Methodology, values and quantitative world-views in qualitative research in community psychology

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The re-emergence of qualitative research methodologies has great potential in community psychology. As community psychology is historically steeped in the quantitative methods, it is not surprising that the thinking that underlies the positivistic approaches in mainstream psychology is reflected in the way in which qualitative methods have been operationalised. In this article a number of issues are identified as conceptual residues from positivism, such as qualitative approaches to validity and developing substantive theory. Unlike quantitative methods where technical sophistication of method and statistics are the hallmark of good research, qualitative researchers need reflective skills, and flexibility of method and theorising. Qualitative research requires the researcher to adapt their methods to reflect the context, and to allow the context to determine questions, rather than apriorilly decided theoretical issues.

Qualitative methodologies are looked on in mainstream psychology as being less ‘objective’ and less able to reveal scientific ‘truths’ (Flick, 2002). Community psychology, on the other hand, “has had a longstanding interest in approaching research in ways that differ from much of mainstream research” (Langhout, 2003, p. 229) and this was reflected in a special edition of the American Journal of Community Psychology on qualitative research in 1998.

Methodologies such as participatory action research (PAR) require that community psychologists address issues such as empowerment and developing social capacities, and reflect the core values of the discipline (Banyard & Miller, 1998). In general terms, qualitative research is more context dependent and less technique driven than quantitative research, which leads to a great array of qualitative methods (Shank, 2006). My comments are related mainly to those approaches that help us make meaning of people’s experiences, such as ethnographies, grounded theory, case studies, phenomenology and the like, that are the more context dependent. Langhout (2003) made the point that “in our articulation of our values and subsequent move away from conventional epistemology, we have not seemed to challenge some underlying methods assumptions” (p. 229). In this paper I will discuss a number of issues relating to the adoption of qualitative methods as part of our research strategies, and some of the pitfalls that come from the historical dominance of quantitative, positivistic psychology. This legacy of this history leads to the belief that any methodology can be understood in the abstract and decontextualised from our research questions, as reflected in mainstream psychology research methods textbooks (Shank). My aim here is to argue that the most difficult aspect of research is deriving questions and the methodological considerations should arise from the analysis of the context of the research questions. In doing this, the complexity of research design is simplified and becomes more transparent than when questions are derived from decontextualised theory. This does not make research easier, as considerable conceptual effort is required, but that effort is more wisely put in to identifying our research questions.

What’s New in Psychology?

A colleague of mine reported that she attended a qualitative symposium in which the presenter was extolling the virtue of photovoice as a new methodology designed to empower our participants in research. She argued with the presenter saying that she had been taught the use of video and still photography in research while undertaking a social work course in the late 1970s. The presenter could not believe that this new ‘psychological’ methodology of photovoice had been used in other disciplines before psychology discovered empowerment and started treating their objects of study not as subjects (which is a term borrowed from medicine that

was used to refer to cadavers; Danziger, 2002) but as participants, through methodologies such as photovoice.

Similarly, the emergence of qualitative methods in psychological research reflects a re-emergence of procedures such as introspection, interview, observation and phenomenology that have been used in Western psychology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (and continued in Europe, Flick, 2002). The battles that were fought to bring methods from the social sciences and humanities into psychology reflected a maturing of psychology from a time when it had been attempting to define itself as a science (Chalmers, 1990), suffering from 'physics envy' (Leahey, 1992), to one in which there was enough self-confidence for the discipline to engage in what had become non-traditional methodologies for the discipline.

Philosophical Roots Revisited

One of the by-products of the fight for the recognition of qualitative methodology has been the need to justify research designs in terms of the underpinning philosophy. This has resulted in levels of intellectual and philosophical awareness, and sophistication, not generally seen in mainstream psychology, where positivism remained relatively unquestioned. Even severe criticisms such as the impact of demand characteristics and experimenter effects (Orne, 1962; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1968; Rosnow, 1981), the crisis of relevance (Elms, 1975, where the value of experimentally based psychological knowledge for human wellbeing and social change was challenged), the overly individualistic nature of psychology (Burr, 2002; Hayes, 2002; Sampson, 1989; Sarason, 1981) and the impacts of values (Sarason; Prilleltensky, 1989; 1994) did not shake the central belief in quantitative methods. Long-term change in quantitative methodologies in psychology was not evident, even though positivistic research methods (especially those in social and clinical areas) were being shown to be fundamentally flawed. Just as the discipline 'forgot' or did not recognise that photographic images had been used as powerful tools in the social sciences, psychology has dealt with the critical commentaries with denial.

