Session 3: Research Methods and Populations
Discussant Comments

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Session 3: Research Methods and Populations, Discussant Comments

I reviewed two papers for this session. First, “A test of the adequacy of two common core youth measures with Latino immigrant youth” (Liu, Broadbent, Cox, Washburn, Croff, & Atiles, 2017) focused on the measurement equivalence of two subscales of the Positive Youth Development Student Questionnaire (i.e., social conscience and caring) among Latino immigrant adolescents. Second, “Is it possible to collect nationally representative data in the United States? A case study from the CREATE Project” (James, Yorgason, Holmes, Busby, & Johnson, 2017) describes efforts to collect a nationally representative sample of recently married couples. Both papers have important implications for data collection, measurement, and interpretation of findings in family science. I will first comment on each paper separately, followed by a general discussion.

“A test of the adequacy of two common core youth measures with Latino immigrant youth” (Liu, Broadbent, Cox, Washburn, Croff, & Atiles, 2017)

Liu et al. (2017) examine the measurement equivalence of the social conscience and caring subscales of the Positive Youth Development Student Questionnaire (PYD) for use among Latino immigrant youth. The authors present a compelling rational for examining measurement equivalence across ethnicity and immigrant status. Clearly, if we are to promote positive youth adjustment in an increasingly diverse nation, we must make sure that our instruments are valid, reliable, and culturally sensitive. The authors suggest that social conscience and caring may function differently among immigrant Latino youth due to cultural differences in individualism and collectivism. Although I agree that these two constructs are likely to be culturally embedded, I encourage the authors to think more about cultural differences between immigrant Latinos and mainstream U.S. culture. For instance, although I would agree that Latino culture is more collectivistic than U.S. culture, some scholars have pointed out that this notion may be
exaggerated in social science research. For instance, a meta-analysis examining these cultural assumptions found that although Latinos were more collectivistic than European Americans, they did not differ in individualism (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002). Further, as Latinos make up an increasing proportion of the United States population, do these dichotomous notions of individualism and collectivism remain static? We often focus on the adaptation of immigrants to U.S. culture, but how much are immigrants impacting U.S. culture? We must be careful not to conflate U.S. culture with white U.S. culture.

I appreciated the authors’ mention of acculturation as a possible factor that could influence measurement equivalence. Researchers should build on this idea to go beyond discrete ethnic categories to more fully capture within group variability. This concept does present methodological challenges, however. If measures are functioning differently based on something as complex as acculturation, how do researchers select appropriate measures for their target population? This question is far beyond the scope of this paper, but it is a conversation that scholars should continue to have.

I agree with the authors that the two subscales they selected are likely to be the most culturally embedded, however, the omission of the other subscales seemed odd. This paper would make a stronger contribution if the measurement equivalence for all subscales were examined. It is critical that the normative development of Latino youth is accurately measured such that literature on Latino youth is not segregated to only cultural processes. Further, examining the full measure would give us more information about the psychometric properties of the PYD.

Examining all subscales of the PYD would also be more consistent with previous work on the measure’s psychometric properties. Discussion of previous studies of the measure’s factor
structure, reliability, and validity were missing from the introduction. Although I imagine this work does not exist for Latino immigrant youth (a unique contribution of the current paper), previous work in other groups gives us information for comparison on how the measure typically functions. It is important to contextualize the current study within previous literature as a step toward establishing measurement equivalence.

In the methods section, I would like to know more about the language of the surveys. Where surveys available in Spanish? How many participants took the survey in Spanish versus English? How were the surveys translated?

It seems that based on the introduction the authors seek to examine measurement equivalence for immigrant Latino youth, however, their analyses suggest they are examining invariance over time. A clearer explanation of the goals of the study would be helpful, including what each test is meant to examine and the conceptual meaning of that test. While invariance over time is important for establishing the reliability of the measure, it does not give us information about construct validity across ethnic groups. This is problematic in this study because it is possible that the PYD functions differently when used among immigrant Latino adolescents. Because the current study does not address this, or even review literature on the factor structure of the PYD, the measure may be consistent (i.e., reliable), but lack validity.

The conceptual meaning of findings should be better explained. As previously stated, this work is important. As such, findings should be clearly presented and contextualized with implications for future research.

“Is it possible to collect nationally representative data in the United States? A case study from the CREATE Project” (James, Yorgason, Holmes, Busby, & Johnson, 2017)
Moving to the second paper, James et al. (2017) pose the question of whether it is possible to collect nationally representative data in the United States and describe efforts to do so in the CREATE Project, a study of recently married couples. The authors present an admirable and for the most part successful effort to collect a representative sample of couples and are commended in doing so. The effort and resources needed to accomplish this task, of course must be weighed against the benefits of this data. First, researchers must be more explicit in defining how data sets are representative. There are so many demographic factors to be considered, I would argue that the answer to the authors’ question is a resounding “no, we cannot collect data that is completely representative of the United States.” Of course, it may be possible to collect data that is representative on a number of dimensions (e.g., socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, etc.). However, even within those groups the issue of within group variability arises. For instance, even when a sample is representative in terms of ethnicity (i.e., discrete ethnic categories), are the data representative in terms of the vast within group variability that exists within these groups? Without that level of representativeness can we truly say that data are representative?

Relatedly, the United States is increasingly diverse. Proportions of ethnic groups are changing, age at first marriage is later, family structure is changing. These demographic trends mean we must consider how long a representative data set would remain representative. Would the time frame be reasonable considering the resources and effort needed to collect such a sample?

The authors point out three factors that should be considered when considering the usefulness of nationally representative data sets for our work. Specifically, maturity of the field, focus of the survey, and the degree to which national and nationally representative data provide
similar information. I agree with these points and believe that family researchers should consider them when deciding the suitability of large-scale nationally representative data for their research. Nationally representative data is not always the best, especially when we are examining complex family relationships and processes.

A point related to both papers is the issue of measurement equivalence of instruments used in nationally representative data sets. If data is representative but the measures are not similarly valid and reliable across groups it presents another issue of whether representative data sets can be a reality. On the other hand, nationally representative data sets can provide opportunities to compare measurement equivalence across groups within a single study, thereby eliminating some of the methodological noise that occurs when comparing such work across several studies.

Taken together, Liu et al. (2017) and James et al. (2017) present important methodological considerations for family science research. Specifically, family science scholars must continue to be mindful of measurement properties of the instruments they use, especially when working with underrepresented groups. Further, we should weigh the pros and cons of large scale data sets for our specific areas while remaining mindful of to whom our findings generalize and under what circumstances, even when using nationally representative data.
References

