

Beyond Research On Cultural Minorities: Challenges and Implications of Research as Situated Cultural Practice

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ABSTRACT: *This article examines the cultural nature of research. This is a consequential idea as research knowledge is expected to inform professional practices for our increasingly multicultural society. We highlight theoretical and methodological limits of the traditional practice of research on cultural groups and outline research as situated cultural practice. This notion challenges researchers to widen the analytic spotlight from a focus on certain groups to shed light on two additional aspects, namely, the sociocultural location of the researcher as a cultural being and member of a scientific field, and the cultural presuppositions in a field's habitual practices. We outline a model of culture that underlies the idea of research as situated cultural practice. We illustrate this notion with quantitative and qualitative research examples and reflect on implications for future research.*

Researchers have conducted studies on cultural minorities as a means to produce knowledge that can be used to serve the educational and psychological needs of our increasingly multicultural society. Although this is an important strategy to produce research knowledge that is responsive to heterogeneous populations, it falls short on several key theoretical grounds. Thus, this article examines theoretically the cultural nature of research.

We pursue this goal by developing two arguments; namely, we highlight the theoretical and methodological limits of the traditional practice of research on cultural minority groups and outline the idea of *research as situated cultural practice*. Instead of devoting efforts to do research on certain minority groups as special cases, we assume humans are cultural beings. The term "minority" is not used to reflect numerical representation. Instead, we use Gibson's (1991) definition of minority to describe groups that occupy a "subordinate

position in a multiethnic society, suffering from the disabilities of prejudice and discrimination, and maintaining a separate group identity. Even though individual members of the group may improve their social status, the group itself remains in a subordinate position in terms of its power to shape the dominant value system of the society or to share fully in its rewards" (p. 358).

The notion of research as situated cultural practice proposes that what drives research, its purposes and uses, how meaning is made during the implementation of research practices, and the knowledge and representations that are produced are culturally and socially mediated and negotiated processes. The idea of research as situated cultural practice requires that the analytic spotlight be widened from an exclusive focus *on* certain groups to shed light on two additional aspects. These are the sociocultural location of the researcher as an individual and a member of a scientific field, and the cultural presuppositions in the habitual practices of a field (e.g., theoretical categories, data collection and analysis tools; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Goodwin, 2002; Latour, 1999; Rosaldo, 1993). We define practices as "actions that are repeated, shared with others in a social group, and invested with normative expectations and with meanings or significances that go beyond the immediate goals of the action" (Miller & Goodnow, 1995, p. 7).

Our analysis is based on the premise that research is one of the best tools societies have to generate knowledge in systematic ways, to inform professional practice, and ultimately to help mold the future of our communities (King, 1968). We must refine how research is theorized in psychology and special education as researchers respond to the rapid and ongoing transformation of the sociodemographic profile of the school population. (Although we present examples from special education and psychology, the literature from which we draw to make our arguments is interdisciplinary and has applications for the social sciences in general.) Current demographic trends challenge researchers to produce knowledge bases that respond to the needs of growing groups of cultural minority students and to address the longstanding pattern of unequal outcomes (e.g., educational performance) across majority and minority groups of students (Lee, 2002).

The bulk of responses to addressing the needs of growing groups of cultural minorities and the pattern of unequal outcomes have been twofold: to ignore diversity or to make use of it (Cole, 1998). Examples of the former include English-only curricula and pedagogical approaches adopted in states like Arizona, Massachusetts, and California. In contrast, efforts that make use of diversity include multicultural approaches and culturally responsive pedagogy (Banks & Banks, 2004). Many of these efforts are grounded in research *on* the cultural traits and practices of various groups that are then infused in psychological and educational interventions. In these approaches, groups' cultural and linguistic practices are used as bridges to enhance the educational experiences and performance of these students (Gallego, Cole, & LCHC, 2001). However, as explained in the following, many of these efforts have significant theoretical limitations. Instead of relying on traditional research that focuses on the cultures represented in classrooms, we propose the idea of research as situated cultural practice.

BACKGROUND AND FOUNDATIONS OF RESEARCH AS SITUATED CULTURAL PRACTICE

The idea of research as situated cultural practice is grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship that uses a more dynamic and complex view of culture and links it systematically to human development. We integrate ideas from the sociology of science, cultural psychology, and anthropology (among others) to articulate the notion of research as a situated cultural practice (Cole, 1996; Engestrom & Middleton, 1998; Goodwin, 2002; Greeno, 1998; Latour, 1999; Rosaldo, 1993). The assumptions and implications of this idea are at the basis of a sociocultural paradigm. A central assumption of sociocultural research on child development, for example, is the "cultural and historical embeddedness of the inquiry itself" (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995, p. 871; see also Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). Unfortunately, researchers in psychology and special education have either ignored culture or used definitions with problematic assumptions.

LEGACIES AND RISKS OF CULTURE-BLIND FIELDS

Researchers in psychology and special education often work today in predominately culture-blind fields. Systematic analysis of empirical studies published over substantial periods of time in peer-refereed journals in psychology, special education, and school psychology show that researchers have neglected to ask questions, or to document and/or analyze data that would shed light on the role of culture in human development and provide alternative explanations for student achievement and behavior other than student deficits, which are often assumed with minority group status (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Graham, 1992; Santos de Barona, 1993).

Culture-blindness is an ideology that permeates many spheres of social activity, including research practices. This ideology assumes that equity in a democratic society is achieved by ignoring cultural differences and that culture and cultural differences are inconsequential. Culture-blindness prevents researchers from focusing explicitly on urgent issues that matter in today's changing world, such as questions related to the perpetuation of systems of advantage for certain groups or the racial stratification of societies.

The special education community has also neglected the role of culture in human development. Artiles, Trent, and Kuan (1997) found that *less than 3%* of studies published in a 22-year period in four influential special education peer-reviewed journals paid attention to even surface cultural markers, such as student race/ethnicity and social class. Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the legacy of culture-blindness in special education research practices is found in the recent National Academy of Sciences report on minority students in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The authors acknowledged, for example, that "analysis for this report of the effect of race/ethnicity on special education placement or outcomes was made more difficult because many research studies did not specify the racial/ethnic composition of the sample or had too few minority children to measure effects by race/ethnicity" (p. 381).

