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Abstract

Research on the development of autobiographical memory has documented the important role of mother–child conversations about past events in shaping children’s memory development. To observe mother–child reminiscing in the natural environment, researchers often conduct home visits. This research methods case focuses on a study in which we visited the homes of mothers and their young children in three diverse cultural settings and recorded their conversations about shared past and anticipated future events. We describe how participants were recruited, how the home visit protocol was conducted to capture the most naturalistic data possible, and the challenges of adjusting to diverse cultural norms when visiting participants at home. We reflect on the dilemmas we faced during recruitment and data collection, how we overcame them, and broader lessons for researchers recruiting participants and conducting home visits in multiple cultures. We also discuss coding, including how best to code naturalistic mother–child speech collected in two languages to facilitate comparison.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Understand how home visits aiming to audio-record mother–child conversations should be carried out
- Apply these procedures when doing home visits
- Understand some of the special considerations when conducting research in multiple cultural contexts
- Think about issues concerning coding in more than one language
- Evaluate the methodological merit of journal articles related to this topic

Introduction

An influential line of contemporary research in memory development has focused on mother–child conversations about personally experienced, one-point-in-time past events (e.g., Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 2006; Jack, MacDonald, Reese, & Hayne, 2009; Leichtman, Pillemer, Wang, Koreishi, & Han, 2000). Mothers typically display a consistent style of reminiscing with their children across conversations about the personal past; for example, they tend to either encourage detailed reminiscing, using descriptive language and many open-ended questions, or not (e.g., Fivush & Fromhoff, 1998; Fivush et al., 2006). Theorists have noted that reminiscing conversations shape children’s autobiographical memory in fundamental ways by teaching them what is worthwhile to remember and how to talk about past experiences, and the normative characteristics of these conversations vary across cultures (e.g., Leichtman, Wang, &
Pillemer, 2003; Nelson & Fivush, 2004; Wang, 2013). When collecting data on mother–child conversations, memory researchers usually either invite these dyads to their laboratories or visit them at home. Although the laboratory setting allows researchers to apply a standardized procedure with higher levels of control over the environment, visiting participants at home provides a more naturalistic setting for the conversations to unfold. Thus, in many studies, researchers have made the choice to study mother–child conversations in the home to increase the ecological validity of their research.

In this research methods case study, we discuss the home visit method we used in a study of mother–child conversations about shared past and anticipated future events in three cultural contexts: Western Turkey, Eastern Turkey, and the United States (Sahin-Acar & Leichtman, 2015). In the following sections, we focus on our experiences first in the recruitment of participants, second during data collection in the homes, and finally in coding natural speech in two languages.

Recruiting Participants

We aimed to recruit 30 mother–child dyads from each of three regions: New Hampshire in the United States, İzmir in the western region of Turkey, and Gaziantep in the eastern region of Turkey. The research goal was to examine differences within and across cultures in mothers’ conversational styles when talking with their 4-year-old children about shared past and anticipated future events. We planned to recruit participants by visiting local preschools, and by snowball sampling, in which participants pass along information about the study to qualified acquaintances. A total of 87 families were included in the final sample. One researcher conducted all recruiting at preschools and conducted all data collection in participants’ homes, ensuring methodological consistency. She is a Turkish national fluent in both Turkish and English, with significant prior experience in each of the three cultural contexts.

Recruitment in Eastern Turkey

The first set of data was collected from June to July 2010 in Gaziantep, a culturally and economically rich city in the southeast of Turkey that lies at the border of Syria, a hundred miles north of Aleppo. Gaziantep has been a center of commerce in the Middle East for centuries. The population consists largely of practicing Muslims who tend to embrace a traditional lifestyle and conservative values (Goffman, 2004).

Recruitment took place at one large private preschool, attended by children from families of upper-middle to high socioeconomic status. After contacting the school and obtaining their agreement to assist with recruitment, the researcher had a meeting with the principal to discuss
possible recruitment techniques. The principal proposed that the children’s teachers first introduce the idea of the research to parents, and that the researcher then wait in the preschool lobby when parents came to drop off and/or pick up children and talk with them about the details. Following this method, the researcher was present in the lobby on several days to talk with parents who showed an interest in participating and made appointments to visit them at home.

