Cultural Sensitivity: Guidelines for Qualitative Research

H.J.M. Lie-A-Ling, P.H. Zuurbier, J.L. Roopnarine and R.L. Lindauer

Summary Cultural differences between researchers and participants may be associated with biases that reduce the reliability and validity of studies and negatively impact target communities. This methodological note responds to the lack of standards for cultural sensitivity in qualitative research in the social domain, and specifically educational sciences, in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Dutch-Caribbean, Suriname, and Flanders. Guidelines for cultural sensitivity are formulated for phases of qualitative research based on a literature review and illustrations of good and inconvenient practices from a case study. The guidelines emphasize the importance of developing cultural sensitivity at the level of researchers, institutions and by involving members of the target community at all stages of research. Finally, the scope of the guidelines is indicated, and the importance of an integral evaluation is stressed.

Keywords culture sensitivity, cultural diversity, cultural bias, qualitative research, guidelines

1 Introduction

To reduce bias in exploring and understanding social and behavioural phenomena, it is important to address more fully differences in beliefs and practices among researchers and participants. Cultural differences between researchers and participants can influence both the quality and generalizability of studies (Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap (OCW), 2020; Tilman, 2002). Researchers should be cognizant of cultural bias, which involves the "tendency to interpret and judge phenomena in terms of the distinctive values, beliefs, and other characteristics of the society or community to which one belongs" (APA Dictionary for Psychology). This can, for example, lead to the misinterpretation of (non)verbal signals and language and can become more problematic when dominant methods are used to assess other cultures. These issues can evoke distrust between parties (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), threaten the validity and reliability of studies and contribute to marginalization of (sub)groups (Burnette, Sanders, Butcher, & Rand, 2014; Tilman, 2002).

One of the world's leading scientific research organizations, the American Psychological Association (APA), acknowledged and addressed this matter on the 29th of October 2021 by officially apologizing to people of colour in the United States for its "role in promoting, perpetuating, and not challenging racism, racial discrimination, and human hierarchy" over its lengthy existence (American Psychological Association, 2021). The APA guidelines (2017, guideline 9; 2019, guidelines 13-17) emphasize the ethical responsibility of researchers, institutions, and agencies for culturally appropriate and ecologically embedded research. Yet, it is unclear how researchers can go about achieving this.

The concept 'cultural sensitivity' addresses cultural diversity in research which can be defined as "employing one's knowledge, consideration, understanding, respect, and tailoring after realizing awareness of self and others and encountering a diverse group or individual" (Foronda, 2008, p 210). Three ethical principles are central to conducting culturally sensitive research: (1) recognizing the importance of culture in people's lives, (2) respecting cultural differences and (3) minimizing any negative consequences of cultural differences (Paasche-Orlow, 2004). These principles are in line with article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and article 1 for equal treatment and non-discrimination in the constitution of the Kingdom of the Netherlands (2002).

In Dutch-speaking countries, that is in the Kingdom of the Netherlands which includes the Caribbean Netherlands, Flanders, and the Republic of Suriname, there are currently no standards for cultural diversity in social science research. This lack of standards is of concern to the educational and pedagogical research fields because these societies are becoming increasingly multicultural due to (post)colonial and contemporary global influences. In response to this concern, the Dutch government collaborated with higher education and the research fields and committed itself to better embedding and monitoring cultural diver-

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sity in research before 2025 (MOCW, 2020).

In the case of qualitative research, special attention is needed for cultural sensitivity because of its characteristics. A Dutch checklist for qualitative evaluation research endorses its importance, although guidelines for culture sensitivity remain implicit (Lub, 2020). In general, qualitative research is characterized by a relative proximity of researchers to the phenomenon and object of research. Ontological and epistemological principles tend to support an interpretive paradigm and it is common to view results as co-constructions between researchers and participants (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Qualitative research methods, ranging from interviews, focus groups, participatory observation to case file analysis, all share the common goal of providing in-depth insights into subjective experiences and phenomena (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). However, cultural differences between researchers and participants can negatively influence these characteristics and detract from the quality of the research being pursued. This methodological note aims to improve the quality and impact of qualitative research in the social domain in multicultural societies by providing guidelines for cultural sensitivity.

