Chapter 5

KINDRED SPIRITS IN SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION: QUALITATIVE METHODS IN COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

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Guba and Lincoln (1994) argued that questions of method are secondary to the paradigm or worldview we hold. In scientific and philosophical terms, our worldview is made up of ontology (our assumptions about the nature of existence and reality) and epistemology (our belief about what knowledge is and what can be known). Methods, then, are the means by which knowledge can be sought within these assumptions and beliefs.

There is a natural fit between (a) the ontology and epistemology that undergird much of community psychology and (b) the paradigms from which qualitative methods spring, leading to particular scientific approaches. The assumptions and beliefs of community psychology include the importance of context, culture, and setting; attention to the frequently ignored disjunction between grand and local theory; efforts to reframe a dominant narrative, which often searches for negative causality in the least empowered individual, into one of strength and emic (i.e., insider) resources; respect for emic perspectives and strengths; an aim to address social inequalities through research and action; and a willingness to thus be called “involved,” that is, scientifically unobjective. The congruent qualitative approaches and aims involve a focus on the discovery phase of research, including the identification of variables and working hypotheses for further study; efforts to develop holistic, detailed description of systems, theories, and processes from multiple perspectives; attention to emic perspectives; a belief that the control demanded by quantitative methods strips away the context that is central to life; concern for the inapplicability of generalized data to individual, specific experiences; and a conception of the interconnection of facts, theories, and values, which disrupts the notion that researchers can simply discard their worldviews and act objectively (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This is not to say that quantitative methods do not contribute to community psychology, but the distinctive fit between qualitative methods and community psychology precepts seems to us to be particularly innate and direct.

Qualitative methods are quite useful for what Kuhn (1962/1996) called “scientific revolution,” something community psychology has been waging since its founding in the 1960s. It is no wonder, then, that rich examples of the application of qualitative methods can be found in the global literature of community psychology today, and the field is well poised to benefit from new and novel qualitative methods utilized in allied social science fields around the world.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF QUALITATIVE METHODS

Qualitative methods arise from and are utilized by multiple theoretical, philosophical, and disciplinary foundations and comprise many typologies, methods, and aims. Nonetheless, at their core they share a commitment to nonnumerical data and focus on such elements as experience, language, memory, meaning, and purpose. They are also uniquely suited to explore iterative processes. Although quantitative methods excel at testing a priori hypotheses,
they tend to reify certain concepts, measurement tools, and explanations through a method-driven demand for replication, standardization, and control, and the reporting of only those findings that are sought out by research (Kuhn, 1962/1996). Qualitative methods, by comparison, have a superior ability to seek, find, and report novel findings that are the hallmark of exploratory research. Although the statistical-mathematical underpinnings of quantitative analysis ultimately enable the study of cause, effect, and control, and lead to generalized findings and global theories that are important to societal advancement, these mathematical underpinnings have the downside of stripping real life context, natural variations, diversity, and ambiguity from findings. For research conducted in real life settings where scientific control is neither practical nor desired, qualitative methods provide a methodologically sound research approach. Qualitative methods also apply different rubrics of rigor, are not beholden to statistical assumptions, and thus are able to discover and explore local context and theory, within-group diversity, and novelty (Miller & Crabtree, 1999), values and approaches that are important to the work of community psychology.

Shared Design Elements

Regardless of theoretical, philosophical, or disciplinary underpinning, typology, method, or aim, many qualitative methods build from a number of shared design elements. Among these are reflexivity, sampling, data types and collection methods, analysis, and definitions of rigor.

Reflexivity. Generally speaking, qualitative research is based on the notion that so-called “bias” is not something that can be separated from human experience and interaction or controlled for, but rather it is rooted in our life-experience and worldview and it is inherent in everything we do. Our worldview imbibles all aspects of our ontology, epistemology, and methods—that is, who we are impacts what we perceive, how we perceive and understand it, the questions we ask about what we perceive, and who we ask. Thus, in qualitative methods bias is explored, not controlled, and this exploration includes researcher self-reflection. The researcher is a critical instrument in all aspects of qualitative research. Careful description of the research methods includes the researcher’s worldview and values, biases and assumptions, theoretical predispositions, and their role in the “setting, context and social phenomenon” under study (Schwandt, 1997, p. 136; see also Glesne, 2006; Miller & Crabtree, 1999).

