Whither the “White Control Group“?
On the Benefits of a Comparative Ethnic Minority Psychology

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Author Note

This paper is based on an invited talk given at the SRCD Themed Meeting – Positive Development of Minority Children, February 2012. Some people in the room hated it, and some loved it. When I tried to publish it reviewers and editors mostly hated it. I still like it and think it is important, so here it is. This version is mostly unchanged since last submitted in early 2014 and references have not been updated. But really, how much has changed since then? Not much. Would I make edits now if I was so inclined? Absolutely.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss ethnic comparative research and the role of the “White control group” in such designs. Accordingly, there are two primary goals. First, to describe the rationale for ethnic comparative research, highlighting how research with White youth is based on different assumptions than research with ethnic minority youth. Second, to offer suggestions for how to conduct comparative research, ensuring that studies that include White samples are not conceptualized within a deficit framework. To this end, three recommendations are offered: 1) having a theoretical foundation for comparative studies, 2) including dynamic mediators to explain group differences, and 3) using mixed methods to reveal heterogeneity within groups. This paper is meant to serve as an explication of best practices that researchers could reference when designing their studies, providing rationale for their design, and responding to reviewer comments.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Race, Culture, Comparative Research, Research Design

Whither the “White Control Group”? On the Benefits of a Comparative Ethnic Minority Psychology

As scientists, we are captivated by differences. Developmental psychologists are, of course, interested in age differences across the lifespan, but they also focus on differences based on social group memberships. Research on gender differences has thrived for decades (Leaper, 2011), as has research comparing youth from different immigrant generational statuses (García Coll & Marks, 2012). Although all of these comparisons come with potential social and political concerns, there has perhaps been no greater controversy on group differences in developmental science than comparisons based on ethnicity or race. These concerns exist for good reason, as there are visible cases in which ethnic comparative research has been used to illustrate how a minority group was inferior to Whites (e.g., Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). Moreover, ethnic minority children develop within a complex structure of racism and oppression that is not similarly experienced among White children (García Coll et al., 1996). Accordingly, some researchers have suggested that ethnic comparative studies may be best avoided altogether (see McLoyd, 2004).

Shying away from ethnic comparative studies, however, creates a paradox. It is common knowledge that the vast majority of theory and research in developmental science is based on White Americans. Thus, there is a need to determine how well our knowledge fits with the experiences and development of ethnic minorities. From a research design perspective, however, it is impossible to answer this question without doing comparative work. Most scholars would agree that development involves aspects that are both universal (e.g., developing trust) and culturally-specific (e.g., how that trust is expressed). Understanding those points of similarities and differences requires comparative designs.

It is important to recognize that the current historical moment differs from what many of the foundational ethnic minority researchers have gone through. While still greatly under-represented, research with ethnic minority populations, conducted by ethnic minority researchers, appears in the pages of the top journals in the field at a relatively higher rate. Along with this greater visibility has come a shift away from deficit-oriented models of ethnic minority development and towards positive models that recognize the unique resources that ethnic minorities draw upon (Cabrera, 2013). Thus, now may be an opportune time to revisit the utility of ethnic comparative research.

In this paper, I take up the issue of ethnic comparative research and the role of the “White control group.” Comparative research has come to be equated with deficit-oriented research. It is critical for the advancement of our knowledge of development of all children to separate these two issues. Moreover, it is reasonable to assume that ethnic comparative studies are inevitably going to occur, and therefore it would be wise to develop a set of best practices for how to go about doing so. Accordingly, I have two primary goals for this paper: 1) to describe the rationale for ethnic comparative research; and 2) offer suggestions for how to conduct comparative research, ensuring that studies that include White samples are not conceptualized within a deficit framework. This paper is meant to serve as an explication of best practices that researchers could reference when designing their studies, providing rationale for their design, and responding to reviewer comments.

The Root of the Problem: Inadequate Research Designs and Failure to Understand the Full Field of Persons and Groups

Many authors have written about their own experiences with journal reviewers, wherein the reviewers claim that a study focusing on a single ethnic minority group is flawed unless it includes a White “control” group (e.g., Markus, 2008; Stanley, 2007; Sue, 1999). This argument is ill-received by ethnic minority researchers who feel they are being differentially treated, as studies with White samples are not considered severely lacking if they do not have an ethnic minority “control” group.

