

USING RESEARCH AND EXPERIENCE IN DIVERSITY WORK

That's Nacho Cheese

Dr. George F. Simons

A great deal of research in the USA is hamstrung by political correctness, from the funding to the reporting stage. Conclusions can be easily rejected as stereotyping the groups they purport to study because they do not fit the prevailing politically correct (pc) stereotypes of what such research should prove.

Recently I received an email request from a community college professor who trains staff working primarily with students of African-American and Hispanic-American backgrounds. The professor was looking for research findings that address the cultural values of these sub-groups in a comparative fashion within "the broader American culture?" I pointed to some of this research, but felt compelled to share my experience of the use of such material. I offer my comments here as perhaps useful to consider in both an academic and training context.

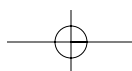
Dear...

Despite the usefulness of research to back up the diversity work we do, frankly I think that much of this work has to be done by getting people to discuss and identify their own values and compare them openly with each others, after which the introduction of research findings makes more sense.

The political side of research

The main problem about identifying and using research of this kind is that a great deal of research in the USA is hamstrung by political correctness, from the funding to the reporting stage. Conclusions can be easily rejected as stereotyping the groups they purport to study because they do not fit the prevailing politically correct (pc) stereotypes of what such research should prove.

A good example of the former (research results seen as stereotyping) is



the research done on Black English (aka Ebonics). Citations from an interview with Tom Kochman, which I will shortly cite, illustrate the complexity and intransigence of the political and social dimensions of this. On one hand we seem to have a cultural respect for scientific research and objectivity, while, on the other hand, when it suits us we see such research as a social construct like any other.

A good example of the latter (research results rejected for not fitting prevailing stereotypes) is the study that Janet Reno had commissioned on violence between men and women a few years ago. The government wanted this research to back up efforts to reduce and punish male violence toward women. When the research showed that women were just as likely to initiate physical violence as men, the results went into limbo. Many people have vested interests in research and demographics that bring benefits to specific groups in the population.

There is as well a good deal of public skepticism about research in the USA, perhaps a sometimes healthy instinct that leads people to treat findings with the populist sense of dismissal found in Mark Twain's quip, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics."

Confusion of research results with stereotyping

When we get to the nitty-gritty of hands-on research into cultural behaviors and the values that undergird them, we run into a vast amount of both political correctness and denial around the values sets of US cultural groups. A couple of examples of this follow.

My organization cooperates with Suzanne Salimbene, a leading researcher and practitioner in the area of cultural issues in health care, (www.inter-faceinter.com). Over the past several years we have developed a DIVERSOPHY® training game (www.diversophy.com/products/customer_service/diversophy_health.htm) aimed at caregivers. The game focuses on providing doctors, nurses and other healthcare staff with information to help them understand culturally conditioned behaviors of their patients and families when it came to medical treatment. While doctors and nurses regularly encountered a variety of folk

On one hand we seem to have a cultural respect for scientific research and objectivity, while, on the other hand, when it suits us we see such research as a social construct like any other. So many people have vested interests in research and demographics that there is much public skepticism about the validity of and motivation behind such research in the USA.

beliefs and treatments among African Americans and Latinos, these same beliefs were not only denied by other members of these groups but seen as racial or ethnic stereotypes or slurs.

A second example. Some time ago, a colleague of mine interviewed diversity professional Tom Kochman (www.kccddiversity.com) about "Black English". The interview stressed both the resistance to Black English as a matter of class rather than race as well as the importance of finding out how and why people behave (in this case, speak) as they do. This is very instructive about the introduction of research on culture that may be statistically based. My colleague reported thusly:

When we get to the nitty-gritty of hands-on research into cultural behaviors and the values that undergird them, we run into a vast amount of resistance based on both political correctness and denial around the values sets of US cultural groups.

"Kochman felt that people should identify the conditions under which African Americans switch to Black English, use Black English solely, or occasionally switch. He said that most people switch, usually in all-African American settings when people are more relaxed. Then the intonation patterns emerge. Kochman said to be aware of what the attitude is of this switching group toward middle class African Americans who don't switch to Black English.

"Kochman said Black English pronunciation is an ethnic link to a group identity. In an Oprah audience, which was almost all African American, 50% used the word 'aks' and 50% used 'asks', with the division running along strict class lines. This is not a 'mistake' dialect but rather a marker signifying class. White Appalachians, for example, also use 'aks.' Kochman said that this pronunciation is hard to change, of course, and provokes disdain from middle class blacks who are trying to distance themselves from it. Dialects, he said, are most pronounced among the poor of any ethnic group because of isolation and distance from the mainstream.

