

Evaluation in multicultural populations: expanding ideas about evidence-based practice

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the evaluation of parenting programs that are attended by parents from diverse cultural backgrounds living in Sydney. While evidence-based practice has been a profound influence on the way in which evaluation is conducted in this area, little research has been undertaken on multicultural populations who use such services. The reason for this can be argued from several viewpoints, including the complexity of cultural research and the difficulties in accessing research participants. However, this paper specifically concerns itself with the inadequacy of the evidence-based paradigm, as it is presently constructed in psychological research. For example, measurement practices involving surveys and questionnaires are not necessarily culturally appropriate ways to collect information from parents. An emerging alternative empirically-based practice model for evaluation is presented which draws upon quantitative and qualitative philosophies and methods. The model will be demonstrated through research undertaken with parents of Pacific Island, Chinese and Arabic backgrounds.

Introduction

Parent education programs, sessions conducted with a standardized group format, have become a popular way for parents to improve their parenting skills (Fine & Lee, 2001). They are one of the most thoroughly evaluated interventions in psychological research, particularly from the perspective of evidence-based practice (Matthews & Hudson, 2001). However, this is not the case for programs conducted with multicultural populations (Forehand & Kotchik, 1996; Gorman & Balter, 1997). This paper describes the context which resulted in the development of evidence-based practice to evaluate program effectiveness in psychology. In particular, it discusses how evidence-based practice, in presenting a universal approach to evaluation, perpetuates ethnocentric and Eurocentric tendencies in psychology. It is argued that stepping outside this paradigm is an essential part to developing an appropriate evidence-base for the effectiveness of parenting programs with parents from multicultural communities. Examples taken from research currently being conducted with three different cultural groups are used to

demonstrate how an empirically-based practice model for parenting interventions which takes account of culture is being developed.

Rationale for Evaluating Parenting Programs

Australia's multicultural population, comprised of many families whose primary motivation for migration is improving the prospects of their children, provides a unique context for undertaking research on parenting (Crisante, 2004; Kolar & Soriano, 2000). The sheer number of children of migrant backgrounds in Australia, the particular stresses faced by their parents and the limited access such families have to parent support services are some of the reasons for needing to provide culturally appropriate services (Department of Family and Community Services, 2004). The vulnerabilities of such families have been responded to by the development of early intervention and prevention programs, the policy area through which parenting programs in Australia are typically funded (New South Wales Department of Health, 2003). This has involved the development of culturally sensitive parenting programs (Kayrooz & Blunt, 2000), often informally derived from several mainstream programs, as well the adaptation of existing parenting programs (Crisante & Ng, 2003). Thus, service provision has generally been based on what programs can be easily accessed, rather than an informed decision about which program best suits a community's needs.

In order to address this inadequacy, a study is being undertaken with three cultural groups who reside in a given area in the western suburbs of Sydney: parents from Arabic speaking backgrounds, which embraces a number of nations and both Christian and Muslim religions; those from a number of Pacific Islands, including Samoa, the Cook Islands, Vanuatu, Tonga and Nuie, and those who are Chinese speaking, in this case, primarily from Hong Kong. Two types of courses provided by trained facilitators who conduct sessions in relevant languages and in culturally appropriate ways are offered to parents. They are part of a universal parenting program which provides courses for over 600 parents each year funded through the Mental Health Program of Western Sydney Area Health Service.

Evidence-based Practice and Psychological Research

Psychology, and, in particular, applications of the discipline to counseling and related fields, has long been preoccupied with demonstrating its effectiveness. This began in the early 1950's, when debate occurred over whether psychological therapy was more effective than the mere passing of time, and later with research on the comparative effects of different therapeutic approaches. Thus, outcome evaluation has always been a central component of psychological research, being influenced by wider developments in the field of evaluation research itself (Scriven, 2001). By and large, this has been underpinned by the experimental paradigm (Fishman 1991). However, the influence of social constructionism has produced a variety of approaches to evaluation, associated, for example, with health, community, feminist and critical psychology.