Sampling. Because qualitative methods are not bound by statistical-mathematical necessities and they neither claim nor aim for generalizability, sampling is often focused on rich, local information (Kuzel, 1999). This emphasis on specific, localized findings rather than generalized, global summaries is a good fit for community psychology’s respect for the diversity and specificity in communities and settings. Sampling is constructed to be consistent with the research question and thus might aim to maximize or minimize variation, explore extreme cases or typical cases, locate theoretically or politically important cases, etc. (Kuzel, 1999). Naturalistic, purposive, and snowball sampling are three ways to gain rich information (Fetterman, 1998; Patton, 1990). In naturalistic sampling, researchers use natural opportunities to speak with a range of participants encountered in the normal course of interacting in a setting. In purposive sampling, researchers seek a specific population, experience, demographic characteristic, or other sample element that is central to a research question. In snowball sampling, key informants and other participants recommend other participants on the basis of characteristics they would be familiar with (e.g., “Is there someone in your neighborhood I could speak with who has had the opposite experience?”). Each of these approaches enables real-life interaction in community settings (Kuzel, 1999).

Data types and collection methods. Community-based qualitative methods involve looking at, listening to, and engaging with people in their natural settings to learn about their lives (Miller & Crabtree, 1999). This is most often accomplished through the collection of various types of interview and observational data. Within each of these general categories are a range of approaches. Interviews may be with individuals, focus groups, family units, or other cases. Interview guides or schedules may focus on
depth or breadth, histories or critical events, or even projective techniques. They may be structured, in which preselected questions are asked of every participant in a set order, or semi-structured, in which preselected questions or themes are reordered and interspersed with additional questions as dictated by participant responses. Alternatively, interviews may be entirely unstructured, following the natural patterns of a conversation, or utilizing a single survey or grand tour question (Fetterman, 1998), such as “tell me about your typical day.” These ethnographically informed approaches are ideal for researchers seeking well rounded, realistic knowledge of community life. Interview data may be collected as audio, video, or written notes. Observational approaches may also be structured (e.g., maps, rating forms, etc.) or unstructured and researchers may act as participants in the setting (i.e., participant/observation; Miller & Crabtree, 1999). In recent years, participatory research and engagement methods such as participatory action research (PAR)/community-based participatory research and PhotoVoice (see Chapter 3, this volume) and other arts-based initiatives have also become popular. In addition to qualitative methods that produce new data are those that collect and analyze a range of existing or prerecorded data. These data might include historical/archival data ranging from newspapers, government records, meeting notes, old photographs, letters, or even material traces (Hodder, 1992) such as erosion (e.g., worn tiles, cracked book spines, paths worn in the grass) or accretion (e.g., kitchen grime, muddy shoes, in-box piles).

Analysis. Qualitative analytic methods, regardless of type of data, commonly involve some form of coding, wherein particular content, themes, processes, theoretical concepts, etc. that are most closely tied to the research question are marked for further exploration and analysis. Although the theoretical underpinning of the exact codes chosen varies tremendously between methods and research questions, coding is fundamentally a way to highlight and organize the most pertinent data among all data collected. In some analytic approaches, codes are preselected on the basis of extant literature, theory, or working hypothesis (e.g., template- or cookbook-style analysis; Miller & Crabtree, 1999). Other approaches, such as grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), locate particularly meaningful data and code only after multiple close readings of the data. In this way coding is “grounded” in the data. Other qualitative approaches may be somewhere between these two extremes. In most cases coding is an iterative process; the coding framework and application change with multiple reviews of the data, code revisions, and attempts to create working hypotheses and theories.

Once data are coded, continued iterative analysis ensues, as organizational structures are created for all the codes and working hypotheses and analytic frameworks within and across all codes and data points are tested against the data itself. In this way qualitative methods are different than quantitative; there are no outliers whose experience is discarded for not fitting an average trend. Agar (1996), in fact, specifically counseled qualitative researchers to seek negative cases that disprove their working hypothesis, thus leading to a “breakdown” in the analytic framework. This leads to additional iterations of coding or analytical organization and to “resolution” (i.e., an outcome that better describes and explains the entirety of the data). Members of the community, research participants, peers, and community experts are often engaged to audit and review a researcher’s understanding, analysis, and interpretation (Glesne, 2011). By including participant voices and community experts at all research stages, qualitative researchers ensure that research is informed by emic perspectives throughout the entire process.

Definitions of rigor. As in all research, the goodness of qualitative research depends on the soundness of the research design and implementation, and researcher competence. Because the paradigms underlying qualitative methods do not expect one truth but rather multiple truths, they do not privilege nor aspire to generalizability. Thus, the standards of rigor in qualitative research are different than the quantitative standards of reliability and validity. In their place is trustworthiness: authenticity, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Glesne, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rigor is secured through member checks, audits,
and peer debriefing (as described previously); triangulation (utilizing multiple data sources, methods, and interpretation); “prolonged engagement and persistent observation” (Glesne, 2011, p. 37); thick (i.e., detailed) description in data and writing; and researcher reflexivity.

