Using Qualitative Methods to Develop Contextually Relevant Measures and Preventive Interventions: An Illustration

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Qualitative methods were used to develop a contextually relevant quantitative measure of parenting stress and inform the design of family-focused interventions aimed at preventing adolescent mental and behavioral health problems. The study focused on the experiences of low-income one- and two-parent families representing three ethnic groups (Mexican, African, and European Americans) living in low-income neighborhoods in a large Southwestern city. This report describes the place of this study in a broader program of prevention research, the qualitative methods and data analysis procedures employed, and how the results were used to develop a new measure of parenting stress and inform future program design. The report also includes reflective comments on the methods used and lessons gained.

KEY WORDS: Qualitative methods; preventive interventions; parenting stress; parent training; ethnic diversity; measurement development; transition into middle school; parenting intervention.

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Qualitative methods have made unique contributions to field research with culturally diverse populations (Furstenberg, 1993; Hughes & DuMont, 1993; Maton, 1993). Unfortunately, many reports of qualitative studies provide only sketchy descriptions of procedures and data analysis. Such reporting inhibits the advancement of methodology. In this paper, we provide a detailed description of the qualitative methods used to understand aspects of the phenomenology operating in the developmental niches of ethnically diverse families residing in low-income neighborhoods in a large Southwestern city (primarily Mexican, African, and European Americans). The purpose of this study was to obtain data that would guide the development of a contextually relevant measure of parenting stress and inform the design of future family-focused interventions to prevent mental and behavioral health problems in adolescents living in these neighborhoods.

Over the past 15 years, researchers at the Prevention Intervention Research Center (PIRC) at Arizona State University (ASU) have conducted a body of quantitative and, more recently, qualitative research that indicates family factors (e.g., parenting practices, family cohesion, and parent-child conflict) mediate the effects of various risk factors and stressful conditions on children's adjustment. This research has provided the generative foundation from which parent- and child-focused interventions have been developed. Our particular team at the ASU PIRC has concentrated on studying the effects of low-income status as a risk factor.

In doing this research, our team has encountered two important challenges related to the diverse ethnic makeup of our targeted neighborhoods. The first challenge is determining the cross-ethnic and cross-language equivalence of quantitative assessment measures (Knight & Hill, in press). To date, team members have systematically analyzed existing data sets to determine whether measures of parenting practices, mental health, and other relevant constructs are valid when used with different ethnic groups and when translated into Spanish (Dumka, Stoerzinger, Jackson, & Roosa, 1996; Knight, Virdin, & Roosa, 1994). In some cases we found that existing measures provided equally valid data across groups or that measures required only slight modifications to optimize cross-cultural equivalence. In other cases, we found it necessary to use qualitative methods to examine constructs from an emic perspective and develop new contextually relevant measures from the ground up (Gonzales, Gunnoe, Jackson, & Samaniego, 1997). The second challenge we encountered was recruiting, retaining, and influencing members of low-income families in preventive interventions. Many of our targeted families are members of ethnic minorities and are monolingual Spanish-speaking (Dumka, Garza, Roosa, & Stoerzinger, 1997). Preventive interventions can be effective only to the degree that at-risk individuals participate and are engaged in making positive changes.