As Fishman (1991) says, “Epistemological battles have been fought in the paradigm wars, with the outcome being a move towards the possibility of multiple epistemological models in program evaluation, rather than a single one, as has been dominant in psychology” (p. 457). The explosion of “alternate” methodologies, culminating in the development of what some have called “qualitative psychology” (Smith, 2003), coincided and collided with global movements in psychology which called for greater accountability within the discipline, at a time when shrinking health budgets resulted in the requirement of evidence of effectiveness to ensure program funding. Thus, while the 1990’s commenced with the possibility of greater diversity in evaluation methods, psychology, particularly in America, embraced and spearheaded the growing support for evidence-based practice, that is, formulating clinical decisions on the best available evidence gathered from systematic research about effectiveness (Chambless et al, 1996).

As part of this process, standards for conducting research were developed, which quickly became a short-hand for requiring efficacy studies using randomized clinical trials with homogenous samples who participated in manualised treatments, so endorsing a narrow definition of research practice and evidence (Levant, 2004). The past decade has consequently been dominated by attempts across various continents to resolve the issue of how evidence of effectiveness should be defined, collected and tested (Chambless & Ollendick, 2001; Elliot, 1998; King, 1998; Roth & Fonaghy, 1996).

Evidence-based practice can therefore be considered to be the re-emergence of the experimental paradigm, largely the casualty of the philosophical conflicts alluded to earlier, but transformed and contextualized in particular ways, in order to maintain the position of mainstream psychology in the face of the increasing influence of economic rationalism in Western countries.

However, with the ascendance of evidence-based practice, two developments of interest have emerged. Firstly, the work of those psychologists involved in parent education, particularly, parent management training, has become to be regarded as an exemplar of good evidence-based practice, as the evaluations have revealed effectiveness across problem types, populations and contexts (Lonigan & Elber, 1998). On the other hand, despite the clear calls for increased research, evidence for the effectiveness of any interventions with multicultural populations remains almost non-existent (Atkinson et al, 2001). The few studies which have been conducted have been criticized because of factors like confounding social factors, especially class, with culture, using assessment instrument of questionable validity and/or applicability, suggesting culturally incompatible interventions, which have shown to produce negative results and having constricted views of multicultural populations by focusing only on visible minorities (Doyle, 1998). The very limited research on parent education has produced mixed results (eg., Glanville & Tiller, 1991; Tulloch, 1997). This situation suggests serious deficiencies in the evidence of the effectiveness of parenting programs.

Evidence-based Practice and Cultural Issues in Psychology: The Case of Parent Education

As stated previously, evidence-based practice has been a significant force in the parenting field, with many programs offered to “mainstream” communities having been evaluated and demonstrated to be efficacious. Embarking on conducting such research with multicultural populations faces the general issues associated with the complexity of cultural research and difficulties in accessing research participants (Sue, 1999). However, the starting point for this discussion is the very applicability of the evidence-based research paradigm to determine effectiveness in multicultural populations (Atkinson et al, 2001; Doyle, 1998 Sue, 1999).

Evidence of the effectiveness of parenting programs has generally been taken to be the demonstration of pre/post intervention differences which show a reduction in symptomatology in parents’ ratings of themselves and their children. Standardised measures of child behaviour problems, parenting style and confidence and individual factors, like depression and anxiety are used to obtain the evidence, which is then analysed statistically. This is ideally demonstrated amongst a group of parents or children who are homogenous in diagnosis and randomly allocated to a control or treatment group, which is then exposed to a manualised intervention, that is, a standardised series of session plans which are published in a manual that practitioners are trained to use. The following discussion will highlight how the ethnocentric and Eurocentric assumptions embedded in such an approach make it very difficult to apply to multicultural populations.

Firstly, some relevant terms will be defined. Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to use one’s own group as the standard when viewing other groups (Berry et al, 2002). Eurocentrism is the term used to signify how much of psychology is founded on the perspective of white, middle-class research participants (Morrow et al, 2002), in this instance, often stay-at-home mothers who are able, willing and interested to participate in parenting research based on completing questionnaires. It is argued that the combined effects of these have resulted in the creation of a universal evaluation paradigm which is not suitable for multicultural populations. This has two interrelated consequences: the setting of inappropriate standards of evidence and the failure to incorporate culturally relevant evidence.

