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# DEVELOPING CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES FOR MICRONESIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GUAM\*

Iain K. B. Twaddle, Jonathan K. H. Lee, Stephanie M. Mansfield,  
Grace P. Sablan & Jeffrey C. Mendiola

## INTRODUCTION

The geographic region of Micronesia encompasses more than 2,000 tropical islands and atolls spread across the western Pacific Ocean between Hawaii and the Philippines. The term *Micronesia*, derived from the Greek *mikros* (small) and *nesos* (island), reflects the small size of the islands compared to those in other parts of the Pacific. The region has a total population of approximately 500,000 and includes numerous distinct island groups, each with its own unique language, culture, and history. Politically, it is divided into five independent nations: the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), including the states of Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae; the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI); the Republic of Palau; the Republic of Kiribati; and the Republic of Nauru. In addition, there are two United States (US) territories: the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) and Guam.

Compacts of Free Association between the US and three Micronesian nations—the FSM, the RMI, and Palau—permit citizens of these nations to live and work in the US and its territories. As the largest and most developed island in the region, the US Territory of Guam offers opportunities for advanced education, high paying jobs, Western health care, and a modern urban environment, all within a few hours flight from other parts of Micronesia. Thus, Guam has become a popular destination for Micronesians from the FSM, the RMI, and Palau emigrating to the US under the Compacts, with thousands of immigrants from these nations making Guam their home in recent years. According to the 2000 Census (US Census Bureau, 2002), there are now over 11,000 Micronesian immigrants in Guam, representing 7.2% of Guam's total population of approximately 155,000. They are comprised of six main ethnic groups, including four from the FSM—Chuukese (56.1%), Pohnpeians (12.3%), Yapese (6.2%), and Kosraeans (2.6%)—as well as Palauans (19.3%) and Marshallese (2.3%). Guam's other ethnic groups include indigenous Chamorros (42.1%), Asians (39.5%), and Caucasians (6.8%), making Guam an island of rich cultural diversity. Its official

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languages include both English and Chamorro.

### **Micronesian International Students at the University of Guam**

The University of Guam is the only US-accredited, four-year institution of higher learning in Micronesia. It has a student population of approximately 3,000, half of whom are of Micronesian descent, including Chamorros (43.0%) and other Micronesians (5.7%) (Johnson & Inoue, 2003). The majority of the Chamorro students are from Guam; they tend to live at home with their families while attending the University and are fluent in English, the University's primary language of instruction. There are also a number of Chamorro students from the neighboring islands of the CNMI; they too are fluent in English, but unlike the Guam Chamorros, live away from their home islands and families while attending the University. The other Micronesian students are primarily from the FSM, the RMI, and Palau. Many of these students are permanent residents of Guam, having emigrated to the island with their families sometime prior to beginning their university education. However, some students from the FSM, the RMI, and Palau move to Guam on a temporary basis for the purpose of attending university. Most of these students do not have family members living on-island and thus reside in the University's residence halls. Like other foreign nationals, they often return home during semester breaks and tend to leave the island when their degrees are completed. Moreover, many are still learning English as a second language. Consequently, even though they are classified as resident students<sup>1</sup>, their university experience is more akin to that of international students. The term *Micronesian international students* is therefore used throughout this paper to refer to students from the FSM, the RMI, and Palau who have moved to Guam temporarily to attend university.

Micronesian international students face significant cross-cultural challenges as they undertake their university studies. Most are on their own for the first time, and are learning to live without the support of their families and extended kinship networks that are central to Micronesian cultures (see Hezel, 1989; Tseng & Hsu, 1986). They also have to overcome linguistic barriers in order to interact with people outside of their own ethnic group. Moreover, as they come from less developed islands, Micronesian international students must adapt to modernity, Westernization, and Guam's faster pace of life (see Smith, 1994). Together, these difficulties often have a negative impact on their academic performance (Smith, Türk Smith, & Twaddle, 1998), and many Micronesian international students return to their home islands prior to completing their degrees. High levels of stress and mental health problems can also result, as demonstrated by research showing significantly elevated levels of depression and suicidal ideation for this population (e.g., Twaddle, Sablan, Lee, Mendiola, & Etpison, 2003).

### **PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICE PROGRAM**

While Micronesian international students have access to many academic and social programs at the University of Guam, prior to this study, there were no specialized services available to meet their mental health needs. To address this concern, the authors developed a psychological service program for Micronesian international

students living in the University's residence halls. The goal of the program was to create a supportive and non-threatening environment where they could talk with their peers about the struggles they faced adjusting to Guam and college life. As Micronesians international students tend to associate exclusively with members of their own ethnic groups, we also wanted to facilitate positive social interactions among students from the different islands in the region. The program was designed to be culturally responsive by incorporating Micronesians cultural values and practices into the intervention model. Seven key cultural characteristics were considered.