Community psychology was born during the period of questioning of mainstream psychology, its methodology and its philosophical underpinnings. The crises over experimental methodology and relevance created a generational change (Rogler, 2002) that was characterised by questioning of assumptions, values, of critical awareness and postmodernism. While mainstream research was generally unquestioningly based in positivism, those embracing alternative methodologies (Langhout, 2003) generally needed to examine the concomitant philosophical assumptions. Social constructionism (e.g., Burr, 2002) and postmodernism (Kvale, 1992) were based on notions of different ontologies and epistemologies. The 'certain' world gave way to uncertainty. Relativism versus realism became a common controversy. Typologies of methodology such as those of Altman and Rogoff (1984), Dewey and Bentley (1949), Dokecki (1992) and Pepper (1942) alerted us to the fact that there was not 'one royal road to wisdom' (Dokecki, 1996). For example, Stephen Pepper (1942, 1966) wrote of four world hypotheses, being Formism, Mechanism, Organicism and Contextualism (he later added Selectivism, but it is not essential for debate presented here). These modes of thinking parallel four ontological and epistemological lines of inquiry in psychology; individual differences, positivism, systems analysis, and cultural and worldview studies, respectively. Pepper made the important point that each world theory has its own guiding principle, or what he termed as root metaphor. Formism's root metaphor is 'similarities and differences'; Mechanism is 'the machine', Organicism 'harmonious unity' and contextualism 'the act in context'. Not only do the root metaphors of each world theory differ, the philosophical assumptions are different. Altman and Rogoff further articulated these differences by integrating the world hypotheses with Dewey and Bentley's typology of psychological agency of self-action (emergent action), interaction (cause and effect) and transaction. What the discussion of these world theories did was to increase understanding of the research questions being asked, and those needed to be asked, in the emerging discipline of community psychology. For example the difficult concept of transaction is somewhat counter intuitive, but is essential for understanding

complex communities. Altman and Rogoff stated:

The *transaction* approach assumes an inseparability of context, temporal factors, and physical and psychological phenomena. Unlike interaction approaches [of positivism], where phenomena interact with and are influenced by contexts, transaction orientations treat context, time, and processes as aspects of an integrated unity. Thus one is not dealing with separate elements of a system. Instead, a transaction approach defines aspects of phenomena in terms of their mutual functioning. Persons, processes, and environments are conceived of as aspects of a whole, not as independent components that combine additively to make up the whole (p. 9).

Invoking concepts like transaction meant that a return to simplistic positivism would be difficult. Transaction precludes the researcher from treating aspects of the social world as separate and discrete elements necessary for reductionistic positivism. The discipline of community psychology has long recognised the importance of understanding context, as the notion of social ecology was fundamental to the conceptual base of the emerging discipline (e.g., Bennett et al, 1966; Rappaport, 1977). How the 'context' and the social world were to be understood has been less well developed. The approaches of Linney (2000), Shin and Toohey (2003), and Tebes (2005) to operationalize context represent considerable advances in dealing with more complex contexts, but these approaches imply that systems can be treated as bounded entities. The implication of transaction is that contexts are unbounded. For example, in her doctoral research Katie Thomas (2004) looked at empowerment and depowerment in a large government organisation. She realised that to study empowerment purely at a local level did not allow for a full understanding of why empowerment programs ended up as disempowering programs. Only in the broader context of national and international affairs could the local situation be best understood.

Dokecki (1996) also developed a typology of research methodologies. He created a two by two methodology matrix by contrasting micro and macro levels of analysis with qualitative and quantitative methods. In this matrix he located methodologies such as experimental (micro-quantitative), systems-analytic (macro-quantitative), interpretive (micro-qualitative) and world-view (macro-qualitative). He argued that the experimental studies dominated psychological research and not enough attention had been paid to the other domains, particularly world-view analytic studies. The dominance of the experimental studies is based in the historical development of the field, and also in the mechanistic mindset of researchers. Dokecki argued that there was a need for a shift to more world-view research as world-views are inherent to understanding context. He also argued that how researchers frame our questions is dependent on our style of thinking about research. Not only should world-view analytic studies be undertaken more frequently, they can also be a preparatory process for research in which we ask why we want to study a particular phenomenon. Questions such as: Who benefits and what are we responsible for? (O'Neil, 1989); Does the research recreate the status quo? (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005; Prilleltensky, 1994), and will we be complicit in maintaining conservative values by blaming individuals for social ills? (O'Neil, 2005) are part of such a preparatory world-view analysis. Some of the advantages of undertaking a world-view analysis is that it assists in addressing issues of ethics and our value systems, and also helps to locate the research in the broader social contexts.

