

# Asking, Witnessing, Interpreting, Knowing: Conducting Qualitative Research in Community Psychology

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We present a framework to describe the process of conducting community-based qualitative research. Qualitative research activities are presented as a series of interrelated acts called asking, witnessing, interpreting, and knowing. Each act in the research process is described in terms of current qualitative research practices, and illustrated with examples from our own research projects on families with schizophrenia and men's mutual support and batterer intervention groups. We critically examine the assumption that qualitative research serves to reveal or amplify the voices of participants. We examine connections between qualitative research and social change and describe the use of qualitative research to not only empower marginalized groups, but also to critique and transform privileged groups. The framework is intended to help community researchers to more fully conceptualize, understand, and engage in the practice of qualitative research.

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The merits of qualitative research have been increasingly recognized by community psychology in the last decade. Qualitative approaches to research reflect an underlying philosophy of science and set of methods that embody many of the values of community research and action (Banyard & Miller, 1998). Some community scholars advocate qualitative approaches as a way to better understand individual diversity and the nuance of social context. By emphasizing detailed, first-hand descriptions of people and settings, qualitative methods are thought to enhance the study of behavior embedded in a larger social world (Trickett, 1996). Qualitative methods are also used to arrive at more ecologically-sensitive constructs upon which quantitative measures can be based (Maton, 1993). Qualitative findings are said to help dispel misconceptions about marginalized populations perpetuated by the use of quantitative

measures originally developed with mainstream samples (Dumka, Gonzales, Wood, & Formoso, 1998; Maton, Hrabowski, & Grelf, 1998).

For many community researchers, the potential of qualitative research lies in its ability to empower groups of people who are typically marginalized by society. In fact, researchers interested in empowerment as a social agenda are among the early advocates of case study and qualitative research approaches in community psychology (Bond & Keys, 1993; Gruber & Trickett, 1987; Kieffer, 1984). The metaphor of "giving voice" is used to link qualitative research to social change (Mishler, 1986; Rappaport, 1990). This metaphor is quite evocative, symbolizing power and privilege in our society, reflecting who is allowed to speak, on what topics, and for what ends (Mulvey et al., 2000). Community researchers often describe their mission as using qualitative approaches to help people who lack the social, political, or economic power to discover, create, or give voice to their stories (Lykes, 1997; Rappaport, 1995, 1998).

Despite the considerable promise attributed to qualitative approaches, the future of qualitative research in community psychology remains unclear.

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To date, there are few published studies within the field that use qualitative research methodologies. Moreover, there is a sense of marginalization among those in community psychology who conduct qualitative studies (Banyard & Miller, 1998; see also Rabinowitz & Weseen, 1997). An absence of formal courses in qualitative methods in many graduate training programs and a general lack of consensus about what constitutes good qualitative research in our field adds to the problem (Campbell, 2001; Hill, Bond, Mulvey & Terenzio, 2000). In attempting qualitative work, community psychologists are faced with a maze of contradictory choices about how to collect and use qualitative data.

One way to contribute to a dialogue about qualitative research in community psychology is to better describe the *process* of conducting qualitative research. A focus on the process can help community psychologists to sort through some of the complex methodological choices and roles inherent in qualitative research and to understand connections between qualitative research and social change. If qualitative research is to inform and shape our discipline, we must both publish the findings of our research and describe the journey.

In this paper, we present a framework of doing qualitative research to help community researchers to more accurately describe and understand the qualitative research process. The framework represents the practices of qualitative research as a series of four interrelated acts called asking, witnessing, interpreting, and knowing. Each act in the research process is described at a conceptual and practical level, and illustrated with examples from our own research projects on families with schizophrenia and men's mutual

support and batterer intervention groups. A brief description of the four-act framework is found in Table I.

Starting with the popular metaphor of "giving voice" through the use of qualitative research, we explore three basic themes throughout the paper. First, we critically examine the assumption that qualitative research serves to reveal or amplify the voices of participants, but does not transform those voices. We examine choices made by qualitative researchers in the selection, recording, and interpretation of participants' voices. We highlight personal and professional dilemmas that can arise when the experiences of both researcher and participant are not adequately considered in the research process. Secondly, we examine the implications of conducting qualitative research for promoting social change. Throughout the paper, we make explicit those aspects of the research process that can strengthen connections between qualitative research and social action. Thirdly, we raise questions about the use of qualitative research to not only empower marginalized groups, but also to critique and transform privileged groups. We explore the use of qualitative methods to critically reveal the assumptions and actions of members of dominant groups, and the use of their voices to motivate and guide efforts at social change.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: A PROCESS IN FOUR ACTS

### Act I: The Act of Asking

In the act of asking, qualitative researchers identify the people who will be the focus of their inquiry.