These findings suggest that culture-blindness permeates research practices in these fields. Cul-

ture-blind research has potentially costly consequences for a nation that is changing so rapidly along cultural lines. Can we afford to inform policy and practice with research knowledge generated from the perspective of only the mainstream group in society? "[W]hat happens to the scholarship when some voices are privileged and some are silenced, or worse, ignored?" (Walker, 2005, p. 35). Researchers must acknowledge this silence and acknowledge the silences that enter inquiry projects at various points of the research process (e.g., problem/question formulation, sampling, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, reporting). Although the cited research reviews focused on surface markers of culture (e.g., ethnicity, language background), it is not only important to acknowledge the need to transcend the use of these indices of culture, but also to acknowledge the limitations inherent in traditional views of culture.

ADDRESSING SCHOOLS' GROWING DIVERSITY: CONCEPTUAL LIMITS OF TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF CULTURE

Research that makes use of diversity can be grounded in views of culture that have important theoretical limitations with significant methodological ramifications. For instance, this line of work is often based on the assumption that only certain groups in our society possess culture. Thus, researchers from the dominant group in society (i.e., White and middle class) assume that their activities, assumptions, values, and practices *are not cultural* (Sue, 1999).

Moreover, it is often assumed that the cultures of minority groups are monolithic and static (Artiles, 2003). For example, discursive practices of African Americans are described as if these practices never change and are used in the same fashion by all members of this group. Methodologically, therefore, it is expected that researchers only need to recruit members of a target community because those individuals carry the same cultural information as their fellow members. Researchers proceed to document the cultural traits and practices of samples and subsequently derive applications for educational and psychological models and programs that presumably apply equally to all members of that community. It is

assumed that the patterns of practices documented reflect the essence of these groups and remain unaltered across time and spaces (see Artiles, 2003 and Cole, 1996 for discussions of such practices in research programs).

These assumptions limit the applications of this line of research in policy and practice. For instance, research on cultural groups might aim to derive psychological and educational interventions uniquely suited to the particular characteristics of distinct cultural groups of students. Nevertheless, several questions can be raised about the assumptions underlying this approach—for example, is it realistic to develop group-specific models in a society in which increasingly more groups are represented, particularly in schools? Furthermore, the cultural practices of disparate groups are differentially valued by mainstream society—for example, the narrative styles of children from certain linguistic groups and dialectal variations of English are devalued in schools (Lee, 2007; Smitherman, 2001). How would differences in group status be reflected in the design of intervention models? How would such equity concerns be addressed? These issues have significant implications for inappropriate referrals to various services such as special education, as well as for assessment practices that are considered uniformly appropriate for groups of students defined by labels such as English Language Learners (ELLs).

In addition, research on cultural minority groups is often construed as a special case of research, often reduced to the use of distinct sampling strategies (e.g., recruit members of groups traditionally underrepresented in research studies). This assumption is often reflected in the organization of scholarly volumes in which a central construct is covered across various chapters—for example, learning disabilities interventions or partnerships with families—and one chapter is devoted to “diverse groups” (i.e., ethnic minority groups). Again, the premise is that disabilities or family life are not cultural; culture becomes a consideration only in relation to certain groups. “The difficulty is that with rare exceptions . . . these populations are treated, in one way or another, as problems” (Cole, 2000, p. 374). A related assumption is to view culture as an independent variable in which the traits or prac-

tices of certain groups are assumed to cause behaviors—for example, membership in a cultural group (e.g., ethnic minority) will determine how a student thinks, learns, or relates to others (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003).

These are limited assumptions about culture and its role in human development. Researchers need to enhance the approaches that make use of diversity. More specifically, we envision special education and psychology research as *situated cultural practice*. This means special education and psychology research must be based on a view of “human nature that places culture at the center of its concerns” (Cole, 1998, p. 291). This is a fundamental idea because culture becomes ubiquitous and requires that researchers tackle several challenges related to the study of the cultural nature of learning and development. For instance, researchers are compelled to investigate questions that

- (1) do not reify culture in terms of specific behavioral or attitudinal characteristics;
- (2) do not isolate cultural particularities from the economic, social, political, and historical contexts in which they appear and function, but rather take these contexts into account;
- and (3) recognize cultural adaptation and improvisation. (Paradise, 2002, p. 230)

An important implication is that researchers in special education and psychology need to discontinue culture-blind research practices and avoid the use of a view of culture that is static, neatly bounded across groups, and indexed as a group or individual trait (e.g., ethnicity). Instead, we suggest, a cultural historical model.

BEYOND RESEARCH ON CULTURAL GROUPS: A SOCIOHISTORICAL VIEW OF CULTURE

The preceding discussion suggests that researchers need to account for the dynamic and instrumental nature of culture in research efforts (Erickson, 2002). Thus, we outline several central premises of a cultural historical model, also known as sociocultural or sociohistorical (Rogoff, 2003). This perspective assumes human development and behavior are cultural and that the nature of social institutions (e.g., schools, workplaces, families) also has a cultural character (Rogoff). This means

culture is not just what *other* people do. A related theoretical premise is that human activity is mediated by (material or psychological) cultural artifacts such as beliefs, values, customs, traditions, tests, literacy practices, and interview protocols that embody historical assumptions about their appropriate or expected uses. Even developmental skills and strategies traditionally considered universal (such as voluntary attention and attention management by children and their mothers) are mediated by cultural processes and practices (Chavajay & Rogoff, 1999). Because human beings regularly interact with others and/or with the tools of culture, cultural mediation processes must be examined historically (i.e., over time) to trace the origins and changes of developmental processes.

This means special education and psychology research must be based on a view of "human nature that places culture at the center of its concerns."

From this perspective, culture is "an immense, distributed, self-regulating system consisting of partial solutions to previously encountered problems" (Cole, 1998, p. 294). Obviously, not every member of a cultural community is exposed to or learns all aspects of a culture; indeed, culture is differentially distributed in patterned ways. For instance, researchers have documented how White middle and upper-middle class students with disabilities possess the cultural capital needed to advance their educational careers, including access to institutions of higher education (McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999). For this reason, cultural communities embody patterned ways of engaging with the world and within-community diversity.

