Investigating Social Justice Challenges Through Qualitative Research (SY031)

Louis J. Kruger, Northeastern University, Boston, MA (Chair of Symposium)
Anna G. Lubliner, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI
Rachel M. Futtersak, CUNY Graduate Center, New York, NY
Margaret R. Rogers, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI
Sherrie Proctor, Queens College, City University of New York, Queens, NY
Rachel Ruah, Northeastern University, Boston, MA
Ashley D. Cameron, Northeastern University, Boston, MA

Additional contributors to this symposium:
Kristin Concannon, Kristin Holborn, Charles Kim, Edward Kimble, Kalyani Krishnan, Chieh Li, Timothy McIvor, Brian Siembor, Diana Stoianov, Elisabeth O’ Bryon, Jennifer Dupont-Frechette, & Marisa Marraccini.

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Symposium Agenda

- Introductions
- Overview
- Goals
- Rationale
- Three Qualitative Studies
- Summary & Conclusions
- Questions & Discussion
Goals of Symposium

- Illustrate how qualitative methods can be used to understand social justice issues relevant to school psychology practice and training.
- Promote understanding of three important social justice challenges related to school psychology.
- Present strategies derived from this research for addressing these challenges.
Rationale for Symposium

- One of the most important dimensions of social justice is protecting the rights and opportunities of individuals (Shriberg, et al., 2008).
- Social justice is at the heart of much of what school psychologists do.
- However, not much is known about how social justice challenges in school psychology might be systematically investigated.
- Qualitative research seems particularly well suited to studying these challenges because of its focus on understanding the social world from the viewpoint of the individual.
The Three Qualitative Studies

- The first presentation will focus on the results of semi-structured interviews with six school psychology advocates.
- The second presentation focuses on a study that used in-depth interviews to investigate the reasons seven African Americans left school psychology programs prior to degree completion.
- The third presentation will focus on semi-structured interviews of five tutors of young adults who failed to pass a state’s high school exit exams (HSEEs).
Successful School Psychology Advocates

What is advocacy?

- “Advocacy is a **critical skill to influence and create change** for our nation’s children” (Futures Planning Committee, 2012)

- NASP *Principles for Professional Ethics* (2010)
  - School psychologists have a special obligation to speak up for the rights and welfare of students and families and to **provide a voice** for clients who cannot or do not wish to speak up for themselves. Advocacy also occurs when school psychologists use their expertise to **promote changes in schools, systems, and laws that will benefit schoolchildren, other students, and families** (NASP, 2010; p. 3).
Successful School Psychology Advocates

- What do we know about the school psychologist as advocate?

- What do we need to know?
Purpose
To understand the science of advocacy, specific to school psychology, by interviewing notable school psychology advocates

- Critical skills
- Barriers and obstacles
- Resources
- Successes
Successful School Psychology Advocates

Research Questions

- What skills are critical for effective advocates to possess?
- What types of barriers/obstacles have you faced?
- Are there specific resources that you routinely call upon to support your advocacy work?
- Could you describe the greatest successes you have had advocating?
Successful School Psychology Advocates

Methods

Participants
- 6 highly successful advocates

Procedure
- Recruitment
- Informed consent
- Semi-structured interviews
- Video and audio-taped
I think you have to be able to listen probably first and foremost.

Open up dialog in a different way…..We have to be listening…to sit on both sides of the room…even if that person can’t, we have to do that.
Results: Advocacy Skills

Interpersonal Skills - 67%

Not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good because you may not get the perfect public policy solution but you may get something that will substantially help a lot.

You have to be able to accept that each other can be as honest as possible, because if you’re not, then again, you’re not going to get anywhere.
Results: Advocacy Skills

Assessment Skills - 67%

We need people who think.... There is merit in stepping back and reflecting...sit down and analyze it.

The scientific problem solving process as applied to practice...what is the problem, what’s your goal, what are you trying to change? Assessing the context, the forces moving toward change, the restraining forces.
Results: Obstacles and Barriers

Inflexibility - 100%

Attitudes are barriers...if I’m advocating in a classroom, somebody might have already made a determination about what kind of kid this is and “You’re gonna tell me its somebody else and...I think you’re all full of...hooey.”

