Cross-cultural influences on the help-seeking behaviours of adolescent females.

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Abstract

This paper discusses the cultural findings of a qualitative study that focussed on the help-seeking behaviours of adolescent females. Seven teenage girls, including two international students, from a senior secondary school in Adelaide volunteered to create and share personal stories about how they seek help. Although the study incorporated a variety of methods, such as a demographic survey, focus groups and interviews, digital storytelling was the primary narrative tool used to elicit descriptive data from participants.

The purpose for outlining cultural aspects in the participants' data is to add to the existing literature and to illustrate that culture can influence the help-seeking behaviours of adolescents. Counsellors and other formal helpers need to develop their multicultural competencies in order to address the needs of individuals from culturally diverse backgrounds. Raising awareness of cultural influences on behaviour is one means of achieving this goal (e.g., Parker & Schwartz, 2002; Russell-Chaplin & Ivey, 2004).

This study discusses the influence culture has on the learning, language, emotion and the coping strategies of adolescent female students and explores how these behaviours affect the girls' willingness to seek help, particularly formal help.

Introduction

There is a paucity of information regarding the influences of culture on the help-seeking behaviours of young people in the Australian context. Previous studies have focussed on cultural values, beliefs and practices in relation to either health, in particular mental health (e.g., Cauce, Domenech-Rodriguez, Paradise, Cochran, Shea, Srebnick, et al., 2002; Lian-Ding & Hui, 1995), or education (e.g., Kuo & Roysircar, 2004), generally of groups of individuals in countries other than Australia. This study, however, generates descriptive data about the Australian multicultural context and adds to the existing literature. Further understanding of cross-cultural influences on help-seeking behaviour may benefit potential helpers in assisting young people in need (e.g., Alexander, Kruczek, Ponterotto, 2005; Arredondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Loches, Sanchez, et al., 1996). Knowledge of the influences culture has on behaviour can also give young people greater insight into their own beliefs, feelings and actions.

The current study explores the help-seeking behaviours of adolescent females using digital storytelling and other supplementary methods such as focus groups, a demographic survey and interviews to gather data. The aims of the study are to add to existing knowledge of adolescent help-seeking behaviour by using qualitative approaches to gather and interpret data, to involve participants as co-researchers in the collection, reflection and interpretation of information and to explore the possibilities and practicalities of digital storytelling as a data-gathering tool. The qualitative research is subjective and interpretative and consists of seven case studies of adolescent girls from a senior secondary school in Adelaide.

Method

Participants

Seven female adolescents volunteered to be part of the research. The students were recruited from the year 11 cohort at a senior secondary co educational independent school in Adelaide in which the researcher is the school counsellor. The principal chose to exclude any year 12 students from the project because she believed that their involvement might impinge on their personal study.

The girls were assigned pseudonyms to disguise their identity. The girls included two international students, Lizzie and Mel and five local students Alex, Cathy, Lydia, Jenna and Paula. The ages of the participants ranged from 15 to 17. Lydia 15 was the youngest while at 17 Lizzie and Mel were the oldest of the group.

Procedure

Parental consent was obtained before commencement of the study. Participants completed a variety of tasks including: a demographic questionnaire, a focus group session, homework activities, an individual digital-storytelling workshop, a group session showcasing the digital stories and a one on one interview with the researcher. Audio recordings of the focus group, the showcasing session and interviews were made and later transcribed. Participants and the researcher took notes during the course of the research.

The research used digital storytelling as its main tool for eliciting subjective information about the participants and their views of adolescent help seeking. A digital story is a short narrative created in a multi-media format. Digital stories are 'mini movies' created by skilfully weaving images, music, voice and written text together (Lambert, 2006). These stories use a variety of tools, including: cameras, scanners, digital voice recorders, soundtracks, the Internet and computers with film editing programs.

Results and discussion

Cultural information about the participants

The participants are from eight different cultures and each girl tends to identify with at least one specific ethnic group. In an inclusive sense the individuals also align themselves with a variety of other groups that can be classified in terms of gender, language, family structure, age and so on. The participants as a group reflect the multicultural mix of people living in Australia (Soboulis, 2006) and the diversity of cultures that make up the student population at the senior secondary school. It is important to note that with the recent Australian Federal Government initiative of encouraging overseas students to study in Australia (Department of Education Science & Training, 2007) the data generated by Mel and Lizzie can provide insight for counsellors and other helpers into the help-seeking behaviours and issues facing Chinese international students.

