

Kansas State University Libraries

**New Prairie Press**

---

Adult Education Research Conference

2015 Conference Proceedings (Manhattan, KS)

---

## Multi-lingual Research in Minority-majority Communities

Debra Bolton

*Kansas State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc>



Part of the [Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bolton, Debra (2015). "Multi-lingual Research in Minority-majority Communities," *Adult Education Research Conference*. <https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2015/papers/4>

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).

# Multi-lingual Research in Minority-majority Communities

Debra Bolton  
Kansas State University

Keywords: multi-lingual research, well-being, social connectedness

**Abstract:** Reaching under-served audiences can be a challenge when we lack knowledge of needs. Using data to create relevant educational topics support adult educators for student success. This study addresses well-being and social connectedness in multi-lingual, Minority-majority, rural communities, and compares data in similar studies that used an English-only approach.

## Multi-lingual Research

It is through face-to-face interactions with those from different backgrounds that people learn to know more about one another. The more humans know about one another, the better community life functions (Putnam, 1995) and people's needs are being met (Field, 2003). What does that have to do with education? When social researchers study multi-lingual and multicultural communities using constructs that mainly apply to the dominant, mainstream culture or language, biased results can occur in the results. Other phenomena of culturally/linguistically biased social research can be an untrue picture of day-to-day life, needs, thoughts, and opinions of non-mainstreamed populations (Hero, 2007). How can human service providers or educators truly meet the needs of ethnic and other under-represented populations, if the data, from which program are designed, is based on culturally/socially biased research? In terms of social research, does one size fit all? What is the alternative to studying humans living in multi-cultural/multi-lingual settings? Multi-lingual social research has been found to uncover assumptions about needs and desires in multi-lingual populations (Bolton, 2011; Hero, 2007). However, there may be reasons why social researchers do not approach multi-lingual research.

## Challenges

There are several reasons that most social scientists do not conduct research in languages other than English here in the United States. One reason is that multi-lingual ethnic groups are inaccessible to social researchers because very little effort has been made to reach those "under-represented" groups (Easterling, et al., 2007; Bolton & Dick, 2013), or "other than English" linguistic groups are excluded because places are subconsciously imbued with "whiteness", a form of cultural capital (Flora et al., 2011). Some researchers stay away from multi-lingual studies, because poor translations (written) or interpretations (oral) can cause bias (Weijters, et al., 2013) if language constructs are not consistent among linguistic groups (Perez, 2009). Constructs in research on mainstream populations have been applied across populations whether or not those groups are from similar cultures, socio-economic backgrounds, or linguistic origins (Easterling, et al., 2007; Putnam, 1995; and Field, 2003). Of course, validity and reliability of questions measuring the same constructs across languages are of great importance (Geisinger, 1994). There are ways of adapting to such issues (Van de Vijver & Hambleton, 1996). The important goal is to incorporate more voices (data) from the non-dominant social and cultural groups working and living in U.S. communities. Rodney Hero noted that those "under-

represented groups will usually “lose out” to dominant/mainstream thought and opinions because there is little or no access to representation as a study subject/sample (2007). If social science truly wants to know the thoughts, opinions, social status, and desires of people who live in this country, mostly newcomers of the past 25 years, is it appropriate to ask those living in the mainstream, who may not know the new populations’ languages, backgrounds, culture, and motivations, to answer research questions? Is that a *representative* sample? Somehow, as researchers, we are only getting part of the story when we don’t ask our subjects directly and include their answers in our data for analysis. Hero (2007) argues that an understanding of racial diversity provides a lens through which assumptions and inadequacies of social interpretations are obvious.

### ***Advantages***

“People ‘see’ through their language; language gives us the ability to ‘see’ (or not ‘see’) the world around us by placing socially-agreed upon words on things (ideas, thoughts, material objects, etc). Speaking with people in their native language allows us to ‘see’ their world from their perspectives” (Dr. Matthew Sanderson, personal communication, March, 2015).

If researchers seek to learn about a given populace, other than “mainstream” populations, and use survey instruments with constructs of the dominant culture, they run the risk of generalizing with survey questions to a population that does not share the same characteristics as the dominant culture (Perez, 2007). There can be a tendency of culturally-dominant groups to judge diverse groups with the dominants’ values (Perez, E. O., 2009; Hero, 2007). For this study, it became important to use research tools that reflected the language(s), sentence syntax, and vocabulary of the group(s) to be studied (Hero, 2007). Multi-lingual research in multi-ethnic communities increases the likely-hood of a *representative sample*. A random sample does not equal a representative sample. Random means that everyone in the entire population had an equal chance of being selected as a research subject (Dick, personal communication, 2015). Another advantage of conducting research in multi-lingual communities using multi-lingual surveys is that there is increased access to human subjects for gathering data. While this may be a challenge, the results are truer knowledge of the sample population because more people were availed the opportunity to give an opinion or tell a story of themselves (Dick, 2015).

