excellent “case” through which to understand the importance of attending to contextual, historical, and ethical considerations. C. Suárez-Orozco and Yoshikawa examine the ways in which undocumented status affects the millions of children, adolescents, and emerging adults caught in the wake of unauthorized status. They elucidate the various dimensions of documentation status—going beyond the simple binary of the “authorized” and “unauthorized”—by presenting an ecological model of development and considering a range of critical developmental outcomes that have implications for child and youth well-being as well as for our nation’s future. Further, they examine some ethical landmines in conducting research with this population.

**Policy Influences**

Of the nearly 24% of children born in a family with at least one immigrant parent, many will show remarkable health and educational resilience given that their families will, on the whole, be more impoverished, have lower educational attainment, be more linguistically isolated, and are more likely to live in overcrowded housing than their U.S.-born counterparts (Hernández, Denton, & Macartney, 2007; Shields & Behrman, 2004). The sheer number of immigrant families and the concentration in impoverished environments requires attention of practitioners and policy-makers who rely on research to inform decisions regarding interventions, policies, and legislation. However, scholars writing to affect policy must do so with great caution not to exacerbate deficit stereotypes. In the final chapter, Capps and Fix present an overview of federal policies that have affected the development of children of immigrant origin. They analyze the reduction in the use of social and other public services and discuss the presentation of research findings in ways that consider the policy implications, both in formulating the results and in influencing future policy.

**Conclusion**

It is our hope this volume will contribute to paradigmatic shifts that will promote more complex and thorough understanding of the authentic and diverse experiences in the immigrant diaspora. We aim to assist scholars with the consideration of research pathways that uphold both ethical and methodological rigor to conduct studies that simultaneously reveal authenticity of participant’s experiences, while protecting the very participants whose lives are exposed in the research process.
References


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