One key component of this model of culture is an explicit attention to power. Culture is distributed unevenly across the various members of a community, which creates hierarchies in which access to and the possession of certain practices, knowledge, or other artifacts are endowed with greater or lower values (Arzubiaga, 2007). These hierarchies have deep historical roots as they are reproduced (though often challenged) across gen-

erations. This is an important consideration because, in addition to the cultural practices that individuals and groups learn and use to mediate their actions, social institutions also embody historically grounded cultural practices that regulate people's behaviors (e.g., discursive rules for classroom talk or ways of relating to others at church or at a school). Attention to *institutional cultures* can help us understand better how inequity is created and maintained for certain groups in our society. Examples of issues and contexts on which the role of institutional cultures can be studied include the contributions of schools to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, the recent racial (re)segregation of schools and its concomitant differential allocation of resources, the persistence of prejudice and stereotyping connected to school racial segregation, and the limited opportunity to learn in schools experienced by immigrant students (Artiles, Trent & Palmer, 2004; Frankenberg, Lee, & Orfield, 2003; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006).

The sociohistorical model of culture outlined in this section suggests that the analysis of developmental and learning processes must be situated in people's activities, whether they are located in everyday routines or experimental simulations. This means researchers pay attention to the social interactions of participants. In turn, the analysis of the cultural work people do with each other is informed by knowledge about what people bring to a given situation (e.g., past cultural practices that enable them to use thinking skills, language, knowledge, etc.) and the institutional cultures in which the interactions take place (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 2006).

This view of culture affords researchers rich possibilities to pose more complex questions about development, learning, and instruction and to understand the cultural communities served in educational systems. This model allows researchers to maintain their traditional concern about cultural patterning of various communities, but it also compels them to be attentive to within-group diversity and to an individual's construction of identities across contexts and time (i.e., history). This is indeed an important theoretical premise because it implies that people are active agents engaged in the *production* and *reproduction* of culture (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner,

& Cain, 1998). It requires researchers to understand, not people's cultures, but *how people live culturally* (Ingold, as cited in Moll, 1997, p. 194). It also affords the research community to re-imagine communities, particularly those historically marginalized and construed as culturally deprived, devoid of resources, and/or culturally stagnant (Artiles, Klingner, & Tate, 2006).

To summarize the arguments presented thus far: We must refine how the notion of research is theorized for at least one compelling reason. That is, we must produce research that responds to the growing diversity of the student population across and within multiple contexts. The traditional response to this challenge has been to conduct research *on* cultural minorities. However, we discussed how this practice is fraught with theoretical and methodological limitations. Instead of focusing on culture as the exclusive possession of certain groups in society, we propose a view of culture that defines the human experience; thus, culture is ubiquitous, dynamic, and has historical roots. The technical work researchers do, therefore, is seen as situated in complex activity settings that are imbued in cultural histories, assumptions, and practices. For example, there are distinctive core assumptions about the human experience that communities of researchers *within* disciplines such as special education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics use in their work. This means culture mediates how researchers think, ask questions, collect and interpret evidence, and report findings; hence, we need to understand research as situated cultural practice.

UNDERSTANDING RESEARCH AS SITUATED CULTURAL PRACTICE

Professional groups have developed guidelines and criteria to judge the soundness and rigor of research studies and made recommendations for the use of research techniques and strategies (e.g., American Educational Research Association, 2006; Odom et al., 2005). Most scientists conceptualize research as a purely *technical* enterprise (Latour, 1999). However, there are other dimensions of research practices that permeate the *technical* requirements; specifically, *personal, social,*

and *ideological* dimensions. Consistent with a cultural historical view, we propose that these dimensions of research, including the technical, are grounded in a cultural stratum. We ground our analysis in the substantial body of scholarship produced in the sociology of science and social studies of science (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Latour). This work suggests that actual "scientists' practice differs from that of its idealized characterizations . . . real scientists in their daily work are anything but disinterested and canonically rational" (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002, p. 22).

[T]here are distinctive core assumptions about the human experience that communities of researchers within disciplines such as special education, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics use in their work.

The technical activities and actions required to conduct research rely on the use of data collection and analysis tools, strategies, and procedures that are grounded in cultural assumptions, traditions, and values. Research strategies for data collection and analysis make visible or ignore aspects of phenomena under study. For example, researchers make a variety of decisions when transcribing recorded interviews or interactions among participants. Some analysts might decide to transcribe only the content of participants' verbalizations, whereas others might be interested not only in *what* people say but also in *how* they say it (e.g., nonverbal communication information such as pauses, voice intonation, gestures, gaze, etc.).

Another example of the cultural nature of research is the use of observational recording forms to code student behaviors during small-group cooperative work. Investigators might be interested in using codes that reflect behavioral topography to code on-task *versus* off-task behaviors. Other researchers might be interested in using recording forms and codes that enable them to measure affective responses during joint attention. The point is that researchers juxtapose recording forms (along with their embedded coding schemes) with

the observed world, and, throughout this process, researchers engage in theory-building activities that prompt them to include and note certain things and ignore or discard others. The decisions about transcription strategies or recording behaviors are grounded in assumptions about the phenomenon under study and the relevant indices to measure it. As Goodwin (2002) explained, “[t]his is the place where the multifaceted complexity of ‘nature’ is transformed into the phenomenal categories that make up the work environment of a scientific discipline. It is precisely here that nature is transformed into culture” (p. S22).

Theoretical frameworks, research tools (e.g., observation protocols, behavioral checklists, achievement or language proficiency tests), including researcher-designed tasks, embody theories of competent performance that might not be relevant or meaningful to a study informant’s history of participation in his or her cultural community (Rogoff, 2003). Thus, technical aspects of research contour researchers’ and study participants’ perceptual fields and mold how a phenomenon is defined and studied (Goodwin, 2002).

We broaden the traditional exclusive focus on the technical dimension by highlighting the cultural work that is done to carry out the different aspects of research studies. This cultural work embodies (a) *personal* (what researchers bring to their work such as assumptions, values, expectations, repertoires of cultural practices); (b) *social* (interactions among researchers and between investigators and study participants); and (c) *ideological* (the values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices that regulate and mediate the work and lives of researchers and participants in institutional settings) dimensions.