First, Micronesians cultures traditionally have a collectivist social structure, where interpersonal relationships are highly valued, and emphasis is placed on meeting the needs of the family and the community rather than the individual (Alkire, 1977; Lessa, 1966). Thus, we implemented our program through a group modality.

Second, gender roles in traditional Micronesians societies were sharply defined, and today, Micronesians still tend to work and socialize in gender-segregated groups (Hezel, 2001). In keeping with these cultural norms, we employed a gender-based model, with separate groups held for men and women.

Third, respect plays a central role in Micronesians social interactions, especially when relating to one's elders. Micronesians are taught from an early age to listen and be deferential toward their elders. They are also expected to avoid familiarity with authority figures by maintaining a respectful social distance (Hezel, 1989, 2001). Consequently, Micronesians international students may feel uncomfortable talking about personal issues and expressing their opinions in a therapy group run by a professional counselor. To address this concern, we developed a peer-facilitator model, employing undergraduate resident assistants (RAs) and psychology practicum students, who were of Pacific Island and Asian descent, to serve as the group facilitators (including the second, third, fourth, and fifth authors).

Fourth, Micronesians do not often turn to strangers for help with personal or family problems, as this would bring shame to themselves and their families (Smith, Türk Smith, & Twaddle, 1998). Thus, they seldom seek professional mental health services. The peer-facilitator model helped to overcome this barrier. While the peer facilitators were trained counselors, they were also members of the student community, who lived, worked, and socialized with the students living in the residence halls. This meant that student residents were already familiar with the facilitators prior to the program's implementation, which encouraged their participation. It also helped to reduce the stigma that Micronesians commonly associate with mental health treatment.

Fifth, Micronesians do not tend to see emotions as psychobiological processes situated within individuals, as is common in individualistic cultures; instead, emotions are understood as "sociocultural achievements" characterizing exchanges between individuals (Lutz, 1998). Thus, the psychotherapeutic practice of exploring and attempting to resolve one's "inner feelings" outside of the context of one's social relationships might seem foreign to many Micronesians. Instead, we created socially-based activities, including team building exercises, structured question games, and group outings, which provided opportunities for participants to express themselves through their interactions with others. We also strived to make the activities culturally relevant so as to encourage participants to utilize their personal strengths and cultural knowledge. For example, one of the most powerful sessions for the men occurred on a night hike in the central hills of Guam. After hiking together for about an hour, the participants and facilitators arrived at the top of a hill overlooking Sigua Waterfalls, where they held a group session. The camaraderie engendered by the hike, together with

the outdoor context, led participants to discuss existential themes and to explore sensitive issues such as suicidal thoughts. After the session, some of the men encouraged the group to climb to the bottom of the falls, where they caught freshwater shrimp and cooked them over an open fire. This rounded off a powerful night of male bonding—Micronesia style.

Sixth, food has an important symbolic meaning in the Micronesian islands, signifying love, care, and affection, as well as respect and hospitality (Marcus, 1991). Hence, food is an essential component of all Micronesian social interactions. We learned early on to integrate food sharing into our program activities, by either serving dinner or preparing meals with participants.

Finally, Micronesia has a vibrant oral tradition, in which storytelling serves as the primary means for passing on cultural, familial, and personal histories (Mitchell, 1970; Peter, 1996). Narrative approaches to therapy fit well with the oral tradition, as they provide a framework for talking with people about their lives through storytelling, that is, by exploring the stories that people bring into therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). Thus, we chose narrative therapy as the primary theoretical orientation to guide our program. We started by asking participants to draw their lifelines, highlighting memorable life experiences, and then invited them to share their life stories with each other. We returned to life stories again in later sessions, with each session covering a specific life period, such as childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Once participants had shared their life stories in detail over a series of sessions, we looked at the broader cultural narratives that shaped their stories, and helped them to deconstruct and re-author these stories in empowering ways. In particular, we wanted participants to make sense of the competing cultural narratives associated with American and Micronesian ideologies, to explore how their problems might be related to the cultural friction arising between Western and indigenous ways.