In the following section, examples of these consequences will be discussed, in order to argue for an empirically based practice model for parenting interventions which takes account of culture.

Problem Behaviours of Children

As alluded to earlier, the evidence-based practice draws on the “disorder-driven” medical model which requires the specification of the particular problem for which a particular intervention is intended. Therefore, to establish the effectiveness of a treatment, it is necessary to specify the particular characteristics, particularly in relation to diagnosis, of the clients provided with the intervention.

These ideas are based on assumptions which do not take into account cultural factors. As is now widely recognised, diagnostic practices are culture-bound activities, because they rest on definitions of normality which have been demonstrated to be culturally constructed. This is clearly the case in relation to parenting, as it is at the same time a universal and a highly variable aspect of human behaviour (White & Woollett, 1992). The psychological literature abounds with cross-cultural research which points to the similarities and differences in parenting styles, practices and concerns between different countries, cultures and communities (Allen & Mitchell, 1998). A case in point is the diagnosis of attention-deficit disorder which is seen to be a particularly “Western” problem, with disagreement between mental health professionals even when uniform criteria are used in well-designed cross-cultural studies (Mann et al, 1992).

As mentioned earlier, culture influences what is considered to be normal or deviant, even though this is often overlooked in mainstream psychology. What parents think is a problem in one culture is different in another and this is made even more complex when migration is part of the equation, as problem behaviours often relate to broader experiences of racism and discrimination which impact on migrant families in differing ways. For example, expressions of aggression in boys of Arabic or Pacific Island background living in Australia conjure images of gang involvement and criminality, but may be viewed quite differently as aspects of masculinity by members of these cultural groups. Being described as a shy or quiet child has a very different meaning if you are a parent from a Chinese background compared with one from an Anglo-Saxon background. Consequently, parents from Chinese backgrounds attend courses, even when, on the basis of standardised measures, their children do not show any problems, as a recent study of course participants demonstrated (Crisante & Ng., 2003). They use courses to obtain ideas about encouraging their children to participate more in the classroom and to minimise conflicts in the family, particularly regarding their children’s career choice. How such parents regard “problem” behaviour is clearly culturally constructed and therefore, does not fit with the unitary nature of problems implicit in the evidence-based paradigm.

Thus, assumptions of uniformity of problem behaviours between children from mainstream and multicultural backgrounds result in inappropriate standards of change being used in evidence-based practice research.

Parents’ Concerns: Reasons for Participating in Parent Education Courses

It is generally assumed that behaviour problems in children and/or a need for greater parenting competence, through increased skills and confidence, are the most common reasons for attending a parent education program. This implies that parents from migrant backgrounds attend courses for the same reasons as non-migrant parents. However, information from both participants and practitioners suggests that parents from multicultural backgrounds participate in courses for other reasons, which are more relevant to them. For example, integrating parenting styles in a new environment, obtaining knowledge about Australian parenting practices and dealing with family conflicts considered to be cultural are commonly mentioned as highly significant reasons

for attendance (Sozomenou et al, 2001). Thus, concerns about parenting arise in response to the migration process and associated experiences, with this occurring in unique and highly specific ways across different groups of parents.

However, parent outcomes are typically based on changes in “universal” measures of confidence, competence or parenting style, measures which do not reflect the sorts of issues which bring migrant parents to courses in the first place. This ethnocentric practice does not reflect the reality of the lives of people from such backgrounds for whom parenting is affected by specific issues unique to their migration experience. A case in point is how the religious backgrounds of communities from the Pacific Islands results in a tendency to use severe physical punishment with children, based on the belief of “to spare the rod is to spoil the child”. Thus, members of this group who migrate to Australia often encounter conflicts between this parenting style and child protection laws. Thus, an important reason for their attendance at courses is to obtain information about the impact such laws can have on family life, as well as alternative strategies for managing children’s behaviour. Such factors not only influence what outcomes are significant and need to be measured, but also the kinds of topics covered by parent education courses in the first instance.

Furthermore, it is assumed that research participants from multicultural backgrounds are willing and able to participate in evaluation practices, as constructed and practiced in mainstream psychology. This is based on the view that parents’ concerns can be communicated via written means, while it is well known that this is a Eurocentric assumption which devalues the place of oral information. Multicultural researchers are increasingly drawing attention to more culturally appropriate methods of collecting data, as, for example, Wright’s (1997) narrative research with Maori women.