Including the Macro Context

Moving to a broader understanding of context is difficult, but as Gergen (1990) pointed out, once you have tasted the 'sweet poison of enlightenment', there is no going back. Recognising that there were other frameworks for basing methodology on, other than positivism, created freedom from the sterile research world of mainstream psychology (Hayes, 2002). This 'brave new world' allowed 'experiment' (in the sense of novelty, rather than technical constraints), to be reintroduced into what Kelly (2003) called adventuresome research: it allowed us to ask complex questions and not to know the outcomes before the research in undertaken. The adoption of these alternative methodologies offered liberation from the tyranny of abstracted and reductionistic theory, which Sarason (1982) argued had befuddled US psychology. He made the comment that: "If anybody ever asked me

wherein my thinking has any distinctiveness, I would say it is in taking the obvious seriously. American Psychology has had trouble recognising the obvious, perhaps because so much attention has been given to the distractions of theory." (p. 132)

Gergen (1990) argued that the adoption of post-modernism theory and methodology led to significant changes:

> Within the modernist era, the scientist was largely polishers of mirrors. It was essentially his/her task to hold a well honed mirror to nature. If others wished to use the results of such efforts, well it was their concern. However, for the post-modernist, such a role is pale and passive. Post-modernism asks the scientist to join in the hurly-burly of culture life- to become an active participant in the construction of the culture. For as we have seen, the primary result of most scholarly inquiry is discourse itself. And, rather than simply repeating the taken for granted assumptions of the culture, the psychologist is in the optimal role to transform this discourse. Rather than "telling as it is" the challenge for the post-modern psychologist is to "tell it as it may become". Needed are scholars willing to be audacious, to break the barriers of common senses by offering new forms of theory, of interpretation, of intelligibility. (p. 33)

Making the leap to examining the obvious more closely and going beyond the limitations of reductionistic positivism, allows the researcher engagement in the world in an active or generative fashion (Bishop, Sonn, Drew & Contos; 2002; Dokecki, 1992; Moghaddom, 1990). It also involves changing our understanding of the outcomes of research. In a complex world where community psychologists engage in social change, there is little that is fixed or immutable. The products of research need to be seen as knowledge claims, claims to be refuted, or as Polkinghorne (1983) wrote, 'assertoric knowledge'. Polkinghorne saw our knowledge claims as being rhetoric to be made in the public arena for others to dispute or agree with. Seeing knowledge as scientific consensus means that the process of developing a knowledge base must be recognised as a social process in which the understanding of social dynamics and human values are fundamental.

Positivism in mainstream psychology led to the belief that research can result in certainty about an uncertain world (Buss, 2002; Sarason, 1981). Accepting that our research models will lead to uncertain knowledge claims about uncertain phenomena represents a conceptual shift that was flagged over a century ago by Charles Peirce. Peirce (1955) developed the notion of 'abductive reasoning' in which knowledge claims are speculated by drawing inferences from logical combinations of more and less certain information. He saw this as a model for the social sciences and life in general. Abductive reasoning allows the generation of theories of community life that reflect temporal and spatial relativities. Abduction is a useful meta-research tool for interacting with data and theory in dynamic social situations. It subjectifies the research process, which is seen as mixing the researcher with data.

Researcher Reflexivity as an Over arching Concept

We begin to see the researcher as central to the nature of the research process, as the *bricoleur* in creating a *bricolage* (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). "A *bricoleur* is a 'Jack of all trades or a do-it-yourself person' (Levi-Srauss , 1966, p. 17). The *bricoleur* produces a bricolage, that is, a pieced-together, close-knit set of practices that provide solutions to a problem …" (Denzin & Lincoln, p. 3). The bricolage is created from what is often seen as not being valuable, not having great meaning, or being obvious, especially by the participants in some social action. The importance of values in positivistic research began to be recognised in social psychology in the 1970s (e.g., Buss, 1975; Gergen; 1973; Sarason, 1981). In qualitative research, the reflexivity of the researcher is a fundamental tool (e.g., Bishop et al., 2002; Denzin, 2000; Flick, 2002). 'Participant conceptualising', (Bennett et al, 1966; Bishop et al., 2002; Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2007), for example, involves the researcher participating