**Table I.** Qualitative Research: A Process in Four Acts

Name of Act	Process
Act I: The Act Of Asking	Identifying and enlisting the people who will be the focus of qualitative inquiry. Requires reflection about assumptions and goals that motivate selection of qualitative methods. Can choose to enlist disenfranchised groups in qualitative research to support empowerment aims or enlist dominant groups to support power sharing or other transformations designed to end oppression.
Act II: The Act Of Witnessing	Listening to and affirming the experiences of research participants. A witness is an open, totally present, passionate listener, who is affected and responsible for what is heard. Focus of witnessing is on acceptance of what is heard and accountability for acting upon it, not on the personal needs of the researcher or a desire of mutuality between researcher and participant.
Act III: The Act Of Interpreting	Making sense of the collective experience of participants by transforming "participant stories" into "research stories" based on the experiences and knowledge of the researcher. Researcher recognizes his or her interpretive authority in working with qualitative material. A critical point of departure in the experience of researcher and participant.
Act IV: The Act Of Knowing	Creating publicly accessible representations of knowledge gained by conducting qualitative research. Embodies the reflections and understandings of the researcher about the social context and lives of research participants. Knowing can be represented through variety of activities such as writing, teaching, speaking, organizing, depending on research and action goals.

We enlist those people whom we choose to represent, whose voices we wish to amplify or reveal, or whose cause we wish to champion. The act of asking requires more than a methodological understanding of the strategies and rules for selecting qualitative research samples (Morse, 1991). It requires us as community psychologists to consider the assumptions and metaphors that describe and motivate our research.

As community psychologists, we evoke many powerful images in selecting “voice” as the metaphor to describe our research work (Mulvey et al., 2000). In “giving voice to people” (Rappaport, 1990) or “speaking out for others” (Reinharz, 1992), we place ourselves side-by-side with the people of our concern. The image of community psychologist is one of advocate, using qualitative research to help the disenfranchised to discover their voices and to be heard by those in power.

In the act of asking, researchers should consider how the metaphor of “giving voice” shapes their motivations for selecting a qualitative approach. The image of the researcher as advocate and the direct, personal presence of the researcher in the lives of those being researched can be powerful draws to qualitative approaches (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Popular methods of qualitative data collection, such as participant-observation and interviews, require researchers to interact directly with those people being studied and often challenge researchers to assimilate into various social settings. This direct presence can enable the researcher to have an immediate, personal stake in a process with intentions to advance knowledge and contribute to a greater social good.

In reflecting upon our motivations for engaging in qualitative research with particular groups, it is also worthwhile to consider why people might choose to tell us their stories. Historically, psychology has been more interested in identifying reasons why people do not participate in research than trying to understand the reasons why they do. A number of authors suggest that research participation can have therapeutic effects on traumatized populations (Berger & Malkinson, 2000; Dyregrov, Dyregrov, & Raudalen, 2000). Yet, the few studies that ask people why they participate in research suggest that helping others and helping science are among the most frequently endorsed reasons (Weiss Roberts, Warner, & Brody, 2000). Although participants may derive personal benefits from being involved with research, existing evidence suggests that people also like to think of their participation as contributing to knowledge and the good of others. In this respect, there may be a strong similarity between what motivates re-

searchers and participants to engage in the research process.

In selecting a qualitative approach, researchers should also carefully consider the assumptions underlying “giving voice” as a metaphor. First, a use of the metaphor assumes that the voices of the research participants are the substance of qualitative research findings and the basis for social advocacy. Advocacy goals are said to link qualitative methods with the pursuit of social justice (Fine & Vanderslice, 1992). The expectation here is that qualitative research can uncover or amplify the voices of the disenfranchised, but does not substantially transform or critique those voices.

A second assumption underlying the metaphor of giving voice is that qualitative research should be done only with marginalized populations. In asking those who are marginalized to be the focus of qualitative study, researchers seek to understand and legitimate participants’ points of view to a larger social audience or to empower those who have previously been silent or excluded from society (Rappaport, 1995). However, asking members of privileged groups to participate in qualitative research may also be an effective way to facilitate social change. Rather, than having empowerment as a central goal, using qualitative methods to solicit the stories of dominant groups can further the efforts of community psychology to illuminate and dismantle systems of oppression (Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997). Using qualitative research methods with privileged groups can ultimately lead to the illumination of dominant cultural narratives (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995, 2000), which represent values and beliefs assumed to be valid and that have a strong influence on social behavior.