One issue with this recruitment method concerned which parent was present in the lobby to meet with the researcher. If the mother was present, the acceptance rate was very high. However, fathers almost uniformly informed the researcher that they could not give permission without consulting their wives, and further, that their wives would have contacted the researcher themselves if they were willing to participate. Thus, of 50 conversations the researcher had with fathers, only one resulted in a family participating. In retrospect, it would have been best for her to wait until children’s mothers were present at school to approach these families, because once the father declined participation, the family could not be approached again. In addition, teachers’ attitudes and their style of talking to parents about the study made a difference. If the teacher who welcomed parents on a particular day was sympathetic and enthusiastic about introducing the study, then most parents stopped to talk with the researcher in the lobby; otherwise, most did not. Finding ways to engage all of the teachers in the idea of the study or consulting with the principal to select those who were most interested to deliver information to parents might have been helpful.

We were able to recruit 32 families from Gaziantep in 3 weeks, thanks to a distinct feature of recruiting participants in that city: mothers’ enthusiasm for helping us find prospective participants. At the end of the home visits in all cultural contexts, we asked families whether they knew any other mothers of 4-year-olds who might be interested in participating. In Gaziantep, regardless of mothers’ education level or work status, once they were asked this question, they either called other mothers immediately or later called the researcher to provide contact information for other mothers who were interested in participating. Almost half of the participants in Gaziantep were recruited by this referral method, and a few mothers also called the researcher without a referral, saying they had heard about the study and wanted to participate. The extensive help that mothers in Gaziantep provided in recruiting was not evident in the other two cultural contexts. We speculate that it reflected the interdependent nature of Eastern Turkish culture, where social networking is critical, and the norm of practicing hospitality, which has historically been a predominant characteristic of Middle Eastern cultures. Although the purpose of the home visits was research, mothers may have perceived that the researcher was a guest who was in need of help. As good hosts, mothers may have felt they
should attend to their guest’s needs: in this case, finding eligible participants.

Recruitment in Western Turkey

The second set of data was collected in July to September 2010 in İzmir, which is also a culturally and economically affluent Turkish city on the Aegean Sea of the Mediterranean in western Turkey. Historically, İzmir has been culturally diverse; it is a continuation of the ancient Greek city of Ephesus and has hosted significant non-Muslim minorities of Greek and Jewish descent. At the end of World War I, there was a population exchange between Greece and Turkey, with many individuals originally from the Balkans moving to Turkey and predominantly to İzmir. Thus, the way of thinking and daily life practices in this region share some similarities with the cultures of Southern and Eastern Europe. The population of İzmir tends to embrace a progressive, modern lifestyle, contrasting with norms in much of the rest of Turkey, especially the eastern and southern-eastern regions (where Gaziantep is located) bordering the Middle East. İzmir has traditionally prospered economically, since it has been a port city for centuries beginning from the era BCE, and it is still one of the biggest ports in the Mediterranean opening to Asia (Hirschon, 2005).

Recruitment took place at one large private preschool in İzmir, attended by children from families of upper-middle to high socioeconomic status. The recruitment procedure was generally the same as in Gaziantep; however, the principal of the school in İzmir did not have teachers introduce the study to parents. Instead, the principal offered a seat in the lobby to the researcher and requested that she approach the parents directly and propose the study. One advantage of this approach was that recruitment was not affected by teachers’ attitudes. However, a disadvantage was that a considerable portion of parents questioned the researcher’s credibility, asking whether preschool officials were aware of the research, or requesting to see documentation indicating university affiliation or ethics clearance; almost 20% did not even want to hear about the study. This issue of the researcher’s credibility in the eyes of the parents was unanticipated. To overcome it, the researcher began each conversation with the information that the principal of the school was informed about the study and showed an official letter from the institutional review board (IRB) granting permission, even before explaining the nature of the study. Parents’ attitudes toward the researcher warmed considerably once this method was adopted.