The resulting intervention model was a gender-based, peer-facilitated support group, integrating narrative therapy with socially-based activities and food sharing. To avoid the stigma associated with mental health treatment, the program was simply called *Group*, with promotional materials presenting the name as an acronym standing for “Guys/Gals Representing Our Unique Perspectives.” Both the men’s and women’s Groups were conducted weekly in the University’s residence halls during fall and spring semesters. They were open to all residents, but attracted mainly Micronesian international students, who comprised the majority of students living there. Throughout the program’s first two years, outcome research was conducted using qualitative methods. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in helping participants to cope with the cross-cultural challenges associated with moving to Guam and attending university, as well as to evaluate the program’s role in facilitating cross-cultural interactions.

## METHOD

### Program participants

The program was open to all students living in the residence halls. Participation was completely voluntary and not based on any clinical criteria. At the beginning of each semester, the program facilitators held social events (e.g., barbecues), where they outlined the goals of the program and invited students to participate. Then each week,

students were reminded about the program by their RAs and via flyers posted in the residence halls. The Groups did not require consistent attendance and remained open to new members throughout each semester. As a result, participation varied, with some students joining occasionally and others settling in as weekly participants. On average, the men's and women's Groups each had 5 to 10 participants per week. In total, 72 undergraduate students participated in the program over a two-year period. They included 41 women and 31 men. Participants' ages ranged from 16 to 59 years ( $M = 23.70$ ,  $SD = 6.93$ ). Fifty-four (75.0%) identified their ethnicity as Micronesian or other Pacific Islander, 11 (15.3%) as Asian, and 7 (9.7%) as Caucasian. Among the Micronesian and other Pacific Islander participants, eight ethnicities were represented (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**Ethnicities of Micronesian and Other Pacific Islander Participants**

Ethnicity	Program Participants		Research Participants	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Micronesian</i>				
Chamorro	7	13.0	2	8.7
Chuukese	8	14.8	3	13.0
Kosraean	2	3.7	1	4.3
Marshallese	2	3.7	2	8.7
Palauan	20	37.0	9	39.1
Pohnpeian	6	11.1	3	13.0
Yapese	8	14.8	2	8.7
<i>Other Pacific Islander</i>				
Samoan	1	1.9	1	4.3
Total	54	100.0	23	100.0

### Research participants

Research participants included those Group members who participated in qualitative interviews aimed at evaluating the program. Overall, 28 Group members participated in these research interviews. For this study, we focused on the responses from Micronesian international students and other Pacific Islanders who had moved to Guam temporarily to attend the University, as our goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in meeting the needs of this population. There were 23 Micronesian and other Pacific Islander research participants, including 13 women and 10 men. Their ages ranged from 16 to 36 years ( $M = 21.73$ ,  $SD = 4.80$ ). Twenty (87%) were Micronesian international students from the FSM, the RMI, and Palau, two (8.7%) were Chamorros from the CNMI, and one (4.3%) was from American Samoa<sup>2</sup>. All participants had recently moved to Guam to attend the University. All but one spoke one of the Micronesian languages as a first language and English as a second language; the remaining participant spoke English as a first language. Eight Micronesian and other Pacific Islander ethnicities were represented. The distribution of ethnicities among research participants closely resembles that for the Micronesian and other Pacific Islander program participants (see Table 1).

## INTERVIEW DESIGN

The effectiveness of the program was evaluated through three types of qualitative interviews: (1) *needs assessment group interviews* held during the initial Group sessions of the first year of the program, (2) *program evaluation group interviews* held during the final Group sessions of each year of the program, and (3) *individual interviews* held with regular Group participants at the end of the program's second year. All interviews were conducted in English by the program facilitators in sessions lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. They were designed as semi-structured, interactive dialogues, loosely following a predetermined set of open-ended questions (Fontana & Frey, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In the needs assessment group interviews, participants were asked to describe the cross-cultural challenges associated with (a) moving from their home island to Guam, (b) living in Guam and relating to people from different cultural backgrounds, and (c) adjusting to college life. In the program evaluation group interviews, participants were asked to discuss their thoughts about the program and its role in helping them to cope with the cultural adjustment problems outlined in the needs assessment. The individual interviews included questions from both of these interview formats, giving participants an opportunity to discuss themes from the group interviews in greater depth. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

## QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

The interview transcripts were analyzed following the constant comparative method from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As we read through the transcripts from the group interviews, line-by-line open coding was used to document emerging themes and identify substantive codes, or categories, within the data. These categories were created by clustering related themes together, with each incident of a theme helping to define the category. Theoretical sampling was then employed in the individual interviews, whereby interview questions focused on clarifying existing themes and exploring hypotheses generated from the group interview transcripts. As new data were collected, the categories were modified until such time that new incidents of a theme no longer added meaning to the category, that is, it had become "saturated." Conceptually related categories were then combined, creating a more parsimonious representation of the data. Finally, categories with themes expressed by a minority of respondents were eliminated from the analysis so that the final set of categories represented only those themes expressed by the majority. These procedures resulted in ten thematic categories, each of which is presented below along with illustrative quotations from the research interviews. The first four categories were derived from the needs assessment interviews and concern cultural adjustment problems experienced by participants; the remaining six came from the program evaluation interviews and focus on therapeutic domains addressed by the program.

