

## Adapting Evaluation Measures for 'Hard to Reach' Audiences

When evaluating community programs, sometimes we lack the tools or approaches needed to include everybody served by the program. For example, we are frequently unable to obtain evaluation information from participants with limited English or low literacy skills because it may be more difficult for them to complete the survey instruments than those with better skills. Young children may also have a difficult time with interviews and questionnaires due to the complexity of the questions or items. In addition, the issue of cultural sensitivity is becoming increasingly important to those involved in program evaluation. When collecting information from children, youth and parents from non-majority cultures, many unique issues arise. Collectively, individu-

als with limited English or low literacy skills, young children, and people from non-majority cultures represent the 'hard to reach' audiences of evaluation. Given the importance of including these individuals in our evaluations, this bulletin provides practical guidelines for program evaluators working with 'hard to reach' audiences. First, several ideas are presented for conducting evaluations with young children or people with limited English or low literacy skills. Although many of these ideas can also be used when working with people from non-majority cultures, a separate section focuses on cultural considerations in evaluation. This bulletin will address the following topics regarding evaluation with 'hard to reach' audiences (click on a topic):

- [Obtaining Consent for Participation in Evaluation](#)
- [Using Surveys with Adults and Children with Limited English or Low Literacy Skills](#)
  - [Suggestions for Modifying Evaluations](#)
  - [Constructing Survey Items](#)
- [Interviewing Children](#)
- [Other Sources of Data](#)
- [Incorporating Cultural Issues in Evaluation](#)
- [Recommendations for Increasing Participation of Non-majority Populations](#)
- [Request for Success Stories in Working with 'Hard to Reach' Audiences](#)

## Obtaining Consent for Participation in Evaluation

When conducting evaluation projects with children and youth, it is first necessary to obtain the appropriate permission(s). For all minors individuals under the age of 18), you must have their parents' permission before they can participate in the evaluation. This parental consent can either be *active* or *passive*. Active consent involves parents giving their permission in writing, usually by returning a pre-printed form to the evaluator. While this is the most cautious approach, it sometimes can lead to lower rates of participation for other reasons than the parents not wanting their children to participate (e.g., the child loses or forgets the consent form). As a result, you may want to use the passive consent approach. Passive Consent involves letting parents know about the purposes and goals of the evaluation and then allowing them the opportunity to deny permission for their child to participate. They can do

this by notifying the evaluator before the evaluation project begins, usually in writing or by telephone. Thus, if no refusal of permission is given by the parent(s), the child is allowed to participate. In addition to parental permission, it is also important to remember that the children and youth should have the option of not participating in any study. They should understand that there will not be any sort of penalty for not participating. When working with youth, it is also advisable to obtain their written assent to participate. Again, a 'passive' approach can be used, where the youth are provided with clear opportunities to refuse their own participation. The decision to use passive or active consent is often determined by the local Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy. You should always check with the local IRB and/or Human Subjects Committee policies before beginning any evaluation.

## Using Surveys with Adults and Children with Limited English or Low Literacy Skills

While surveys and questionnaires can be used with 'hard to reach' audiences you might have to modify them to get the most accurate information.

### Suggestions for Modifying Evaluations (click on a topic for more information)

1. [Items \(and responses\)](#) can be read aloud to participating students.
2. [Item wording can be simplified](#), so that they are more appropriate to the reading level of the participating students.
3. [With instruction](#), children may learn how to use Likert-type scales. It may also be possible to modify the response scales by simplifying the responses.
4. [Surveys can be administered](#) in abbreviated form.
5. [If given in interview form](#), the survey can be presented in a more playful manner, so that it doesn't "feel like a test."
6. [Provide an adequate](#) amount of time for students to complete the survey.

### Constructing Survey Items

There are a number of general principles relevant for survey design, regardless of the target audience. These principles are especially important when using surveys with younger participants and adults

with limited English or low literacy skills. The following list represents some issues that may be problematic in the construction of survey or questionnaire items.