Recruitment in Northeastern United States

The third set of data was collected from January to March 2011 in the Seacoast region of New Hampshire, a prosperous area on the Northeast coast of the United States. Historically, the area housed one of the first permanent settlements of Europeans in New England. The
population is predominantly European-American and the towns where we recruited participants were of upper-middle to high socioeconomic status. Participants were recruited at four preschools, because the number of 4-year-olds at each school was small. All principals offered to follow the same procedure employed in İzmir; they did not ask teachers to introduce the study; instead, the researcher waited either in the lobby or outside on the playground and approached the parents personally to propose the study. As in İzmir, the researcher approached all parents initially by informing them about the principal's assent and showing IRB documentation and then introduced the study. All parents who were approached listened to information about the study, but the highest rejection rate was in this cultural context. Almost 40% of the parents approached turned down participation, whereas in each of the other two cultural contexts the rate was lower than 20%. We speculate that this might be because of a major cultural difference between Turkey and the United States: American culture is generally more individualistic, and some mothers might not have been comfortable with a stranger visiting them at home to observe their conversations with their 4-year-olds. The high rejection rate may also have been a function of more hectic family lifestyles in the United States, rendering mothers unwilling to schedule an appointment. A satisfactory sample was finally achieved by extensive recruitment efforts, including recruiting half of the participants from a research-friendly university preschool, and with the help of one mother who single-handedly found five more families who were willing to participate.

Home Visits

Participants

The final sample included 87 mother–child dyads in total: 32 in Gaziantep, 30 in İzmir, and 25 in New Hampshire. Most mothers in all cultures had a college degree or higher (66%-96%), were married (93%-100%) and were similar ages (33-36 years). Although most mothers from İzmir and New Hampshire worked outside the home, almost 40% of the mothers from Gaziantep did not. Mothers from Gaziantep had given birth to their first children at a younger age ($M = 25.94$, standard deviation [SD] = 4.30) compared with both mothers from İzmir ($M = 29.66$, SD = 3.72) and New Hampshire ($M = 31.24$, SD = 3.62), $F(2, 84) = 14.104$, $p < .001$, in keeping with the more traditional way of living in Eastern Turkey. No mothers from İzmir or New Hampshire and two mothers from Gaziantep were wearing veils during the data collection. Approximately one-third of the families from Gaziantep, a quarter of families from İzmir, and all families from New Hampshire were living in houses with yards.

Procedure

The general procedure was the same in all cultures. Before each home visit, we informed
mothers that we preferred that they choose a time for the visit when they could be alone with
their child to record a conversation. The majority of mother–child dyads were alone at home
when the researcher visited (n = 77), so the study usually took place in the living room. For the
remaining 10 home visits, fathers or grandmothers were present at home. To avoid any issues
with the flow of the conversations, family members other than the mother and child were asked
to be in another room during the completion of the study tasks, and all complied. Two children,
one from İzmir and one from Gaziantep, went to the other rooms to search for those adults who
were present at home and who were instructed beforehand to keep the conversation at
minimum if the child came to talk with them. As instructed, they sent children back to the living
room; any conversation with the other adults was deleted from the verbatim transcriptions of the
mother–child conversations that were coded.

As part of the research protocol, we asked mothers about a proximal and a distant past event
that they had shared with their child, and after these tasks were completed, we asked them to
come up with two anticipated future events, one in the proximal and the other in the distant
future. The protocol was adapted from previous studies of mother–child conversations about
past events (e.g., Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Reese & Fivush, 1993). The reason we asked the
mothers to decide which events they would converse about in advance, rather than having the
mother–child dyads decide on them together, was to ensure a smooth flow to the conversations
and to avoid having mothers switch topics in the middle of a conversation. We also considered
beforehand that it might be difficult for mothers to memorize all events selected, so the
researcher brought a piece of paper and a pencil, that the mother wrote down certain keywords
(e.g., “grandmother visit”) to remind themselves of the selected events. By keeping a piece of
paper with the nominated past and future events in view, none of the mothers experienced any
problems retrieving topics to converse about. We also anticipated that mothers might
experience problems with understanding the time frames we intended when they were
instructed to find proximal and distant past and future events. Therefore, the time frames were
defined in the instructions, “a couple of weeks ago/a couple of weeks later” for the proximal and
“a couple of months ago/a couple of months later” for distant past and future events. After
receiving these instructions, none of the mothers required further clarification.