## RESULTS

### Cultural adjustment problems

*Acculturative Stress.* The first theme that emerged from the analysis addressed the acculturative stress associated with the experience of adapting to a new environment and culture. All of the research participants had moved to Guam from other islands in the Pacific, and many came from small atolls where subsistence lifestyles are still commonly practiced. Participants described having difficulty adjusting to Guam's more Westernized culture and faster pace of life, and highlighted significant differences between the cultural values in Guam and those in other parts of Micronesia.

*When I was a freshman, it was really hard for me because that's the first time I was away from home... I did not like the campus. I did not like the life here... Then during my sophomore year, when I went back to Chuuk, I planned not to come back. I really don't want to come back, but my parents told me to go back: "You go there and finish the school!" So I went back during sophomore year.*

*I'm not used to the life here in Guam, it's too complicated. It's kind of faster for me, it's different . . . more modernized.*

*In Pohnpei, everything is... not the same as here. People value different things. When I moved to Guam, I was just shocked... I was used to viewing things like the way the Pohnpeians saw it.*

*I was born in the Marshall Islands, in one of the outer islands... I moved to Guam two years ago, and at first... it was kind of hard for me to talk to people because it's a new environment. Where I'm from, in our culture, it's hard for people to confront others. And for me to come over here by myself... it was hard for me to mingle with others. Especially the first year, I couldn't confront people, you know just talk to them straight, because of the different culture.*

*Intercultural Tensions.* The second theme focused on the intercultural tensions Micronesian international students sometimes experience, not only with people from Guam as outlined in the first theme, but also with fellow residents and other University students from a variety of cultural backgrounds. While the residence halls house students from diverse Pacific Island and Asian cultures, Micronesian international students tend to socialize exclusively with students from their own island region. This is not surprising, as each region has its own unique language and culture. Participants said that they associated with members of their own ethnic group as they were not accustomed to interacting with people from other cultures. They also explained that when they did try to socialize with people from other cultural backgrounds, they often faced social and linguistic barriers.

*Well when I came here, I just hung out with Palauans. It wasn't that I was racist or anything... I got so used to staying around Palauans back home, so when I*



*came here, I didn't really want to meet anybody else.*

*I think everybody has stereotyping, right? But especially when I never met anybody from anywhere, you just know your own kind.*

*I like to hang around with residents from other cultures sometimes, but sometimes I feel like, you know, an outsider.*

*I think I'm ok with different cultures... hey, I'm going out with a Yapese guy... He always like to force me to learn Yapese, and I'm like, "No way, just stick with English!"*

*Homesickness, Loneliness, and Isolation.* The third theme reflected feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and isolation. In addition to coping with being in a new culture, most of the participants were living away from their home islands and families for the first time. While being away from home is a common experience among college students, it is a significant event for Micronesian international students, most of whom grew up in close-knit, extended family networks, where interdependence and mutual support were highly valued. In the research interviews, participants talked about the challenges they faced as they adjusted to living independently, focusing on the experience of being alone in a new place without family and friends for support.

*I've never been staying alone, it's always with my family. So in the beginning it was really scary... I felt so lonely.*

*Now, I just moved into the dorm and I am learning to be alone. I'm trying not to think about it because it's really painful. Sometimes I don't want to eat... I cry... I won't study at school.*

*I'm still adjusting. I used to find it hard to do everything by myself. You have to think of your schedule, going to class. You have to do stuff like paper processing and registration, thinking of what to eat and when to cook it. You come home from class, the hardest part for me is when you are tired, you have to do everything by yourself.*

*My family and friends back home are the ones I think about a lot. When I have something bothering me or I feel like I am lonely, I used to look for my mom and dad to spend time with.*

*When I had a problem, I talked to my friends. Here, I don't really have that. I mean, I have some friends, but I can't share too much with them. So I feel alone sometimes.*

*Past Exposure to Social Problems.* The fourth theme concerned participants' exposure to social problems while growing up in their home islands. In recent years, modernity and westernization have brought about rapid social change in Micronesia, including dramatic shifts in the traditional family structure and a consequent rise in

social problems such as suicide, substance abuse, and family violence (Hezel, 1999). In fact, the suicide rates for young men in Micronesia are among the highest in the world (Rubinstein, 2002). Most participants had direct exposure to such problems within their own families and peer groups. After moving to Guam, many were troubled by memories of these experiences, which often exacerbated their cultural adjustment difficulties.