People get stuck in their own perceptions of what things are, and they won’t listen to you when you say “I live this everyday.”
I think the biggest challenges and barriers I’ve seen are bad policy that’s introduced that’s not linked to research, that’s not linked to best practice.

When advocating within a school system, unfortunately, the union can be an obstacle.
You benefit from networking with other people and bringing things up because you know there’s all these connections that you’re not aware of.

I rely on my colleagues tremendously...I’ll call on the phone and say, “What do you think about this? Am I on the right track? Is there something I’m missing?”
Successful School Psychology Advocates

Results: Resources

Information - 67%

*My books...the Internet.*

*Through this mental health coalition that we have in town, I’ve grown a lot in understanding what police officers go through, and what first responders, EMT’s go through. And what are their resources. How we might take advantage of their knowledge and how we could be informed by them.*
A long story short, by the time he was beginning his 8th grade...we were able to have a program, hire a teacher, and bring him back. And when he walked across the stage to get his diploma, the superintendent said “You deserve a lot. Because without you doing what you did, he wouldn’t have walked across this stage, ever.” So that was good.
Successful School Psychology Advocates

Results: Successes

Building Capacity - 50%

*It’s just trying to get one more person, one more person interested in speaking up on behalf of kids. That’s what I like best.*

*Just getting people, anybody who I can get them on board for school psychology, getting into the colleges and universities...*
Successful School Psychology Advocates

Discussion/Conclusion

- First study of its kind
- When completed, it will include 20 school psychology advocates
Reasons for African American Student Attrition from School Psychology

Study Rationale

- Calls for more diversity in school psychology (Curtis, Grier, & Hunley, 2004; Lopez & Rogers, 2007; Truscott & Truscott, 2005)

- Graduate programs avenue to enter profession

- If people of color are not successful graduating from programs, increased diversity may not be achieved

- Attrition studies missing from school psychology literature
Purpose of the Study

To explore what experiences contributed to participants’ decisions to leave school psychology programs
Research Question

What experiences do participants describe as contributing to their decisions to leave school psychology programs?
## Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994)</strong></td>
<td>Describe the meaning of a phenomenon for a small number of individuals, uncover shared meaning, study of rarely researcher populations. Dukes (1984) suggest that 3-10 participants are appropriate for a phenomenology.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Three-Interview Series (Seidman, 2006)</strong></td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; interview = Focused Life History; 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; interview = Focus on Experiences with Phenomenon; 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; interview = Making Meaning of Phenomenon Space Interviews 3 days to 1 week apart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recursive (Nastasi, Moore, &amp; Varjas, 2004)</strong></td>
<td>Revisions to interview protocol based on on-going data collection and data analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Constructivist (Fox, 2001)</strong></td>
<td>No pre-existing theoretical framework related to African American school psychology leavers; bottom-up data emergence; thorough review of leavers literature occurred after data collection</td>
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Participants

- All self-identified as African-American
- 6 Females, 1 Male
- Age Range- 25 to 40 ($M = 34.5; SD = 5.19$)
- 5 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs); 2 Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) graduates
- 3 PhD Seeking; 4 EdS seeking
- Time in programs ranged from one to three years ($M = 1.5; SD = .78$)
- Average time since left programs was 10.7 years (range from 2 to 16)
Interview Guide

- Developed by principle researcher
- Semi structured interview format
- Questions based on review of retention literature & brief review of attrition literature
- Demographic Data (Part I)
- Interviews Gather Information in Three Stages Following Seidman’s Model (Parts II-IV)
Researcher as Instrument

- I served as sole interviewer for all 21 face-to-face and 7 telephone follow up interviews
- My experiences worldview influence research process
- My biases
- Same race researcher benefits (Seidman, 2006)

Research Team

- Myself (African American [AA] female), major professor (White male), 1 White specialist student, 1 AA doctoral school psych student; 1 AA counseling psych doctoral candidate

- minimize my biases; peer debriefing (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); met biweekly
Procedure

