

Cross-national Collaboration in the Study of Parenting and Child Adjustment

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ABSTRACT

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Using the collaborative model of the Parenting Across Cultures (PAC) project, this chapter highlights seven important work and project management practices that may create more effective cross-national collaboration. These include project leadership, group communication and cohesion, dissemination of results, measurement validity, interpreting the meaning of culture, capacity building, and adaptation. Challenges and opportunities that are connected with cross-national research and collaboration are discussed within each suggestion. We conclude that, despite potentially enormous challenges, engaging in cross-national collaboration in the study of parenting and child adjustment can contribute significantly to our understanding of how children develop around the world.

Key-words: parenting, cross-national, collaboration, culture, child adjustment

1. INTRODUCTION

Researchers and experts across many and varied disciplines have undertaken cross-national partnerships to solve problems and advance science. In certain areas, such as HIV/AIDS prevention (Piot & Seck, 2001), sudden public health crises (Dajani & Carel, 2002; Fontanet, 2007), and disaster response (Lubroth, 2006), the exigent need seems clear: in matters of life and death, capitalizing on economies of scale and bringing together the best science and practices for solving global problems is of obvious benefit. In other areas, like space science (Council, 1998), nursing care (Carlson, Goguen, Jarvis, & Lester, 2000), and social work (Kreitzer & Wilson, 2010), the benefits are just as salient. The study of parenting and child adjustment is no exception, but a majority of empirical studies in child development literature continue to involve only North American or Western European samples (Arnett, 2008). Although these studies contribute to our knowledge in important and meaningful ways, they do not provide a complete picture of parenting or child adjustment in a culturally diverse world. Several professional organizations for developmental scientists promote international research. For example, the mission of the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development (ISSBD) is to promote scientific research of human development throughout the lifespan; it has members from more than 60 countries and holds meetings throughout the world. The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) began as a primarily American organization, but now includes cross-national study in its strategic plan (SRCD, 2014-15), specifically in the following two ways: 1) SRCD will incorporate cultural and contextual diversity in all aspects of the Society's organization, activities, and membership and 2) SRCD will incorporate international perspectives in its organization, activities, and membership. An international consortium of developmental science organizations is currently in formative stages.

Using the collaborative model of the Parenting Across Cultures project as one example, and building on the research of other international collaborations, this paper summarizes some of the lessons we learned by working as an international group to study parenting and child adjustment in nine countries. We present both challenges and opportunities we faced and highlight practices that may create more effective international collaboration in the study of parenting and child development.

2. THE PARENTING ACROSS CULTURES PROJECT

To advance understanding of parenting and child adjustment in diverse countries around the world, we developed the Parenting Across Cultures (PAC) project as an international collaboration among nine countries: China, Colombia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, the Philippines, Sweden, Thailand, and the United States (see Lansford & Bornstein, 2011 for overview). We assessed over 1400 families from thirteen cultural groups annually through interviews with mothers, fathers, and children about the parent-child relationship, the child's adjustment, attitudes and beliefs, and cultural values. As the youth approached adolescence, we assessed self-regulation, relationships, and adolescents' risk-taking and social information processing.

This sample of countries is diverse on several socio-demographic dimensions, including predominant race/ethnicity, predominant religion, economic indicators, and indices of child well-being. For example, on the Human Development Index, a composite indicator of a country's status with respect to health, education, and income, participating countries range from a rank of 4 to 128 out of 169 countries with available data (UNDP, 2010). To provide a sense of what this range entails, the infant mortality rate in Kenya, for example, is 18 times higher than the infant mortality rate in Sweden (World Bank, 2016). In the Philippines, 23% of the population falls

below the international poverty line of less than US\$1.25 per day, whereas less than 1% of the population falls below this poverty line in Italy, Sweden, and the United States (UNICEF, 2010). The participating countries vary widely not only on socio-demographic indicators, but also on psychological constructs such as individualism versus collectivism. Using Hofstede's (2001) rankings, the participating countries range from the United States, with the highest individualism score in the world to China, Colombia, and Thailand, countries that are among the least individualist countries in the world. Ultimately, this diversity provides us with an opportunity to examine research questions in a sample that is more generalizable to a wider range of the world's populations than is typical in most research to date.