Researchers’ and participants’ interpretive and analytical processes are mediated by their cultural biographies (*personal* dimension). Paredes (1984) and Rosaldo (1993) have analyzed the ways in which well-meaning researchers use assumptions, knowledge from past experiences, and preconceptions about the communities in which they work to make decisions during fieldwork. For example, researchers might ascribe particular traits to entire cultural communities based on informants’ statements made during interviews; however, it is feasible that a deep understanding

of nuanced cultural expressions such as local humor could have changed substantially the interpretation of the informant’s statement. Researchers can also mis-represent individuals or communities through the use of coding categories based on stereotypical views of communities—for example, immigrant mothers’ reported discipline practices can be misinterpreted as authoritarian because of the lack of researchers’ understanding of the social ecology of a community’s social networks and violence level (Arzuviaga, Ceja, & Artiles, 2000).

The *social* dimension permeates every aspect of the technical implementation of research. For instance, researchers working with colleagues to design a study, or researchers instructing informants on data collection procedures engage in complex social practices that entail interpretive work and reasoning processes to achieve shared understandings of project tasks, or reach agreements on the meaning and goals of study activities. These social processes (and their concomitant cognitive work) undoubtedly have a cultural basis.

Time (i.e., history) is also a central factor in this discussion. Research activities are enacted in complex social contexts in which time plays a key mediating role. This means that the biographical trajectories (that include things like stances toward authority, values, preferred communication styles) of researchers and study informants mediate how they interact with one another. However, their interactions take place in institutional contexts (e.g., school classroom, testing room, principal’s office, school cafeteria). These contexts also encode cultural practices built over time that define people’s roles, status and hierarchies, rules of interactions and communication, and how routines should be enacted (*ideological* dimension). Institutional cultural practices have histories that create structures of advantage or disadvantage for different participants. For instance, the discursive practices privileged in classrooms afford advantages to middle class students and can have important consequences for students who are not familiar or have proficiency with such linguistic practices (Lee, 2007). In short, multiple mediating forces layer researchers’ and study participants’ interactions during research project activities (e.g., biographies, institutional practices) that

have deep historical meanings and consequences. People's performance in data collection tasks must be interpreted as shaped in part by these historically grounded and contextual forces; hence, we emphasize the notion of *situated* cultural practice.

To conclude, the conduct of research requires the coordination of technical, personal, social, and ideological dimensions. This is an important argument because it poses several critical demands on researchers beyond mastering techniques and methods. We cannot discuss all the potential implications of this far-reaching argument here. Our goal is more modest. Rather, we discuss fieldwork issues that make visible research as situated cultural practice, and illustrate these fieldwork issues with examples from quantitative and qualitative studies.

RESEARCH AS A SITUATED CULTURAL PRACTICE: FIELDWORK EXEMPLARS

We discuss fieldwork issues that illustrate research as situated cultural practice, namely, the composition of the research team and sampling decisions, validity considerations in the design and implementation of data collection procedures, and the roles of researchers during fieldwork. These research issues have been debated in various disciplines such as sociology (Naples, 1996); anthropology (Van Maanen, 1995); cultural psychology (Cole, 1996); and education (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), and will illustrate the notion of research as situated cultural practice.

RESEARCH TEAM COMPOSITION AND SAMPLING PROCEDURES: COMPLICATING THE IDEA OF "INSIDER"

Guidelines for effective research practices recommend the inclusion in research teams of key informants from the communities (e.g., schools, neighborhoods) in which studies take place. These informants play important roles that range from supporting entry to the target communities, to providing crucial information about the history, practices, and needs of their communities. One of the challenges associated with this practice is the researcher's lack of knowledge or understanding of the community's cultural practices.

This risk is heightened in projects that entail a short-term data collection phase.

Key informants, for instance, could share information that is partially understood or even misinterpreted by researchers because of their lack of familiarity with the community's language and cultural practices. Paredes (1984) revisited several classic anthropological studies with Chicanos(as) and Mexican Americans and showed how European American anthropologists failed to understand nuances and subtleties in the use of Spanish and other local cultural practices. Paredes's scholarship, as well as others, has called attention to various subtle (yet highly consequential) cultural aspects of researchers' work (Rosaldo, 1993; Stanfield & Dennis, 1993). Potentially damaging consequences include researchers' misunderstanding and misrepresentation of communities' histories, practices, and needs. Examples are listed in Table 1.

Researchers face similar challenges in quantitative studies. For example, it is likely that researchers recruit samples in communities different from their own socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, such as academically struggling learners or students with learning disabilities (LDs) in high-poverty schools. This is why it is always critical that research teams reflect on the nature of their connection to the group being studied (Goodnow, 2002). This practice might assist researchers to proactively anticipate the informants' perception of what researchers are doing and what they expect from informants. As Goodnow explained,

an early lesson in cultural studies is that people often agree to what researchers ask out of courtesy, amusement, expected benefit, or a sense of duress. The "ideal" group for the questions we have in mind may also be unwilling to be involved or unlikely to respond as we hope they will. When we consider our actions from others' points of view, we learn a great deal about what people perceive as sensible tasks, reasonable questions, appropriate social behaviors, and the implicit social agreements that are part of any situation that involves testing, interviewing, or observation. (p. 239, quotation marks in original)

Key informants or community insiders can play a decisive role in research projects in terms of facilitating access to the target population and in the

TABLE 1

Cultural Encounters in Research Projects and Their Potential Consequences

<i>Cultural Encounters During Study Activities</i>	<i>Reflections on Potential Consequences</i>
Informants' perceptions of what the researcher's main cultural community thinks of them.	What do low income Latino students perceive that European Americans think about them? How do these perceptions mediate their performance in the study tasks?
The influence of researchers' affective responses to informants.	How is the casual and informal demeanor of an African American researcher perceived by immigrant Cambodian students?
The (often implicit) criteria used to recruit key informants.	How do narrow criteria related to social class and surname produce skewed samples in Latino communities?
The history of interracial or interclass contact that informants have with the researcher's main cultural community.	How does the history of conflict between Native American and White groups mediate Native American students' engagement with research tasks presented by a White researcher?
The history of trust toward mainstream institutions that informants might have developed over time.	How do Black immigrant Haitian parents living in a state where anti-immigrant laws and policies are constantly discussed and presented daily on the local news engage in a parent involvement study?