**Ethics in Qualitative Methods**

As in all methods, it is crucial for the qualitative researcher to ensure that research is carried out in ethical ways that allow for proper consent and protect the health, welfare, confidentiality, and dignity of participating and nonparticipating individuals and communities. There are many areas of ethical overlap between qualitative and quantitative methods, including the necessity of proper training and proper application and utilization of the chosen methods. Although the relationship between researcher and participants also presents ethical concerns in quantitative research, the centrality of the researcher-participant interaction raises some specific ethical considerations in qualitative methods (Brodsky, 2001; Glesne, 2006). The researcher can play any number of roles—from outside evaluator to community insider, friend, or advocate (Glesne, 2006). Throughout this range of roles and relationships, issues of power, reciprocity, honesty, responsibility, and expectations loom large. As Glesne (2006) articulated, ethical qualitative research results from attention to professional and personal ethical guidelines, methodological knowledge and skill, along with clear communications with and openness to hearing the needs and concerns of research participants and communities.

**Critiques of Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative methods are not without useful critiques. Although the critiques stemming from positivist and postpositivist traditions of objectivity, control, generalizability, reliability, and validity are well known, intraparadigmatic critiques exist as well. Qualitative methods are not appropriate for all work, and the choice of methods must be secondary to the research question of interest and the paradigm in which it is conceptualized. Mixed methods and studies that alternate qualitative and quantitative approaches can contribute greatly to a knowledge process that values discovery as much as it values rejecting the null hypothesis (see Chapter 9, this volume). An important concern for qualitative rigor is that although quantitative methods are taught at all educational levels and have well established evaluation criteria, qualitative methods are often treated as something that one can “pick up” without proper instruction or mentoring. As a result, unfortunate examples abound of poorly designed and implemented qualitative work. The reputation of the approach, as well as the putative “science” that follows, can suffer by these examples.

**Exemplars of Qualitative Research in and for Community Psychology**

Given the unique synergy between qualitative methods and community psychology, it is not surprising that there is a wide range of global scholarship that brings these two elements together. In the following sections, we briefly introduce some of this work, presenting exemplars from U.S. and European community psychology as well as some newer, novel, and emerging trends in allied fields that have resonance and promise for work in community psychology.

**U.S. Community Psychology**

Qualitative methods in the United States are a rapidly growing component of community psychology research and application. Below we highlight a range of qualitative approaches in community psychology, grouped loosely into three categories that relate to their goals, rather than methodology: (a) theory generating, (b) action generating, and (c) evaluative.

**Theory generating methods.** A number of community psychology studies use qualitative methods to describe and explain data through the generation of theory that often derives from, rather than being ascribed to, data. These methods include grounded
theory, phenomenology, consensual qualitative research, and case study analysis.

Described as the “most influential paradigm of qualitative research in the social sciences today” (Denzin, 1997, as cited in Fassinger, 2005, p. 156), **grounded theory** seeks to generate theory when no theory yet exists or current theories are inadequate. Grounded theory originated with Glaser and Strauss (1967) and the specific multistage coding and analytic process used varies depending on the ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspective of the research design (see Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Examples of grounded theory research in the field include Ullman and Townsend’s (2008) “What Is An Empowerment Approach to Working With Sexual Assault Survivors?” and Lewis and Orford’s (2005) “Women’s Experiences of Workplace Bullying: Changes in Social Relationships.”

**Phenomenology**, originating in psychology and education, seeks to understand people’s lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. It does so through interviews, documents, observations, and even art. Analyses consist of bracketing meaning units to textually and structurally describe the essence of the phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). Examples in community psychology include Charlesworth’s (2005) “Understanding Social Suffering: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Inequality” and Parke and Griffiths’s (2005) “Aggressive Behavior in Adult Slot Machine Gamblers: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.”

**Consensual qualitative research** is another theory generating approach (C. E. Hill, 2004). This method strongly values consistency, is particularly useful for research teams, and integrates elements of phenomenology, grounded theory, and process analysis. Data collection utilizes semistructured interviews and analysis consists of three distinct stages: (a) segmenting the interview data into categorizing domains, (b) identifying core ideas within domains, and (c) constructing common themes through cross-analysis. In each stage, researchers must come to a consensus, and an auditor checks the researchers’ judgments. An example of consensual qualitative research in community psychology is Halamová, Timulak, and Adamovova’s (2013) “Qualitative Analysis of Statements of Participants of Public Workshops Concerning Experiencing the Community Building.”

**Case studies** encompass a range of methodological and epistemological traditions (Creswell, Hassen, Plano Clark, & Smith, 2011). They involve close study of a unit (e.g., person, family, organization, community, event) that is bounded in place and time, with data collected in many ways (e.g., interviews, observations, documents, artifacts). The aim is to describe the case, its themes, and, when appropriate, themes across cases (Yin, 2008). Examples of case studies in community psychology include Bess, Prilleltensky, Perkins, and Collins’s (2009) “Participatory Organizational Change in Community-Based Health and Human Services: From Tokenism to Political Engagement” and Culley and Hughey’s (2008) “Power and Public Participation in a Hazardous Waste Dispute: A Community Case Study.”