Data from the demographic survey, the digital-story plans, the digital stories themselves and the interview transcripts reveal with which cultural groups the participants identify. Six of the seven girls are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Lydia identifies as Australian and is the only participant with English parentage. Lizzie, Mel and their parents are Chinese: Mel is from Shanghai and Lizzie from Mongolia. (It is interesting to note that Mel initially defined her cultural group as 'yellow' but later substituted this term for Chinese).

All participants except Lydia fit the description of 'Third culture kids' (Soboulis 2006). 'Third culture kids' are generally described as migrants, refugees, children of migrants/refugees or international students who have spent much of their developmental years away from their parents' culture. This distance from the parental culture(s) can cause an individual to fluctuate between feeling connected and disconnected with the culture(s) of their parent(s) and the dominant culture of the new country/group in which they live. The cultural practices of these 'Third culture kids' therefore are not static; they can change depending on how the individuals view themselves at any given time. 'Third culture kids' may at times be confronted with a variety of cultural meanings and practices that potentially conflict.

Examples of this internal conflict are depicted in some of the participants' comments about times when they have similar views to their parents and times when their views are in sharp contrast to those of their mothers and fathers. Although these conflicts are similar to those described by Soboulis (2006) they may also be attributed to the fact that these girls are all adolescents and generally during adolescence young people may question parental views (e.g., Carr-Gregg & Shale, 2002; Fuller, 2000).

Barriers to seeking help

Learning within the family context

Our first cultural and learning experiences occur within the family context (Rosen, 1996; Sarbin, 1986). It is there we begin understanding who we are, to whom we belong and how we should behave. By acquiring a shared set of meanings we create a shared set of practices that influence the ways we define ourselves, communicate, show emotion, behave, interact with others and how we present ourselves to the world. Culture helps us to make meaning of the world and of how we fit in (Hall, 1997; Whiston, 2004; Woodward, 1997).

Some participants identify particular family values that affect their help-seeking behaviour. The influence of family members' beliefs, attitudes and values about seeking help are also outlined in other studies (e.g., Cauce et al., 2002; Hamid, Yue & Leung, 2003; Lian-Ding & Hui, 1995, Whiston, 2004). If family members, particularly parents and other significant individuals, value professional help and regard seeking assistance positively then their adolescent children are more likely to view seeking help in a similar way (e.g., Cauce, et al., 2002) and the interview data from some of the participants, affirm these points. Whiston (2004) suggests that counsellors should be

aware that different cultural groups may have specific stances about degrees of disclosure, particularly to non-family members and some of the stories in this study highlight cultural and family attitudes toward disclosure. Three participants, Jenna, Mel and Paula, share a similar rule that stresses personal matters are not discussed outside the family. This particular directive therefore discourages disclosure to non-familial members and although understood by the three girls, the rule is not always applied.

Despite this, these girls at times purposely choose not to disclose personal information to a family member because they are concerned about the possible consequences. Below are some relevant comments from Jenna and Mel.

> Jenna: Everything is kept in the family.
>
> Mel: They [parents] do say, "Keep [things] in the family." We just act, as we know that. Because they think it is a family thing, so we don't talk to other people.

The 'family rule' mentioned by Jenna, Mel and Paula is linked to help-seeking obstacles of privacy, pride and 'keeping face'. A reticence to be open with others about problems relates to the fear of stigmatisation and the idea of bringing shame to oneself and one's family. For some individuals and groups, stigma and shame are attached to having a problem and seeking help for it (Deane & Chamberlain, 1994; Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000; Yau, 2003). Privacy and pride as they pertain to young Chinese students studying in America have been previously identified (e.g., Lian-Ding & Hui, 1995), and these characteristics also have relevance to the non-Chinese individuals in this study. The help-seeking barrier of pride can be linked to what Foo, Merrick, & Kazantzis (2006) describe as 'losing face', which implies behaving in a manner that is disrespectful to self and one's family. Foo et al. (2006) describe Chinese Singaporeans who avoid seeking formal help because of the stigma that is associated with mental illness.

Both Lizzie and Mel discuss issues to do with 'losing face' and the embarrassment of seeking help. Lizzie, for example, is concerned that a helper could humiliate her and make fun of her problems. She describes feeling humiliated when as a younger person she sought her mother's help and as a consequence Lizzie can be hesitant to seek help from others, both inside and outside the family. These views of 'keeping face'/'losing face' and stigmatisation do not only apply to the participants from Chinese backgrounds, other participants, such as Jenna, Cathy and Paula for example, discuss these barriers when talking about their reluctance in seeking help from school counsellors.