On these two counts, that is, types of measures and methods of collecting data, the evidence-based paradigm is again found lacking.

Creating New Standards of Evidence

In the preceding discussion, examples of inappropriate evidence have pointed to types of evidence, such as broader, more culturally relevant definitions of problem behaviours in children, as well as that of parents’ concerns about their own capacities which are not traditionally included in studies of effectiveness of parenting programs. These suggest that different types of measures are required to demonstrate that parenting programs are effective with multicultural populations.

But perhaps the most significant aspect of new evidence relates to what points to potentially the “active” ingredient which influences outcome. This relates to the importance of practitioner characteristics, such as multicultural competencies, which have been shown to be highly relevant in determining outcomes in relation to counselling (Atkinson et al, 1998). Relationship factors like ethnic and linguistic similarity between the practitioner and client have been shown to have a similar effect (Atkinson et al, 2001). Within the evidence-based framework, the effects of such factors are not seen as

important, because the critical determinant is considered to be the nature of the treatment as specified in the manual. However, there are few manuals which provide instructions on how to account for cultural factors in parent education. As a member from the Samoan community recently said, parenting programs must be located in the spiritual, supported by biblical references and conducted by influential people, such as religious leaders, for parents to experience them as relevant and beneficial.

Critics of manualised interventions, and the subsequent emphasis on treatment variables, have drawn attention to the role of common factors, like the therapeutic relationship, a shared worldview and client/practitioner characteristics as being more relevant to the outcomes for clients from culturally diverse backgrounds (Atkinson et al, 2001; Tsang et al, 2003). This is because “ethnic and cultural factors account for as much or more of the variance in psychotherapy outcome with ethnic minority clients as does the treatment provided” (Atkinson, et al, 2001: 569). At this point in time, there is no provision within the evidence-based model for ways to assess the impact of facilitators on outcomes for parents from multicultural communities.

Towards an Alternative Model of Evaluation

Searching for an alternative approach to evaluation involves the uncertainty and untidiness of moving beyond the purism suggested by evidence-based practice in order to pragmatically address what remains a key evaluation question: are these programs effective for multicultural communities?

In so doing, the development of “crude models” becomes part of the process (Smith 1997). Greene (2002) suggests that such loosening up demands less attention to paradigms but rather more attention to methods which will achieve this result. Furthermore, it requires an up-close involvement, a deep connection with people in their daily activities, as part of this process. Having set out some examples of the difficulties associated with conducting multicultural research with existing frameworks, the remainder of this paper presents some of the issues generated in conducting research which departs from the “gold” standard of evidence-based practice. It describes current research utilizing mixed methods to invite “engagement with diversity” (Greene, 2002: 24) by fusing qualitative and quantitative methods to create a “merged” research process (Ponterotto & Greiger, 1999). Within this, a qualitative approach does not have the status of a substitute for, subsidiary of or preliminary to quantitative research. Rather, the boundaries between the quantitative and qualitative are necessarily collapsed, fluid and shifting, moving pragmatically and purposefully, instead of being fixed in the manner suggested by the evidence-based paradigm endorsed in psychology (Bazeley, 2003).

This process will be discussed primarily in relation to the activity of collecting evidence, as part of an emerging research model which is derived from a series of interrelated studies utilizing a range of qualitative and quantitative methods.

Engaging Participants in Collecting Evidence

The evaluation literature points to the utility of engaging participants in the process of development of program evaluation (Mathie & Greene, 1997). As part of this study, participants have been invited to discuss their ideas about the key questions that parents need to be asked about their experiences of participating in courses and what outcomes were important to them. This occurred after a series of 14 interviews were conducted with a group of parents of varying backgrounds who completed parenting courses conducted in English. Even though more than half of these participants had links to other cultures through their parents, partners, or by being born overseas themselves, the questions asked in these semi-structured in-depth interviews did not provide relevant information about how culture influences outcomes and experiences of participating in a parenting course.