**Action generating methods.** These types of methods describe phenomena, experiences, and issues, often to bring about change. Such approaches can include ethnography, oral history and narrative analysis, *testimonio*, and PhotoVoice (see Chapter 3, this volume).

**Ethnography**, with roots in anthropology and sociology, explores cultural phenomena. Although ethnography originally had no interventionist aims, many community psychologists, who have utilized it since at least the mid-1980s, include an action step. Ethnography aims to present a holistic account on the basis of the emic views of the culture’s boundaries, and often involves the researcher as a participant–observer, living within the culture for extended periods of time. Examples of ethnographic research in community psychology are Snell and Hodge’s (2007) “Heavy Metal, Identity and the Social Negotiation of a Community of Practice” and R. P. Hill’s (2003) “Homelessness in the U.S.: An Ethnographic Look at Consumption Strategies.”

Oral history and narrative analysis originated in the humanities, focusing on the stories people tell. These methods typically involve collecting stories and experiences from one or two individuals through either documents or interviews and then
presenting the meaning of those stories in chronological order (Creswell et al., 2011). Although oral history and narrative analysis are not necessarily aimed toward generating change, because of community psychology's focus on research and action, many applications in the field do have an explicit focus on moving from description and explanation to creating change. Shelton and Johnson’s (2006) “I Think Motherhood for Me Was a Bit Like a Double-Edged Sword: The Narratives of Older Mothers” and Kidd and Davidson’s (2007) “You Have to Adapt Because You Have No Other Choice: The Stories of Strength and Resilience of 208 Homeless Youth in New York City and Toronto” are prime examples of this method in community psychology.

**Testimonio** is distinct from oral history narration as its fundamental objective is to make oppression known and call others to action toward justice and restoration. It is always intentional and political (Reyes & Rodriguez, 2012). Testimonio has roots in Latin American liberationist pedagogy, and was adopted in the United States in the 1970s. In testimonio, the narrator presents a first person account of events with the intention of empowering him/herself through this account. It can be presented as a memoir, vignette, song lyrics, or spoken word. Although the account is singular, the testimonio represents the voices of many affected by the events. A prominent example of testimonio is Menchu, Burges-Debray, and Wright’s (1984) “I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala.” In the field of community psychology, Parra, Martin, and Hoyos (2012) used the method for “Child Soldiers in Colombia: Five Views.”

**Evaluative methods.** Numerous qualitative approaches have also been used in community psychology for formative and summative evaluation of settings and outcomes. Qualitative evaluation has the benefit of relying on data that remains in the emic native language of the program and setting (Patton, 1990). This may begin with a qualitative or mixed method needs assessment, collecting data through key informants, public forums, nominal groups, or open-ended surveys. West, Williams, Suzukovich, Strangeman, and Novins (2012) described a purely qualitative needs assessment in “A Mental Health Needs Assessment of Urban American Indian Youth and Families” and Baber and Bean (2009) detailed a qualitative evaluation in “Frameworks: A Community-Based Approach to Preventing Youth Suicide.”

Geographic information systems (GIS) community mapping is an important and relatively new approach in community psychology. It can be used for description, theory generation, intervention, and/or evaluation, and can combine qualitative and quantitative methods (Futch & Fine, 2013). GIS software allows for the creation of maps to understand and convey experience in a physical environment. Broadly, community mapping consists of 5 steps: (a) identifying community issues and forming a collaborative team, (b) determining the appropriate geography, (c) collecting the data, (d) creating maps, and, for action research, (e) using maps to promote change. Examples include Coulton, Korbin, Su, and Chow’s (1995) “Community Level Factors and Child Maltreatment Rates” and Coulton and Pandey’s (1992) “Geographic Concentration of Poverty and Risk to Children in Urban Neighborhoods.”

**European Community Psychology**

Qualitative community researchers are active around the globe. Here we highlight just one non-U.S. context, Europe. More so than in the United States, the qualitative methods utilized by community psychologists in Europe tend to be explicitly informed by the philosophical and paradigmatic traditions of social constructivism, critical theory, and linguistics.