Learning

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is socially constructed and takes place in various contexts. Children initially acquire values and behaviours through interacting with family and later through schooling and by interacting with others, therefore an individual's learning evolves as contexts change.

Teaching and learning styles are not universal (e.g., Soboulis, 2006), hence understanding what and how young people are taught can provide insight into cross-cultural influences on help-seeking behaviour (Parker & Schwartz, 2002; Whiston, 2004). Western education, for example, encourages students to develop critical and analytical thinking. Students are expected to extend their learning through enquiry, and by expressing and validating opinions and thoughts (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997). The assumption, therefore, would be that all participants who are currently educated in Australian schools acquire analytical skills and aim to be independent learners. As a consequence it might be expected that students educated this way are capable and comfortable asking questions and sharing their subjective views with others. The five local students in this study, however, do not always demonstrate this learning style.

Mel and Lizzie began their schooling in Adelaide at the age of 17 and at the time of this study they would have spent fewer than six months in Australia. The teaching and learning styles adopted by Chinese schools generally differ from those of Australian schools. Ballard and Clanchy (1997) note that educational practices in China are based on a 'Confucian Heritage' style in which a 'conserving' attitude to knowledge is promoted and where replicating information rather than questioning it is valued and expected. It could be considered ill mannered and inappropriate therefore for Chinese students to question the authority of their teachers, counsellors or parents and as a consequence it might be expected that Mel and Lizzie may be reluctant to ask questions, express personal opinions and freely involve themselves in class discussions. Australian teachers and school counsellors may find the information about educational practices of other cultures interesting and worth reflecting upon when working with Chinese international students (Soboulis, 2006).

Understanding more about the principles and practices in teaching and learning of different cultural groups can add to the help-seeking discourse (e.g. Russell-Chaplin & Ivey, 2004).

Because questioning and debating with authority is seen as inappropriate or disrespectful by Chinese students it is reasonable to assume that Mel and Lizzie might have difficulty engaging in debate or questioning the rules and values endorsed by family and educational institutions. This perception is confirmed by Mel and Lizzie's hesitance in asking teachers or counsellors for support. These girls indicate that generally students do not question or seek support from school personnel in China and although Mel and Lizzie mention that counsellors are not employed in schools in China, they suggest that young Chinese people would not access counsellors if they were available. Lizzie adds that Chinese students would also be unlikely to access support from teachers either in Australia or China. This may be due to a variety of reasons such as language, the stigma associated with seeking help, the reluctance to ask non-family members for assistance, and discouragement from asking questions which appears to be a feature of schooling in China.

> Lizzie:… [International Students in Australia] don't want to communicate with teachers, mainly because of language difficulties. They don't think the teacher is going to help. Students aren't used to seeking help from teachers. They don't talk about matters with teachers in China. In China teachers teach and students don't want to talk to teachers.

It is apparent from Mel and Lizzie's interviews that these girls have limited and inaccurate information about the role of counsellors in South Australian schools. They had misconceptions about what my role was and who might access my support. Mel, in particular, considered that only individuals 'at risk' accessed my support. According to Jorm (2000), knowledge and understanding of available health services are aspects that help to facilitate help seeking, therefore Mel and Lizzie's lack of knowledge, understanding and experience of the support services available to students in Australian schools may also influence their unwillingness to seek formal help. Their inclination to ask me questions and later seek my support was based on the relationship we developed during the course of the research. Yagil and Israelashivili (2003) point out that a positive relationship between the helper and helpee coupled with positive helper characteristics can facilitate help-seeking behaviour.

The comments from Mel and Lizzie suggest that there is a need for more in-depth orientation for international students, where the roles of support services are clearly defined and later revisited, and that this would facilitate help seeking and general student wellbeing (Jorm, 2000). The data from Mel and Lizzie also point out the importance of developing positive relationships with potential helpers, and suggest that counsellors and school personnel should be proactive in developing relationships with international students.

The influence of language on help-seeking behaviours

Language is an intricate part of culture (Holmes, 2001; Whiston, 2004), so culture and language cannot be looked at in isolation. Language is significant in the help-seeking stories of some participants in particular Lizzie and Mel whose first language is Mandarin. An ability to express oneself, to be understood, and to understand others are important when seeking and receiving the support (Whiston, 2004).

Foo and Merrick (2004) and Kuo and Roysircar (2004) discuss the influence of language ability and comprehension on help seeking. Kuo and Roysircar (2004) indicate that adolescents who study abroad may experience linguistic, social and cultural difficulties. The study by Atkinson, Bui and Mori (1995) adds that a cultural and linguistic match between a formal helper and the client can facilitate help seeking, promote disclosure and result in positive therapeutic interventions.