"In addition, grammar is a signifier of class as well. 'I have went' instead of 'I have gone' is similar to Southern whites, and may be traceable to British Isles working class or prisoners more than a hundred years ago. So the question is, how do you define what is

uniquely African American? The patterns exist he said, and *the important thing is to discuss the conditions where these patterns occur.* (emphasis mine)

"Kochman went so far as to say that there is a war going on between 'Afro-centric' and 'Euro-centric' African Americans. Similar to the speaking Spanish-at-work controversy in California, whites don't want Black English spoken in the elevators and in the lunchrooms. What's different about this case is that some middle class African Americans don't want Black English spoken either, and want to distance themselves from what Kochman calls the 'Afro-centric' view because of the costs of staying connected. In sum, he mentioned class and 'assimilation' (my word) as factors to look at in talking about this issue. Because of this, it's necessary to debrief the stereotypes that people (of all backgrounds) have been taught to associate with Black English speakers (white, black and others. e.g., on the bus I was surprised to hear two white women call each other 'blood').

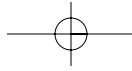
The credibility of what research you cite will be filtered through what your listeners diversely make of your identity. Don't feel bad or good about this. It just is.

The value of research is connected to who you are

There is another dimension to be considered using such research. Whatever research you cite will be seen in terms of who you are and why you are citing it. My temptation is to identify you from your name as a white man, but then again, you could be a Latina married to a person with a European name or descended from a black family once owned by German American slaveholders. In either case, the credibility of what research you cite will be filtered through what your students diversely make of your identity. Don't feel bad or good about this. It just is. Tom Kochman, and his work, is often passed over or resisted because both he and his research contradict prevailing PC stereotypes.

Identifying and sharing one's own experience as a prerequisite to using research findings

I really believe that what you must do is help your students work with their clients to **identify and acknowledge *their* values.** Your students need techniques to do so that fit with the real life of the client



population. You would probably do well to create some live, in-the-field situations for them to do this in your instruction and coaching and show them how to tease out the variants of values in their clients, so that they can make sense out of research findings from an empirical and experiential base.

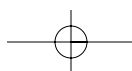
Just as Germans and Italians didn't exist as such until they arrived in the USA, (At home they were Bavarians, Saxons, Piemontese, Sicilians, etc., as there was neither a German nor Italian state when they emigrated to the USA) so Black and Latino are not only generalities, they are US created political and cultural realities however strongly or vaguely based on race and ethnicity. Because of this labeling, they begin to have a culture of their own in the new context.

This is difficult, as the prevailing politics make it difficult even for the clients of your students to know and accept their own cultural strains and values. For example, great numbers of Black Americans are of mixed race, but are politically constrained to be simply "Black." In my years of working with diversity, I encountered only one Black group whose members actually made a point of looking at their real mix of cultural values, e.g., one woman who was part Irish and part Black talked about and told how she benefited from both components of her culture, the values and personality traits that she saw resulting from each of these ethnic sources.

On the other hand, people having the mix of Black and Latin origins experience both Blackness and being Latin differently. Though Latin cultures have their own racial prejudices, the mixing of Latin, Black and Indio is so extensive in many places that it is the normal situation. The Catholic conquistadores, despite their own brutality and coercion, recognized that other races had souls, and intermarried freely. This is quite in contrast with the White Protestant behavior set that dominated further north in the USA, viz., the recent conflict surrounding acceptance the Black descendants in the Thomas Jefferson family (www.ishipress.com/slaves).

The US experience shapes cultural identities

The cultural background of Latin Blacks and US-descended Blacks is quite different, until they are both lumped together in the US environment. Just as Germans and Italians didn't exist as such until they arrived in the USA, (At home they were Bavarians, Saxons, Piemontese, Sicilians, etc., as there was neither a German nor Italian state when they emigrated to the USA) so Black and Latino are not only generalities, they are US created political and cultural realities



however strongly or vaguely based on race and ethnicity. Because of this labeling, they begin to have a culture of their own in the new context. Likewise, to address Latino values, you need to know where your Latino population is from as well as what happens to them in coming and being here, as most only become "Latinos," when they come to the USA. Until then they are Colombians, Mexicans, Nicaraguans, etc.

Taking an off-beat approach may help

Here in Europe humor and jokes often used as a starting point for the discussion of cultural differences because they generally contain both a kernel of truth and stereotypes build on the same perception. Because of the pc that straight-jackets humor in the USA, you may not be able to directly use what follows, but it might be instructive to have a look at it, nonetheless, as it illustrates that there are other possible points of entry into discussing culture-specific values and behaviors.

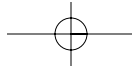
Search for alternative means of getting past the pc straight-jacket. Remember, there are other possible points of entry into discussing culture-specific values and behaviors.

Today friend sent me this humor piece. I have copied it below and then followed it with potential questions that would provide a way of searching for the values people could indentify with by debriefing the humorous story. Here is the story.

