Thinking through others: Qualitative research and community psychology.  
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**FRIEND OR FOE?**  
**ETHICS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Many qualitative researchers seem to have a tendency toward self-righteousness, even an ecclesiastical superiority. I believe this is an unfounded stance. There are evils and abuses possible in qualitative work, possibly even more egregious because the relationship of researcher and researched is often more intimate and complicated. There is also a greater potential for betrayal when you are taking somebody’s words and stories and making them public. Despite what many qualitative researchers proclaim, we are more generally appropriating voice rather than giving it. That is, once we “leave the field” and begin the business of scholarly writing, it becomes our story. We select, edit, interpret, analyze, and theoretically frame the words and experiences of our “subjects.” And so we should—it’s what we get paid for, so to speak. But participants often are not thrilled to read themselves summarized and interpreted in ways that may not correspond to their self-perceptions. Their perspectives are presented as partial, their interpretations as just one of many possible ways to view things (Punch, 1994). The person who was their friend (or colleague, or advocate, or confidante) has suddenly been replaced by an academic. But the researcher always was just that, a researcher. The problem arises because he or she forgot that and wanted the participants to forget it as well. Truly collaborative research can mitigate this problem, for example returning the written product to participants for their responses and contestation, or by aiming for multivoice reports, including a variety of perspectives and interpretations (e.g., Denzin, 1997). But the real answer, I believe, is to confront and explicate your “dual role” from the outset and not kid yourself or your participants. (I am assuming here that it is unethical to deliberately deceive “participants,” and furthermore that doing so would not be my understanding of qualitative research.)

Representation is a tricky business, particularly representation of those people and communities that are marginalized, oppressed, and have little opportunity to put forward their own self-representations. Numbers offer a certain aggregate anonymity that words and stories do not. Questionnaires allow a certain confidence that you won’t get information you would prefer not to have. What do you do with data that make your participants look “bad” in your or
others' estimation? Do you include remarks that are offensive or hateful in your account? What if one or more of your participants seem to be "living up" to the very stereotypes you are seeking to disrupt? Political is an overused word, but the negotiation of personal relationships, social and cultural assumptions and inequalities, representing others, and defining problems and issues are "political" to the extent that they involve real power and resource differences. Institutional review boards are rarely attuned to ethical complexities of extended field work and participant observation. Should consent forms say something like "there is the potential that you may come out of this looking like an idiot"? Pseudonyms may protect confidentiality of participants to the general public, but how do you prevent participants from being identified by the other participants, particularly when dealing with highly charged relationships or issues? What if participants decide that they don't like what you have to say about them? Do you have an ethical obligation not to publish or to publish? What if your participants feel "ripped off" when you leave the field and end the relationship?

I don't have good answers for these questions, and I haven't found any in the literature. The answer most often is "it depends." Again, I think the best prevention is to be as clear as you possibly can be about what you're up to and why, even if this means that some people won't talk to you and some places won't let you in. If nothing anybody says will be guaranteed to be "off the record," then you should say so. Still, I don't know if there are answers here; the ruthlessness and sensitivity that have to co-exist in the social sciences—the persuasions to divulge combined with a cold analytic gaze, intimacy and transience—make qualitative research an ethically tricky proposition.

SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS

I agree with Schweder (1996b) that there are some real differences between quantitative and qualitative research. The questions, object and objective, terms and methods of validation, relationships and process are generally very different. But I would argue that quantitative research is no less interpretive, it just shows up in different places in the texts. Consider the sometimes huge leap the reader is asked to make from the methods and results sections to the introduction and discussion sections of a quantitative work. The question of what the ANOVA means and why we should care is an interpretive issue. Qualitative researchers just strew the interpretation everywhere in their work, and ideally try to be as transparent about it as possible. The sameness and difference need to be recognized in discussions of the validity and quality of qualitative research. As indicated above, there are various and competing ideas about assessing and discussing the validity of qualitative research (see also Denzin, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mischler, 1990); but these discussions often ultimately come down to whether the work is useful and whether one trusts the author. The same holds for quantitative work.

There also is no reason to believe that quantitative work cannot be reflexive, contextual, and effective of social and community change. A great deal of the defensiveness and polemics on the part of qualitative researchers is due to the fact we often actually are marginalized; we are called upon to justify ourselves and our work in ways that quantitative researchers are not. Qualitative inquiry offers a great and increasing variety of methods well suited to questions about context, meaning, and process. Qualitative work is also ideal for a community psychology that seeks to span levels of analysis (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995) because it allows for close, contextual, and detailed observation of the transactional ways people and settings, individuals and culture, role and identity relate. It also allows theory and lived experience to come together in a way that allows for paradox, complexity, and qualification. I have tried to
make clear that qualitative inquiry has a long, independent, and rich history of its own. I have also tried to argue that there is no reason to consider qualitative work as second-best, preliminary, or untrustworthy. Such a position seems nothing more than a lack of imagination or a misunderstanding of social inquiry. End of polemic.

There is no reason why quantitative and qualitative inquiry cannot be gainfully employed simultaneously. In fact, they can inform one another in valuable ways, and community psychologists should avail themselves of all possible tools. A methodological pluralism seems like a promising way to avoid a certain trained incapacity to see situations, people, and problems in a variety of ways. That is, it seems like it would lessen the likelihood that the world will become a series of “Latin squares” (Sarason, 1981). It is, however, no simple matter to combine them because the languages and forms of reporting tend to differ in important ways. I suspect that the choice, when there is one, is based on the researcher’s preferences for particular kinds of questions, relationships, and writing styles, if not also on particular talents.

However, it won’t be a matter of choice unless qualitative methods are brought into the tent, taught in training programs, and understood by editors and reviewers.

A final and perhaps most banal issue is that qualitative work is wordy, often very long, complex, or even contradictory, and foregrounds a situated perspective, sometimes multiple perspectives. A short report on qualitative research is often a bad one because too much is omitted or glossed over to allow for a full understanding or assessment on the part of the reader. All of these characteristics work against it in journal publishing. Often only fragments of a study can be fit to page limitations and the single-point preference of most editors.

However, the rarity of qualitative research in our journals is most likely not a political issue, nor an intentional marginalization. More likely, it is because many reviewers and editors don’t know how to assess and offer constructive feedback on qualitative research. Critiques of constraints in training, publishing, and epistemology aren’t new of course, and they don’t apply just to methodological issues. But, like questions of ethics or representation of the “civic other,” it is a matter of collective or corporate thought, change, and responsibility. That is, they are not issues that get resolved through the efforts of one or two individuals. In the meantime, community psychologists will be working with half the methodological toolbox potentially available to them.

REFERENCES