Kuo and Roysircar's (2004) research focuses on Chinese adolescents living in Canada. Students from low-socio economic backgrounds and with poor English reading abilities were identified as being unwilling to seek help from unfamiliar individuals. As their families are able to provide the fees and living expenses to enable their children to study abroad, it is assumed the girls from this current study are not from low socio-economic backgrounds. Lizzie is the more fluent of the two in spoken and written English, although both girls indicate that their oral English language ability is a barrier to seeking help.

Confidence and oral language fluency can influence an individual's help-seeking behaviour and data from Mel and Lizzie's stories show that their ability to converse in English affects their choice of helpers and their willingness to seek help. Both help-seeking stories provide links between language competence, age and gender of potential helpers. Issues related to *language* are discussed in Kuo & Roysircar (2004), *age* in the studies of Wintre, Hicks, McVey, and Fox, (1988) and Tishby, Turel, Gumpel, Pinus, Lavy, Winokour, et al. (2001) and *gender* in Garland and Zigler (1994) and Rickwood & Braithwaite (1994).

Lizzie and Mel mention they would seek help from other friends who spoke Chinese but are reluctant to ask for help from local English-speaking adolescents. The girls report that the English spoken by young Australian students is more difficult to understand than that spoken by some Australian adults because the girls find that younger people generally speak quickly and

frequently use colloquialisms. However, Mel willingly seeks help from her present home-stay mother because the latter is conscious of the language issues facing international students and therefore modifies the pace and complexity of her English oral language.

Both girls state they would prefer if potential helpers spoke Mandarin. This is congruent with the views of Atkinson, et al. (1995) who describe that for communication to be effective it would be beneficial if both addressors and addressees spoke the same language. Yet, Mel and Lizzie indicate that if the helper couldn't converse in Mandarin they would consider seeking help from individuals who are approachable, trustworthy and who are known to them. Mel and Lizzie's comments reveal that helper characteristics have influence over the girls' intentions to seeking help. The link between helper characteristics and help seeking has been argued in other literature (e.g., Yagil & Israelashivili, 2003).

Awareness of sociolinguistics can help to provide additional reasons for Mel and Lizzie's reluctance to seek formal help. Hwang, Liu, Han, and Chen (2003) explain that within the Chinese culture it is generally more socially acceptable to discuss physical rather than psychological conditions. These researchers also point out that emotions are explained in reference to reactions in parts of the body, for example feelings of disgust or distress are explained with the idiom that is translated as, 'my heart hurts' and 'my head is feeling sick.' Reflecting on the points made by Hwang et al., (2003) may help to explain Mel's and Lizzie's use of symbolism and metaphors to explain elements of their stories. Mel, for example, uses an image of dyed hair going down a drain to symbolize adolescents who are 'at risk' and in need of support.

Kleinman (1980) investigates aspects of the Mandarin language and explains that the language has limited vocabulary to describe emotions and hence it could be presumed that speakers of Mandarin may have difficulty engaging in western style therapy where emotions are discussed and analysed. Consequently it could be the case that Lizzie's and Mel's disinclination to disclose personal information to other than familial sources may also be related to the linguistic properties of their first language, however there is insufficient data to confirm this. It is interesting to note that even though Kleinman (1980) discusses the lack of emotional words in Mandarin, Lizzie more than Mel uses emotional terms during her discourses and her digital story, which may indicate that Lizzie does not find it difficult to express her feelings in English. Further research into the area of linguistics, especially into the similarities and differences between first and other

languages, may provide insight into the help-seeking behaviours of international students and other 'Third culture kids'.

Cross-cultural influences on coping and problem solving

Through reflection and discussion, participants reveal links between culture and coping styles. Hamid, Yue and Leung (2003) explore the association between family environment and coping strategies of Chinese adolescents. These researchers suggest that adolescents with secure family environments tend to have a constructive/problem solving coping style where self-help strategies are adopted. If problems are unable to be solved alone individuals from this cultural background generally seek help from familial individuals or refrain from doing anything by adopting a non-action approach.

The non-action approach is based on Taoist principles in which individuals 'let nature run its course'. According to Hamid et al. (2003), the principles above are taught to Chinese children from a very young age. Information provided by Mel and Lizzie affirms findings from previous research about the help-seeking practices of Chinese youth (e.g., Hamid et al). Neither girl seeks help from professional sources but occasionally chooses to seek the support of familial sources such as their mothers (Mel in particular does this). This reluctance to seek formal help may also be related to the view discussed earlier, that some cultures may discourage self-disclosure to non-family members (e.g., Whiston, 2004). Lizzie tends to manage difficult issues herself by either ignoring them or by surfing for subject-specific information on the Net.

