

Using ethnographic methods for development of culture-specific interventions[☆]

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Abstract

Cultural specificity is considered important in developing effective school- and community-based interventions. This article illustrates the use of ethnographic research to enhance understanding of students' cultural experiences and facilitate the development of culturally specific interventions. Ethnographic data were collected during formative and intervention phases of a school-based mental health promotion project. Data were coded using an interactive deductive–inductive process. Culture specificity was defined as the integration of *etic* (universal) and *emic* (culture-bound) perspectives. Four culture-specific themes were identified: adult-sanctioned behaviors and practices, adolescents' perspectives about the present and aspirations for the future, and societal factors. These themes encompassed code categories reflecting cultural attitudes, beliefs, customs, expectations, norms, and values; and reflected the ecological framework that guided the research. Future research is needed to address the use of combined *etic–emic* conceptualizations of culture in the development of culture-specific interventions.

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Several gaps exist in knowledge and methodology for addressing cultural diversity within school psychology. First, the study of culture and cultural contexts has been largely ignored (Rogers, 2000). Second, although it is evident that psychologists recognize culture to be an important factor in the development of interventions (Ramirez, 1994; Ramirez, LePage, Kratochwill & Duffy, 1998), an empirically or theoretically informed approach to the development of culturally appropriate interventions is lacking (Malgady, 1996). Third, approaches and methodology suggested by researchers have not been systematically applied in practice nor are they sufficiently scientifically or theoretically grounded (Halsell Miranda, 2002; Lopez & Rogers, 2001). Finally, although several models for addressing cultural diversity have been proposed within the school psychology literature (e.g., ethnic validity model, Barnett et al., 1995; nondiscriminatory assessment procedures, Ortiz, 2002; Participatory Intervention Model, Nastasi, Varjas, Sarkar, & Jayasena, 1998), limited empirical support has been provided. This paper describes and illustrates the use of qualitative research methods to address these gaps, drawing from research conducted in the country of Sri Lanka.

For the purpose of this discussion, *culture* refers to the values, beliefs, language, ideas, customs, and behavioral norms shared by members of a group. Thus, culture is *not* synonymous with race, ethnicity, or language.

Culture specificity implies that critical elements of the intervention (e.g., intervention strategies and targeted competencies) are relevant to the targeted culture, make use of the language of the population, and reflect the values and beliefs of the members of the culture. Inherent in this model is the assumption that one cannot separate person from culture and that understanding the culture is essential to understanding the individual. In addition, change efforts cannot be solely person-centered, but must address the role of culture in promoting and sustaining behavior patterns (Nastasi, 1998, p. 169).

Qualitative research provides a mechanism for researchers and practitioners to study the culture of students, develop culture-specific interventions, and examine the extent to which interventions embody the cultural experiences of participants (Nastasi & Berg, 1999).

Efforts to ensure cultural specificity can increase acceptability, integrity, ecological validity, sustainability, and institutionalization of the interventions (Nastasi et al., 1998–1999; Nastasi, Varjas, Schensul, et al., 2000). Nastasi and her colleagues used ethnographic methodology to inform the development of a sexual risk intervention for adolescents and young adults and to monitor cultural appropriateness during evaluation (Nastasi et al., 1998–1999; Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, & Jayasena, 2000). Opportunities for participants to provide feedback and suggest modifications to the intervention facilitated implementation and improved intervention integrity. Participants reported an increased sense of empowerment because of opportunities to inform the content and process of the intervention. In addition, efforts to achieve culture specificity fostered sustainability and institutionalization through active participation, development of the sense of ownership of the project, and development of research and intervention skills

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