There were two digital voice-recorders used during the home visits, one of which was placed
close to the mother and child, and which stayed in place until the visit was completed. The
second recorder was placed nearby and also recorded as a fallback, and mothers were
informed that if the child left the room and she had to follow, she should take the recorder with
her so that their conversation would be recorded at all times. Using a second digital voice-
recorder was a good method for two reasons: first, it avoided data loss from any problems that
might have occurred with the first recorder, and, second, it captured children’s conversation if they decided to go to another room. During home visits, approximately 10% of children ran into another room without an apparent reason, and their speech was not lost.

Special Considerations That Arose During Home Visits

The location of the researcher during the home visits was an important consideration. At the outset of the study, we planned that the researcher would stay in the room during the mother–child conversations, in a location distant from the mother and child (e.g., a corner), to provide instructions between conversations and to be available should questions arise. However, once data collection began in Gaziantep, it became apparent that the researcher’s presence was problematic. Surprisingly, this was not primarily because of the reaction of children. It was because some mothers turned to address the researcher mid-conversation, elaborating on the events they were discussing with their child or commenting on a good quality about their child, such as an ability that seemed extraordinary. The researcher did not reciprocate the communication efforts of mothers in these cases, and after the first few participants, the protocol was modified. After providing the mother with instructions, the researcher asked whether she might sit in another available room, such as the kitchen, and asked the mother to let her know when she was finished talking with her child. In the majority of cases, mothers agreed. The same procedure was repeated for both shared past and anticipated future events.

Another issue concerned children’s temperament. Two children, one in New Hampshire and another in Gaziantep, cried shortly after the researcher arrived and asked the mother to tell the researcher to leave. In those two visits, mothers were told they could stop participating if they preferred. However, both mothers asked whether the researcher could provide the instructions quickly and then wait in the car and said that they could then easily complete the tasks by themselves. Instructions were given in the entrance hall at home while mothers told children that the researcher was leaving and mothers sent children back to the living room. After mothers were given task instructions, they got two recorders, turned them on and told the researcher they would place them in the living room close to where they would be. During those visits, the researcher waited outside, and mothers came out with voice-recorders after they completed the tasks. This kind of research is hard, especially in terms of recruiting, and participants could easily give up their participation in the face of issues such as a child who is uncomfortable in the presence of the researcher. Thus, without violating the minimum requirements for data collection, researchers might prefer to accommodate the needs of the families wherever possible.

There were a few issues that we faced after completion of the tasks during home visits. In
Turkish culture, it is quite common that any visitor is served tea, and this is the minimum as there are also snacks served most of the time. For this reason, all participants in all cultures were instructed during the recruitment process that the researcher had a very tight schedule, and she would leave right after the study was completed. In addition, Turkish participants were instructed that there was absolutely no need to serve any kind of food or drink during the visits. Nonetheless, in half of the home visits in Gaziantep, tea was served. Furthermore, regardless of whether mothers served tea or not during the visit, when the researcher got ready to leave the participants’ homes, approximately 50% of mothers in Gaziantep said that they had prepared special food for the researcher and began to insist that she stay and eat. In Turkey, as in most Middle Eastern cultures, if a guest is offered food and if she does not at least try it, it is generally perceived as rude. The researcher tried to avoid accepting mothers’ offers, and in some instances explained that she had visited several homes that day and she was full, yet mothers still insisted that she should at least try the food that they prepared. In sum, in 29 home visits out of 32, mothers in Gaziantep either served full-course meals and insisted that the researcher should at least try to eat them or served finger foods with tea, without asking whether the researcher would eat. We observed that some mothers were seriously offended if they were turned down, taking it as a personal offense, and as a sign that the researcher did not find them worthwhile to show respect by trying the food they had specially prepared. In one case, the whole family arrived after the study was completed, ready to eat. When the researcher said she could not accept the offer, the mother got teary-eyed and said she prepared all the food particularly for the researcher to taste and she would be very insulted if the researcher left, so the researcher felt obliged to go back and sit with the family at the table and taste the food.