*The thing that I kind of worry about is I once tried to commit suicide... Committing suicide was like a popular thing back home. It's like a hobby and everybody is competing... It's crazy, all those people I knew, I think half of them are dead—they commit suicide. We grew up together, we played together, we went to school together. I knew all of them and all of them are gone. I lost a lot of friends. When I'm lonely in my room... I get flashbacks. I don't want to think about those dark days.*

*My dad beat my mom up all the time, so I think my mom got tired of him, so they divorced. I stayed with my mom until now... When I came to Guam, I was thinking of my mom. When she has a problem, she come and talk with me and if she's mad at somebody, she came and beat me up or slap me. But I'm used to that life.*

*In Yap, when I was growing up, my father was an alcoholi... I lived with drunk people and I watch them drink and I know that when they get drunk they sometimes fight. That is kind of scary sometimes... So when I was growing up, I usually go and visit my grandma and most of the time I really want to be with my dad and mom... And when my mom was pregnant, my dad got drunk one time, and I think he is really drunk, he doesn't know what to do. So we were trying to run away from him . . . and then he just pushed me and I hit the wall.*

*In Chuuk, there are a lot of teenagers like my age or older that if they have problems they drink a lot. They are always going out and they never concentrate on their education.*

## **THERAPEUTIC DOMAINS ADDRESSED BY THE PROGRAM**

*Sharing Personal Issues.* The fifth theme indicated that “Group” provided a supportive environment for sharing personal issues. Participants explained that Micronesians tend to deal with personal problems on their own, rather than turning to other people for help. However, they said that Group created a unique space where they felt safe to disclose personal issues and to give and receive feedback. Some felt that Group was the only place where they could talk openly and share their feelings with others.

*When I first heard about Group, I thought, “Hmm... maybe I'll give it a try... maybe I'll learn something.” And yes, I have learned some things over these years. I've learned a lot about sharing feelings and that it's okay to share, it's a way of developing and growing in college and in life. You better yourself by going through this program... It's a way to open and explore your mind.*

*At first when I attend the Group, I was in shock when you asked us to talk about our life. It was something new for me. In my culture, people don't talk about their problems, they keep it within themselves. But Group opened my mind to talk about personal stuff. There were times that I really miss my family and I was thinking of going back home, and the Group really helped me out during those stressful times. I'm glad I had the Group to turn to.*

*The good thing about the Group is it allows others to share their problems. Where I come from [Kosrae], they don't do that. It's the "man thing" – they don't share, it's seen as a weakness. But the Group allows us to talk with others. You're not the only one facing problems, so you need someone. It's good that you can share and give them advice . . . so it helps, it really helps.*

*The Group gives us an outlet to discuss issues seriously and to get constructive feedback from the other members. It's a good setting for that. There were times when I felt there was no other place to express myself.*

*Sharing Life Stories.* The sixth theme focused on the importance of exchanging life stories as a means to enhance personal growth. Participants valued the opportunity to share stories about themselves, their families, and their home islands. They gave especially positive feedback about the life narrative sessions, in which each participant was invited to tell their entire life story, focusing on the people, places, and experiences that were most influential in shaping their identity. Participants said that through sharing their life stories, they were able to gain insight into their past experiences and develop a deeper appreciation for the people in their lives. They also enjoyed hearing the life stories of their fellow Group members, which they felt taught them valuable life lessons.

*I really enjoy the Group, it taught me a lot about life. You know, we've been having this Group for the past two years and I learned a lot from the different stories that have been shared.*

*You're the first people that I've told how my life was in the past. I never shared my story with another person, not even my girlfriend. Most people think, "Who cares?" . . . but you got to tell your stories so other people can help you in your life.*

*Some of the stories that we talk about in this Group, whether it was a story from childhood or a story of a particular person in your life, I believe that those were the stories that needed to be discussed because it meant something to a person. Like when I talked about my grandfather, I didn't realize how much I valued him, and then as I talked about it, I realized that I actually miss these people in my life.*

*We share many things in Group. One is that we shared past experiences so that others may learn from them. By sharing those experiences, I think the Group was able to help its members by giving examples of problems they went through. Learning from their mistakes, you can go forth with your life, and if you do make a mistake, you know that other people have been through it and you can plow on through.*

*Addressing Mental Health and Substance Abuse Problems.* The seventh theme highlighted the role of the Groups in addressing mental health and substance abuse problems. In the Group sessions, members frequently talked about feeling stressed and overwhelmed with their lives; many described emotional difficulties such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts; some confided that they often turned to alcohol and drugs as a means to cope. Participants explained that by providing an outlet to talk about these problems, Group helped them to improve their mental health and to reduce their substance use.

