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Good Enough? Interventions for Child Mental Health:

From Adoption to Adaptation – From Programs to Systems

Introduction to the Special Issue

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Abstract

This special issue examines essential challenges and successes for developing, implementing, and disseminating evidence-based psychological interventions for child and adolescent development and mental health. The main aims are to identify what evidence is “good enough” for roll-out, if and how interventions need to be adapted to developmental diversity and contextual variation, and how they relate to complex systemic contexts. Themes of the special issue are twofold and first include questions about adoption versus adaptation, both in terms of developmental tailoring and cultural adaptation of existing intervention programs. Second, the issue tackles questions about what systems of support are needed to ensure the system readiness for child and adolescent mental health interventions. We argue that moving from simple adoption to dynamic adaptation and from programs to collaborative systems offers new perspectives for developing and implementing flexible protocols and strategies that allow adapted intervention. The special issue raises broader questions of whether current intervention programs and practices are good enough in moving us from mere adoption to innovation in system readiness, or whether we need to do more before we can claim that interventions are good enough for roll-out.

Keywords: Child mental health; Developmentally tailored interventions; Cultural adaptation; Systems of support; Roll-out

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Are psychological interventions for children and adolescents good for all? Or are adaptations to interventions necessary to make them more relevant for target populations' needs? If so, what kinds of adaptations, when, and how? There are several reasons why it is urgent to reflect on the question asking what is good enough for roll-out for psychological interventions for child development and mental health, why existing intervention programs and practices show effectiveness or not, and under what conditions. First, the number of children with emotional and behavioral disorders remains high, and there is a lack of systematic monitoring and delivery of mental health services for children and adolescents (Costello, this issue). Second, it is not yet fully understood how the field should deal with the almost pervasive small and moderate effect sizes of many psychological, psychiatric, and educational programs. Third, it is not clear under what circumstances interventions can count as “good enough” for large-scale dissemination, and what needs to be done to deliver sustainable interventions in complex adaptive systems. These essential challenges need to be considered in making decisions about what results constitute “good enough” for systematic roll-out.

The special issue aims at discussing these questions by focusing on three independent yet interrelated lines of work: the role of developmental considerations in the design, implementation, and evaluation of intervention programs, and the question of contextual and cultural adaptations in intervention programming. These issues have

critical implications for providing how the best possible, integrated systems of support can be created.

For the special issue, author teams contributed examples of their work on the question of adoption versus adaptation and programs versus systems, with the first three articles addressing the issue through discussing the need to tailor interventions based on needs and developmental levels of children and adolescents. When it comes to developmental adaptation, the articles discuss the role of how to incorporate diverse developmental characteristics of children, special needs, and heterogeneous subgroups of children in current intervention planning, as well as the question of timing and if there are periods in development that are more crucial to intervention than others (Ng, Eckshtain, & Weisz; Garber & Brunwasser, this issue; Malti, Chaparro, Zuffianò, & Colasante, this issue). Although these issues have been discussed in the literature since more than a decade (e.g., Ollendick, Grills, & King, 2001), they are not systematically addressed in existing psychological interventions. For example, developmental research has shown that there is not only intraindividual but also great inter-individual variability in children's self-regulatory ability to adapt to adversity (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010). While this is likely going to affect responsiveness to interventions at any given time point in development, it has not yet been systematically considered in current conceptualizations of intervention principles.

The next three articles illustrate this question by expanding current research on contextual and cultural adaption of intervention programs (see Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005). Specifically, the authors discuss the question of cultural robustness of interventions, the need to adapt existing programs to new social and cultural contexts, and

the feasibility of adopting existing programs and transporting them without extensive revisions to different cultural settings (Sundell, Beelmann, von Thiele Schwartz, & Hasson-Knut, this issue; Gardner, Melendez-Torres, Leijten, & Montgomery, this issue). This question relates to the ongoing debate of the role of culture in conceptual models, designs, and delivery of interventions targeting child and adolescent mental health and development (Pina & Gonzalez, 2014). While this first set of articles approaches the question of adoption versus adaptation from different perspectives, they all address themes of why interventions (don't) work, how child development and cultural and contextual diversity matter for program models, and how delivery can be improved to expand the scope of impact in program and practice delivery.

The last set of papers addresses one of the remaining challenges in current intervention programming, i.e., the integration and coordination of system services. Despite the call for more coordinated systems of support over the past 10 years (Greenberg et al., 2003), systems that serve children and youth remain fragmented. For example, the typical institutional settings in which interventions need to get rolled out need an answer to the questions whether specific interventions, such as anti-bullying programs, can be connected to other interventions so that they can be administered to all students. Simultaneously, the systems context in which public service innovations are located is complex and constantly changing, which has created a recognized need for flexibility and adaptability (Paina & Peters, 2012). Based on a developmental epidemiological perspective, Costello (this issue) argues for the systematic use of screenings and surveillance systems at the population level to monitor need for services and track the effects of interventions. The question about early detection systems

becomes particularly relevant for targeted or high-risk intervention, where a differentiated process of detecting, diagnosing, and intervention is needed. Moving from programs to systems, Kendziora, Osher and Weissberg (this issue) investigate how districts can make social emotional development and mental health a systemic part of their educational practice and integrate it into their strategic plans and district policies and priorities. Lastly, Ghate (this issue) discusses the related question of how to deploy an implementation lens to better understand what is good enough for roll-out in diverse, complex systemic contexts, and if and how adaptations are necessary to create flexible, integrative approaches to the design and evaluation of psychological interventions for child development, health, and well-being.

Collectively, the special issue offers a selection of articles that describe the need for dynamic, flexible adaptations at the individual-developmental and contextual-cultural level in real world practice settings. The “future directions” article discusses the main themes of the special issue and derives suggestions for future research and empirically-driven intervention practice (Malti, Beelmann, Noam, & Sommer, this issue). We believe that new models that are theory-guided and that consider adaptations flexibly and from an integrative approach have great potential in relation to intervention adaptation, coordinated systems of support, and large-scale impact. We highlight areas for research on dynamic intervention program adaptation to diverse developmental needs, cultural settings, and complex systemic conditions. This includes, but is not limited, to the assessment of developmental differences, cultural differences, and more systematic study of developmental risk and resilience factors that influence intervention effects, as well as moderators and mediators of intervention effects to identify mechanisms of change and to

strengthen the link between program theory, developmental research, and empirically-driven intervention practice. These are core questions that will need to be addressed in future research and practice. We hope that these questions stimulate debate and new ideas that can move the involved fields forward to improve psychological interventions for children and adolescents.

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