**Critical discourse analysis.** Discourse analysis (DA) is a family of interdisciplinary approaches that share the basic tenet that verbal communication is neither a direct reflection of the outside world nor a direct reflection of the inner world. On the contrary, the ways we talk, the words we use, and how we use them, play an active role in creating and changing our identities and our social relations. Although there are multiple, theoretical-grounded perspectives within DA, all approaches are embedded in a social constructionist perspective, stemming from poststructuralist linguistics. They have the common aim of carrying out critical research (Hepburn & Jackson, 2009) aimed to detect power patterns in social relations and symbolically subvert
them so as to induce social change. DA is not just a data analytic method, but a theoretical perspective, a “complete package” (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 4). Use of the method assumes acceptance of the philosophical and ontological principles entailed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1989) emphasizes the workings of ideology and power, and their connection to pressing social issues. This is in harmony with the ethics of community psychology, which aim to reveal and critique dominant narratives and fight inequalities. Fairclough (1989) approached the analysis of textual materials with a three-level model of critical discourse. These three analytic levels of a communicative event are (a) social practice (the wider social and cultural structures that regulate and control the distribution of discourse), (b) discursive practice (the specific conditions in which the text is produced and consumed), and (c) the text or discourse itself. The first two analytic levels are clearly aligned with community psychology’s understanding of the central role of context above the conversational, microsystem level (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the second two levels, Fairclough directed attention to the context within the microsystem level (e.g., the relationship between speakers, how identities are constructed through language, wording, metaphors, and grammar). This careful multilevel analysis of discourse can help researchers understand how social identities and relations, interpretations, and accounts of the events are constructed through language, and how language has a performative (i.e., active, direct) effect on power imbalances and social inequalities. Kadianakis (2013) applied critical discourse analysis to community psychology in “The Transformative Effects of Stigma: Coping Strategies as Meaning-Making Efforts for Immigrants Living in Greece.”

**Dialogical analysis.** Another approach used widely in European qualitative community psychology is dialogical analysis. On the basis of the theory of dialogism (see Martin Buber, George Herbert Mead, Mikhail Bakhtin, among others), dialogical analysis examines human communication and interaction. Dialogism posits that all language is in “conversation” with that which has come before and that which will come after. It can be interpreted as a “theory of the mind” in which the limits of the self are found within relationships with the other, and the social world is multiply constructed as a “set of multivoiced realities situated in culture” (Marková, Linell, Grossen, & Salazar Orvig, 2007, p. 8). In this view, systems of symbols, socially shared knowledge, and all kinds of cultural artifacts have dialogical properties.

Dialogical interactions have three essential elements (Marková & Linnell, 1996): coconstruction of meanings (i.e., meaning is jointly generated by the dialogue participants); sequentiality (i.e., dialogue derives parts of its meaning from the prior sequence, and is itself reinterpreted as the sequence unfolds further); and act–activity interdependence (i.e., dialogical interactions are dependent on the context in and purpose for which they occur). Numerous coding systems exist to capture the coconstruction and sequencing of meaning (the third element is not directly captured, but explored through data comparisons focused on different communicative activity types). Coding thus takes into account the context and purpose of the communication and allows for exploration of its impact on content, construction, and meanings. Multiple coding systems exist including Stiles’s (1992) verbal response mode analysis and Linell, Gustavsson, and Juvonen’s (1988) initiative-response analysis. Dialogical analysis perspectives and methods centralize two important features for community psychology researchers: the role and relevance of overarching systems to the meaning of our data, and the intersubjective nature of knowledge that is produced through social interactions. An example is Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, and Rand-Hendriksen’s (2009) “Globalization, Neoliberalism and Community Psychology.”

**Newer, Novel, and Emerging Trends**

The increasing acceptance of qualitative methods comes, in part, from their flexibility and recognition of the added value of nonnumerical approaches, freed from statistical constraints. Qualitative acceptance has coincided with and been informed by emerging trends that offer further research promise (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Although community psychology was a relatively early adopter of qualitative methods, there exist new and emerging
approaches that may further bolster community psychologists’ values-informed research and practice.

Critical theory methods.

Critical qualitative inquiry. Also known as critical qualitative research, critical qualitative inquiry (CQI) is grounded in critical theory. It has gained popularity in the past decade-plus as a preferred approach for researchers committed to equality and social justice (e.g., education, health, feminist, gender, queer studies). CQI aims to advance multiple qualitative approaches by making room for diverse, even competing, forms of knowledge, in settings such as academia and healthcare. CQI-informed analyses question prevailing institutional assumptions and explicitly acknowledge power and social position in observed phenomena. Common methods include situational analysis (Perez & Cannella, 2013), dialogic texts (Korth, 2002), critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996), and tactical interviewing (Kuntz & Presnall, 2012).