*Most of the time, school is not hard for me to cope with, it's more my personal problems that get in the way. When I come to Group, I unload a lot of personal things that are blocking me from doing what I think I should be doing, like my schoolwork. For me, school is not hard. It's controlling my emotional problems that's hard for me. So Group helps a lot.*

*I think it's healthy to talk about suicide instead of keeping it all to yourself. The Group gave us an opportunity to do that.*

*In the islands we find all kinds of excuses to drink and to do all kinds of stuff, and I guess the Group just showed us that we don't have to resort to these kinds of things to let it out. You know, in the islands, you don't say things when you're sober, but when you're drunk that's when everything comes out. But in the Group it didn't matter, you can just say whatever.*

*I quit smoking and I haven't had a drink for two months now—just from the Group, 'cause we shared our problems... I'm glad that I was able to quit.*

*Improving Interpersonal Relationships.* The eighth theme underscored how the Groups helped participants to improve their interpersonal relationships. In Micronesia, people tend to define themselves through their relationships with others, and thus, interpersonal conflicts can be particularly stressful. During the Group sessions, members often talked about frustrations they were experiencing in their relationships with family, friends, classmates, and fellow residents. Participants reported that Group helped them to strengthen these relationships by providing a forum for sharing their interpersonal struggles and receiving feedback from their peers, as well as by giving them an opportunity to learn about other Group members' relationship experiences. Moreover, participants maintained that by encouraging them to express themselves and listen to others, Group taught them to communicate better with their families.

*When I come to Group and people talk about their families and their relationships, it really helped. It helped me see things, not only from my point of view, but also from their point of view... then I know how to deal with my relationships a little better.*

*The Group helped me a lot. That's why when I went back to Pohnpei, when my parents talk to me, I listen. Not like before, I would get angry and talk back.*

*Meeting people in Group helped me understand my parents better. It helped me understand why my parents were trying to teach me more about island family values, rather than the American beliefs that I learned in school.*

*I learned a lot from the Group... Before, when I was with my family, I don't spend a lot of time with them. But now, whenever I visit home, I'm trying to give all of my time to my family, especially my kids. Before I would just go to work, go somewhere else, then go back home and sleep, but now I can relate to my family more and give them love and talk to them.*

*Creating a Sense of Belonging.* The ninth theme captured the sense of belonging that was created among the Group members. Those who attended regularly developed close bonds with each other and began to feel attached to the Group. As participants were living away from their families, many felt that the Group served as a surrogate family, providing an important source of social support during their stay in Guam.

*At first, I didn't join the Group because I thought that if you have that tag attached to you, that you belong to that group of women. That would mean that you are weak and that you can't handle your problems on your own. But then I joined the Group and realized it doesn't mean that at all. I began to enjoy it and developed an attachment to it, like this is where I belong and I should be here.*

*Group automatically forms something between the members... we have this in common now. Our relationships with each other are built on that common ground.*

*I think the Group created a sense of community between us. Before, we had assumptions about everyone, but when you guys started Group, it made everybody open up to each other as individuals.*

*This Group became my second family while I'm away from home. It gave me a sense of belonging. When back home, I see my mom, my dad, my brothers and sisters, my relatives, my family. This Group served as a replacement... I felt like I belonged to this.*

*Facilitating Cross-Cultural Interactions.* One of the goals of the program was to facilitate cross-cultural interactions among students from the different islands in the region, and this goal seems to have been met. Participants reported that Group helped them to overcome cultural barriers so that they could connect with Group members from different cultural backgrounds. They also explained that their experiences in Group helped them to feel more confident in cross-cultural interactions outside of Group. Some noted that Group helped them to improve their English language skills.