Involving parents directly in this process has revealed surprising results. On the one hand, the parents from Chinese backgrounds do not draw any distinction about being asked their opinion about relevant evaluation questions for parents in general and their personal experiences. In their minds, the two are combined in a way which makes it difficult for them to take a “meta” position. At this point in time, they are willing to provide information about *their* experiences about participating, but not to act as consultants to me about what questions they think should be asked. On the other hand, participants in the Pacific Island program are very concerned about providing the right questions to make the “government people” happy. Herein lies the complexity of trying to develop a respectful, culturally appropriate process for defining and collecting evidence in a context in which the significance attached to words and numbers often appears to be equally puzzling to parents.

Yet, the politics of the situation and the ascription of power towards the research group are always present. Of the three groups involved in the research, the Pacific Island communities are the most engaged with the importance of the evaluation process. This relates to the extreme lack of parenting services, combined with the high rates of family intervention by child protection agencies and the police.

Using Questionnaires to Collect Evidence in Culturally Appropriate Ways

Psychologists have begun to develop measures which have been validated with culturally diverse groups. An example is the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire which asks parents about how they assess their children’s behaviour in relation to factors like cooperation and sociability, has been widely used in parenting research and is available in 40 languages (Goodman, 2002). Rather than translating the questionnaires into a written form for each Pacific Island community, course facilitators have been trained to verbally administer them in a large group format at the first session of the parent education program. This has several advantages:

- It increases the amount of data collected, since it provides a way of encouraging completion of questionnaires
- It presents the questions in a culturally acceptable form, that is, narratively, rather than in writing, as some of the participants may have never seen their language in a written form

- It avoids literacy issues and allows for questions to be answered immediately;
- It encourages both facilitators and parents to be actively involved in the process of providing information about program impact (Papineau & Kiely, 1996).

This same process is being used with the Arabic and Chinese background parents, but using the translated questionnaires, which are provided in English and the relevant language, so catering for the varying capacities in both languages and overcoming low completion rates, as noted in an earlier study (Crisante & Ng, 2003).

Experiencing the Evidence in Context

Collecting evidence in evidence-based practice is usually conducted in a remote manner, with researchers who analyse data from parents without having had any contact with the parents in any significant way. This disconnection has important implications, least of which is failing to do justice to the complexity of evidence collection. In the present study, the researcher is immersed in all aspects of this process, so developing a deep connection with parents and facilitators and the various struggles they experience in their lives while engaging in parent education. For some of the Arabic mothers, this includes careful negotiations with family members particularly mothers-in-law, to make attendance possible. With the Pacific Island group, this involves testimonial accounts of changes in parenting practices, participation in prayer, singing hymns and sharing food, all of which have been incorporated into the parent education courses. Such ethnographic encounters provide detailed information about both the process and outcomes of parent education with multicultural families, so eliciting evidence of the social reality of the experience in ways not previously considered to be part of the evidence-based paradigm.

Re-appraising Existing Evidence

As has been mentioned earlier, this research is taking place in the context of a parenting service which has been operating for several years and which has accumulated a large data set of parents who attend programs conducted in English for the general community. This has provided surprising demographic information about parents from multicultural backgrounds who attend such courses. For example, the average age of parents who attend courses, as well as the average age of the child who is a concern is identical for parents from Australian backgrounds compared with those of multicultural backgrounds. Contrary to expectations, a significantly higher proportion of these parents, compared with their Australian born counter-parts, have children who are already involved in counselling and related services. This goes against ideas that people from non-English speaking backgrounds are reluctant to attend courses, as they are perceived as irrelevant to them. Instead, it suggests that once a need is identified, parents from multicultural backgrounds are willing to attend services, even when these are not conducted in the most “culturally ideal” circumstances. Exploring the differences between parents who attend universal and culturally specific programs provides another piece of evidence in answering what works for whom.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed examples of the ways in which evidence-based evaluation practices in psychology do not adequately address the issue of whether parenting programs are effective in addressing the needs of parents from multicultural backgrounds. It has described some of the methods used to obtain this evidence with the aim of developing an alternative process for conducting such evaluation. This emerging evaluation process will provide evidence of the outcomes and experiences of parents to fill this important gap in the evaluation literature, and in so doing, help to establish a broader approach to conducting evidence-based practice.

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