The decision about whether or not to include a White sample to compare with ethnic minorities, however, is not so clear-cut. As I will explain below, the argument for including a White control group in a study with ethnic minorities is fundamentally different from the argument for including an ethnic minority control group in a study with Whites.

Figure 1 illustrates a hierarchical model of persons and groups. As with all models, this one is an overly simplified depiction of reality. Some readers may question the need to illustrate such a simple model, but I have found that it is sometimes necessary to reflect on simple models to surface assumptions and practices that are too often taken for granted. Illustrating this model also helps to reveal *common practices* in relation to *best practices*, and thus can help illuminate solutions to the “White control group” problem.

Figure 1 contains five elements, depicted in Columns A-E. Columns A, C, and E, refer to levels of categorization, from humans, to ethnic groups, to individuals, respectively. Columns B and D refer to processes that link different levels of categorization. Column B captures between-group variations in processes and Column D captures within-group variations in processes. Importantly, the figure contains double-sided arrows, indicating a reciprocal psychological process between groups and individuals. This model is, essentially, a visual representation of Murray and Kluckhohn’s (1953) well-worn dictum that that individuals are like all others, like some others, and like no others.

This hierarchical model reveals the source of the tension around the White control group problem. Studies conducted with White populations are typically situated within Column A, *Whites as humans*. That is, researchers recruit participants for their sample, and they end up being mostly or all White. That demographic profile is incidental rather than intentional, and the sample is meant to be representative of human behavior rather than the behavior of White individuals specifically. It is important to note that this is not strong research practice, as (mostly American) White children are obviously not a representative sample of the human population. Because this research is situated within Column A, no ethnic minority comparison group is necessary vis-à-vis the study design, because no claims to difference or uniqueness are made.

In contrast, research with ethnic minorities tends to be in Column C, distinct ethnic groups. Researchers recruit from specific ethnic minority populations because they are interested in those groups in particular. The goals of this type of research are fundamentally different from the goals of research conducted within Column A. The ethnic minority sample is not assumed to represent general processes of humans in toto, but rather is meant to represent the ethnic minority group that was sampled.

Figure 1. Hierarchical model of persons and groups. For simplicity, numerous intervening levels have been omitted (e.g., “Americans” between columns A and C).

There are, however, two distinct types of research questions that fall within Column C. The first question within Column C is focused on the phenomenological experiences or individual differences within an ethnic group, and makes no claims to uniqueness or difference between groups. For these types of studies, which are attempting to make links between Columns C-D-E, a White control group is unnecessary. Although within-group studies are highly valued in ethnic minority research (Cabrera, 2013; Cooper, García Coll, Thorne, & Orellana, 2005), they can suffer from conceptually similar pitfalls as ethnic comparative research. Power differentials exist within every group, based on gender, social class, immigrant status, sexuality, and so on, and thus any within-group comparison along these dimensions has the potential to lapse into within-group deficit models (i.e., using middle-class Latinos as a standard for comparison of low-income Latinos).

The second type of research question in Column C is quite a different case. This type focuses on documenting that a given aspect of development is *different* in some way between one or more ethnic minority groups and Whites. As a matter of basic research design, these types of questions require a comparison group; difference can only be asserted if difference is assessed. Thus, if a goal of the study (explicit or implicit) is to document a difference between an ethnic minority group and Whites (e.g., differences in structural barriers to educational opportunity; Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003), then the criticism of the lack of a White control

group is completely warranted. Again, this argument does not map on to studies with White children, as currently conducted, because those studies are not focused on documenting the development of a specific group (as noted previously, there is an appropriate criticism to be applied, just not this one¹). Given that a large share of ethnic minority research is dedicated to aspects of the minority context that presumably differ from the White majority, such as personal discrimination and institutional racism, processes related to minority identities, and culturally-specific practices (García Coll et al., 1996), I argue that most ethnic minority research should, in fact, be comparative. Fortunately, there are solutions for how to approach comparative ethnic minority research, ensuring that the research is both rigorous and considerate of the structural dynamics that underlie ethnicity.