*I think Group is good because it allowed people from all over the place to share things and learn how different cultures think and also how to respect each other's differences.*

*I always thought that everybody has different cultures and customs, so we won't really relate to each other. But when we come to the Group and talk, I realize an islander is an islander—we are all the same. Group is a place where you can come and talk, and your background has nothing to do with it.*

*When I'm outside, I see cultural differences. But coming here to Group and how you guys run it, makes me see people differently. It makes me focus on the individual rather than the cultural differences.*

*Group helped me talk to other people and it made me open to others. Before I joined Group, I was the guy who doesn't talk much, but after the Group I was able to say "hi" or "hello" to whoever I met. Not only that, I was learning how to speak English from the Group... It really helped me to talk to others from different countries, different cultures.*

## DISCUSSION

The needs assessment results indicate that Micronesian international students who have left their home islands in order to attend university in Guam face various cultural adjustment problems as they adapt to being away from their families and living in a new cultural environment. Participants in this study experienced acculturative stress due to Guam's more Westernized culture; intercultural tensions when interacting outside of their own ethnic group; and intense feelings of homesickness, loneliness, and isolation. Moreover, while adjusting to their new lives in Guam, participants were still adapting to the rapid social changes in their home islands and the consequent increase in social. These findings point to several concerns that call for the attention of educators and counselors working with Micronesian international students. Yet research with other international college student populations has yielded similar results (e.g., Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Mori, 2000), suggesting that the findings are not unique to Micronesians. For example, Constantine et al. (2005) found that Asian international college women attending university in the US felt anxious about living in a foreign country and fitting in with others, encountered conflicts between their cultural values and those in the US, and experienced sadness about missing family and friends from home. The only theme from our needs assessment not commonly reported in the literature on international students is past exposure to social problems. This topic arose in our study because we asked participants about past life events that continued to affect them after moving to Guam. While some aspects of this theme may be unique to Micronesians (e.g., Micronesia's high suicide rate), the general notion that past stressors have an impact on cultural adjustment is certainly applicable to other populations (Prendes-Lintel, 2001). Thus, mental health counselors working with international students should consider addressing both past and current stressors that may affect their cultural adjustment experiences.

The cultural adjustment problems outlined in the needs assessment interviews initially served as the focus of the Group sessions. Once Group members became more comfortable with the facilitators and each other, however, they soon began to introduce more personal concerns into the sessions, such as their struggles with mental health and substance abuse problems and their difficulties in close interpersonal relationships.

These types of problems are also evident among other groups of international students (e.g., Lin & Yi, 1997). While such problems did not arise in our study until after the needs assessment was conducted, they are nevertheless important aspects of participants' adjustment experiences, and thus were given serious consideration in the Group sessions. Accordingly, counselors should be mindful that international students might not disclose some types of personal problems until after rapport has been well established.

Encouragingly, results from the program evaluation interviews suggest that psychological support services can be effective in alleviating Micronesian international students' cultural adjustment problems, particularly when the intervention model reflects consideration of their cultural values. In this study, participants responded positively to a gender-based, peer-facilitated support group, integrating narrative therapy with socially-based activities and food sharing. The men's and women's Groups provided safe environments for participants to share their personal issues and life stories, to work through mental health and substance abuse problems, and to improve their interpersonal relationships. The Groups also served as valuable sources of social support, creating a sense of belonging and facilitating cross-cultural interactions. According to one participant, the program met a critical need:

*I hope this Group continues to reach out to the students at the University. There's a lot of islanders out there that need help, not only with their studies, but also their stressful personal lives.*

Another participant highlighted the relevance of the program to Micronesian cultural values:

*Living in a collectivist society, people need other people more. So I would recommend to run the Group again for students in Micronesia.*

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES**

Overall, the results point to several promising psychological intervention strategies for use with international students. Central to our program was the support group model, which we chose due to its correspondence with Micronesia's collectivist cultural values. International student support groups have also become popular interventions in a number of mainland US university counseling centers (e.g., Brinson & Kottler, 1995), and similar groups have been used with immigrant students in US high schools (e.g., Cárdenas, Taylor, & Adelman, 1993). Group interventions are particularly appropriate for international students as they provide an opportunity for members to connect with other students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and encourage them to learn from each other's experiences as they work through their cultural adjustment struggles (Constantine et al., 2005). Moreover, international students may find group interventions to be less intrusive and anxiety provoking than individual counseling, as groups create a unique social space where members can first observe others sharing personal information and then choose how and when they wish to self-disclose (Brinson & Kottler, 1995).

While the program was based on a standard group therapy format, we also

incorporated socially-based activities so as to provide opportunities for Group members to interact in a variety of settings. This model fit with Micronesian cultural values by encouraging participants to form deeper connections with each other, thereby allowing them to share their feelings within the context of social relationships rather than in a purely clinical environment. Other international student populations may also benefit from interventions that use socially-based activities to promote the development of peer relationships, as most international students are dealing with the loss of their social support networks from home (Hayes & Lin, 1994).