Although cross-national collaboration is necessary for a broad perspective of child development (Bornstein, 2002; Cole, 2006), many researchers point to the pitfalls and difficulties that arise in these kinds of collaborations (e.g. Pryor, Kuupole, Kutor, Dunne, Adu-Yeboah, 2009; Somekh & Pearson, 2002), including difficulties that center on cultural differences in work pace, lack of experience in international cooperation, and the effort and expense required to schedule and attend meetings (Ingleby & Schoorel, 2007). We believe, however, that when undertaken with keen planning and foresight, the many benefits of cross-national collaboration can offset these difficulties. We propose seven areas in which we learned lessons that may generalize to other projects and global, collaborative research: project leadership, group communication and cohesion, dissemination of results, measurement validity, interpreting the meaning of culture, capacity building, and adaptation.

3. PROJECT INSIGHTS

3.1. Project organization and leadership

The leader of any large-scale cross-national collaboration must be able to manage the numerous administrative tasks that are required when many entities are involved. The complexity of a multisite project demands time, energy and someone who has the patience and skills to “steer the boat” (Multisite Violence Prevention Project, 2004). Even when all co-investigators take a part in early discussions and together as a group form shared objectives, a leader must be able to set clear roles, expectations and time frames. In the PAC collaboration there is a Principal Investigator (PI) who organizes grant applications, coordinates the oversight of the research work, determines general timeframes and handles the overall budget and administration. Site-specific management of data collection is handled by a local, experienced co-investigator at each data collection site. Because the PI is an experienced and well-established researcher, and has infrastructure support from the funded university with regard to information technology, financial oversight, and the like, all of the tasks are approached with the dual purpose of ensuring best research practices, while also managing all of the administrative details. In contrast, when professionals are employed only to manage the project and are not themselves researchers, there is often decreased personal contact among the researchers at different sites (Katsouyanni, 2008), and the research questions and objectives lose prominence in discussions.

Several contemporary researchers have highlighted problems of dominance, exploitation, and assimilation in leading and managing international collaborations (Manathunga, 2009; Porter, 2010; Pryor et al., 2009). To avoid a potentially problematic power assumption that may be created by abdicating all decisions to one leader, we instead propose that the project leader should be careful to assemble a group of co-researchers with whom responsibility for both fiscal and research decisions can be effectively delegated. In the PAC project, each site has a separate

budget as a subcontract of the primary research grant. In addition, because each co-investigator is also the site coordinator in the location where data are being collected, accountability for data fidelity and budget management is well-maintained. Delegation in and of itself is tricky in an international setting, and like the study of parenting and child development, most of the research on effective managerial delegation has been done in primarily Western samples. Studies of international leadership that have attempted to define a universal leadership style or common “hows” of delegation (Chevrier & Viegas-Pires, 2013; Javidan & Teagarden, 2011), have met with moderate success, primarily in asserting that 1) effective managerial processes do not always transfer effectively from one culture to another and 2) cultural values must be taken into account when aspiring to participative leadership. Face-to-face meetings, described in the following section, helped with this.

In response to these challenges, the PAC project brings together a team of coinvestigators for whom the Principal Investigator had knowledge of a previous track record of successful international collaboration on a smaller scale. Even so, accountability remains paramount. Because there is a high level of motivation in each site to manage data collection in a way that is most relevant for each site, and because there is a shared responsibility for doing this within a specific time frame and with guidelines for fidelity, the need to develop these defined roles among colleagues was established early on in the project. This confidence created opportunities for shared decision-making, including fiscal management and decisions about research procedures, recruitment and retention, and measures. Fiscally speaking, often the country that finances the project or secures the grant funding has more influence on the decision-making than the others involved (Cole, 2006). Instead, we found a more successful approach includes each site having local responsibility for both a site-specific budget, and for managing data collection.

Discussion about fiscal responsibility began early in the project, and each site contributes to applications for continued funding.