"A Mexican family crosses over the border to the "Land of Milk and Honey" where the streets are paved with gold. But the husband can find no work...

"His family is hungry, so he takes a walk to a quiet place at the foot of a big hill, kneels at the base of a tree, and begins to pray: 'San Jose, you took care of Maria and Jesus, please show me a way to feed my family...'

"Eyes closed, the Mexican does not see a black man coming over the top of the hill, who is stumbling wildly with a broken grocery sack. When the Mexican man opens his eyes, a large wheel of cheddar cheese rolls down the hill and lands at his feet!



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"'Gracias San Jose, thank you!' he cries, grabs the cheese, and runs straight home.

"Arriving home, he gives the cheese to his wife and instructs her to make nachos. 'But wouldn't you rather have cheese enchiladas and other things?' she asks.

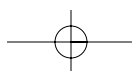
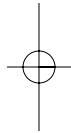
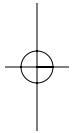
"'No,' the husband says, 'San Jose sent this to me with a message... As I ran home, I heard him shout after me, 'THAT'S NACHO CHEESE!'"

How can you use this?

You can look at this as a piece of borderline ethnic humor, of course, but you can also see it as a cultural goldmine rather than running away from it. Here, for example, are some starter questions for discussion among the many that arise from this story.

1. What are the values that impel a Mexican family as a family to migrate (whether they are legal or illegal immigrants)? How might Black and White Americans react to these values?
2. What are the stereotypes of the US that appeal to migrants? What realities of US life and immigration to the USA are in conflict with the stereotypes?
3. What stereotypes of the USA reveal the values system the immigrant family going to confront? What values is the Mexican Family going to be struggling with in the new context? How much of this is the same as or different from Blacks who have been in the US for many generations, from Black emigrants from Latin and non-Latin areas of the world.
4. What familial and religious values are expressed, defended and challenged for immigrants to the US? How well prepared culturally are US social and psychological services to serve Mexicans, Blacks and other groups in ways that respect religious and other values?

If jokes work because they contain both a kernel of truth and a play on stereotypical understandings, how would you identify both of these in the story?



5. What is the role of food in cultural identity and comfort (i.e., what makes food to be "soul food" for various groups)?
6. What cultural values are expressed in the relationships of men and women in Mexican and African American cultures?
7. What are the values and issues involved in using Black English and avoiding or denying its use? What makes it easy or hard to discuss language, accents or other things we experience across racial and cultural boundaries?
8. Did you find this story funny? If so which parts struck you as humorous? What does this tell you about the structure of the values it called forth from you when you heard or read it? How might these same values come into play when encountering people with the same backgrounds as those in the story? How does humor differ across cultures?
9. If jokes work because they contain both a kernel of truth and a play on stereotypical understandings, how would you identify both of these in the story?

Discovering what people are laughing about (or angry, depressed, embarrassed, confused ...) may be the most useful starting points for helping them talk about values. It is far closer to their reality and far more likely to provoke sharing than presenting research data that may be resisted for no other reason than it is not their experience.

Find and use the *real stuff* people experience and talk about

You don't have to use my friend's story, to do this, of course. It may be far more important to choose stories (and humor if you dare, because it is so right-on to what people feel) prevailing among the student clients of the staff you are training. I suspect that the Latino students are more than likely not immigrants themselves but children of immigrants. Their stories will contain the conflicts and contradictions of inherited and acquired culture, which will be far more important to know about and explore than research data on likely behaviors of ethnic groups. Again, you want to know why and how values are being carried into action.

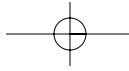
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In any case, discovering what are people laughing about (or angry, depressed, embarrassed, confused, blank, i.e., didn't get it) may be the most useful starting points for helping them talk about values, and far closer to their reality and far more likely to provoke sharing than presenting research data that may be resisted for no other reason than it is not their experience.

Essentially such discussions are focused on making your students and their students into researchers in their own right, respecting the realities of the people at hand, rather than making them reliant on academic studies that are often far more narrowly focused, hard to apply to every day reality and all too easily feel procrustean and coercive.

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Discussion Leaders:

1. Have you run into a situation where research was seen as a reflection of who you are and why you are citing it? How could this problem have been eliminated by identifying and acknowledging the values of your audience? What steps could you have taken to do this? _____

2. There are many ways of getting past the pc straight-jacket. Humor serves to disarm the listener and to break down barriers, but if you are uncomfortable using humor, try using a story or a non-political current event to involve your audience. **What will you use to provoke sharing among your audience?** Be sure whatever you use is something that is relevant to your audience, or it will be received much the way empirical data will.

3. If jokes work because they contain both a kernel of truth and a play on stereotypical understandings, how would you identify both of these in the "Nacho Cheese" story?