Note. Content was drawn from Boesch, 1996; Goodnow, 2002; Paredes, 1984; and Rosaldo, 1993.

sampling process. Gueron (2001) discussed the significant benefits derived from random assignment (such as the increased reliability of estimates of program impact) in her 25 years of experimental research. She also warned, however, about the politics of random assignment that is often related to, among other factors, relying on community leaders and key informants for gaining access to sites. If not handled carefully, study participants might refuse to participate in the research or introduce threats to the fidelity of interventions.

Gueron (2001) discussed several lessons learned from her experimental work. We used these lessons to craft a hypothetical example that illustrates the cultural work involved in the composition of research teams and sampling procedures. The hypothetical example is an experimental intervention to increase the reading achievement of ELLs with LDs. The study would be conducted in a high-poverty community with a high proportion of ELLs and African American learners. Many members of this community would be undocumented immigrants; as we know, there are significant challenges related to obtaining informed consents from and designing

data collection procedures that render valid and reliable evidence with this population (Cornelius, 1982). This would make sample recruitment and data collection more difficult and lengthy. In addition, the school staff might be torn about random assignment, particularly with regard to students in the control group ("All these students ought to receive the intervention!" they might say). School staff might also raise sustainability questions ("What will happen after you finish your study and we stay behind with no resources to continue implementing the intervention?"). These situations would open a difficult negotiation process to obtain informed consent that could threaten the implementation of the study; culturally knowledgeable leaders and key informants can play crucial roles in resolving these situations in ethical and professional ways (Gueron, 2001). Moreover, school leaders and key informants can be a critical source of support when staff training is carried out. School personnel are working under immense pressure to meet No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) accountability and inclusion requirements; key infor-

mants and leaders with a deep understanding of research sites and school community histories can lay the groundwork to explain to overextended school personnel the purpose and potential benefits of the study, as well as the critical importance of learning the study procedures during the training sessions.

We have presented, thus far, examples of the challenges and risks associated with working with community insiders. It is also necessary, however, to raise questions about the very notion of *insiders*. The practice of recruiting insiders is based on the assumption that culture is cohesive; that is, it is assumed that cultural communities are homogeneous. The logic behind this practice is that key informants are knowledgeable about their cultural community—these individuals are insiders in the target communities. For example, researchers would recruit a Vietnamese person from the Vietnamese community in which they will conduct a study about the experiences of Vietnamese parents of children with mental retardation (MR). Researchers would assume such a person is both knowledgeable about the culture of the Vietnamese community and is considered an insider by her fellow community members, including the Vietnamese parents of children with MR.

We made such an assumption in our selection of an individual to assist us with our research in a Latino community. (The project was funded by Vanderbilt University's Learning Sciences Institute. The Principal Investigators were Angela Arzubiaiga, Alfredo J. Artilles, David Bloome, and Victoria Risko. The pilot research from which these examples are taken focused on the language practices and emergent biliteracy of ELLs who had recently migrated to a southern state.) In our attempt to choose a key informant who was knowledgeable of and involved in the target community, it became evident that the insider status was not a fixed position. Rather, the roles of insider and outsider are dynamic and socially negotiated through everyday practices (Holland et al., 1998). Our research team recruited a Latina woman whose pseudonym is Alicia. She was highly recommended by the school as a leader of the Latina(o) immigrant community in a small southern town. Her daughter attended the school in which we were doing our research, and she was

heavily involved in school activities. Field note and journal evidence suggested that she was considered an insider by Latinas(os) as reflected in the many roles she played to support these Latino families. For instance, she was a trusted interpreter for many families wherever she was needed in the community (e.g., hospitals, courts, school). Indeed, Latino(a) parents had *confianza* (trust) in Alicia.

However, we also learned over time there were important differences between Alicia and the other Latino families. Alicia's perspectives on certain critical issues were not necessarily aligned with the views of many members of the Latino immigrant community. For instance, many Latino families supported bilingual education programs, whereas Alicia supported English immersion programs, which was the school's position. It became gradually apparent that Alicia was not always an insider in the Latino immigrant community. We found out, for instance, that her Anglo married name positioned her as an outsider in the minds of many Latino families. Furthermore, her Anglo stepfather was born in the United States, which socialized her to the practices of the dominant culture. She also informed us that while she lived in Mexico, English was the language spoken at home. On the one hand, in some ways, Alicia was comfortable with and identified with the mainstream Anglo culture of the United States. On the other hand, she identified herself as Latina and was fully conscious of the discrimination Latinos(as) experienced in this town; in fact, she related instances in which she felt discriminated against for being Latina.

After we learned about Alicia's status as both insider and outsider in the Latino community, our team decided to create spaces within the research project to reflect and question the problematic dichotomy of insider and outsider identities. We expected these reflections and discussions would inform future data collection and analysis efforts and decisions. In addition, we invited Alicia to some of the research team and school meetings with teachers so that she would have access to our views on literacy and language instruction. We expected and found that access to our perspective helped her to better understand the purpose of our project.

To conclude, recruiting individuals who are considered insiders in a cultural community is a laudable and consequential strategy to support researchers' work in project activities such as entry to sites, sample recruitment, securing informed consents, and staff training. Nevertheless, there are significant risks associated with this practice. The examples described make visible the cultural nature of this research strategy because expectations about the appropriateness of a person as an *insider who can also assume an ahistorical position in a community* is illusory. Researchers can inadvertently essentialize cultural groups when they assume that all members of a (professional, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, etc.) community act and think the same way, when, in reality, "pure" or homogeneous cultures do not exist (Cole, 1998). In fact, the examples suggest that the construction of insider/outsider identities is always a local accomplishment. Alicia's story teaches us that researchers must strive to understand how people *assume*, but are also *given*, and *co-construct* multiple positions (e.g., insider, competent, engaged) across contexts, depending on a host of forces that include local communities' practices and history, as well as a person's biographical trajectory. Researchers face important challenges for the composition of research teams and sampling strategies.

OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDITY AND POWER IN DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

Attention to ecological validity helps us to understand the idea of research as situated cultural practice. Ecological validity is defined as "the extent to which behavior sampled in one setting can be taken as characteristic of an individual's cognitive processes in a range of other settings" (Cole, 1996, p. 222). Individuals' actions in experimental conditions are expected to represent their typical (cognitive, linguistic, social) performance under similar conditions across settings. Qualitative studies also focus on individuals' performance in the target natural settings with the expectation that the recorded performance reflects participants' routine ways. Ecological validity, on the other hand, requires that researchers understand the difference between "sampling the occurrence of psychological tasks in different environments

and sampling environments within which to engineer psychological tasks" (Cole, Hood, & McDermott, 1997, pp. 52–53). This is particularly important because study participants may not be familiar with researcher-designed tasks or procedures. Hence, the recorded behaviors might not offer a valid instance of what the researchers wanted to examine in the first place (Cole, 1996). Unfortunately, interventions in psychology and special education are often designed with evidence obtained from ecologically invalid studies (Cole, 2000). On a positive note, researchers in fields like developmental psychology are becoming more attentive to the sampling of everyday activities/tasks to gauge situational competence and increasingly acknowledge the key role social interactions and interpersonal assistance play in developmental processes (Goodnow, 2002).

Ecologically valid inquiry requires researchers to (a) target situations that are authentic to the person's routine experiences and (b) work in settings that accurately resemble the individual's everyday milieu (Cole, 1996). These requirements rest on the assumption that *there is an alignment between researchers' and participants' understandings of project goals and data collection activities*. Gueron (2001), for example, advised quantitative researchers to help project participants understand how flexibility can (and cannot) be used in the study procedures. She explained,

[s]ites that decide to participate sometimes come to view the initial procedures as holy writ. They may nearly kill themselves trying to follow them without realizing you might be able to make a change that will not matter to the research but that will make their lives much easier. They probably will have trouble distinguishing between rules central to the study and those that can be adjusted at the margins. (p. 39)

Lack of research teams' and participants' understanding or confusion about the subtle but consequential issue of data collection flexibility might threaten the integrity of interventions. Again, this issue depends largely on the participants' definition of the situation (e.g., the study procedures) and its alignment with the researchers' perspective (Cole et al., 1997).

It is important to recognize there are multiple opportunities in the process of designing and

conducting research findings in which ecological validity can be violated. Let us examine, for example, some issues related to intervention studies. Experimental intervention procedures differ from everyday life in a number of ways. For instance, researchers and participants rarely know how the intervention tasks, procedures, or situations relate to the participants' *routine ways* to perform or use the cognitive, linguistic, or social strategies purportedly tapped by the intervention (Lave, 1997). Gersten et al. (2005) recommend checking fidelity implementation through the observation of key features of an intervention, like drawing visual representations of a math problem. It is feasible that researchers obtain a high fidelity index in such a project, but the fidelity measure would not offer any insight on whether study participants were familiar with drawing visual representations of abstract ideas using school-based math codes, or whether they were talented at representing such concepts with narrative or artistic means in their daily routines. In short, the implementation of the intervention was conducted with high fidelity, but the intervention practice was not ecologically valid to gauge the participants' math proficiency.

Experimental intervention procedures also differ from everyday life in the timing of performance demands (Lave, 1997). A teacher might allocate the required instructional time and enforce the prescribed response latency in an early literacy intervention study that targeted traditional skill based outcomes (e.g., nonsense word fluency, sound naming, blending, segmenting) that would result in a high fidelity index. Nonetheless, attention to ecological validity would assist us to understand that several participating struggling readers could interpret the intervention as meaningless and boring, resulting in lack of engagement with the tasks or delayed responses that, in turn, would affect the impact of the intervention.

These are important ecological validity issues researchers must be mindful of during the implementation of research projects. But even when researchers design procedures with ecological validity in mind, problems can arise. Let us illustrate this point with an example from our pilot study on the emergence of biliteracy. A theoretical premise of our project was that reading is situated within readers' sociocultural contexts that, in

turn, implies that reading research should be located in the realm of literacy and its practice (Lee, 2007). This model of literacy compelled us to be concerned with collecting evidence in participants' everyday contexts, and, therefore, we designed data collection tasks with explicit attention to ecological validity.

In addition to documenting literacy practices at school across contexts and languages, we aimed to assess family literacy practices at home and in the community. For this purpose, we gave video cameras to families to record daily literacy activities. To our surprise, the video recordings that families produced depicted staged literacy events at home that mirrored traditional school literacy practices. For instance, we saw one of our target students, Silvia (pseudonym), assume the role of a pupil while her older sister became the teacher who guided her to read a passage in English. The sister spoke in a severe tone and extended commands, corrected Silvia's pronunciation, and rarely responded to her gestures. Other tapes showed several episodes of Silvia sitting in front of the camera with her books open, occasionally turning the pages of her notebook or looking at the camera. We realized that we neglected a crucial component of ecological validity, namely, the alignment between participants' definition of the data collection procedure with the research team's definition (Cole, 1996).

We deliberated how best to approach this unexpected course of events. Researchers too often may assume that clear and systematically delivered instructions ensure that study participants share researchers' definitions of the data collection tasks. It is further assumed that what participants do or say in data collection tasks (i.e., their behaviors), reflect who they are, what they think, and what they typically do outside of research contexts in the domain under scrutiny. In our project, a blatant deviation from what we expected to obtain made visible the fragility of these assumptions. We were reminded that, "when we speak, we afford subject positions to one another" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 26). Our instructions afforded these families particular subject positions as imitators of school teachers and pupils. Language mediated largely how we afforded these positions. Noteworthy is that there is no term for "literacy" in Spanish. One would need to describe

the idea at some length with some technical language in order to convey the concept. A literal Spanish translation of the word "literacy" is "reading and writing" (lecto-escritura), which obviously does not reflect the complexity of this construct. Framed this way, our directions summoned school-like activities and, thus, they afforded the positions role-played by the families.