We did our best to keep our social contact with the participants at a professional distance during home visits, especially while running the tasks, but in some cases to avoid insulting mothers, particularly in Gaziantep, this was not possible. In İzmir, only 10% of mothers offered tea and insisted; the majority either did not serve anything or if they did, they did not insist. In New Hampshire, mothers asked whether the researcher would like a glass of water or a cup of tea, but none of them insisted. It is widely known that in every cultural context, locals have their own ethnotheories about the ideal ways to raise children, to follow certain daily practices, and as an extension of that, to host and offer feasts for their guests (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003). Because of this, it is very important for researchers who are doing home visits to try to understand the nature of these ethnotheories in the cultures they are working in, and if it would not interfere with the flow of data collection, to follow and fit in with those practices.
The home visits we conducted resulted in a rich set of recordings of mothers talking with their young children about past and anticipated future events, which we then needed to code. We adapted well-established coding procedures, developed in the extensive prior research on parent–child conversations about personally experienced past events, for the purposes of the present study (e.g., Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988; Leichtman et al., 2000). The general goal of these procedures is to identify and quantify instances of parents’ speech that are relevant for characterizing their *style* of reminiscing with children—how they think about the past and scaffold their children’s memory for events (e.g., by asking many open-ended questions or using descriptive language). Because we wished to compare across conversations recorded in two different languages, several methodological issues arose that are worthy of note.

All of the recordings were transcribed so that coders could work from written transcripts. The detailed coding we wished to do would have been impossible to achieve directly from recordings. We were primarily interested in evaluating mothers’ elaborativeness and repetitiveness in the conversations, two composite variables established in previous literature, as well as children’s memory responses (e.g., Fivush & Fromhoff, 1988). Elaborativeness is made up of several features of mother’s speech, including open-ended and yes–no questions that probe memory, and repetitiveness is made up of verbatim and gist repetitions that appear in speech.

We aimed to examine these variables across the three cultural contexts to reveal differences in the conversational styles of mother–child dyads and wished to collapse data coming from all cultural groups for some analyses. Thus, one of the main methodological decisions that we had to make concerned whether to code the data in their original language or whether to first translate the Turkish data into English and then code all of the data in English. Both methods have been used in previous studies comparing conversations recorded in different languages (e.g., Han, Leichtman, & Wang, 1998; Li, Fung, Bakeman, Rae, & Wei, 2014).

One perspective in dealing with this issue concerns relevant linguistic and grammatical differences in the *syntactic structures* between languages. If conversations were transcribed verbatim and coded in their original language, linguistic differences may have been a confounding factor. For instance, Turkish is a head-final language and all sentences are composed of suffix use in verbs. A sentence like “I will go” would be translated as “gideceğim,” in which “git” means “go,” “ecek” stands for the modal verb “will,” and “m” stands for the first person singular “I.” In this example, the sentence in Turkish that is composed of only one word is the verbatim translation of the sentence in English that is composed of three words. Thus, from this perspective, to avoid a possible inflation due to syntactic differences, all conversations should be translated into one language to equalize them before coding.
An alternative viewpoint stems from ethnographic research, in which individuals are observed or evaluated in their own cultural and linguistic context. The concern from this perspective is that translating conversations into another language, regardless of the quality of the translations, may cause a loss at the level of semantics, or meaning. Our major variables of interest, elaborativeness and repetitiveness, were made up of semantic units (e.g., questions) that were independent of number of words or other syntactic characteristics. Thus, as in many recent studies in the developmental literature, we made coding decisions favoring the preservation of semantics in their original context. Before finalizing our coding scheme, we consulted with a professor of linguistics, who strongly supported coding all conversations in their original languages, in view of the measures of interest.