Another key element of our program was the use of peer facilitators. The peer-facilitator model worked well with Micronesian students as Micronesians often feel uncomfortable sharing personal problems with strangers or authority figures. One of the primary reasons that students attended our program was that they personally knew the Group facilitators, who were fellow students, and who either lived and worked in the residence halls or regularly participated in residence life activities. Peer counselors have also been successfully used in mainland US universities to assist international students with their transition to American culture (Brinson & Kottler, 1995; Mori, 2000). In general, peer counseling may be more appealing to international students than traditional mental health services as it provides a means for them to receive support without the stigma many non-Western cultures associate with mental health treatment.

Finally, narrative therapy also proved to be an effective intervention with Micronesian international students. The narrative model integrates indigenous cultural values with Western theory by combining oral traditions and postmodern ideas, and thus fits well vis-à-vis the Micronesian cultural context. While narrative therapy has been applied to multicultural counseling (Semmler & Williams, 2000), its use with international students is not addressed in the literature. Nevertheless, narrative therapy seems an ideal intervention for international student populations due to its emphasis on the sociocultural context of human experience. Other features of our program (e.g., running separate Groups for men and women, sharing food during Group sessions) also helped to make our services culturally responsive for Micronesians, and may be appropriate for use with other groups of international students.

In conclusion, each of the intervention strategies employed in our program to help Micronesian international students cope with cultural adjustment may be effective with other international student populations. It should be noted, however, that these interventions may not be appropriate for all cultural groups. To develop programs for international students that are culturally responsive, we recommend that mental health practitioners (a) work with representatives of the populations they wish to assist to learn about their cultural values and practices, (b) select or develop intervention models that correspond with these cultural characteristics, and (c) modify their interventions, based on feedback from clients, to make them more culturally relevant (Constantine et al., 2005; Mori, 2000; Sue & Sue, 2003).

## LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the study yielded promising results, a few limitations should be noted. First, the open design of the program resulted in high rates of attrition—while some participants came to the Group every week, others attended sporadically or stopped attending midway through the year. A few terminated their participation when they moved out of the residence halls or dropped out of the University. While high attrition



rates are common in psychotherapy studies (Wierzbicki & Pekarik, 1993), they are nevertheless a reason for concern. Attrition can be related to important clinical variables such as symptomatic improvement due to treatment success or lack of improvement resulting from treatment failure (Lambert & Ogles, 2004). Future research could examine attrition more closely by interviewing participants who withdraw prematurely to identify their reasons for terminating and to evaluate the impact of the program on their clinical status.

A second limitation of the study is that the research interviews were *program* focused rather than *symptom* or *problem* focused. Our goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program by asking participants to share their thoughts about its role in helping them to cope with cultural adjustment problems, rather than by measuring the degree of change in these problems over time. This approach corresponds with the emphasis in qualitative research on hearing participants' own views and perspectives (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). While there was general consensus among participants as to the program's effectiveness, future studies could employ qualitative or quantitative measures of cross-cultural adjustment, administered prior to and at the termination of the intervention, so as to assess the degree to which their adjustment problems were resolved.

Third, this research was aimed at evaluating the impact of a psychological service program conducted under normal conditions (referred to in psychotherapy research as an *effectiveness* study), rather than under tightly controlled experimental conditions (referred to as an *efficacy* study). As effectiveness studies employ treatment conditions that are more practical for community application, their results tend to have higher external validity. On the other hand, efficacy studies focus on isolating treatment effects by employing standardized treatment protocols, homogeneous samples, and random assignment of subjects to treatment and control conditions, and thus yield results with higher internal validity (Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Wells, 1999). Efficacy studies would serve to extend the results of this research by evaluating the degree to which changes in participants' adjustment problems can be attributed to the intervention.

Lastly, the qualitative data presented here may not fully reflect participants' thoughts about the program due to several constraints in the research design. Of primary concern is that researcher bias may have influenced the types of questions asked in the interviews, as well as the ways in which the data were analyzed and interpreted, highlighting the importance of having other researchers replicate our findings (Constantine et al., 2005). Another limitation is that by grouping all participants into one sample, unique responses associated with specific Micronesian ethnic groups may have been overlooked. Furthermore, as the interviews were conducted in English rather than the participants' first languages, their responses may have been restricted. Future studies should consider focusing on specific Micronesian ethnic groups and conducting interviews using indigenous Micronesian languages.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Citizens of the FSM, the RMI, and Palau attending the University of Guam qualify as resident students for tuition purposes.
- <sup>2</sup> Participants from the CNMI and American Samoa, which are both US territories, were included in the study as they shared with Micronesian international students the

experience of being Pacific Islanders who had moved to Guam temporarily to pursue university studies.

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