'The Socio-cultural Context of Health Intervention: An Analysis Based on Collective Meanings

Shikha Dixit
Professor in Psychology,
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur
Kanpur–208016, U.P., India
E-mail: shikha@iitk.ac.in
Phone nos.: 0512-2597157 (off.); 2598613 (res.)

Abstract

The present paper discusses the relationship among health intervention, culture, and community, and proposes that social representations of health and illness can enhance the understanding of this relationship. The paper proposes that collective understanding of health issues at the level of the target community needs to be harnessed for effective intervention. It is argued that in order to conceptualize health intervention, the components of the intervention structure have to be identified. The identification of components can be done on the basis of the study of relevant social representations of the target population. Moscovici's social representations theory has been discussed in the paper as a basic approach that can be employed to understand the collective meanings and social reality. The health related phenomena could be better understood through exploration of relevant social representations. The paper briefly discusses the social representations approach and outlines the insights that this approach provides for understanding community health intervention. Further, the results of an empirical study are outlined in order to strengthen the theoretical arguments presented in the paper. To conclude, it is proposed that approaching community level intervention from a purely bio-medical perspective may lead to rejection of the programme by the target community. The identity protective functions of social representations and the existence of multiple collective meanings can lead to the perception of intervention as a threat to common beliefs and cultural practices. In addition to studying the social representations of the target community for whom the health delivery system has to be developed, the social representations of the various stakeholders such as health administrators, financial institutions, health professionals, and grassroots level workers should also be explored. Such an exploration will lead to an understanding of the schism between professionals and locals and provide directions for design of effective health intervention.