### **Methodology**

The southwest region of Kansas is a popular location for researchers, sociologists, anthropologists, human ecologists, etc. The three population centers of Southwest Kansas are Minority-majority (U.S. Census, 2010). After a commissioned study was undertaken to measure for social connectedness (social capital), only in English, it became very clear that at least half of the population was not represented in the sample. Most of the data came from the opinions of others when asked about non-mainstream populations (Bolton & Dick, 2013). The local researchers were invited by a foundation to complete a study to quantify the needs of underserved populations. The two researchers (Bolton & Dick, 2013) were connected to bi-lingual/bi-cultural constituents in the ethnic communities, so the initial study (2007) partially replicated the study completed in 2007 (Easterling et al). However, the 2013 study employed culturally and linguistically appropriate survey instruments. The new study would also add

measures to gauge health and well-being with a goal to understand better the socio-economic and health status of multi-ethnic populations. The survey instrument was designed by members of an ad hoc committee organized to complete this project. The survey was written in four languages, English, Spanish, Karen (the language of one of Burma's major clans - pronounced, Kaw-ren), and Somali. The translated surveys were taken from the original English questionnaire. Once the questions were translated, they were back-translated to English to make sure that the integrity of the original questions remained and meaning was not lost (Perez, 2007). Steps were taken to assure that there would be a representative sample of the county's population. Most of the surveys were distributed in a focus group-type format in that groups were given surveys to complete. Since some of our sample had never completed a survey, some were functionally illiterate in their Mother Tongue, and some needed assurance that their answers would not expose them to the authorities (documentation status), surveys were distributed in group settings. "Focus" group facilitators were trained prior to their proctoring the completion of surveys by any gathered groups of people. For example surveys were completed at the local senior center, with various parent groups associated to different school programs, in church groups, at family literacy classes, at health/nutrition classes or adult education classes. The survey was also made available on-line in English.

### **Interviews**

Thirty (30) face-to-face interviews were completed in English and Spanish, and any open-ended questions from the surveys were translated, and back-translated, from Karen, Somali, and Spanish and analyzed with other qualitative data.

### **Data Analyses**

The analysis contained in this report is limited to

- Frequencies
- Test of Proportions (*t*-test)
- Test for Independence ( $X^2$ )
- Ethnographic examples
- Qualitative Interviews

Interviews (Qualitative data were analyzed separately from quantitative data.)

Total Surveys Completed: **464**

Surveys completed in focus group setting: **327**

Surveys completed online: **137**

Interviews: **30 (analyzed separately)**

### **Results**

A 2007 Social Capital study was completed by researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and Wake Forest University School of Medicine (Easterling et al, 2007). The study was commissioned by a Kansas health research and promotion institute. The study compared five communities in Kansas. Finney County (a Minority-majority) was compared, for example to Dickinson County, a homogenous population. The counties were measured with the same social constructs. As might be expected, Finney County was said to be lowest in social connections and community engagement. While the method of gathering data was random access dialing (n=350), it did not reach a representative sample of the community. In this, particular, Minority-majority community, very few of the ethnic populations possess

land-line telephones and the majority do not speak English (Bolton & Dick, 2013). There were 13 qualitative interviews. The interviews subjects were not representative of the ethnically-diverse populations. Qualitative data about the ethnic populations were the opinions of city government leaders, school administration, agency directors, and other professionals. 12 of the 13 interviews were Anglo, and mostly related their own opinions of the ethnic populations. The research team borrowed heavily from social capital put forth by Robert Putnam (1995), which tends toward cultural bias (Hero, 2007).

### Comparisons to English-Only Research in Multi-Lingual Communities

The localized study (Bolton & Dick, 2013) was completed in four languages (English, Spanish, Karen, and Somali). The table illustrates why studies should be done in more than one language when the population demographics warrant it.

Primary Language at Home	Other languages spoken in home	Born in U.S.
English 69%	English – 21.0%	Yes 47.2%
Spanish 23.3%	Spanish – 35.3%	No 51.1%
Somali 2.2%	Somali – 2.1%	
Karen/Chin/Burmese 3.0%	Burmese/Karen/Chin – 1.7%	
Chinese .6 %		
Vietnamese .9 %	Swahili – (1) .2%	

Interestingly, 69% of people list English as the primary language spoken at home, yet more than half of respondents said they were not born in the United States. The online survey was offered only in English. Three respondents listed two languages other than English as primary home-spoken languages: 2 – Spanish, and 1 – Burmese/Chin. Other languages include Afrikaans, Japanese, Punjabi, Hindi, French, Ethiopian, Tagalog, and Swahili. *24% said they read and write their adopted English language.*

### Conclusions

When the two studies were compared in terms of social connectedness and community engagement, the 2007 (Easterling et al) English study pointed to Finney County as having low social connectedness as compared to Dickinson County’s homogenous demographics. The study pointed to a history of gang violence in Finney County (from the point of view of the dominant culture respondents). In the 2013 (Bolton & Dick) gang violence was not mentioned in questions about safety and feeling safe in neighbors (from the point of view of respondents who speak languages other than English). The localized study found the multi-lingual respondents to be highly connected to one another and to others outside their immediate groupings. Trust was measured high among non-Whites in the localized study while trust was measured low in the 2007 (Easterling et al) study especially when compared to homogenous counties. Measurements in the 2007 study tended toward cultural bias. For example donating and volunteering (measures for social connectivity) were asked about donating or volunteering for institutions such as libraries and museums. The localized study asked about giving money to others without expectation of return payment. In that case, donating was high among non-White groups. “Do you do any type of work for others without expectation of payment?” Again, results showed high connectivity. Volunteering at the schools was especially high among non-Whites when

walking groups of children to and from school and monitoring recesses was considered a form of volunteering.