From this perspective, the qualitative researcher seeks to create social change by revealing and critiquing narratives underlying systems of oppression. Such analyses also can inspire critical consciousness among dominant group members, motivating them to share power or undertake other self-initiated transformations (Mulvey et al., 2000). Asking those in powerful roles and positions to participate in qualitative research can also carry the danger of legitimizing and perpetuating the values and beliefs represented in dominant cultural narratives, rather than challenging the status quo. Researchers studying dominant groups must remain attuned to this possibility throughout the research process (see Mankowski, Maton, Burke, Hoover, & Anderson, 2000).

Helping the disenfranchised to gain power and access to resources or helping to disrupt the oppressive conditions perpetuated by those in power

are two basic strategies for promoting social change through qualitative research. The ability of qualitative research to promote social change does not rest solely on whether the marginal or powerful are asked to speak. Rather, the ability of qualitative approaches to facilitate social change also follows from the choices and activities of the researcher in the acts of witnessing, interpreting, and knowing.

## **Act II: The Act of Witnessing**

The second act in conducting qualitative research is the act of witnessing. The act of witnessing metaphorically draws from roles and practices in religious and legal institutions in our culture. Here, witnessing refers to the act of having personal or direct cognizance of something, to see something for oneself. The witness actively listens to and affirms the experiences of a narrator giving a testimonial. Witnessing is a natural consequence of using qualitative methods that require the direct presence of the researcher in the process of research. In studying marginalized groups, qualitative researchers are often among the few to witness the people of their concern as valued informants and teachers. In conducting research with dominant groups, witnessing may help elicit prior experiences of being powerless that are unexamined or repressed, or reveal unguarded narratives that make transparent the workings of an oppressive system. In working with either marginalized or mainstream populations, witnessing can be transformative for both the researcher and the research participants.

Dori Laub (1995) describes the necessity of witnessing in his work with the people of his concern, men and women who survived the Holocaust. He contends that the presence of an empathic listener and addressable other is necessary to enable the survivor to integrate and make sense of his or her experience. Laub believes that to create knowledge in an audience via one's testimony is ultimately to create knowledge in oneself. In Laub's work, telling one's experiences of the Holocaust in the presence of a witness serves to affirm both the individual Holocaust survivor and the continued existence of the Jewish people. To have a positive impact, a witness must be an open, totally present, passionate listener who is interested, affected, and responsible to what he or she hears (Laub, 1992).

This characterization of the witness is helpful in the context of debate about how qualitative researchers should conceptualize and enact the re-

searcher role (Daly, 1992; Fine, 1992). Descriptions of the role of researcher in collecting qualitative data range from that of a neutral observer to helper, friend, family member, or even therapist (Daly, 1992; Gilgun, 1992; Edwards, 1993). Qualitative researchers spend time reflecting upon the personal rewards and perils associated with entering the lives of research participants (Campbell, 2002). The emotional involvement of the researcher in the lives of the research participants is considered an unanticipated by-product of qualitative methods (Carter & Delamont, 1996; Reinhartz, 1992).

Yet, by conceptualizing the role of qualitative researcher as witness, we explicitly acknowledge and actively anticipate our emotional involvement in the lives of research participants (see Tierney, 1994). As a witness, the researcher expects to be responsible for what he or she hears and observes. Witnessing in qualitative research is not about the personal needs of the researcher, his or her level of self-disclosure, or desire for mutuality between researcher and participant (Matocha, 1992; Oakley, 1981). Rather, witnessing involves the transformation of the researcher from dispassionate scientist to impassioned listener and human being. The witness apprehends both the horror and humanity of what is unfolding around her, and is more capable and motivated to engage in social change efforts as a result. In witnessing the disenfranchised or those in power, the researcher as witness should expect to confront his or her privileged status and the nature of social injustice. The act of witnessing is about both acceptance of what we hear and being accountable to act upon that knowledge.

To this point in the qualitative research process, we have described the research act as thoughtfully deciding whom to ask to share their stories and witnessing those people's lives. Witnessing intertwines the researcher and the research participants, potentially creating very rich and illuminating material. The close interaction of the researcher with the research participants, however, also creates some dilemmas in analyzing the material that must be negotiated during the act of interpreting.

