

Conducting Qualitative Research in Community Psychology: The Story behind the Stories

Community psychologists have increasingly recognized the merits of qualitative research approaches to understand social systems and promote social change. With an emphasis on detailed descriptions of people and settings, qualitative methods can amplify the voices of people who have been marginalized by society and critique and transform privileged groups. Yet, the maze of conceptual and methodological choices inherent in conducting qualitative research in community psychology is not deeply discussed. If qualitative research is to meaningfully inform and shape our discipline, we would do well to discuss the process of qualitative inquiry as well as the findings of our research.

The present symposium brings together two sets of researchers involved with very different types of qualitative studies to examine the process of conducting qualitative research in community psychology. One qualitative study in the symposium involves interviews with state workers and community members about their implementation of social policy that regulates the practices of batterer intervention programs across the United States. The other qualitative study consists of first-person accounts of young adults who experienced the death of a close friend to inform our understanding of coping with loss in the digital age. Symposium members use a conceptual framework for conducting qualitative research articulated by Stein and Mankowski (2004) to compare and contrast these two research projects. In this framework, the process of conducting qualitative research is viewed in “four acts” consisting of the Acts of Asking, Witnessing, Interpreting and Knowing. Each research act involves a set of choices, activities, and tensions that are shaped by multiple sources. Symposium members take turns applying elements in each of the acts to their projects to promote a candid discussion of the process of doing qualitative research in community psychology. Ample time is reserved for audience discussion of challenges and rewards of qualitative forms on inquiry.

Asking, Witnessing, Interpreting, Knowing: A Conceptual Overview

This presentation provides a brief conceptual overview of the process of conducting qualitative research in community psychology proposed by Stein and Mankowski (2004) that frames the symposium. We discuss the basic elements of this “four act” process designed to guide researchers’ understanding and activities as they apply qualitative methods to fundamental questions in community psychology. In the Act of Asking, researchers identify and enlist the people who will be the focus of qualitative inquiry. This act invites researchers to reflect on setting factors, personal history, and research assumptions and goals that have motivated them to select qualitative methods. A second act in the process of conducting qualitative research is the Act of Witnessing. Here researchers engage with research participants as “passionate listeners” who are affected and responsible for what is heard. At the heart of the research process is the Act of Interpreting, which involves making sense of the collective experience of participants by transforming “participant stories” into “research stories” based on the experiences and knowledge of researchers. Fundamental tensions arise as researchers recognize their interpretative authority in working with qualitative material. Interpreting becomes a critical point of departure in the experience of researcher and participant. Creating publically accessible representations of knowledge as a result of the research inquiry is examined in the Act of Knowing. Dilemmas arise as researchers define and claim “knowledge” and confront issues of “scholarship” in the dissemination of the results of their inquiry. This conceptual overview provides a launching point for symposium members to discuss their experiences conducting research using this four act framework.

Young Adults Accounts of Death of a Close Friend: Continuing Bonds and Digital Remembrance

Empirical studies confirm the essential role that friendships play in young adults' personal identity, physical health, and psychological well-being. Yet, relatively little is known about how young adults cope with the death of a close friend. Unlike bereavement of a family member, there is often little social recognition that an individual experiencing the death of a friend has the right to grieve or seek support. However, social media now offers adults new ways to mourn the death of relatives and friends. Researchers are only beginning to examine the inclusion of new societal rituals for understanding and coping with death in the digital age.

To contribute to this emerging literature, our qualitative study focused on first-person accounts of 20 young adults who had experienced the death of a close friend. We were particularly interested in understanding if these young adults experienced a continuing relationship with their deceased friend and what traditional and digital forms of remembrance young adults used in coping with loss. Using the "four act" structure of the symposium, we discuss the values, choices, regrets, and rewards that we experienced in conducting our research. Our goal is to contribute to a balanced and realistic dialogue about the process of conducting qualitative research in community psychology. In the Act of Asking, we explore individual and research setting factors that impacted decisions for our inquiry. We then describe our experiences working with participants as they shared compelling personal accounts and we reflect on how witnessing our participants impacted the research process. In the Act of Interpreting, the multiple choices and challenges we faced in learning to interpret the voices of our participants are discussed. We share our activities and plans to disseminate the findings of our research in the Act of Knowing.

Asking, Witnessing, Interpreting, and Knowing: Contours of Male Intimate Partner Violence Intervention Program Policy Implementation in the U.S.

We discuss our engagement with the four acts of qualitative research (Stein & Mankowski, 2004) as we conducted a national interview study of policy implementation in the area of intimate partner violence (IPV). We interviewed 46 individuals who administer state regulations of IPV intervention practices across the United States. The study's purpose was to describe and understand how legislative and other regulatory standards that govern the practices of IPV intervention programs are implemented in jurisdictions across the United States.

Many community partners asked us how to assess intervention programs' compliance with regulatory standards and if protocols exist for this work. In **asking** about states' implementation of policies, we experienced significant challenges identifying and contacting the person(s) responsible for administrative implementation of program standards in each state. **Witnessing** accounts of administrative workers' experiences made us aware of the challenging position some workers find themselves in, often with little support and guidance for how to do their official job. We negotiated participant uncertainty, built trust, offered reciprocity by sharing information, and potential risks and implications of findings from these interviews. We have begun **interpreting** how the process of intervening on IPV within the criminal justice system reflects some of the same coercive forces characteristic of IPV perpetration behaviors. Participants' descriptions and experience of implementing policy are bound by rules and procedures that may be arbitrary and coercive, which reflects paradoxically the control that abusive persons use in an intimate relationship. Community partners' eagerness to learn the findings of our study as they attempt to implement policy led us to present our initial findings sometimes before we felt fully ready to do so, without a complete sense of **knowing**. To address this urgency and tension, we are exploring novel dissemination methods such as an interactive website to share how states implement their policies.