1. Are items and questions written in a simple, yet precise manner?	Not Acceptable: Do you enjoy talking with old people? ('old' is imprecise)  Acceptable: How often do you visit with retired people?
2. Do any of the questions reflect any bias, such that the respondent is encouraged to answer in a particular way?	Not Acceptable: All kids drink alcohol sometimes. How often do you drink?  Acceptable: If you drink alcohol, how often do you drink?
3. Are any of the questions or items unnecessarily personal?	Not Acceptable: Do your parents tell you they love you?  Acceptable: How do you feel about the following statement, "My parents care about me." Strongly Agree      Agree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree
4. Are there any ambiguous words or colloquialisms in the question? Items should be worded in a way that will mean the same thing to all respondents.	Not Acceptable: How often do you 'party' with your friends?  Acceptable: How often are alcohol or drugs available at parties you attend?
5. Are the response categories too vague? Are the response categories mutually exclusive? Terms like "occasionally" can have a wide range of meanings.	Not Acceptable: How often do you..... Rarely      Once in a while      Sometimes      Occasionally  Acceptable: How often do you..... Less than once a month      1-3 times a month      Once a week or more
6. Are the response categories biased (more responses in one direction than the other)?	Not Acceptable: Our country spends 35 million a year on education.  Should this amount be: Tripled      Doubled      Increased a little      Stay the same  Acceptable: Increased greatly      Increased slightly Reduced slightly      Reduced greatly
7. Are there any 'double-barreled' questions? Sometimes two questions are combined into one, yet one answer is required. It may be best to ask two or three questions instead of one. An example of double-barreled question would be:	Not Acceptable: Do teens receive adequate education on birth control and STDs?  Acceptable: Do teens receive adequate education on birth control? and Do teens receive adequate education on STDs?
8. Do any of the questions assume (unfairly) existing knowledge or bias on the part of respondents?	Not Acceptable: Do you agree with community curfew laws?  Acceptable: Until what time do you think kids your age should be allowed to stay out?

Adapted from: Dillman, D. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

## Interviewing Children

Interviews typically involve an adult asking a child a series of pre-established questions. However, an older child or adolescent could also serve as the interviewer. The interview is an especially useful approach when it is important to gather information directly from the children themselves.

When conducting interviews with children, it is important to ask direct questions to get honest responses. For example, it is helpful to ask about

what actually happened rather than what they think is true, as the latter may yield different responses. Timing is also important because the recall of younger children is subject to forgetting and interference more than older children (Brainerd, 1997).<sup>1</sup> There are times when the interview may not be appropriate such as when sensitive information is required. If interview methods are to be used effectively, the following points should be considered:

1. The child should possess adequate receptive language skills in the language used by the interviewer.
2. The child should be comfortable with the interviewer. It is critical that the interviewer take some time to establish rapport with the child prior to beginning the actual interview.
3. The interview should take place in familiar surroundings (e.g., in school). Distractions should be kept to a minimum.
4. The language of the interview should be age appropriate. Questions should be clear and brief. Try to avoid asking multiple questions about the same topic, as it can make it seem that a prior answer was 'wrong' or unacceptable.
5. Because children are susceptible to social influences, it is important to avoid the unintentional use of leading questions. In other words, questions should be neutral.

*Adapted from* Black, J. K., & Puckett, M.B. (1992). The young child: Development from prebirth through age eight. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

<sup>1</sup> Brainerd, C. J. (1997). Children's forgetting with implications for memory suggestibility. In N.L. Stein, P.A. Ornstein, & B. Tversky (Eds.) Memory for everyday and emotional events. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

There are additional things to consider when talking with young children. Interestingly, some of the best basic guidelines available come from research done on questioning child witnesses. This is not surprising given the need to obtain accurate and valid information that will stand up in a court of law. The

following recommendations are adapted from Zaragoza, Graham, Hall, Hirschman, and Ben-Porath, Eds. (1995). Memory and testimony in the child witness. Applied Psychology: Individual, Social, and Community Issues, 1, 118-120.

AVOID	USE
Long, compound sentences	Short sentences
Embedded clauses	Simple sentence constructions
3-4 syllable words ('identify')	1-2 syllable words ('point to')
Multi-word verbs ('might have been')	Simple tenses ('-ed', 'was')
Uncommon word usage ('automobile')	Common terms ('car')
Pronouns (them, their)	Proper names ('teachers', 'mom', 'Jane')
Referent terms (here/there)	Stable terms (in your classroom, at home)
Relational terms (more, less)	Concrete visualizeable terms (a lot, a little)
Rough transitions	Introduce new topics ("Now, we are going to talk about school")
Passive voice ("Was she hit by him?")	Active voice ("Did he hit her?")
Double negatives ("Is that not false?")	Positive constructions ("Is that true?")
Hypotheticals ("If you would like a break, let me know")	Direct approach ("Are you tired?" or "Do you want a break?")