Indigenous inquiries. Also of interest to social justice-oriented researchers, and often closely related to critical qualitative inquiry and PAR, are indigenous inquiries. Here, indigenous researchers ally with local collaborators to create space for “indigenous ways of knowing and being” and produce inherently political research efforts (R. Bishop, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The qualitative methods chosen and shaped by indigenous paradigms are intended to maximize local participation and empowerment. This approach is increasingly embraced by urban policy and social work researchers, working with wide-ranging, marginalized rural and urban communities (R. Bishop, 2005; Chenail, 2008), to design emic informed consent procedures (Ellis & Earley, 2006), and to produce contextualized data collection methods and analytic frameworks such as critical personal narrative and testimonies (Rubilar, 2013), indigenous participatory theater (Balme & Carstensen, 2001; Greenwood, 2001), and story circles (Lavallée, 2009).

Arts-based research. Arts-based research (ABR) describes another interesting set of methods that produce highly localized knowledge. ABR is not yet commonplace, but is becoming more prevalent in health, education, gender studies, sociology, and art therapy research. ABR makes systematic use of the art-making process of researchers and participants across all forms of artistic expression “as a primary way of understanding and examining experience” (McNiff, 2008). There are currently six prevailing genres of arts utilized by ABR: narrative inquiry (e.g., creative writing), poetry, music, dramatic performance (e.g., ethnodrama), dance, and visual art (Leavy, 2009). Similar to CQI, ABR methods are meant to be highly participatory and transformative for groups and deeply reflexive for researchers (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Visually based research. Visually based research methods use collected or existing visual materials as data (Prosser, 1998). They are usually grounded in critical theory and have some overlap with ABR approaches and PhotoVoice, although they may not use participatory methods. Documentary film and photos (Matteucci, 2013) are most commonly studied, along with other visual artifacts such as artwork (including elicited projective/diagnostic drawings), and other media (e.g., print advertisements, online content). These methods are most associated with visual sociology, which explores the visual dimensions of social life, especially for marginalized groups (Mizen & Wolkowitz, 2012), and visual anthropology, which is primarily associated with ethnographic film production and study of a culture’s production of visual media.

Qualitative methods and technology. The use of cutting-edge tools to aid data collection and analysis is not in itself new, but recent advances now make it possible to incorporate technology at every step of the research process. Quantitative and qualitative researchers alike can now adopt an evolving array of tools to enhance, expedite, and sometimes automate their methods to an unprecedented degree.² Ongoing improvements in basic word processing and spreadsheet options

² It is important for community psychologists to consider the contextual meaning, comfort, and availability (among other factors) of technology to and for community partners. Although technology may serve to facilitate and promote research in one setting, it may introduce uncomfortable or nonnaturalistic impediments to research in another.
facilitate the coding process, as do mechanical translation and transcription. Electronic coding, analysis, and interpretation (within limits), and storage of data (textual, visual, and sound) are available through a wide variety of qualitative data analysis software (Bergmann & Meier, 2004; Rademaker, Grace, & Curda, 2012). These and other types of software and technologies are particularly suited to facilitating mixed method research approaches. For example, in health research, physiological measurements such as voice analysis and eye tracking have been used with data from interviews (Morse, 2012).

Qualitative research places a special emphasis on communication, and the increasing availability of affordable and adaptable audiovisual recording equipment and software (including voice recognition technologies), cloud-based platforms for information exchange, and social media all offer novel, although technologically mediated, ways to gather information and connect with research participants and collaborators. Online networks and communication tools (e.g., live chat, bulletin boards, blogs, email, video conferencing) provide alternatives to face-to-face interviewing, increasing community and participant access despite distance, and enable the study of online-only communities. Ethnographies of online cultures and communities (e.g., online or virtual ethnography, netnography) extend traditional notions of fieldwork, while maintaining a heavy reliance on interviewing (J. Bishop, 2008; Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2006). Community psychology has already produced a number of online community studies (e.g., Blanchard, 2007, 2008; Salem, Bogat, & Reid, 1997), but lags other fields in the use of qualitative methods in this area. Numerous challenges and limitations to online research methods still exist, particularly around ethics (e.g., securing informed consent; Wilson & Peterson, 2002), but they also offer great promise, with the full scope of their ease and adaptability yet to be determined.

TWO APPLICATIONS OF QUALITATIVE COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY

Understanding Resilience and Community in High Risk, Cross-Cultural Context

This first example of qualitative community psychology research illustrates how qualitative methods are well suited for work in settings whose context presents unique challenges to standard methods and measures, theory, assumed cultural understandings, and processes. In such communities, there is an immediate assumption, or at least awareness of the possibility, of the disconnect between the generalized understandings and approaches of predominantly Western social science and local theory. In this case, the setting was an underground women’s humanitarian and political organization active before, during, and after the 1996–2001 Taliban rule of Afghanistan. The research goal was to explore the resilience and resistance of organizational members and supporters and the role of community in countering the risks experienced by Afghan women across multiple decades of war and socio-religious-cultural repression. The ultimate applied goal was to provide useful understanding and local theory on the “spontaneous resilience” (Brodsky, 1999) arising without outside intervention, which might aid community organizations, policy makers, interventionist, and governments. The research was carried out over five, 6-week-long trips to more than ten settings ranging from refugee camps, orphanages, and boarding and day schools in Afghan and Pakistani cities and rural villages. Approximately 225 individual and group interviews were conducted with women, men, and children, as well as participant observation and an archival and photographic review. The resulting data (some 500 pages of interview and observation notes) were coded using an open, recursive coding template built on extant research questions, researcher training, worldview, reflexivity, and grounded theory. Analytic findings and working hypotheses were discussed with research participants and collaborators, key informants, and area experts, as well as peers. Findings from this study included work focused on multilevel resilience, multilevel psychological sense of community, bridging diversity between insider and outsider research collaborators, and violence against women, and findings have been disseminated in scholarly and mainstream books, chapters, articles, postings, and presentations (e.g., Brodsky, 2003, 2009; Brodsky & Faryal, 2006).

Given the setting—a secretive community organization, situated in a cultural context that rarely produces or is represented in traditional social
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Science research and operating under extreme risk in a war zone—a traditional quantitative approach utilizing random sampling, validated measures, and experimental control would have been not only inappropriate, but practically impossible to carry out. For example, trying to capture experiences, beliefs, and values in this setting with established measures of (mostly Western) psychology and social science may have resulted in findings but their accuracy and applicability to local meanings and concerns would have been highly suspect. The qualitative methods used were consonant with the exploratory and descriptive nature of the research question as well as the underlying values and principles of the researcher and community psychology epistemology and ontology. In a setting where women’s voices have been routinely silenced, it was important to privilege their descriptions and analysis of their experience rather than replicate their oppression. Open-ended interviewing is well suited to accomplish this goal. Further, in a context, where survival demands taking great caution and restraint in what is said, being present in multiple settings to not only elicit narratives, but observe actions, provided crucial triangulated data that was essential to research rigor. Careful researcher reflexivity, which is central to qualitative methods, was also an important component in the production of knowledge in a setting that differed so greatly from more familiar researcher contexts. This is a good example of a situation in which the attempts to control researcher bias that are standard in positivist and postpositivist approaches would have merely buried important insights that came from working through inherent differences in world view and understanding (Brodsky & Faryal, 2006). Finally, qualitative methods allowed this work to not only place the findings within a specific local, cultural context, but actively explore the multiple contexts that are not just the “ground,” but are also a central “figure” in community psychology research (e.g., Brodsky, 2009).

Documenting Community Participation Through Qualitative Research and Action

A second exemplar of community qualitative research highlights how engaging community members in the creation of community narratives led participants to build shared identities, promoted critical awareness, valued lay knowledge in research outcomes, and reflexively challenged and reshaped the role of researchers. This research was designed and implemented using the community profiling method, developed (Martini & Sequi, 1988) and then modified (Francescato, Tomai, & Ghirelli, 2002) in Italy. This method, along with others such as multidimensional organizational analysis and affective education, stand out as distinctive empowering tools that have been developed by Italian community psychologists (Francescato, Arcidiacono, Albanesi, & Mannarini, 2007).

Community profiling is a participatory research process aimed at analyzing, and then composing an overarching shared narrative, of different facets (called profiles) of a local community (geography, demography, economics, services, institutions, culture, and psychology). It utilizes a research group comprised of community members as coresearchers and community psychologist researchers, who gather data and identify the strong and weak points for each of the profiles. Data collection techniques vary from profile to profile, and include environmental walks, individual interviews, narrative group techniques for the cultural and psychological profiles, and archival research seeking out hard indicators (e.g., demographic trends, unemployment rate, measured levels of air pollution, etc.).

The general picture of the community that emerges from the strength–weakness analysis is successively illustrated in a public meeting, to which all the community members, both those who are involved in the research process (e.g., interviewees, focus group participants, research group members) and those who are not, are invited. Through a collective deliberation, the priorities for change are established and initial plans to reach the set goals are formulated, along with a set of recommendations for the local administration.

The exemplar community profiling experience presented here was requested and funded by a local municipal council of a community of 17,000. It was carried out over 9 months by a research team composed of two community psychologists and 15 coresearchers, who were community residents recruited
through a public call. Throughout the research process, 26 community members were also involved as key informants and individual interview participants. Key informants were sampled for exemplary cases; in particular, individuals were recruited who had intensive and indepth experiences in one or more of the profiles under scrutiny (intensity sampling; Patton, 1990). The interviews consisted of two parts: The first probed the specific participant knowledge and was aimed at collecting relevant factual information on the profile; the second part elicited the subjective perceptions of the community, the representation of the state-of-the-art, and the depiction of the imagined future of the community.