## **Act III: The Act of Interpreting**

As qualitative researchers, we typically spend long hours reading and re-reading our texts (e.g., field notes, interview transcripts) to achieve an understanding of them. Our job as researchers is to make sense of the collective experience of participants. We

draw upon our subjectivity and understanding of our relationship with research participants to conceptualize the meaning of what they have and have not told us (Denzin, 1989).

Yet, in interpreting qualitative data, we confront a fundamental question: "Whose story is it anyway?" (Estroff, 1995). In our desire to amplify or critically analyze the voices of participants, we must confront our own authority in interpreting their words. The act of interpreting involves the transformation of "participant stories" into "research stories" as shaped by the experiences and expertise of the researcher (Denzin, 1989). Regardless of what approach to analysis we take, interpreting qualitative material is deeply personal. In seeking understanding, the qualitative researcher must ultimately ask "what do the voices say to me, the singular listener?"<sup>4</sup>

In striving to "give voice" to participants, researchers may be tempted to avoid interpretive authority (Kidder & Fine, 1997) in qualitative data analysis by extensively quoting participants or removing themselves from the manuscript. In so doing, the researcher suggests that the reader act as sole interpreter so that participants' voices may speak for themselves. This stance on interpretative authority often is impractical given the space limitations of most scholarly outlets. Moreover, it fails to acknowledge the influence of the researcher throughout the process, mistakenly implying that the material can remain untainted by their interpretations. The researcher defines the parameters of the research by deciding who will be asked to participate, what kinds of stories are of interest, which observations are noteworthy, and which will go unrecorded. By denying interpretative authority, we reject the values and commitments that guide the entire research act.

Feminist scholars are especially clear about the need for researchers to be explicit about their social values and personal agendas in each phase of the research process (Harding, 1991; Ribbens & Edwards, 1998). In particular, feminists call for research "reflexivity," a process by which researchers reflect upon the impact of their own personal history, values, and social status on the research itself and on relationships be-

tween researchers and participants (Reinharz, 1992). Through reflexive engagement in the research experience, researchers are encouraged to document and analyze the impact of their values and viewpoints in shaping their findings, thus better enabling others to judge the validity and meaning of their work (Reissman, 1993).

Although research reflexivity is certainly helpful, it does not entirely resolve the issue of interpretive authority in qualitative data analysis. Researchers may not have the self-awareness and/or practical means necessary to recognize the filters that they use to select and interpret qualitative accounts, thereby calling into question a basic assumption of reflexivity. Moreover, it is not clear how much personal material should be presented to be "appropriately" or sufficiently self-reflective. Too much or irrelevant autobiographical material can shift the focus of the research from the experience of participants to the experience of the researcher (e.g., Krieger, 1991).

Rather than confining discussions of interpretative authority to a few reflexive paragraphs, researchers should write explicitly about the process of qualitative data analysis in their work (Campbell & Salem, 1999; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). As a discipline, we know little about how a researcher finds his or her voice in a sea of field notes and transcripts. Researchers need to actively discuss the tension between participant voice and researcher authority as it relates to concepts such as oppression, empowerment, collaboration, and diversity. Researchers need to explain how their stance toward the participants shaped their selection of material and how their interpretation contrasts to the meanings held by participants.

We can choose to disregard our subjectivity in the process of interpreting our data, but it will shape our understanding of our research texts nonetheless. In reciprocating the risks of honesty and self-disclosure that we ask of our research participants, we reveal more clearly our own interpretations of what we have witnessed. We are compelled to assert our voice in order to be both ethical with respect to our relationships with participants and to give meaning to those relationships. Hiding our voices behind the mask of scientific neutrality increases the chances that our interpretations will disparage or damage the lives of our participants and perpetuate the status quo.

In reading, re-reading, indexing, and in other ways dialoguing with collected qualitative materials, researchers negotiate multiple meanings and

<sup>4</sup>In some cases, a team of researchers are responsible for the interpretation of qualitative data. A research team typically reaches final consensus about what they believe the voices of participants are saying, as demonstrated in their publications and presentations. In this respect, a team of researchers ultimately becomes a "singular listener" in seeking understanding of qualitative material.

perspectives in deciding “what is the story?” and “whose story is it?” The act of interpreting is a critical point of departure in the experience of researcher and research participant. No matter how strong the identification with participants, or how seemingly mutual the research goals, the ultimate authority of interpretation of research material is with the researcher. Although the researcher can try to minimize or ignore this departure, it becomes evident in the more public act of knowing.

