Genetic Counseling and Ethnic Minorities

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The role of a genetic counselor is to translate the implications of genetic testing and facilitate client process of meaningful, informed decision making. Relatively little research has examined the process and content of genetic counseling interventions, particularly among ethnic minorities. This study aimed to assess the understanding and recall of information presented in genetic counseling sessions; specifically, to compare the retention of information for Caucasian vs. ethnic minority participants.

Genetic counseling is a relatively new field; counselors are largely Caucasian individuals of European descent, and the language of genetics is complex and unfamiliar to lay individuals, and even more so for those to whom English is a second language. As such, it was thought that minority participants would recall less information from the genetic counseling sessions.

Study participants were asked to respond to a series of questions about their knowledge of genetic counseling. They then watched a recording of a simulated genetic counseling session, and answered questions regarding the material presented in the video.

Recruitment efforts resulted in the collection of data from 98 Caucasian participants and 26 ethnic minority participants. The minority participants were primarily Hispanic (n=11) and others self-identified as Asian (n=4), African American (n=3), and other non-Caucasian (n=12). Of the Caucasian participants, 16 were male and 82 were female. The median age of these participants is 29 years. Of the non-Caucasian minority participants, 11 were male and 15 were female. The median age of these participants is 28 years.

In accord with our hypotheses, Chi-square tests indicated that Hispanic participants responded to information recall items in a pattern that differed significantly from Caucasian participants. The items that revealed the greatest differences in response patterns dealt with knowledge of the BRCA1 and BRCA2 mutations, "2 (2, N=123) = 11.45, p = .004; and cancer prevention techniques, "2 (2, N=123) = 8.011, p = .035. Overall, findings suggest that minority participants retained less information from genetic counseling sessions than Caucasian participants. While these findings are preliminary in nature and the current sample size is small, the information gained is important for improving current communication practices in genetic counseling, particularly as the field grows and adapts to better serve minority populations.