A couple of lessons are worth mentioning. First, researchers must remember to distinguish between the *production* of an actual event (e.g., the actual "literacy" events caught on video at home) and the *meaningfulness* of the event for the people that produced them (Bloome & Clark, 2006). Although these families produced what they seemingly thought was a literacy event at home, we would need to gather additional information about how meaningful the observed event is for the routine cultural practices of the family. This, of course, imposes additional demands on researchers in terms of the duration and intensity of data collection. (The result of our team's reflections and deliberations was that we changed how the data collection task was framed. We opted for a more open-ended approach, and thus, we asked families to video record their daily routines. Our plan was to subsequently identify literacy practices from those routines through an iterative coding process.)

Another lesson is that a participant's behavior cannot be interpreted as embodying her fundamental nature or her traits (e.g., Latino student's home literacy practices), but as the result of people's *situated* efforts to participate in cultural practices in particular contexts. People's discourse and actions in a given situation reflect how they resolve the constant tension between (a) the rules prescribed by their cultural community and (b) the positions they assume in particular circumstances and situations that compel them to negotiate, comply, or innovate (Holland et al., 1998).

The families in our research project defined the data collection task as a request to role-play school literacy activities. This could have been interpreted as a strange request. Nevertheless, the families honored our petition. But why did they acquiesce to such an unusual request? The answer, in part, is grounded in another critical aspect of ecological validity, namely, *power*. Life events, including research activities, do not take place in a

vacuum. Every situation or event is always imbued with power. Where there are people, there are roles, hierarchies, and, thus, power. An important fact documented consistently in the sociology and anthropology of education is that communities create subtle cultural differentiations within themselves through political processes in which power is the main currency (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). In the United States, certain groups (e.g., people with disabilities, women, racial minorities, poor families, some recent immigrant groups) occupy a lower status, and, thus, they wield less power (Rosaldo, 1993). Over time, mainstream perceptions, values, and stances toward these oppressed groups get fossilized, thus, building up historical residues that permeate social interactions or institutional policies. An example is the range of stereotypes created about low-status groups with regard to their abilities and values (e.g., poor families do not value education; poor African Americans have limited mathematical abilities but excel in the arts and sports) and the pernicious consequences of such stereotypes on these individuals' performance in certain domains (Steele, 1997). Harry and Klingner's (2006) 3-year study of minorities in special education documents a host of examples in which negative historical residues about minority children and families mediated how school personnel represented them as *different* (e.g., disabled) and lacking.

Researchers can no longer assume that study results represent *a view from nowhere*. All researchers bring perspectives, assumptions, and expectations to their labor that are cultural in nature and shape the work done in their projects. But culture and power are not only indexed in people's perspectives, they are encoded in the categories and discourses on which research questions and analytical categories are grounded. Foucault's idea of dividing practices is relevant in this discussion—these are categories created for "organizing and controlling people and subjecting them to the goals of a social institution" (as cited in Bloome & Clark, 2006, p. 237). Thus, it is germane to ask how do researchers contribute to make school dividing practices look "natural" for certain groups of students through the questions they ask and the methods used to gather evidence?

In summary, the notion of research as situated cultural practice is made visible in fieldwork events in which ecological validity is at stake. Concerns for ecological validity create crucial demands on researchers for the design of research data collection procedures and the task instructions for participants. These examples illustrate the significance of checking for study participants' familiarity with research tasks and activities as well as the alignment between researchers' and participants' understanding of research procedures. Equally important is the role of power and how researchers use it in investigative activities, particularly with members of minority communities. These considerations also create additional challenges for researchers in terms of the roles they play in their projects.

RESEARCHER ROLES: TENSIONS BETWEEN PROFESSIONAL DISTANCE AND INFORMANTS' WELL-BEING

Researcher roles have been debated for a long time in research communities (Brantlinger, 1999; Rosaldo, 1993). Positivist approaches to research expect researchers to be detached from study participants as a way to preserve their objectivity. From a naturalistic perspective, researchers assume the role of the human instrument in which they are expected to document the role of their subjectivity in the research process (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). However, there is disagreement in the latter tradition regarding how involved the researcher should be with his or her informants; some argue for merely documenting their own subjectivities (through keeping a journal, working with a peer debriefer, etc.), whereas others with a participatory bent do not object to becoming advocates for their informants. Ultimately, researchers using all paradigms face fieldwork situations in which their roles are challenged. This issue has been framed as related to researcher identities—researchers construct and (can) use various identities during the research process (Marshall & Rossman). For instance, researchers can approach their work as a professional and technical endeavor in which interest-free goals and a distant position is adopted. In contrast, other researchers might assume a transformative stance in which the goal is to change oppressive

conditions and an activist identity is embraced (Brantlinger). Harry (1996), for instance, describes how she adopted various researcher identities in her projects that included researcher as Afro-Latina, Third World mother, inclusion standard bearer, and advocate. These identities were shaped by specific contextual factors and the participants involved in the projects.

We argue that independent of the roles embraced by researchers (from traditional to transformative), all the work that goes into constructing the division of labor in research projects entails cultural practices. Consistent with the view of the culture we are using, power issues are at the center of these processes. This is an important consideration because researchers have significant power in research projects. In the end, researchers' decisions about how to define their roles are not based purely on technical considerations; moral and ethical sensitivities are at the heart of such decisions (Brantlinger, 1999). Interesting examples about the intertwining of power, ethical, and moral issues in the definition of researcher roles are found in Harry's (1996) work. In a study of Puerto Rican families with special needs children and their communication with special education professionals, she witnessed school practices that violated legal rules in the conduct of IEP meetings with a participating mother. She did not advocate for the mother during the meeting but informed her about the procedural anomalies after the meeting. Harry reflected about her lack of involvement at the meeting as related to her role as a doctoral student, which positioned her in a more vulnerable status.

In a subsequent study with African American mothers of children with disabilities, Harry intervened actively to advocate for a mother who had, in her view, "been pressured into tears by the arguments of the committee" (Harry, 1996, p. 298). Harry had to decide whether to adopt an advocacy role in situations in which she was committed to the well-being of both the families of children with disabilities and the school staff. In one case, she opted to advocate for the parents and assist them in presenting the goals for their child with disabilities to the school personnel (Harry).