### Other Sources of Data (click on a topic for more information)

Depending on the questions you want to answer in your evaluation and the characteristics of the target population, methods not directly involving the children or youth of interest may need to be used. Following are some common sources of information on children and youth (click on any of these sources for more info.): 1) [institutional records](#) (e.g., school data); 2) [observations of students](#) in natural environments such as schools or other structured community settings; 3) [survey and questionnaire](#) data from parents and/or teachers; 4) [rating scales](#) completed by significant adults (parents or teachers); and 5) [anecdotal records](#) from parents or teachers. Teachers' aides and peers can also provide useful information, again depending on the nature of the questions you are

trying to answer in your evaluation. It is also important to keep in mind that many low-literacy adults may not have been successful in school. Therefore, anything that looks like school work or a test may be intimidating to them because they often learn by "doing". Instead of the traditional paper-and-pencil evaluation you may want to employ a more "hands-on" method of evaluation. If the evaluation can be implemented in a fun way, such as a game or a role-play, it may be even more readily accepted by program participants. For example, a parenting class may teach anger management skills. As a part of the evaluation, participants could be asked to role-play a scenario between a parent and child in which the parent successfully implements anger management skills.

## Incorporating Cultural Issues in Evaluation

There are a number of issues related to conducting evaluations with individuals from non-majority cultures, including acculturation and the translation of existing scales and instruments. Although this bulletin is not intended to address these issues, for those interested in acculturation issues, Marin and Marin (1991)<sup>1</sup> provide a 'test for acculturation' in both English and Spanish.

A brief discussion of translation issues is presented at the end of this section. The primary focus here is on enhancing the participation of minorities in evaluation research so that your evaluations are

inclusive and meaningful. For various reasons, minority children and youth are often underrepresented in research and evaluation efforts. According to Marin and Marin (1991), there are a number of legitimate historical reasons why persons of minority status are often suspicious of social science research. However, these authors also provide the following recommendations designed to improve the participation of Hispanic populations. Most of these suggestions would probably be appropriate for other minority groups as well. In fact, several of these suggestions could apply to persons from non-minority cultural groups.

## Recommendations for Increasing Participation of Non-majority Populations

1. Become familiar with the community in which evaluation is to be conducted. This includes things such as learning about existing community agencies, local demographic information, economic conditions, and names of social and recreational places in the community.
2. Establish legitimacy by demonstrating local relevance and the usefulness of the evaluation results. Local contacts and/or working out of local agencies or organizations can be of great assistance in these efforts.
3. Enlist local evaluators and other key stakeholders to facilitate project success.
4. If possible, offer a choice of language to participants (regardless of which evaluation methods are selected). Surveys are much more likely to be completed if they are presented in the participants' primary language.
5. Use same ethnicity interviewers/observers when possible. This will often enhance participation and the accuracy of the results.
6. If compensation is provided it should be appropriate.
7. Be sensitive to Likert type response scales, as some cultures may not be familiar with making subtle distinctions used in some Likert scales.

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from: Marin G., & Marin, B.V. (1991). Research with Hispanic populations (pp. 58-65). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

In general, Marin and Marin (1991) state that most traditional data collection strategies are appropriate for use with non-majority participants. However, they suggest that the use of telephone interviews or diary methods may be the best when investigating sensitive topics. There is some evidence that individuals in non-majority cultures may respond differently to survey methods. For example, Marin and Marin (1991) suggest Hispanic participants may provide: more extreme responses; more acquiescent responses; more socially desirable responses; and more incomplete survey protocols than non-Hispanic participants. Thus, the data of non-

majority participants should be examined for irregularities in response patterns.

Regarding the translation of existing scales into other languages, the basic issue is to create a 'culturally equivalent measure' of the indicator (Werner & Campbell, 1970).<sup>1</sup> This is often a difficult task; however, there is a great deal of evidence that it can be done successfully. For a concise summary of the major translation techniques, please see Marin and Marin (1991), pages 88-100. Another helpful source is Brislin (1980)<sup>2</sup> on translating oral and written materials.

### **Request for Success Stories in Working with 'Hard to Reach' Audiences**

We see this bulletin as a work in progress. Many of you have experience conducting evaluations with hard to reach audiences, and we would like to include your success stories. Be sure to describe the challenges you faced and how you addressed them. To get a true picture of the success of a program, all groups being served should be included in the evaluation. While adapting evaluation measures for such audiences can be a challenge, it is definitely worth the effort as it can help you tailor your programs to achieve the best results with different groups. We hope this bulletin has provided you with some practical guidelines for evaluating hard to reach audiences. Please e-mail your stories to [aleta@ag.arizona.edu](mailto:aleta@ag.arizona.edu). Thank you for taking the time to share your experiences with others!

- <sup>1</sup> Werner, O., & Campbell, D.T. (1970). Translating, working through interpreters and the problem of decentering. In R.N. & R. Cohen (Eds.), *A handbook of method in cultural anthropology*. New York: American Museum of Natural History.
- <sup>2</sup> Brislin, R. W. (1980). Translation and content analysis of oral and written materials. In H. C. Triandis & J. W. Berry (Eds.). *Handbook of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. (pp. 389-444). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

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