By combining insights from a literature review and a case study, guidelines for cultural sensitivity are formulated for phases of qualitative research (cf. Lub, 2020). Online databases (Google scholar, PsycINFO, EBSCO) were used to search for literature in the social domain using the following key terms: culture sensitivity, culture diversity, culture bias, positionality in combination with the terms qualitative research or guidelines. The case study is introduced in the next section. Thereafter, we draw from literature to substantiate each research phase with illustrations from the case study to offer guidelines for cultural sensitivity when conducting qualitative inquiry.

2 The case study

A brief introduction is provided of the qualitative case study that is used as an illustration of good or inconvenient practices. The case study examined intergenerational transmission of religious upbringing in three-generation Afro-Surinamese families (Lie-A-Ling, Zuurbier, Roopnarine, & Lindauer, forthcoming). Afro-Surinamese have a turbulent sociohistorical past embedded in Dutch colonial rule, slavery, racism and poverty. Within this context, Afro-Surinamese religion consisting of the Winti faith, originally from Africa, and Christianity, introduced by Dutch colonists, is intergenerationally transmitted in families. The study focused on Creole Afro-Surinamese living in Paramaribo, who are further referred to as Afro-Surinamese. The aim was to contribute insight into the protective or threatening qualities of religion for motherhood and child development. The research question posed was: 'How is Afro-Surinamese religion

used and intergenerationally transmitted or changed in parenting? In-depth interviews were conducted with 36 mothers stemming from 12 families. A research unit consisted of a family with three generations of mothers, that is, a grandmother (G1), her daughter (G2) and granddaughter (G3). The contributions of fathers were captured through the lens of daughters, reflecting on the role their father played in their upbringing. We reflect in the next section on good or inconvenient choices made related to cultural sensitivity in research.

3 Cultural sensitivity in research phases

3.1 Design phase

Paradigm. When participants' cultural backgrounds differ from those of researchers, it is essential for the research design to accommodate unconventional or marginalized worldviews and cultural contexts (APA, 2019; Tilman, 2002). For instance, an interpretative paradigm and its underlying ontological and epistemological principles allow for multiple views on reality that may deviate from what is conventional (Burnette et al., 2014). Also, a constructivist approach interprets phenomena within a specific (cultural) context rather than against what is common or dominant (Miller, 2004). Another aspect concerns the theoretical framework. Researchers should consider to what extent dominant theories entail cultural bias with possible negative consequences for (sub)groups. By alternately using a deductive and inductive approach, the research is driven by both theoretical and data-driven insights (van Staa & Evers, 2014). In other words, new or divergent insights are not overlooked (Miller, 2004).

Researcher level. Cultural sensitivity requires that researchers be aware of their own assumptions, world views and cultural values in relation to the participants and choices made in phases of research (Paascha-Orlow, 2004). A broader description of goals that promote cultural sensitivity in researchers include considerations of: (a) awareness of cultural diversity between researchers and the target group, (b) awareness of the researchers' own cultural perspective and that of the target participants or groups, (c) encounters with the other culture and (d) cultural knowledge (Foronda, 2008, p. 210). Relatedly, the development of specific researcher attributes should involve: (1) consideration, which refers to an empathetic and deliberating attitude; (2) understanding, which refers to perceiving and understanding the nature, importance or effects of participants' values and experiences; (3) respect, which refers to the appreciation and recognition of others; (4) tailoring indicates that researchers change their own perspective or make a practical adjustment in order to take the perspective of the other into account (Foronda, 2008). Reflexivity promotes researchers awareness of their

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own position and biases through an alternation of reflection and questioning (Hibbert, Coupland, & MacIntosh, 2010; Holmes, 2020). As the viewpoint of researchers is reflected in all stages of research, it is recommended to start with reflexivity as early as possible. In fact, the APA (2019) recommends reflexivity as an ongoing activity with respect to ethnicity and race.

