

LOST IN TRANSLATION: PREVENTING THE MEANINGS OF SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH FROM BEING LOST DURING THE TRANSLATION OF NATIONAL SURVEYS

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Background: In multicultural Australia, the translation of sexual and reproductive health (SRH) surveys into community languages has become a standard practice. Nevertheless, translation is often viewed as a supplementary or last-minute activity, and by translators who are outside of the study team. Few studies have examined how the meanings of SRH terminology can be lost in the translation process and the implications of this for the quality for the research.

Methods: Guided by best practice for cross-cultural survey adaptation, the Australian Study of Health and Relationships (ASHR) survey was translated into Simplified-Chinese. To examine question acceptability and comprehension, six focus groups were conducted with 39 Mandarin-speakers in Australia. Group transcripts were analysed thematically and triangulated with meeting documents and fieldnotes.

Results: Three themes that captured how meanings were lost in the process of survey translation were identified: 1) linguacultural differences in sexuality and relationships between English and Chinese; 2) the clash of everyday and professional discourses; and 3) translation challenges associated with source questionnaire design. Western concepts such as “sexuality”, “gender” and “relationship expectations” were subtly altered or became incomprehensible to the target population during translation. Maintaining linguistic and cross-cultural equivalence was particularly challenging when translating questions with “explicit” reference to genitals and sexual acts. Everyday Chinese translations of some SRH terms were problematic due to their inherent stigmatizing connotations [e.g. “HIV”=*aizibingdu*(AIDS virus)]. Translation errors were likely to be introduced if translators were not well-informed about the skip logics and definitions of terms with similar meanings (e.g. “steady”/“regular” partners). The intended mode of survey administration (e.g. paper/phone interviews) also affected translation style and word choice.

Conclusion: Meanings of SRH terminology can be lost easily in the translation process. To improve cross-cultural comparability of SRH data, translation should be planned carefully and integrated into earlier stages of survey design, to ensure that quality is maintained.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Sex in Translation project is funded by the Department of Health. The authors declare no conflict of interest in the development of this study.