#### **Act IV: The Act of Knowing**

The final act in the research process is the act of knowing. In the act of knowing, the researcher translates participants’ experiences and his or her interpretations of them into various kinds of research products suitable for particular audiences (Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997). As we engage in the act of knowing, we use our private interpretations to produce publicly accessible representations of knowledge. The act of knowing is more than writing up and presenting the results of our research. Rather, activities such as teaching, creating alternative settings, or using popular culture arenas to disseminate findings are also included in this act. We create justification for both our research findings and research methods in the act of knowing. Choices made in this act can increase the chances that the research will contribute to social change.

When we return to our metaphors for qualitative research to guide us in this act, we are faced with a contradiction. Using qualitative research to “give voice” to the experiences of research participants assumes that the voices being amplified are, in fact, those of participants themselves. When we acknowledge that the voices of the research participants do not stand alone in qualitative inquiry, but are interpreted and given meaning by the researcher, then the use of qualitative methods to give voice for social change becomes more complicated.

In making our private process of using qualitative methods public, we risk critique not only for our findings but also for ourselves, since our personal engagement with text material is an integral part of how new knowledge is gained. In the act of knowing, the issues of vulnerability, faith, and need for action can parallel those of the research participants. Both the researcher and the research participants make themselves vulnerable by sharing the details of how they come to know their hard-earned truths with others

who are in a position to judge the “validity” of this knowledge. In the act of knowing, we as researchers assert our own voice.

In his work on empowerment, Rappaport (1990) asks a poignant question of all community researchers: “For whose benefit is this research being conducted?” Researchers are in the business of producing research and that scientific study is designed, in part, to advance the career of the scientist. It is not sufficient for community researchers to make abstract references to the potential of their work to advance knowledge for some group of unspecified others. Rather, researchers are asked to consider both the long-term contributions of their work to knowledge and its immediate benefit or harm to the people whom they study. In the act of knowing, the qualitative researcher not only asks himself: “Who will hear the voices of the research participants?” The personal presence of the qualitative researcher in the research process demands a second question: “What good can my work do for the people that I have come to know through my study?”

One way to strengthen the link between research and action is to create research documents that make our methods and interpretations accessible and our findings sufficiently compelling to motivate action. In their writing, researchers can help their intended audiences to better understand what was done, why, what was learned, and to whom it applies. Such attention to research process can enable researchers to understand and articulate their activities in ways that better establish the validity (or “trustworthiness”) and reliability (or “dependability”) of their accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In particular, this framework for the qualitative research process may assist researchers to establish a kind of validity known as *verisimilitude* (Denzin, 1989). Rather than transmitting knowledge by reporting abstract facts, a text that creates verisimilitude recreates in the reader an experience similar to that of the participant’s through the use of vivid, thick description. For example, domestic violence can be described in terms of an abstract model of perpetrators’ “power and control” motivations (Pence & Paymar, 1993), or in rich, experience-near language that conveys perpetrators’ phenomenology before, during, and after an episode of violence (Reitz, 1999). The qualitative researcher is challenged to create a research text that is grounded in the social context and experience of participants, acknowledges the researcher’s ways of knowing, and offers new understandings through the shared experience of reader, writer, and participant.

Researchers may feel most comfortable writing research reports, but this may not always be the most persuasive way to translate knowledge into action. Sometimes the link between research and social change can be powerfully expressed through teaching or by creating new settings for disseminating knowledge. More than a decade ago, Price (1989) invited community psychologists to consider the range of arenas for action in addition to scholarly publication that included popular magazines, radio, expert testimony, and community forums. He cautioned that using such venues would challenge existing standards of professionalism in the social sciences. More recently, community art and performance have been recognized as potentially effective outlets for psychologists interested in promoting connections between research and social action (Gergen, 2001; Thomas & Rappaport, 1996).

Expanding “appropriate” outlets for community research also enables us to address questions about how the research can directly benefit participants or contribute to critical consciousness or social change. However, the challenge for us as community psychologists engaged in qualitative research is still one of honesty and clarity, regardless of the specific activities undertaken in the act of knowing. The aim is to make our methods and interpretations publicly visible to an appropriate degree so that others (e.g., participants, peer-reviewers, community members, policy makers, students in classes) can scrutinize and evaluate them. In so doing, we further enable the transformation of knowledge into action.