Researcher role dilemmas can also arise in quantitative studies. For instance, researchers leading a professional development experiment to prepare teachers in the use of "response to intervention" (RTI) strategies might face such a quandary. It is feasible, for instance, that the researchers might learn about teachers' low morale in the target schools that is due to the overwhelming number of mandated reforms teachers are expected to implement. Moreover, a subgroup of teachers in the selected schools might express strong negative attitudes toward RTI for various (unstated) reasons that seemingly suggest a limited understanding of RTI. What are researchers to do? How can this information be used as random assignment procedures are about to be implemented? What role should researchers assume with regard to their relationship with the participating teachers?

In all of these examples, decisions to pursue particular roles are the result of cultural practices related to normative assumptions and expectations of what research is about, the expected identities of the researchers, awareness about researcher's power and how to exercise it, and the contingencies of interactions during fieldwork. These examples illustrate how researchers face situations in which some of the traditional expectations and norms for their roles were challenged. As researchers face dilemmas, they make choices about their identities and roles as researchers.

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH AS SITUATED CULTURAL PRACTICE: TOWARD EPISTEMIC REFLEXIVITY

We explained earlier that the need to refine theoretically the notion of research is driven by two major contemporary developments, namely, the increasing diversity of the student population and the growing pressure to respond to minority children's needs and their longstanding pattern of unequal outcomes (Cole, 2000; Odom et al., 2005). Moreover, the problems and questions studied in psychology and special education are increasingly complex, which require that researchers have access to a wide range of methodological approaches (Odom et al). We argue that one important effort

to respond to these challenges is to use the idea of research as cultural practice in future research programs. Our proposal raises significant challenges for researchers as illustrated by our examples on the composition of research teams, sampling decisions, validity, and researcher roles. We expect our analysis will promote critical deliberations about the cultural nature of human development and learning and the cultural resources we deploy to study them. These deliberations can help research communities make progress in better understanding and addressing effectively the needs of students from marginalized communities, such as ethnic and linguistic minorities, immigrant students, and students with disabilities.

TOWARD AN EPISTEMIC REFLEXIVITY IN PSYCHOLOGY AND SPECIAL EDUCATION

The discussion of research as situated cultural practice sheds light on the cultural historical forces that shape the design and application of inquiry strategies, procedures, techniques, and the generation of knowledge. Rather than abandon research with minority groups altogether, we expect our analysis and examples will compel researchers to be mindful about the cultural nature of their research projects. Specific issues to be addressed in future research include how research teams are created, how access to communities is achieved, how samples are defined and selected, cultural considerations to achieve ecological validity, and the need for ongoing deliberation about researcher roles. Although space constraints prevent us from addressing these aspects, we outline a few reflections about what we consider the most critical and perhaps challenging implication of our analysis, namely, to maintain a meta-awareness about the fact that research is also a cultural practice.

A meta-awareness about research practices will help researchers to engage systematically in critical self-reflection or embrace an "epistemic reflexivity" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), that is "the inclusion of a theory of intellectual practice as an integral component and necessary condition of a critical theory of society" (Wacquant, 1992, p. 36). Epistemic reflexivity summons a stance toward the conduct of social science; as Wacquant explains, this notion compels researchers to

engage in self-analysis as cultural producers. Epistemic reflexivity reminds us that disciplines and the work of researchers can be the objects of study, and it challenges researchers to examine critically the social and cultural influences that constitute theoretical categories and research practices (Erickson & Gutierrez, 2002; Moss, 2005).

Although epistemic reflexivity has been theorized by various social scientists, we use Bourdieu's take on this construct (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). His primary focus

is not the individual analyst but the *social and intellectual unconscious* embedded in analytic tools and operations [He also defined it as a] *collective enterprise* rather than the burden of the lone academic; and [he] seeks not to assault but to *buttress the epistemological security* of [psychology and special education]. (p. 36; emphases in original)

Epistemic reflexivity can assist researchers to tackle at least three sources of bias that were reflected in our analysis and examples. The first source of bias is in the sociocultural markers such as social class, ethnicity, and gender that filter the researcher's gaze. The second source is in the location of the researcher in the academic field that affords her a particular point of view in relation to others. It is assumed that scientific fields are social fields with intellectual and political considerations.

By bringing to consciousness those forces that shape our understanding and practice, we can attain some degree of control over them and reconsider the practices and institutions through which they work so that the field's incentives can become more consistent with its goals. (Moss, 2005, p. 26)

And third, the intellectualist bias that is found in the "presuppositions inscribed in the fact of thinking of the world, of retiring from the world and from action in the world in order to think that action" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 39). These presuppositions are embedded in constructs and data collection and analytic tools, strategies, and procedures. Epistemic reflexivity, therefore, "calls less for intellectual introspection than for the permanent sociological analysis and control of [special education and psychological] practice" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, p. 40).

The challenge for researchers is to institutionalize epistemic reflexivity in the routine procedures of journal peer reviews and grant evaluations, research design and conduct, and researcher and leadership preparation. We expect epistemic reflexivity will contribute to the consolidation of research communities with disparate theoretical views and methodological approaches that engage in routine discourse with one another that can be characterized as "transformative criticism" (Longino as cited in Green & McClelland, 1999, p. 229). This way, the traditional research that documents mostly deficits and "typical" practices of minority communities will shift to ask more complex questions about learning and development as cultural endeavors. The consolidation of an epistemic reflexivity will also assist us to frame studies with explicitly stated assumptions about the cultural location of researchers and the means they use to answer study questions and hypotheses. In conclusion,

epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognize and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their innermost thoughts are subjected and it informs a conception of the craft of research designed to strengthen its epistemological moorings. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 46)

This is indeed a highly consequential practice that should be nurtured as we are living in an era in which culture is becoming increasingly complex and researchers are being challenged to account for culture as the medium of human development.

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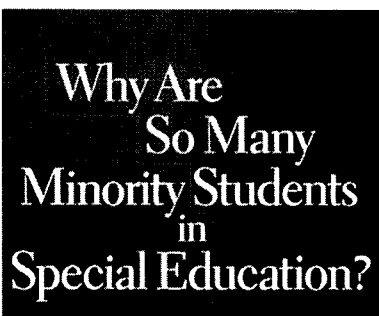
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