

ON FIELD METHODS AND STIGMA: CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON ILLNESS CATEGORIES THAT DO NOT EXIST LOCALLY

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Background: This presentation reviews the role of ethnography and how it can be leveraged to conduct research on an illness category that informants maintain does not exist locally. Through presentation of a year-long ethnographic study and focus-group interviews with adult family caregivers (n=22) for elders with dementia in Oaxaca, Mexico (Yahalom, 2019), this presentation explores how Alzheimer's is held to not exist and how research might still proceed while remaining sensitive to local cultural truths.

Issues/Focus: In Oaxaca, negating the existence of Alzheimer's performs important social functions and discloses central social anxieties. This led to significant methodological barriers to access the community, and to understand community-specific distress.

Methods: Collaboration with a respected local resident helped navigate these barriers, as well as incorporating the local truth that Alzheimer's did not exist locally. Through engaging with the local truth about Alzheimer's by appreciating its pragmatic function -- and specifically not insisting a contrary biomedical perspective -- community trust and participation were fostered.

Results: Adopting these methods in Oaxaca led to appreciation of how local truths about Alzheimer's strengthen central values perceived to be in danger. More broadly, this presentation will illustrate how to engage with local truths, and argue that doing so leads to development of a response to distress experienced locally.

Implications: This presentation encourages approaching local truths as being valid in themselves, instead of applying biomedical illness categories to cross-cultural research sites. Specifically, it explores how local truths about illness are best investigated by remaining attentive to their pragmatic function, and it provides epistemological direction in how to develop research methods that attend to other cultural truths in additional research settings.

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Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this presentation, participants will be able to:

1. Develop community-specific research methods that foster attunement to local knowledge about illness
2. Acquire strategies for overcoming obstacles to access to research subjects

References

1. Yahalom, J. (2019). *Caring for the People of the Clouds: Aging and Dementia in Oaxaca*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
2. Yahalom, J. (2019). Pragmatic truths about illness experience: Idioms of distress around Alzheimer's disease in Oaxaca, Mexico. *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 56(4), 599–619.