### **ILLUSTRATING THE FRAMEWORK: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH WITH MARGINALIZED AND MAINSTREAM GROUPS**

In the next section of the paper, we illustrate more concretely the process of doing qualitative research by each describing an ongoing research and action project in terms of the four-act framework. Although we did not begin these projects with the framework in mind, its subsequent development has helped us to better conceptualize our own work and to be more explicit about the benefits and challenges of doing qualitative research in community psychology. In each of our illustrations, we continue to evaluate the potential of qualitative methods for “giving voice” to unheard narratives, for use with both marginal and dominate groups, and for facilitating social change.

### **Research With Adults With Schizophrenia and Their Families: Cathy’s Story**

#### *Act I: The Act of Asking*

I can trace some of my interest in conducting qualitative research to my early experiences as a graduate student working on a large, quantitative study of a self-help organization for people with serious mental illness (Rappaport et al., 1985; Stein, Rappaport, & Seidman, 1995). Although it has been years since I attended self-help groups as a research assistant, I still carry with me many of the personal stories that group members shared that exemplify the tragic, compassionate, and unjust circumstances of serious mental illness. As an academic with graduate students of my own, I wanted others to hear the stories that I had once heard about the everyday lives of people with mental illness. Initially, I hadn’t considered who would be the audience for the narratives that I wanted to collect nor did I anticipate how strongly participants’ stories would become intertwined with my own. I do, however, remember the sense of frustration that I felt when reviewing existing literature on adults and families coping with schizophrenia.

There is ample evidence to suggest that adults with schizophrenia and their families often have considerable involvement in each other’s lives (Hatfield, 1987; Marsh & Johnson, 1997). Yet, people with schizophrenia and members of their families are rarely included in the same study. Existing “family studies” typically focus on the views of parents or well-siblings of adults with mental illness (Loukissa, 1995). The design of the research in this area sends a strong, implicit message: “People with schizophrenia are not really family.”

In reviewing the literature, I realized that my decisions about who to include in our family study would have implications for how adults with schizophrenia are presented in academic discourse. Some feminist writers discuss the need to conduct social science research in a way that explores the “disruptive possibilities” to change the academic discourse to include the experiences of women (Fine, 1992; Holland & Blair, 1995). In our project, the issue was to use qualitative research to amplify the obvious, but overlooked fact that adults with schizophrenia are family members. In designing our research, I decided to ask multiple members of the same family, including the member diagnosed with schizophrenia, about coping with mental illness. The prevailing social views of the people of our concern are both reflected and shaped by social

science research. By including adults with schizophrenia as family members in our study, I had identified social science researchers as an audience in need of “enlightening.” I also imagined that including people with schizophrenia in the study may help family members to consider their loved one’s views of mental illness as equally valid as their own.

### *Act II: The Act of Witnessing*

The qualities of a passionate listener and our fundamental belief in the value of what we were about to learn were central to our witnessing families coping with schizophrenia. As Daly (1992) notes, in order to understand how families create, sustain, and discuss their own realities, a researcher must gain access to the private activities of family members and the “backstage” meanings of family life. Adopting a stance as witness in using quantitative methods to interview multiple members of the same family allowed us access to both the shared public persona of families and to private family images and meanings.

Witnessing multiple members of each family at one point in time enabled us to identify the shared account of major elements of each family’s experience of schizophrenia. Similar to other qualitative studies (Bell, 1998; Daly, 1992), we found that women in their role as mothers typically expressed the family narrative to the outside world. Mothers in our study generally gave the most detailed accounts of the circumstances and chronology of their adult child’s illness and were the ones who kept track of medications, services, crises, and consequences of schizophrenia. In individual interviews, other family members often deferred to mother’s interpretation of pivotal family events by saying things like “you should also ask my mom (or wife) about that, she could tell you better what was going on.”

Embedded in the details of mothers’ public stories of their son or daughter’s mental illness were understandable amounts of sadness, frustration, disappointment, and hope. Yet, the listening stance of interviewers seemed to allow these mothers and other family members to go beyond their public story and share a more spontaneous analysis of how schizophrenia had recast family life. It appeared that the interviewer as a passionate listener and social audience member allowed research participants to “think out loud” about their experiences and to self-reflect about their lives in ways that they had “never thought about before.” The act of witnessing

created a sense of connection that helped participants to share private aspects of strength, vulnerability, humor, and adaptation they experienced in the course of coping with schizophrenia in their everyday lives. As witnesses, we were responsible for what we heard and observed as individuals and as members of families ourselves. Listening, valuing, and responsibility required us to consider how society causes hurt and pain to families coping with schizophrenia and how we are part of society. As researchers, the act of witnessing made us collectively responsible for trying to better understand and describe the impact of schizophrenia on family life in some useful way.