Institutional level. The facilitation of researchers with time, peer consultation, supervision and training require significant investment and should be incorporated into guidelines for research (Burnette et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2014). One suggestion of the Dutch National Action Plan (OCW, 2020) is to promote cultural diversity among researchers. This will improve the exchange of cultural knowledge and sharpen skills at peer level.

Community level. It is important for researchers to acquire cultural knowledge and skills as early as possible in the research process. It is recommended that researchers construct a feedback loop of representatives from the target community in all stages of the research to reduce ethnocultural bias (APA, 2019). Discussions with gatekeepers, informants or members of the community (who are not participants) can help researchers gain cultural knowledge and make them more sensitive of phenomena and topics which are relevant to the research design (Pelzang & Hutchinson, 2018; Peticca-Harris, deGama, & Elias, 2016). For instance, when working with marginalized and Indigenous groups, an explicit eye is needed for the magnitude and type of stressors that are encountered or have been faced (Burnette et al., 2014; Tilman, 2002). In this phase, collaboration with members of the target community is essential to be able to assess potential risks and benefits related to the study (APA, 2019).

Case study. None of the involved researchers were of Afro-Surinamese descent. Therefore, several choices were made to promote cultural sensitivity toward the target group. First, the design benefited from the input offered by an inter-disciplinary, multicultural research team. That is, two developmental psychologists, a psychiatrist and an anthropologist worked together on the research. The team members had cultural roots in the Netherlands, Suriname, Guyana, and the United States. Second, an interpretive constructivist paradigm was chosen, in which Afro-Surinamese religious motherhood was conceived as a cultural construct. Eco-cultural frameworks that highlight parental etnotheories guided the conceptualization of the present study (cf. the Developmental Niche model of Super and Harkness, 1986). Third, reflexivity started during the initial stages of the study and involved feedback and questioning from peers and members of the Afro-Surinamese community. This led us to challenge assumptions that Afro-Surinamese mothers use harsh physical disciplinary methods routinely in childrearing. Although studies support this assumption in general, it could con-

tribute to stereotyping and hinder exploration of the subject. As the research progressed, reflexivity proved essential for identifying and exploring non-harsh parenting practices. Fourth, discussions with an Afro-Surinamese pastor and other community members provided cultural insights into the socio-historical background of slavery, racism, Christian and Winti religion, and matrifocal structures in relation to motherhood. These informants were found in the acquaintance sphere of the researchers. This helped the researchers to zoom in and be sensitive to topics of the Winti-religion, as there is a taboo to talk about this in the community. The contacts with Afro-Surinamese community members also proved to be very valuable for identifying gatekeepers, which included individuals who helped with identifying potential families to identify potential families. Finally, pilot interviews were conducted with two Afro-Surinamese mothers that aimed to contribute to sensitivity of topics, appropriate communication, and manners. For example, researchers were made aware that some family members lived in other parts of the country or in the Netherlands which impacted family support and influenced family dynamics. These efforts contributed to acquiring cultural knowledge and sensitivity in the early stages of the study and should not be seen separately from gaining access to target families.

Guidelines for the design phase
1. The chosen paradigm gives room to engage multiple cultural perspectives and interprets phenomena within context
2. Reflexivity is started early and integrated in all phases of research, with specific goals related to cultural sensitivity
3. Through reflexivity and encounters with the target community, cultural awareness, cultural knowledge and skills (among else, understanding; consideration; respect, and tailoring) are prompted
4. Research teams are preferably multicultural in composition

3.2 Method: collecting data

Recruitment. For the collection phase, collaboration with the target group can be of tremendous value. Informants can provide cultural knowledge about the phenomenon under investigation, which helps researchers to formulate selection criteria for participants. Also, members of the community can act as gatekeepers by helping with the recruitment of (potential) participants (Plochg, Juttmann, Klazinga, & Mackenbach, 2007).