in, and reflecting upon, the ongoing social dynamics in an evolving fashion, in which "knowledge is constructed through action" (Dalton, et al., p. 16). The reflexive and action orientation is based on Dewey's (1929) criticism of the separation of knowledge and action, and later reflected upon by Gergen (1990, as previously quoted), and Argyris and Schön (1974). Schön (1983) distinguished between professional knowledge and conceptual knowledge, the latter being based on traditional theory and research, and the former being based on reflection on action. He argued that professionals, be they researchers or practitioners, should be able to integrate both to make sense and operate in the world. Argyris and Schön developed models of professional action based on their concept of double loop learning in which the researcher is seen as an active part of the research process. They are required to actively reflect on information and readjust their research questions in the light of this reflection. Bishop et al., Denzin and Lincoln, and Dokecki (1996) saw this as an incremental approach to developing knowledge whereby questions are raised, tested, reflected upon, revised and retested, and so on until a satisfactory picture is reached.

The approach that Bishop et al (2002) referred to as 'iterative-reflective-generative practice' raises three fundamental questions relating to 'validity' and research process. As most researchers in community psychology have been grounded in quantitative methodology before developing qualitative skills, they tend to have unexamined aspects of the mechanistic or positivistic world theories. One of these is the basic assumption of experimental fidelity, in which all subjects receive the same treatment in a particular treatment condition. Randomisation of subjects, control of extraneous variables and effective manipulation of the independent variables are signs of good quantitative research. In the iterative reflective approaches, information gathered from participants, is analysed in an ongoing fashion, and thus the nature of the research questions change. The 'failure' to maintain the same interview schedules is a characteristic of good research. Participants may even be engaged in the process of reflecting on outcomes and developing the understandings mutually (e.g., Burgess-Limerick & Burgess-Limerick, 1998; Reason, 1998). In a contextual qualitative research design, as in an interpretive ethnography (Denzin, 1997), the research questions change with the context and with the understanding being developed throughout the process. If a researcher is new to a context, the first questions that need to be asked will be broad and naïve. As more is learned about the context, the sophistication of the questions, the analysis and the understandings becomes greater, and therefore the methodology changes.

A focus on issues of sample size and representativeness also reflect an inheritance from quantitative methodological values. In quantitative studies, representative samples need to be large enough to allow specified effect sizes to be identified and to allow generalisations to be made. The salience of those quantitative values to criteria to judge qualitative research is found among qualitative researchers, when, for example, they express some 'embarrassment' about the small samples they obtain. This reflects assumptions that representativeness of people is important, rather than representativeness of concepts and issues. Obviously, qualitative research can be used to gain representative data, but it can be useful in the process of 'filling in the gaps between correlations' with rich and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Taking a post-modern perspective, multiple realities are possible which can be local and specific (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gergen, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 2003), both in place and time (Gergen, 1973). The number of participants will be dependent on the nature of questions being asked. For example, in doing a case study of an organisation, it is not feasible to get a representative sample of CEOs as there will be only one. Similarly, people are often interviewed because of their position, rather than as a representative of the human race. The number of participants should be determined by the questions being asked and the nature of the information collected.

Allowing the nature of the information determine the number of participants often requires recruiting people until saturation of themes and theoretical categories is reached, or until little new information is being discovered (Lincoln & Guba, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

For example, in a study of Indigenous Australian sense of community it was found saturation was reached after the second interview (Bishop, Colquhoun & Johnson, 2006). Sense of community was a concept common to all Indigenous people and thus only a few interviews were required. The initial design of the study, with a much larger sample size reflected our naiveté, and the fact that some aspects of culture are so well understood by the community that large sample sizes are not only not required, but reflect a lack of understanding of the phenomena being studied.

Another hangover from positivistic research is the notion of pure vs. applied research. This distinction reflects issues from psychology which "… tacitly assumed that physics constitutes the paradigm of good science to which all other sciences should aspire." (Chalmers, 1990, p. 19). In the physical sciences pure research and applied research have quite separate meanings. In psychology, the distinction is really more one of decontextualised research versus grounded, pragmatic or substantive research (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Dewey, 1900; Wicker & August, 2000, respectively). In community psychology these distinctions are less important as research is necessarily attempted with the community and in the community. The concepts of pure vs. applied needs to give way to the concept of applicable research, which arrises from the experience of a community and is 'ground truthed' in the community (to borrow a hard science term for the process of establishing external validity). Wicker and August's approach of emphasising 'substantive theorising' recognises the need to understand local contexts and to embed our research in those contexts. Participatory action research, and action research in general, reflects Dewey's notions of pragmatics and undertaking research that has meaning and relevance in specific contexts.