From Categories to Processes: Suggestions for Future Comparative Research

In this section, I present three recommendations for how comparative ethnic minority research should be conducted. Each of the recommendations targets different aspects of Figure 1. Importantly, these recommendations shift the emphasis from the groups themselves (columns A, C, E) to the processes that link the different levels of hierarchy (columns, B, D).

Recommendation 1: Use Theory to Guide Expectations of Difference

Comparing ethnic groups (or any group) in research should only be done when there is a well articulated theoretical, conceptual, or practical rationale for doing so. That is, just because the sample comprises multiple ethnic groups does not mean that comparative analyses should be conducted. The dangers of warrantless group comparisons are manifold. First, any such comparison will necessarily lead to *post-hoc* interpretations and theorizing about the difference. Second, the interpretations will often be *ad-hoc*, in that the interpretations are based only on the evidence in hand, and not in the context of the existing literature or with consideration for replication. Taken together, *post-hoc* and *ad-hoc* sense-making can result in HARKing (Hypothesizing after the Results are Known; Kerr, 1998). HARKing is likely much more widespread in developmental science than most would care to admit, and is an extremely poor and dangerous approach to science.

The antidote for these problems is having substantive theory guide the study, providing rationale for testing for differences and how those differences are expected to play out. A challenge to conducting theory-based research on ethnic group differences is that there are few psychological theories, particularly in developmental science, that involve propositions about group comparisons. Indeed, in many instances there is a need to examine how well a theory and its empirical support based on White samples fits with other ethnic groups. This is important and necessary work, but there will be no theoretical guidance about similarities and differences among groups. In these cases, conceptual attention should be paid to the nature of the group comparison itself.

Cauce, Coronado, & Watson (1998) discuss three predominant models of cultural comparison: cultural deviance, cultural equivalence, and cultural variance. In the *cultural deviance* model, Whites are seen as the standard from which all other ethnic groups are compared. Any deviation from the White mainstream is located within the ethnic groups' culture itself. This model is most clearly associated with the deficit perspective. In contrast, the

¹ I will also add now, just to be crystal clear, that there are changes that need to be made to all research to be less White-centric and less U.S.-centric. These are important issues as well, but they are not the issues I address in this essay.

cultural equivalence model locates ethnic group differences within social structures and economic differences. This perspective is manifest in the “race is confounded with class” mantra, and has led to the practice of controlling for social class when making racial/ethnic comparisons. This model is criticized, too, as it implies that if it were not for social and economic disadvantage, ethnic minorities would be just like Whites, and thus privileges White American culture. Furthermore, this model assumes that social class is experienced equally across different groups. Researchers have demonstrated that the status of “middle class” is much more tenuous for Blacks than Whites (Hardaway & McLoyd, 2009). Those occupying the Black middle class are more likely to be upwardly mobile and to have close family members living in poverty, and therefore have less robust systems of economic support (e.g., property ownership). Finally, the *cultural variance* model does not assume any one standard or that different ethnic groups have the potential to be equal. Strong consideration for the minority context, which involves a life of institutional and personal oppression, renders any possibility of equal status impossible. Within this model there is an understanding of both similarities and differences among different groups, and that the differences can be sources of strength as well as sources of challenge.

The discussion of the three models of cultural comparison is meant to highlight that not all group comparisons are conceptually equivalent. These three models underlie the existing comparative research, whether or not the original researchers were cognizant of their choice. The first step towards conducting rigorous comparative research is to be explicit about which model of group comparisons will be used. Failure to surface the model can lead to a cultural deviance model without the researchers realizing it, resulting in deficit-based interpretations. Thus, again, the real danger in comparative studies is ignorance, and not the comparison, per se.

Recommendation 2: Include Dynamic Psychological Mediators to Account for Differences between Groups

If comparisons of ethnic groups are done for theoretical, conceptual, or practical reasons, then it follows that the comparison of two groups on some construct cannot be the end of the story. Indeed, if there is a rationale for why groups should differ, then some measure of that rationale should be included in the analysis (Helms, Jernigan, & Mascher, 2005; García Coll et al., 1996). This practice can be most clearly understood in the case of simple mediation.