Language. Another key aspect is that meaning making of language influences the reliability of statements, which advocates for the interviewer or moderator to speak the same native tongue as that of participants (Pelzang, 2018). This is especially relevant for phenomenological, ethnographic and grounded research

where in-depth interviews and focus groups are commonly used (Grossoehme, 2014). Another option is the use of translators or interpreters, although alertness to mistrust among participants due to the translator's insider position is necessary (van Nes, Abma, Jonsson, & Deeg, 2010). Because conversations usually take longer and the meaning of narratives can get altered, it is necessary to verify the role and position of translators and interpreters in terms of trustworthiness and professionalism.

Case study. Gatekeepers helped identify potential families, each consisting of three generations of mothers residing in Paramaribo. In general, gatekeepers made the first contact with the families and thereafter the interviewer made contact by telephone. Most of the time, access to the three generations mothers was obtained through G2, who functioned as the gatekeeper of the family. Not only did she give permission to G3, she also promoted participation of G1. By acknowledging the hierarchical structure of the families, dropout could be prevented.

In terms of cultural characteristics of the interviewer, selecting someone from a mixed Suriname background helped to bridge the gap between the researchers and the Afro-Surinamese community. Like the target group, the interviewer spoke both Dutch and Sranan Tongo. Differences were observed when a Dutch male observer was present; some participants seemed to retreat into silence rather than open up. Most of the conversations were held in Dutch, though it was noticeable that important and sensitive messages were regularly expressed in Sranan Tongo. This multilingual facilitation benefited the flow, depth, and authenticity of the conversations.

Guidelines for collecting data
5. The data-collection process is tailored to meet collaboration between researchers with gatekeepers and informants
6. Interviewer characteristics are weighed in terms of cultural differences and similarities with potential participants
7. In case interpreters are utilized, their role and position in terms of reliability and professionalism are discussed with members of the community
8. Culturally sensitive knowledge and skills are applied iteratively in all stages of research to bridge cultural distance, including in the field of language, religion and cultural etiquette

3.3 Analysis

Triangulation. Triangulation involves the use of multiple theories, researchers, data-collection methods, data-analysis methods, and sources to mitigate bias and to enhance reliability and construct validity (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, Di-

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Censo, Blythe, & Neville, 2014; van Staa & Evers, 2010). By involving target community members as part of triangulation cultural bias can be avoided. Likewise, allowing key informants to review and give feedback on the data can contribute to construct validity (Amerson, 2011; Burnette et al., 2014; Staples, Bird, Masters, & George, 2018).

Reflexive iteration. An important process that has not been mentioned so far is reflexive iteration. Though it concerns all areas of research, it is indispensable for the analysis phase. This process involves progressively connecting emerging insights to increase focus and understanding of the data (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). As researchers refine and connect their cultural knowledge and skills through encounters and emerging insights in the data, this can increase cultural sensitivity. For designs of studies, it is vital to incorporate time to facilitate these processes, as will be illustrated below.

Case study. Data were collected and analysed from two cohorts, which demanded extra time investment and alertness to manage exceptions in the data. Yet, there were important advantages to having two cohorts. During encounters with the first cohort, it was noticed that mothers reacted quite reservedly to Winti-related topics. Winti, an Afro-Surinamese nature religion, has been taboo in Suriname for decades. This awareness process has led to tailoring and therefore, conversations were held with the Afro-Surinamese cultural organization NAKS and some Winti experts. As a result, Winti knowledge, respect and understanding increased in the interviewer. What this meant is that Winti stories could be better understood and appropriately questioned, making it easier for mothers to converse about the subject. Care was taken to use the same topic list for both cohorts. Correspondingly, cultural sensitivity and intuition increased in the research team, although alertness to over-involvement on the subject was required.

In retrospect, the reliability and construct validity of the study would have benefited had the informants been involved in the analysis process and if the main results were presented to participants for feedback (also called member check). We did apply reflexive iteration and other forms of triangulation, which improved the reliability and construct validity of statements and contributed to reaching the point of saturation quite quickly. After eight research units, no new codes or themes were found. We continued up to 12 units to be sure that saturation was reached. In this regard, use of three sources per research unit, namely G1, G2 and G3, contributed to gaining a rich (as in, substantive deep information) and thick (as in quantity) account of Afro-Surinamese religious parenting. Additionally, informants participated in interpreting sayings in Sranan Tongo.