It has been argued that Chinese people with mental health problems firstly favour self-help strategies, secondly seek help from relatives, and then turn to traditional therapies before seeking professional help (e.g., Hamid, et al., 2003; Ng, Fones, & Kua, 2003; Ow, 1998). These problem-solving strategies and help-seeking behaviours are not only applicable to the Chinese participants but are also evident in some of the other participants in this study. Alex, Cathy and Jenna, for example, mention that they prefer to adopt, in the first instance, self-help strategies before asking others for assistance. However, if further support is required these girls tend to seek help from a family member.

Adolescence and independence

Reflecting on the cultural differences of how adolescence is viewed may also provide information about why some groups of people prefer to adopt, in the first instance, self-help strategies to solve their problems. Some cultures where the emphasis is on the individual, for example, focus on the development of independence while other cultures focus on the collective, and as such the family and belonging to a particular cultural group are seen as important (e.g., Bennett, Chown & Kang, 2005). Culturally different interpretations of adolescence may affect how a young person copes and how they seek help. One could infer, for instance, that independence equates to less reliance on parental support while in collective-focussed cultures adolescents might be open to spending more time with family and be more willing to involve others to help solve problems. From the data generated it would appear that independence and an emphasis on the individual is generally encouraged by the families of Jenna, Lizzie and Mel while the collective and the reliance on family is revealed in the stories of Lydia, Alex, Cathy and Paula. The degree of support and reliance on family however, appear to fluctuate according to the issues at hand.

The importance of developing independence is seen in both Jenna's and Lizzie's help-seeking stories and although independence is promoted in some cultures it is described in some research as a psychological barrier for seeking help (Barnett, 1988). Although both girls are from vastly different cultures they both seem to value independence and self-reliance. Are these values culturally specific or do both girls' families promote these traits or is developing independence and self-reliance a trait common to adolescents of a particular age (K. Geldard, & D. Geldard, 1999)? Jenna explains that her life is somewhat more difficult as a teenager than it was as a younger child, because it is expected that she will solve her own problems and be less reliant on her parents for support. Lizzie mentions that her father encouraged her to be independent not just as an adolescent but also as a younger child. When she was a young child her parents encouraged her to be self-reliant and tended to discourage her from seeking their help. Independence according to Lizzie is about managing life's ups and downs. For her independence denotes strength. Her father managed life this way and Lizzie wants to emulate this.

> Lizzie: My dad is very independent. He left home the same age as me, he said, "You need to be strong and independent and you need to do everything by yourself to succeed."

Summary and future directions

The findings from this research provide descriptive information about cross-cultural influences on the help-seeking behaviour of the seven adolescent female participants. The analysis of the

data reveals that the cultural influences of learning, language, emotion and coping affect the participants' intentions to seek help. Note that although cultural influences are evident in the data generated by the participants it is important not to attribute the significance of culture to all of their discourses and behaviours.

The participants as a group reflect the multicultural mix of people living in Australia (Soboulis, 2006) and the diversity of cultures that make up the student population at the senior secondary school. The Australian Federal Government has vested interest in international education, and the 2006 figures of over 350,000 overseas students; 80,000 of whom are from China, are testament to this (DEST, 2007). Hence the information generated by Mel and Lizzie can help to raise awareness of cultural aspects that not only affect help-seeking behaviours of newly-arrived students but also provide valuable insight into non-western learning principles which could be of interest to educators and helpers alike. Various literatures urge formal helpers to increase their multicultural competencies so that they can provide culturally inclusive therapeutic interventions, therefore learning more about diverse cultures and how culture influences behaviour can assist in their skill development (e.g., Parker & Schwartz, 2002; Russell-Chaplin & Ivey, 2004).

Whilst these findings offer an insight into the relationship between culture and help seeking they also indicate that further research in the area is needed. Research could target different groups, for example international students or newly arrived refugees, so that educators and professional helpers can learn more about culturally diverse clients who may access their services. Further studies into the area of linguistics for example, may provide insight into the help-seeking behaviours of international students. Future research could also explore existing training programs offered to teachers and counsellors to investigate how such programs help to address the needs of culturally diverse clients. The findings generated by studying current teacher and counsellor-training programs can be used to refine and update existing programs so they can extend the multicultural competencies of future educators and other formal helpers.

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