As a general rule, researchers should analytically replace static social group markers (e.g., ethnicity) with dynamic psychological constructs that have the potential to explain group differences (e.g., ethnic identity, discrimination). Such procedures will lessen the likelihood of essentialized interpretations that reify the social categories. Indeed, social group markers have no explanatory value in and of themselves—just as age is not a sufficient explanation of behavior. Rather, they simply serve as a proxy for dynamic psychological constructs. The ability to explain the observed difference and remove any “inherent” interpretations serves two goals. First, it deflects deficit interpretations. Second, it is rigorous study design, as the approach moves understanding from descriptive to explanatory.

The use of psychological mediators primarily addresses column B of Figure 1, the link between humans and ethnic groups. The shift to mediators puts the emphasis on the processes that link the different levels of the hierarchy, rather than on the categories themselves. For example, a large number of studies have demonstrated that ethnic identity is more important for ethnic minorities than Whites (Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). Juang and Syed (2010) found that when family cultural socialization was added as a predictor of ethnic identity, ethnicity was no longer a significant predictor. Thus, the ethnic differences in ethnic identity are not because there is

something inherent to the ethnic categories themselves, but rather because of ethnic differences in practices around the socialization of culture. As with all mediation models, the next question is to assess why there are ethnic differences in cultural socialization (Figure 2). Such a practice of successive mediations gets at the psychological nature of group differences that is the bread and butter of developmental research.

Figure 2. Models depicting ethnic difference (minority and White) in ethnic identity (path a). These differences are accounted for by ethnic differences in family cultural socialization (paths b and c). Paths d and e indicate unknown processes that account for the ethnic differences in socialization.

Recommendation 3: Use Mixed Methods to Retain Individuality within Groups

One of the dangers of group-based analytic strategies is the tendency to reify and homogenize the group (Gjerde, 2004; Rogoff, 2002). How do you classify individuals into groups without implicitly assuming some level of homogeneity? Categorization of individuals into groups should be done thoughtfully, with consideration for whether the groups are meant to be racial, ethnic, or cultural (Markus, 2008). Ultimately, no system of categorization will be perfect, but it should at least be rational. Additionally, following Figure 1, Column D, focusing on the processes that link individuals to their ethnic groups can help alleviate the problem of implicit homogeneity. One approach is conduct within-group analyses to examine differences by gender, social class, or some other social positions variable (Cole, 2009). As noted previously, however, this approach leads to the same problem of group heterogeneity that we began with.

An alternative approach is to make use of mixed methods research. Mixed methods refers to a broad family of research designs that include both quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (textual) data or analysis (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008.). One design, the quantitative-qualitative embedded design, is particularly germane to the current problem. This design, which has increasingly appeared in the developmental literature, sets the quantitative component as the primary means to address the research question (e.g., the ethnic group comparison). The qualitative component is secondary, and can serve several purposes, including discovery of potential mediators and moderators and to allow for the texture of human experience and individuality to come through.

Kim, Reichwald, and Lee (2013) conducted a mixed method study to understand the process of cultural socialization among transracial, transnational adoptive families. Based on

observational assessments, the families were classified as acknowledging the racial and ethnic differences, reject those differences, or exhibiting discrepant views that included both acknowledgment and rejection. Quantitative analyses indicated that adolescents from the acknowledgment group reported significantly greater parental cultural socialization than those from the rejection group. Qualitative analysis, however, revealed variability within the acknowledgment group, with some families more likely to have conversations about cultural practices whereas as relatively fewer discussed issues of race and discrimination. Analyses of this kind are an excellent approach to conducting group-based studies without implicitly implying homogeneity.

Conclusion

A developmental psychology based on sound science, and not solely on politics, reveals that conceptualizing comparative ethnic research as either good or bad does not make a lot of sense. Just like any study that we do, researchers must link their study goals to their methods and analysis, all of which should be guided by theory when available. The hierarchical model in Figure 1 can help researchers properly locate their studies (as well as studies they evaluate) and design them to be maximally effective. In particular, shifting the focus from the groups/categories themselves to the intervening processes that give rise to similarities and differences has the potential to advance our knowledge of ethnic minority children, and by extension all children.

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