### *Act III: The Act of Interpreting*

Our experience as witness, our sense of connectedness to participants, and our vision of ourselves as “giving voice” to the disenfranchised, led to an impasse in the data analysis phase of the research. In working with the transcripts of families coping with schizophrenia, we felt a deep personal responsibility to “accurately” represent the experiences of all participants. We had purposely embraced a grounded-theory (Charmaz, 1995) approach to our research with an abiding faith in our ability to find the “emergent truth” in the words of our participants. After many months re-reading hundreds of pages of verbatim interview transcripts, these families had become a central part of our lives. Yet, even as dedicated researchers with good community psychology values and hundreds of near-memorized transcript pages, we had not located the single road to truth.

We came to find our own voice as researchers through our struggle to understand the metaphor of “giving voice” to others. We had assumed that giving voice meant representing all families equally and in the same way. We had defined our job as finding “themes” in the texts of families that would reveal a definitive truth in the experience of all participants. However, we noticed ourselves being drawn to the texts of some families more often than to others. It was only when we confronted our guilt for these preferences and began to examine the reasons for our attraction to particular family stories that we could move forward with data analysis. In originally designing the research, we were guided by a life course perspective that emphasized the importance of major life transitions such as graduating high school, attending college, gaining employment, getting married, etc. Yet, we had failed to recognize life course theory



in trying to make sense of participants' experiences. When we realized that we were especially attracted to family stories consistent with a life course perspective, we could examine its influence in shaping our personal views about coping with schizophrenia. Having made our framework and assumptions explicit, we were then prepared to actively engage in an interaction between researcher and research text where both had something to contribute. Using life course principles, we were able to form and test hypotheses, look for similarities and differences in families' experiences, and actively seek disconfirming evidence in order to effectively represent *all* of the families in our research. We recognized a fundamental distinction between researcher and research participant when we acknowledged our interpretative authority. We came to understand our job as helping to tell a story about families coping with schizophrenia, as systematically and carefully as we could, that reflected their experiences through our eyes.

#### *Act IV: The Act of Knowing*

One of the original goals of our research was to try to expand social scientists' views of family to include adults with schizophrenia. We also wanted to illustrate the role of qualitative methods in systematically describing aspects of everyday family life. To accomplish these goals, we wrote a scholarly paper that described our understanding of the experience of families coping with schizophrenia (Stein & Wemmerus, 2001).

Another important aspect of the act of knowing is to find new ways to transmit knowledge through teaching. As a result of working with these families, I wanted to structure educational opportunities for students that might increase their capacity to understand, value, and witness people coping with serious mental illness. For me, creating learning opportunities that help to challenge stereotypes about people coping with mental illness and that involve local community members is one of the short-term benefits of conducting research. I developed a "community teachers project" as a way for graduate students in clinical psychology to experience the act of witnessing through the use of qualitative methods (Stein et al., 1999).

In the project, adults with schizophrenia who were clients at a local community mental health center volunteered their time as "community teachers" to graduate students as part of a practicum course. Some of these community teachers had also previ-

ously been participants in our family study. Each community teacher worked one-on-one with a graduate student for about 2 hr a week for 6 weeks. Most community teachers had no previous formal experience as teachers and these adults varied widely in their level of social functioning. Yet, being a "teacher" provided these adults with both an expert role and a set of behavioral expectations and activities.

Together, graduate students and community teachers developed learning plans for their meetings that outlined topics for discussion and planned field trip opportunities. For example, one teacher-student dyad examined some of the financial issues facing people with serious mental illness. In one of the six sessions, the community teacher discussed how he had to manage his money in order to be eligible for the state's "spin-down" program that contributed to the cost of his expensive psychotropic medication. He also described his experiences applying for and receiving various government entitlements (e.g., Medicaid, food stamps, housing vouchers) and planned a field trip to a local grocery store to allow his student to observe people's reactions to the use of food stamps.