- IRB Approval December 2008
- Sent out emails to begin network sampling
- Sent follow-up email 1 week after initial email.
- Contacted potential participants via phone (see if met inclusion criteria; if so, asked if interested in participating)
- Yes, gathered initial demographic information
- Sent out email inviting individuals to participate in study
- Scheduled interviews with participants
- Completed Face-to-Face Interviews January 2009 - May 2009
- Codebook Finalized (late June 2009)
Data Analysis (Moustakas, 1994)

Stage 1: Data Preparation
Stage 2: Holistic Understanding
Stage 3: Horizonalizing
Stage 4: Meaning Units/Theme Development
Stage 5: Textural & Structural Descriptions
Examples of Selected Significant Statements

- I kinda felt like the professors weren’t in sync with us. *[Faculty Disconnect]*
- I just didn’t feel connected to the department or to my peers. *[Peer Disconnect]*
- My main decision to leave had to do with finances. *[Funding]*
- I mean, you’re doing the WISC again. It just became monotonous. *[Job Role Constraint]*
- I wanted to get a mentor, and I just didn’t feel like I clicked with any of them in that manner. *[Faculty Disconnect]*
- Instead of just writing reports saying yes they qualify, no they don’t for special education, I wanted to be able to provide more consultation to teachers *[Job Role Constraint]*

* [*] = Meaning Units That Were Then Developed Into Codes.*
Data Analysis
Codebook

- Organized by Research Question
- Main Code and Corresponding Sub Codes
- Brief Definitions, Full Definitions, Exemplars, and Guidelines for Use

Inter-Coder Agreement (ICA)

- Two Research Team Members Independently coded one participant’s three interviews and established consensus of coding
- Same coders separately coded one of another participant’s interviews, comparing for ICA
Results ~ Experiences Contributed to Decisions to Leave

PROFESSIONAL MISALIGNMENT

- Program Failure to Meet Training Expectations
- Perceived Job Role Constraint
Kevin

It was a polite, sort of negotiation away from the subject matter. There would be a lot of head-nodding, you know what I mean. Um, but in terms of how you know in what ways are we being trained to undo this pattern, there wasn’t a lot of those kinds of conversations. And I really didn’t have a sense that I was being equipped with the tools to out and be part of the solution instead of the problem.
Professional Misalignment
Perceived Job Role Constraint

Amel

“It just sounded like a lot of testing and they were talking about ratios of like school psychologists to students and it was ridiculous and yeah it sounded overwhelming actually.”

Kendall

“I was trying to make sure I was going down a path that did not lead me to being pigeon holed as a school psychologist.”
Experiences Contributed to Decisions to Leave

RELATEDNESS

Faculty
  Race

Peer
  Race
  Simultaneous Decision Making
The people for APA accreditation came and they wanted to talk to all the students. And they asked us, one of the questions they asked us was about diversity. And I mentioned the group that had been started to address diversity. You know, it was a group that I was proud of that started to address some of the issues. And then, don’t you know, we never had another group meeting again. After all the paperwork was filled in… I felt very used… Like, did they just create the groups just specifically for that?
Kevin

“To their credit, they did. But I wasn’t interested, you know. And one of the students, she called me one day and said Kevin I don’t know what’s going on with you. Because it got to the point where I was wearing it on my face when I’d show up to class…”
## Trustworthiness

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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| **Dependability** | - External Auditor  
|                 |   - Detailed description of research methods and analysis                   |
| **Credibility**  | - Multiple Analyst Triangulation  
|                 |   - Peer Debriefing  
|                 |   - Member Checking  
|                 |   - Persistent Observation                                                  |
| **Transferability** | - Dense description of sample  
|                 |   - Rich descriptions of the data                                            |
| **Confirmability** | - Peer Debriefing  
|                 |   - Reflexive Journal  
|                 |   - Audit Trail                                                            |
Discussion

- Mismatch beyond program level to field as whole
- Perceptions of job role constraint accurate
- Poor relationships with faculty - need for culturally sensitive White faculty & more AA faculty
- Social Justice Implications
Helping Young Adults Pass a High School Exit Exam

Preliminary Results from Interviews with Five Tutors
Background

- One part of a larger study focusing on risk and resilience among young adults who have failed to pass a high school exit exam
- A high school exit exam (HSEE) is state-mandated test that public school students must pass in order to obtain a high school diploma.
- 25 states have HSEEs
Focus of Study