3.2. Group communication and cohesion

Even in the age of advanced information technology and communication tools, periodic face-to-face meetings are essential to effective cross-national collaboration. Decisions about constructs and measures can be made much more efficiently when the entire group can engage in discussion, and detailed conversations about cultural nuances are better held in person than over email. Cho and Lee (2008) have shown that groups using computer-mediated-communication such as email had a better flow of information if the group had pre-existing social-networks or group connections. In-person meetings can help to create these group connections and feelings of group membership that favor subsequent digital communication. Other research (Asch & Jackson, 2001) points to the need of an initial meeting early on in the project to introduce and build the team. One important part of these meetings is to gain knowledge of each other's backgrounds –aspects that sooner or later will affect the project or at least the project schedule. Both digital communications and in-person meetings are affected by cultural reference-frames (Cho & Lee, 2008; Köhler, Cramton, & Hinds, 2012). For example, meeting expectations as well as meeting behavior differ depending on cultural background. Köhler et al. argue that knowing each other's communication and meeting behaviors can reduce conflicts and misunderstandings in cross-national projects.

Annual meetings need to cover a lot of ground efficiently. In the PAC project, the meetings occur in a different collaborating country each year and include visits to the local communities where study participants reside, including meetings with participating families in

their homes when possible. Our face-to-face meetings have been an important mechanism to get to know each other as individuals, to practice open-minded behaviors, and to propel the follow-up electronic communication in a positive direction. Between meetings, emails are kept to a minimum, and include multiple pieces of information, with short, but reasonable, time frames for response, usually approximately two weeks. Meeting times have been dense, goal-directed, and outcome-driven, and have always included time for site updates, retention strategies, discussion of main outcome analyses, and future directions, despite typically occurring over only a two day period.

3.3. Dissemination of results

Because dissemination of research findings in peer-reviewed journals is an important part of scientific inquiry and a researcher's everyday activities and career, all partners have the right to know the expectations around publication in advance. Via group discussion, our team rejected the idea of corporate authorship and instead named individual authors to each manuscript to more accurately represent individual contributions to the research design and analyses. Multiple native languages also add a new layer of complexity when disseminating results. Articles produced from our international data include contributions from all sites, typically published in English-language journals, yet there is also need for dissemination of results that are site-specific. It was therefore agreed upon by the work group to use site-specific-data for publication in domestic outlets. Prior to beginning analyses, group members circulate a brief data use proposal outlining the research questions, hypotheses, and proposed analyses. The purpose of the data use proposal is to give the group the opportunity to provide input at early stages of a new manuscript and to ensure that individuals in different sites are not duplicating one another's efforts. In addition, prior to annual in-person group meetings, group members circulate

manuscript ideas and feedback and attend the meetings well-prepared for both small and large group conversations about analyses. It is important to note that emphasis has been placed on no one individual or group of individuals within the project “owning” the data; while major outcome papers are discussed as a large group, there are no limitations on any group members’ “use” of the data, provided the agreed-upon publication committee procedures are followed.

3.4. Measurement validity

In all studies the validity of the measures that are used is important; in large-scale international collaborations validity has to be considered more than once. To interpret results correctly and obtain meaningful results, it is of primary importance that the measures authentically assess the same thing in all included sites.

In psychology it is common practice to measure abstract concepts such as attitudes, beliefs, and values (Milfont & Fischer, 2010), and this can be challenging even within a single cultural group. In the PAC project we frequently use measures that are already widely used in many countries, but still we find cases in which some items are not suitable in specific cultural contexts. One example is an item from the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Rohner, 2005); we asked parents to indicate how often they said nice things to their children. In our Kenyan sample, parents reported lower levels of warmth compared to the grand mean for the other eight countries included (Putnick et al., 2012), but in interpreting the results, the Kenyan site coordinator explained that Kenyan parents show warmth in other non-verbal ways. This example shows that there are still items that do not have construct validity, and in this case it was essential to have a person from each site to function as a cultural interpreter of sorts. We also conduct statistical analyses testing for measurement invariance on a number of measures (see

Huang et al., 2012) . Establishing measurement invariance across 13 cultural groups has statistical challenges that must be addressed on a continuing basis. For this reason, we have dedicated statistical support to address these concerns with each set of analyses.