Because of our decision to code in the original languages, it was essential that we carefully compare the coding of the two datasets to ensure that it was the same. A bilingual Turkish–English speaker wrote coding keys in both languages. Then, after native speakers of Turkish and English coded the full datasets in the two languages, the bilingual coder of the Turkish dataset also conducted reliability coding on the American data. High rates of agreement indicated that the same coding scheme was applied across cultures.

Conclusion

Our study focused on mother–child conversations about shared past and anticipated future events, and we recorded mothers’ conversations with their 4-year-old children at home in three settings, two Turkish cities and the United States. Developmental researchers have often preferred to collect data like these in the natural context of participants’ homes, maximizing ecological validity.

In the process of recruiting participants and making home visits, we faced certain challenges that were a function of working in homes and in diverse cultures. At the point of recruitment, we faced challenges in connecting with mothers, rather than fathers, at their children’s preschools; questions about the researcher’s credibility when she approached parents with no introduction; reluctance among some mothers to participate in a study that involved their time and the researcher coming into their homes; and the potential for third parties (e.g., teachers or parents) to influence the way that the study was first introduced to potential participants. We were able to address these issues by modifying our recruitment strategies and by recognizing the extraordinary help some participants were willing to give us in recruiting their acquaintances, supporting the efficacy of the snowball sampling method in cases like this.
We designed a procedure for the home visits that worked well in general, but required modifications as we went along to accommodate the particular characteristics of families (e.g., the presence of extended family members), children (e.g., those who were shy), and cultural norms (e.g., the requirement that the researcher eat with the mother in some Turkish homes). Our experience in home visits underscores the importance of researchers being knowledgeable about and sensitive to the perspective of participants in the cultures in which they work. In addition, the strategies we used to avoid potential problems that could derail the research protocol paid off. These included bringing two recording devices to every home visit, instructing mothers in advance on what to do if their child left the room and allowing the mothers to cue themselves with written notes during the conversations.

We coded participants’ speech from transcriptions, adapting previously established coding schemes designed to identify aspects of parents’ style of reminiscing with children. As in all cross-cultural research that involves data collected in multiple languages, we also had decisions to make about whether to code the conversations in their original form or in translation. Because we were interested primarily in conversational features related to meaning, we chose to code in the original languages, and this required us to take extra steps to be sure that coding in both languages was the same.

When collecting data across cultures and in participants’ homes, researchers may face issues that are hard to anticipate in advance. These issues may range from easy to serious ones to overcome. They underscore the importance of researchers carefully attending to a study as it evolves and potentially modifying the protocols surrounding recruitment and even some non-essential details of data collection, when necessary. Although, of course, the core procedures for collecting data must be identical across homes and cultures to preserve the data’s integrity and make comparison possible, researchers should remain open to adjusting peripheral aspects of their protocol. Maintaining good rapport with participants, and being sensitive to their cultural norms and expectations of a visiting researcher, is essential to conducting successful research in homes across cultures.

Exercises and Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the available methods to recruit mother–child dyads for home visits?
2. In the process of approaching prospective participants, what are some of the important points for researchers to keep in mind?
3. As a researcher, when you make an appointment for a home visit, what might be some of the arrangements that you should communicate to your participants before the visit?
4. To collect audible data without any interruptions or technical problems during home visits,
what are some of the measures that you should take into consideration?

5. Especially when you conduct research with different ethnic or cultural communities, how would you describe the right attitude of the researchers?

6. Which aspects of their protocol might researchers consider modifying as a study progresses and why? Which aspects of their protocol should never be modified?

7. What are the important considerations researchers need to take into account when coding data in more than one language?

References