Guidelines for analysis
9.   Forms of triangulation incorporates the involvement of members of the

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target community or symbolic representations, for example literature or cultural organisations

10.   Reflexive iteration is related to cultural sensitivity with consequences for time investment and effort

3.4 Report

Accountability. A written account is given of choices made regarding cultural sensitivity to enhance transparency about the research process and results (Lub, 2020).

Translation. Translating text can be associated with loss of meaning and have negative consequences for construct validity (van Nes et al., 2010). Researchers often write in a language other than their native language and use translated quotes. Preferably, researchers can act as moderators during the translation process by explaining the context and intended meaning of text to the translator (van Nes et al., 2010).

Community impact. Equally important is that researchers avoid pathologizing the target group. Overly negative accounts could contribute to stigmatization and racism (Sue et al., 2007; Tilman, 2002). It is advised that researchers and members of the target group check the text for overly negative portrayals and stigma. Also, the APA (2019) recommends that journals formulate specific guidelines to check submitted documents on stigmatization and racism.

Case study. Because of the bilingual nature of quotes, the researchers collaborated with members of the Afro-Surinamese community to translate texts from Sranan Tongo into Dutch. The Dutch text was then translated into English by one of the researchers. It would have been better if a professional translator had assumed responsibility for this task. A native English-speaking peer then checked the English text. Though peers screened the final text, we failed to involve members of the target community.

Guidelines for report
11.   A written account is given of choices made regarding cultural sensitivity, including the process of reflexivity and translation
12.   Written reports are checked for overly negative accounts of the target community that can lead to racism or stigmatization

4 Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this methodological note was to contribute to the quality and impact of qualitative studies in the pedagogical and related research field in multicul-

tural societies. At present, guidelines are lacking for culture sensitivity in qualitative research in Dutch-speaking countries, such as those of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Dutch-Caribbean, Flanders and the Republic of Suriname. The guidelines presented herein have been built up in steps, whereby a foundation is laid in the design phase on which iterative construction is continued. This makes it possible to estimate the required investment in time and resources, which increases feasibility. If there is one lesson to be learned, it is the value of involving target community members at all stages of research. These guidelines are applicable for qualitative research in the social domain in multicultural societies comparable to Dutch-speaking countries. As such, these guidelines can be used as a supplement to the Dutch criteria list for qualitative research (Lub, 2020). Since the guidelines have not yet been tested, evaluation is recommended. In short, the suggested guidelines attempt to contribute to the integration of cultural sensitivity in qualitative research in which collaboration between researchers, institutions, governments, and non-scientific community representatives is the common thread.

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Samenvatting

Cultuur Sensitiviteit: Richtlijnen voor Kwalitatief Onderzoek

Culturele diversiteit tussen onderzoekers en deelnemers kan in verband worden gebracht met culturele bias die de betrouwbaarheid en validiteit van studies afzwakken en doelgroepen tekort doet. Deze methodologische nota speelt in op het gebrek aan standaarden voor culturele sensitiviteit in kwalitatief onderzoek in het sociale domein in het Koninkrijk der Nederlanden, het Nederlands Caraïben, Suriname en Vlaanderen. Op basis van een literatuuronderzoek en illustraties van *good* en *inconvenient practices* uit een casestudie zijn richtlijnen voor cultuur sensitiviteit in fasen van kwalitatief onderzoek geformuleerd. De richtlijnen benadrukken het belang van het ontwikkelen van culturele sensitiviteit op het niveau van onderzoekers, instituten en vooral door leden van de doelgroep te betrekken bij alle fasen van onderzoek. Tot slot wordt de reikwijdte van de richtlijnen aangegeven en wordt het belang van een integrale evaluatie benadrukt.

Kernwoorden culture sensitiviteit, culturele diversiteit, kwalitatief onderzoek, culturele bias, richtlijnen

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