Validity is an issue that has been brought from positivistic psychology to qualitative research. Terms such as trustworthiness, enhancing truth value, transference, dependability, confirmability, verifiability and reproducability are used to give parallels to validity and reliability of quantitative methods (e.g., Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Flick, 2002; Patton, 2002; Punch, 2005). The clearest parallel can be seen in the following:

The question of validity can be summarized as 'a question of whether the researcher sees what he or she thinks he or she sees…. Basically, three errors may occur; to see a relation, principle etc. where they are not correct (type 1 error); to reject them when they are indeed correct (type 2 error); and finally to ask the wrong questions (type 3 error) (Flick, 2002, pp. 221-222).

The imposition of the quantitative language and concepts onto qualitative methods has meant that psychology has not been free to develop more appropriate procedures for assessing the appropriateness and effectiveness of qualitative methodology. While there have been moves towards more qualitative specific approaches such as the use of audit trails (Punch, 2005), the assumption that qualitative and quantitative methods are compatible is conceptually flawed, as they are embedded in different ontologies and epistemologies (Pepper, 1942; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). What is essential in developing evaluative test for qualitative research (internally, while the research is ongoing, and externally) is the development of procedures that are based on the questions being asked.

Pepper (1942, 1964) suggested that a major criterion is that the research outcomes make sense; that they have the 'look and feel' of how social systems operate. Does the research make sense to us as researchers and the communities we work with? Increasing community participation in setting research agenda, methods and conduct of research allows for more opportunity to ensure fair representation of the community's issues. The better representation of community issues generally increases the complexity of the research. Increased complexity of psychological methodologies reflects the fact that social systems are complex by their nature and that people in those systems see things differently from their respective vantage points. Sarason (1982) wrote of a rabbi who is approached by a member of his community who complains bitterly about her husband. The rabbi listens to her story and agrees she has a legitimate complaint. The next day the husband approaches him and gives his version of the conflict, and the rabbi agrees with him. The rabbi's wife, who has heard both people,

remonstrates with the rabbi, saying "First you said the wife was correct, and then you agreed with the husband. How can you do this? They can't both be right!" The rabbi thinks for a while and then says "Yes, you know, you are right". Just as the rabbi could contain contradictions, communities will hold multiple truths, and they can maintain those truths while there is little conflict or forums in which the differences occur become visible (Bishop & Syme, 1996). Researchers need to recognise that they must be able to cope with the complexity and the uncertainty and ambiguity of community life. Clarity and simplicity need to be hallmarks of how questions are framed, and why those questions are being asked. If this can be achieved, the community and the broader society will reveal the complexity of the interplay of social structures and action.

In conclusion, qualitative research can be a powerful tool for community psychologists, both as a means of understanding how people make meaning of their world, and as it involves philosophical and procedural aspects that require that we examine ourselves as actors in broader contexts. The centrality of the researcher overtly brings subjectivity into the research process and creates the need to tolerate uncertainty. Research models and processes based on strategies such as abductive reasoning and iterative-reflective-generative practice addresses uncertainty by recognising that reality is uncertain, relative and changeable.

Adopting either mixed or purely qualitative methodologies can allow people to be seen in complex contexts. Complexity needs to be anticipated and mirrored in community psychological research. The generative nature of creating a bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) or using an iterative-reflective methodology (Bishop et al., 2002; Dokecki, 1996) means that theory is expansive rather than reductionistic. Our theories are strengthened through the awareness and inclusion of complexity. Recognising the possibility of multiple truths and the historically, culturally and chronological specificity of phenomena requires an appreciation that knowledge claims need to be asserted, not as ends in themselves, but as a means of dialogue with other researchers. By taking away the appearance of the grandeur of theory and seeing knowledge as consensual (Polkinghorne, 1983), contextualised theory can emerge from observations grounded in community's experiences and the outcomes related back to the community.

Qualitative methodology helps us focus on preparatory worldview analyses of research context at micro and macro levels as part of scoping. The worldview analysis also helps us ask questions about the questions we are asking, such as: Why are we engaging in the research? How will this research benefit those who participate? Does the research maintain or recreate dominant social structures? Asking these questions is fundamental to the principle of developing ethical research, as was advocated by the founders of community psychology at Swampscott in 1966.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their thorough and detailed comments. I need also to acknowledge the insightful and helpful comments made by Alison Browne.

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