In addition to key informants, almost 50 more community residents were involved in focus groups. Following Patton (1990) again, the sampling here was based on two criteria: the maximum variety (to achieve the broadest coverage) and the recruitment of critical cases to confirm or invalidate an ongoing analysis (i.e., seeking breakdown; Agar, 1996). As far as the second criterion is concerned, the research group decided to focus on two types of social actors: (a) minority status groups, who could bring into the research process a pluralistic view of the community, and (b) change agents, people who were expected to have a special role in triggering growth in the community. The data from the former group strongly suggested that young people were powerless within the community; therefore, two focus groups were organized with them: one with high school students and one with college students and youth seeking employment. To represent change agents, journalists and volunteers engaged in local associations were chosen. Journalists were chosen for their role in creating and transmitting collective images and setting the local agenda that directed public attention to specific problems and priorities. Volunteers were targeted for their civic engagement, which was at odds with the lack of concern, feelings of apathy, and disengagement that was reported by many key informants.

Rather than engaging in traditional group discussions, the focus group participants were invited, either all together or in subgroups, to develop a movie script about the community (Francescato, 2008), choosing the genre (e.g., drama, documentary, science fiction, comedy, thriller), main characters, and plot. Movie scripts were then either narrated or significant scenes performed, and afterward participants were invited to verbalize the emotions that emerged from their script and to reflect on the problems and the coping strategies entailed in their created story.

Through the negotiated research process, community members built a shared, though not completely consistent, vision of the community. This included identifying critical areas, most of which revolved around the lack of citizen involvement in public policy and agenda setting, and potential resources, which were mainly territorial dimensions perceived to significantly affect personal and social well-being. In addition, members were able to compare different visions of their future (for more details see Francescato, Gelli, Mannarini, & Taurino, 2004).

Moving beyond the specific aims and the results achieved, this exemplar highlights some of the contributions of qualitative methods to community psychology research. To begin with, the use of qualitative methods enabled participants to share their real-world experience and build knowledge from it, and enabled researchers to understand the meaning and significance of this experience. Moreover, the use of group-based, narrative approaches that aimed to generate new and multiple accounts of the community, led participants to question their partial points of view and to reconnect them in a larger, new vision—in which their collective identity was reinforced, renewed and changed. Narratives also produced metaphors that were helpful to develop new scenarios and new roles for individuals and groups (Francescato et al., 2010). In this social, cognitive, and affective dynamic, participants also went through a sort of consciousness raising process in which consideration of personal experience led to new information about, and better understanding of, their larger social or political reality. Such approaches have historical association to the political work of the feminist movements, and theoretical links to critical theory, but in this example one can also see how consciousness raising relates to the critical awareness that is linked to empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000).

This community profiling example also shows the convergence of qualitative and community
CONCLUSION

Qualitative methods are rich, epistemologically, ontologically, and methodologically coherent partners for community psychology and have proven their utility in current use as well as showing great promise for future applications. Our work with underserved, minority, diverse, and cross cultural communities in particular is strengthened when our methods specifically give voice to the emic perspective. The values, principles, frameworks, and approaches of community psychology also have much to offer qualitative researchers in the areas of understanding, engaging, and promoting community strengths, emic values and resources, positive growth, and social justice. Although qualitative methods are as old as research itself, their increasing (re)acceptance in the social sciences represents a golden opportunity for the emergence of contextually and culturally informed, locally relevant knowledge and theory.

We encourage community psychologists to explore current and emerging qualitative methods for promoting community research and action around the globe. We simultaneously encourage the systems in which community psychologists work, particularly the outlets for dissemination of scholarship and action, and the arbiters of professional success and promotion, to fully embrace the benefits of qualitative methods, while also recognizing and appreciating the inherent distinctions between qualitative and quantitative methods. These include the unique products of these methods and the additional time they often take to produce well. And herein lies a caveat emptor for the potential qualitative researcher. Although things are changing, qualitative researchers are still a minority in community psychology and beyond, and the push of “big data,” psychological neuroscience, and the current state of the publishing industry all need to be evaluated in a cost–benefit analysis before engaging in qualitative research. Qualitative research is demanding (in many ways more so than quantitative research) and it is often neither proportionately sustained in terms of resources, nor proportionally rewarded in terms of scientific acknowledgement. Although it is our view that the benefits greatly outweigh the costs, we encourage researchers to think realistically about their own short and long term goals, as well as the atmosphere and settings in which they are seeking to produce knowledge, advance positive social change, and build a professional career.

It is our belief that the field will and should continue to recognize and reward work produced in the unique congruence of qualitative methods and the assumptions, beliefs, values, and priorities of community psychology. Qualitative methods are the perfect coconspirators to community psychology’s remarkable 50 year “scientific revolution.” Here’s to their continued success in contexts and communities around the globe.

References