- What psychological and environmental factors...
  - help individuals to pass a HSEE?
  - impede them from passing a HSEE?
Rationale for Study

- In MA alone, about 3,000 high school seniors each year have not passed one or more of the three required exams
  - English Language Arts
  - Mathematics
  - Science (Either Biology, Physics, or Technology)

- This number underestimates how many high school students have not passed MA’s HSEE because it does not include those who have dropped out prior to senior year
Rationale for the Study

- Although studies have documented the unintended negative consequences of failing a HSEE, scant attention has been paid to psychological factors and understanding this major setback from the perspectives of:
  - The individuals who failed the test
  - The tutors who are attempting to help these individuals pass the test
- The latter group is the focus of this presentation
The long-term goals of our research program are to use the results of our research in conjunction with other relevant research to develop programs that will increase the coping skills of those who initially fail a HSEE so that they will eventually succeed on such a test. Inform policies on statewide standardized testing for English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from lower socioeconomic communities.
Settings and Participants

- HSEE tutors at two community colleges that primarily serve students of color from lower socio-economic communities
- State funded tutoring program
- Three tutors were male and two were female
- Three tutors were African-American, one was Latino, and one was White
- Four of the five tutors had master’s degrees
- Number of years they worked in education ranged from 6 to 45
- Number of years doing HSEE tutoring ranged from 3 to 10
Who Are Tutors’ Students?

- Most have failed to pass at least one of the HSEEs multiple times
- Interesting group for a resilience study
  - They have yet to succeed, but have not given up
- A high percentage of the students are English language learners
- Most are between the ages of 18 and 28
Method

- Qualitative Approach to Data Analysis
- Semi-structured interviews
  - Protocol of open-ended questions with follow-up questions for specifics and examples
  - Interviewers were two graduate students and their two professors
  - All interviewers achieved 95% fidelity with the interview protocol prior to conducting the interviews
Method: Examples of General and Follow-up Questions

3. Based on your experience, how does failing the MCAS affect someone?

| 4. Specific Effect Questions (if not already answered) | • What have you observed?  
• Ask for an example for each effect /consequence |
|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| • How did failing affect your students’…            | • Can you expand a little on this?  
• Can you tell me anything else?  
• Can you give me an example? |
|   o feelings about themselves? (emotional impact)    |                                                 |
|   o views of their strengths and weaknesses? (also a   |                                                 |
|    moderator) (self-concept)                           |                                                 |
|   o effort/motivation to do well in school? (academic |                                                 |
|    motivation)                                        |                                                 |
|   o confidence in passing the high school MCAS in the |                                                 |
|    future? (MCAS self-efficacy)                       |                                                 |
|   o goals and plans for the future? (Goal Setting     |                                                 |
|    and Plans)                                         |                                                 |
|     • in general                                      |                                                 |
|     • education related                               |                                                 |
| • Does failing multiple times have a different effect |                                                 |
|   than only failing once? If yes, how?               |                                                 |
Method

- All interviews were audio-recorded
- Length of interviews ranged from 42 to 64 minutes
- Interviews were conducted during a four month period of time
Coding System

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim
- Coding system was initially developed for interviews of young adults who had failed to pass the HSEE
- The system was adapted for the tutors’ transcripts (e.g., added a coding category for tutor’s approach to helping students)
Coding Process

- A research team composed of a faculty member and three graduate students coded the transcripts
- Two team members coded each transcript
- Differences in coding were resolved by consensus at a team meeting devoted to each transcript
- The next step involved grouping codes within conceptual themes
Four Themes

- Internal Protective Factors
- External Protective Factors
- Internal Risk Factors
- External Risk Factors
Examples of Codes for the Theme of Internal Risk Factors

- Academic Self-efficacy/Negative
- Coping/Problem-Focused/Maladaptive (specify)
- Coping/Emotion-focused/Maladaptive (specify)
- External Explanations for HSEE Failure
- Importance of Passing the HSEE/Devalues
- Mindset/Negative
- Self-concept/Negative
- Test Anxiety
- Unrealized Expectations on HSEE
Results
Protective Factors

- Tutors mentioned many different protective factors, including:
  - Effort
  - Goals
  - Self-reflection
  - Positive mindset (optimism)
  - Support from others
Protective Factors: Effort

- Mental or physical activity that is exerted toward attaining a goal
- Prominent theme for four of the tutors, and mentioned by all five
Protective Factors: Effort

- “….he’s a very responsible, and determined young man. So he would come for a couple of hours in a morning…leave directly from here and report to work, and then in some cases come back for an evening session, or a Saturday session.”