Just as we are aware that the sample from each of the sites involved in our research does not wholly represent that culture, however, we must also acknowledge that the same is true for the collaborators. We often rely on one or two representatives from each site to be the spokesperson(s) for each culture as it relates to measurement relevance, cultural appropriateness and the like. Thus, the decisions reached by the group on these matters are only as successful as each individual is in his/her role as cultural ambassador and his/her willingness and ability to express concerns and questions to the group.

In the PAC project, to avoid the pitfalls of misrepresentation of results due to cultural differences, an initial meeting was held to bring collaborators from all sites together to discuss the project in general, but more specifically to decide about measures. Each item and its cultural relevance was painstakingly reviewed and discussed; already at that stage there were items or complete questionnaires that were rejected. Pilot studies offered a second test for validity; these took place in each country. Both children and parents were interviewed to test the appropriateness of the items. It is not unusual that this international adaptation of measures requires considerable discussion before the whole group reaches a consensus (Lee, Lau, Chung, & Lo, 2004), but it is also important not to add measures just to please all interests in the group (Multisite Violence Prevention Project, 2004). Instead, a better goal, and a practice we uphold, is to ensure that included items fit well within each country and assess the desired constructs within the aims of the project (Somekh & Pearson, 2002).

3.5. Culture doesn't explain everything

Like other cross-national studies (e.g., Cole, 2006; Porter, 2010) we realize that although culture is the most obvious difference between our sites this does not mean that it is the only variable explaining similarities and differences. For example, mothers in some cultures can have more in common with mothers in other cultures than with fathers in the same culture. In a Swedish qualitative study about young parenthood, for example, it became apparent that it was not the parents' age that joined parents in their perception of parenthood, but instead gender (Tryggvason, Sorbring, & Samuelsson, 2012). Part of the challenge of cross-national research is not only to have data from different countries but also to conduct the analyses using procedures that are multi-cultural (Azuma, 1984). This means that researchers should be aware of themselves as products of their cultures and use this as a tool in the analyses. How can the results be interpreted taking into account cultural variations? Although some large work groups rely on the expertise of a few statistical scholars to weigh in on complicated analyses, we have maintained that the analyses should remain all group members' concern with collaborators building on knowledge gained in other single-country studies. Furthermore, we often report the grand mean in publications as a way to draw sought-after comparisons across sites without misrepresenting the meaning of those comparisons; the samples are not nationally representative.

3.6. Capacity building

Cross-national collaboration runs the risk of being a venture among individual researchers and not so much between universities, something that has been pointed out as problematic (Pryor et al., 2009). Our experience has been, however, that universities can be strengthened by such collaborations. As one example, when financing originates with one

country, other sites have to adapt to the administrative procedures that are customary in that country. To manage project administration, each university's administration has to find ways to handle the requirements, such as establishing Institutional Review Boards and obtaining necessary Federalwide Assurance Numbers for US federally funded projects. As a result, later collaborations now occur in some locations in a much smoother way compared to the procedures (or lack thereof) that were in place when the project began. Katsouyanni (2008) argues that lack of knowledge of how to handle large projects drives some universities from ever coordinating these kinds of projects, which is problematic because there is a trend among research financiers to direct support to large-scale studies. As with many projects, the level of experience and expertise of group members varies, specifically when it comes to knowledge about the advanced statistical analyses and techniques necessary to handle the longitudinal project data. The PAC project has attempted to address this issue by giving collaborators access to project statisticians so that they can lead conceptual aspects of manuscripts with support in conducting complicated, rigorous, statistical analyses. In some cases, this contact has led to the strengthening of research methods in a university beyond the project members.

Strengthening collaboration is a bidirectional process, however, not simply a place for western methods to be imposed in other areas of the world. Maintaining a truly international perspective means that each investigator is challenged to view and review data in a global context. The international perspective aims to develop an understanding of cultural diversity in a more broad perspective (Bozarslan, 2007). In our collaboration we continually challenge each other to interpret results without viewing one culture or country as the normative one, but instead to synthesize commonalities and differences across sites based a number of factors, of which culture is only one. For example, our research has revealed commonalities that exist across

parenting roles, rather than across cultures; in most of the sites, mothers reported higher levels of warmth and acceptance than fathers (Putnick et al., 2012).