### **Education, Household Income and Other Factors**

Of the respondents completing surveys, 26% have less than high school diploma; 37.3% have high school diploma; 25.0 % have a college degree; and 11.2% have an advanced or professional degree. Nearly 20% of respondents live on fewer than \$12,000 per year. The most common yearly income was \$25,000 to \$49,000 per year. As will be illustrated in later analyses, income, as an effect, will be shown to make in significant difference in some instances but not others. Sixty-two percent (62%) of respondents own their homes, 36% rent their homes. Anglo respondents were twice as likely to own their homes as non-Anglo. In terms of health insurance, 94.42% of Anglo respondents have health insurance, and 57.14% of non-Anglo respondents do not have health insurance. Even with full-time employment, only 60% of non-Anglo respondents had health insurance.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

In the localized multi-lingual study (Bolton & Dick, 2013) the data show that Non-Anglo respondents were 4 times more likely to say that “more education” and “access to medical care” would help them to live better lives. Non-Anglo respondents also showed a greater need for transportation, improved health, affordable child care, public services (phone, lights, sewage, etc.), public assistance (Snap, WIC, etc.), and children’s services than Anglo respondents. Non-Anglo respondents said that “improved English skills” would help them to live better lives (38% vs. 0%). Adult educators could look at these data as an indicator of why there may be slow progress in learning. When families have other “fires” to put out, survival and basic living skills take precedent over education (Maslow, 1943; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When education was tested with “needs”, we found that 52% of respondents with Less than High School, and 29% of respondents with a high school diploma said that more education would help them live better lives. Those two groups also reported higher need for medical care, transportation, improved health, and affordable child care. Education did not have an effect on the need for mental health counseling, affordable child care, and senior services. However, 42% of those with less than high school and 15% with a high school diploma said that improved English skills would help them live better lives.

These data show that we can learn more about underserved populations when researchers probe deeper for information. That is if there is a desire to meet the less-than-obvious needs. The more we know about our students, the more we can design relevant educational programs to reach learners in contexts they will readily understand.

### **Is Multi-lingual Research for You?**

You may be saying, “I don’t speak all the languages present in my adult education classes. How can I do multi-lingual research?” While this does not assume that all adult educators *want* to do research, it is an encouragement to promote multi-lingual research so that you have a full picture of the needs of your students beyond reaching educational goals. Learn to read data beyond the overall percentages. Look at deeper comparisons. For example: How does gender affect this outcome? How do learning styles affect that outcome? How does income affect another outcome? As for *doing* multi-lingual research, this is where *your* relationships

come into play. Do you know anyone involved in education or academia that is fluent in any of the languages present in your classrooms? Even if you only have small surveys to get your students' opinions, learn to use data and learn to trust your students enough to ask them their opinions on learning.

### References

- Bolton, Debra, and Shannon Dick. (2013). *Finney County Community Assessment Fact Book*. <http://www.lulu.com/shop/search.ep?type=&keyWords=By+Debra+Bolton&x=9&y=6>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments on nature and design*. Cambridge: Harvard.
- Easterling, D., Foy, C. G., Fothergill, K., Leonard, L., & Holtgrave, D.R. (2007). *Assessing social capital in Kansas: Findings from quantitative and qualitative studies*. A report to the Kansas Health Institute.
- Field, J. (2003). *Social capital*. New York: Routledge.
- Flora, J., Emery, M., Thompson, D., Prado-Meza, C. M., & Flora, C. B. (2011). *New immigrants in local food systems: Two Iowa Cases*. *Int.Jrnl. of Soc. Of Agr. & Food*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 119-134.
- Geisinger, K.F. (1994). *Cross-cultural normative assessment: Translation and adaptation issues influencing the normative interpretation of assessment instruments*. *Psychological Assessment*, 6(4), 304-312.
- Hero, R. (2007). *Racial diversity and social capital: Equality and community in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Pérez, E. O. (2009). *Lost in Translation? Item Validity in Bilingual Political Surveys*. *The Journal of Politics*, 71, 1530-1548.
- Putnam, R.D. (1995). *Bowling alone: America's declining social capital*. *Journal of Democracy*, 6, 65-78.
- Van de Vijver, F. & Hambleton, R.K. (1996). *Translating tests: Some practical guidelines*. *European Psychologist*, 1(2), 89-99.