- “...one girl who I saw...was so happy ....she was like: ‘Miss! I passed the HSEE! Thank you!’ ... she was relieved.... we had the seven week summer course, which was also two times a week and she would, she was there every day....”
Protective Factors: Goals

- The end toward which effort is directed
- Prominent theme for three of the tutors and mentioned by four tutors
Protective Factors: Goals

- “...in many cases it’s a mother who worked three jobs to get them to this stage, and so they want to do it for them. Some cases it’s a child, many of them have toddlers, and so they’re trying to provide ...that home and future for the young ones...”
However, Goals Without Effort Are Insufficient

- “he has... a regular job, ...delivery boy... And he wants to get a better job, and he wants to get his diploma, he wants to go to college... He already has a son... He wants to be a better provider... However, because he’s put on hold...that’s his excuse... sometimes he won’t attend the class because he’s hanging out with the boys.”
Risk Factors for Failing the HSEE

- Tutors mentioned many different risk factors, including:
  - **Negative impact of failing the HSEE on subsequent attempts to pass**
  - Negative mindset (pessimism)
  - Weak academic and study skills
  - Lack of effort
  - Lack of self-reflection
  - Limited English proficiency
  - Other life responsibilities
  - Test anxiety
A prominent theme for all five tutors was the negative impact of failing a HSEE. In particular, their comments focused on the following areas:

- **Self-perceptions**
- **Goals**
- **Emotions**
- **Perseverance**
Risk Factors: Negative Impact of HSEE Failure

- All five tutors mentioned the negative impact of HSEE failure on **self-perceptions**
  - “I see a lot of students and their confidence is low. And they are very afraid. They ... feel like the HSEE defines them. ...And they feel that ‘Oh. I have not passed the HSEE. I’m not smart enough.’ ”
  - “…it’s devastating once they fail more than once or twice, they begin to personalize it...internalize it...and think that it’s a direct reflection on their innate intelligence.”
All five tutors mentioned the negative impact of HSEE failure on their students’ goals. “...We have so many who come in and say, ‘I would like to be a nurse’, or ‘I would like to work with computers after this’...And all of those plans tend to change after failing the HSEE...they begin to think what can I do without a diploma.” “Well, a lot of them can’t get jobs at all because everything usually requires a diploma.”
Risk Factors: Negative Impact of HSEE Failure

- Repeated failure can undermine protective factors and perseverance
  - “I have a student ... and he has taken the exam 6 times. So he is definitely hurt by it. And he, and he wants to give up ... he gets frustrated because he sees that other students who come to the session maybe once or twice pass the HSEE and he does not... And he’s trying, he’s trying, but it’s not enough.”
Tentative Conclusions

- From the tutor’s perspective...
  - Even students who have repeatedly failed a HSEE and have multiple risk factors, also have multiple strengths (i.e., protective factors)
  - A constellation of protective factors can help some students ‘overcome’ their risk factors and eventually pass the HSEE
Tentative Conclusions

- From the tutor’s perspective..
  - A major challenge for these students is successfully coping with the negative impact of failing a high stakes test.
  - Effort and goals are important protective factors, but in isolation do not ensure someone will pass a high stakes exam.
  - Goals can motivate, but different individuals find different goals motivating.
Limitations of the Study

- Small sample size
- Relied on the perceptions of one type of informant (HSEE tutor)
- Do not know to what extent the tutor’s point of view corresponds with other potential measures of their students’ risk and protective factors
Next Steps in Our Research

- Compare the results from the tutor and student interviews
  - What are the areas of agreement and disagreement?
- What are the implications for designing tutoring and other academic intervention programs that
  - build upon at-risk students’ protective factors to improve their resilience?
  - minimize the effects of a student’s risk factors?
References


References