As described in section 3.2, the PAC project has utilized annual face-to-face work group meetings to serve several aims. Not only does this contribute to a broader understanding of the countries in the PAC collaboration, but it also made it possible to have lectures, seminars and conferences at the host university following each annual work group meeting. These programs have included faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, as well as individuals from local and governmental agencies. Because doctoral students need to engage in large scale boundary crossing both literally and figuratively to develop long-range research skills (Manathunga, 2009), they are further integrated with the project in many sites. Their contribution includes participation at meetings and assistance with data collection, analyses, and reporting, further building a university infrastructure of international cooperation.

3.7. Adaptation

As of this writing, our group is in its 10th year of formal collaborative work together. We have experienced little turnover of key personnel; all but one of our original site coordinators are still working at the same university as they were at the start of the project, and the major personnel changes have involved only the addition of collaborators. Still, we learned through experience that being open to change and adaptation is not always as easy or successful as it first sounds.

Expansion of the project is a tricky issue. Although we want to remain open to the possibility of including other sites and expanding our cultural breadth, our experience has been that this is difficult to accomplish once initial funding and data collection are underway. Without

the related accountability and staffing that funding provides, timelines and quality data collection are at risk. Even with the best of intentions and interests, it simply proved infeasible for individual researchers in new sites to bring their own funding to the project and maintain the fidelity and pace maintained by the other sites. Similarly, allowing for flexibility in data collection and cleaning methods has not been without difficulty and compromise. We tried to be sensitive to the different staffing structures and work burden at our collaborating universities and initially attempted to be more flexible within the group, but we learned that maintaining identical data entry and cleaning procedures across sites was necessary to maintain the accuracy and consistency needed to manage the wealth of data across sites, even if it seemed to add an additional data management burden for some sites at first.

Like any long-term project, we must carefully consider how flexibility and adaptation influences our work. Through regular attendance at international conferences, vigorous work within our respective universities, and strong collaboration among team members both electronically and at annual in-person meetings, we have been able to respond to changing theories and methods in the world of child development research. As we have expanded our research questions, so too have we expanded our use of different data collection and storage methods. In response to scheduling requests and challenges from families, we successfully implemented a secure online version of our interview, and we now utilize a secure file-sharing network within our work group to more efficiently collaborate on manuscripts and streamline information about data collection. Implementing these different modes of data collection allows sites to have some flexibility to use methods that work best in the local context. When regulations from a funding body have restricted flexibility, such as by requiring annual IRB approval, we have sometimes struggled to work within local constraints (e.g., a single IRB

review being sufficient for an entire project period and not allowing re-review of the same project from year to year) and also meeting requirements instituted by the funders outside of that country.

4. CONCLUSION

Although there are many ways in which the PAC project has succeeded in globalizing the study of parenting and child adjustment, we also acknowledge that there are still methodological and conceptual problems to be solved. First, because we did not obtain nationally representative samples from each site, we acknowledge that results must be carefully interpreted to avoid over-generalizing findings to entire countries. Second, because the field in general lacks rich measures of many aspects of culture, projects are often left to compare differences between sites, without exploring underlying cultural differences or similarities. We also acknowledge that the success of any longitudinal study is almost wholly dependent on the retention of research participants. To that end, retention conversations are a part of every work group meeting so that ideas can be shared among sites regarding research assistant training, family engagement, and community outreach to locate and retain consistent participation by parents and youth.

Despite these challenges, initiating more international collaborations has the aim of broadening the research base beyond the traditional samples in the child development literature that hail primarily from the United States and Western Europe. Other disciplines such as medicine and disaster response have made this shift with positive results, and many of the same lessons can be applied to research on parenting and child adjustment. We have highlighted seven considerations that have made the Parenting Across Cultures project a successful international longitudinal study of parenting behavior and child development. Important contributions have

been made to the literature as a result of this collaboration, and we believe significant progress can be made in developing future cross-national collaborations that will advance other interests in child development and beyond.

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