

# The cultural language of pain: a South African study

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**Abstract** (Full text available online at [www.tandfonline.com/ojfp](http://www.tandfonline.com/ojfp))

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**Background:** Culture is the framework that directs human behaviour in a given situation. Accordingly, culture also influences the meaning and expression of pain. However, the influence of culture on the communication of pain is not always understood and considered by healthcare practitioners. It is often erroneously anticipated that all children (irrespective of cultural origin) will express pain either through quiet endurance or loud verbal complaints. This view could contribute to the inadequate management of pain that is so often described in pain literature. Pain assessment and measurement are integral components of pain management, but are often negatively affected by the healthcare professional's pre-conceived ideas, as well as by his or her inability to understand the cultural meaning of pain, the non-verbal and verbal language of pain, and the patient's ability to cope with pain.

**Method:** The aim of this study was to identify the unique meaning of pain in reference to both general and paediatric pain. In addition, the study aimed at gaining insight into the origin and management of pain. This was achieved by means of qualitative methodology. The study group included people from the South African Nguni and Sotho cultures. A total of 42 participants, who were on average 42 years old, were interviewed.

**Results:** The study indeed indicated variances between the experience and expression of pain and the generally accepted idea that pain is not culture based.

**Conclusion:** Health care providers need to be increasingly aware of and sensitive to the cultural expression of pain and how differences in the communication of pain could possibly influence their care plan.

**Keywords:** cultural expression, Nguni, pain, pain assessment, Sotho, South Africa