To complete the project, students were required to write a short final paper in the form of a personal narrative about their community teacher. Each community teacher read drafts of their student's paper, supplied comments, and received a final copy of his or her student's work. Collaboration on the final paper was among the most transformative aspects of the project for student-teacher pairs. In writing the narrative paper, students' role as "listener, learner, and addressable other" took a tangible, written form. For adults with schizophrenia, the paper captured a shared experience with their student and reflected their own expertise as teachers. Several community teachers gave a copy of their student's final paper to family members, friends, and caseworkers as "gifts." By sharing their student's final paper with others, these community teachers said that they hoped that people closest to them might learn something new.

### **Research With Men's Mutual Support and Batterer Intervention Groups: Eric's Story**

#### *Act I: The Act of Asking*

My understanding of the process of doing qualitative research has been formed primarily through using interview, focus group, and participant observation methods in studies of men's self-help

and mutual support groups, and men's batterer intervention groups (Mankowski, 2000; Mankowski et al., 2000; Silvergleid & Mankowski, 2001). One of the challenges of this work has been determining how the potential benefits of qualitative research can be realized with privileged groups. Because qualitative methods are mainly advocated in community psychology to "give voice" to disempowered groups, the use of such methods to study groups of men, especially violent men, requires explanation. While community psychologists have been interested how patriarchy and other forms of oppression negatively impacts the lives of women (e.g., Riger & Krieglstein, 2000), feminist theories of gender and qualitative methods have not been brought to bear on understanding men's gendered experiences and behavior in community psychology.

Qualitative methods can be useful in producing accounts that enable a critical analysis of the framing assumptions, ideologies, strategies, and practices used by dominant groups to consolidate and maintain power (e.g., Salzer, 1998). In addition, qualitative research can be used to vividly illustrate the costs of occupying the oppressor role. For example, men commit most acts of violence, but are also the victims of most violent crimes because of antisocial and risky behaviors linked to traditional gender role ideology and expectations (Sabo, 1998). Asking members of such dominant groups to describe their experiences can be used to develop critical consciousness about oppression, and to motivate change and power sharing (Mulvey et al., 2000). To help ensure that asking men to discuss gender in a qualitative study did not simply lead to reification or perpetuation of dominant cultural narratives on masculinity, feminist women were included as members of the research teams.

### *Act II: The Act of Witnessing*

The act of witnessing members of dominant groups presents a challenge for the researcher who must be both an open, nonjudgmental, and sensitive listener but also not collude with or rationalize oppression. Witnessing called for clearly conveying acceptance of men in the groups, balanced against my conviction that sexist attitudes and violent behavior are destructive to women and men alike. In thinking about how to accomplish this role, I wondered how much I should disclose during interactions with participants about my beliefs and experiences as a White, heterosexual, professional male? Is it construc-

tive for me to attempt to establish participants' trust through nonjudgmental acceptance and empathizing with their struggles? Does my witnessing legitimize the voices of violent or sexist men in ways that are counterproductive to their individual change or to social change?

Seeing these questions through the present framework, I now realize that I resolved these questions by drawing a clear distinction between the acts of witnessing and interpreting. I initially attempted to be a fully open, nonjudgmental witness to men's experiences, knowing that in the act of interpreting I would try to bring into conversation their voices, my own, and those of others' as expressed in prior theory and research on men's gendered behavior. From this perspective, I was able to sit more fully present as a witness and thus able to create conditions in which men were able to share their experiences as both victims and perpetrators of sexist behavior. These experiences revolved around key themes and events including competition with other men, fear of intimacy and affection with other men, violence perpetrated on other men and female partners, use of pornography, and childhood experiences of being emotionally and physically abused by other men (especially fathers) and women. Witnessing their stories revealed experiences and perspectives that have not been represented in community psychology scholarly literature on the consequences of sexism, and which can be targeted in interventions or social change efforts.

In addition, as Sanford (1982) has noted, such interviews can function as transforming interventions. Group members commented that being witnessed during research interviews helped them reflect on their lives and heal from some of the traumas they described, "I really enjoy this because it helps me to reflect back and to pull things together. I really think that social science interviews can be very healing when done in this kind of a setting." Another suggested that "Everybody should do this. It is really a gift you [as a researcher] are giving us—the opportunity to have our life story heard."

Finally, witnessing helped facilitate the discovery of new voices and potentials within themselves. Participants were able to speak about their love of other men, positive aspects of their relationships with their fathers and their partners and children, and how they interrupted or resisted sexism. These experiences and stories were not often conveyed to other men in their lives because they feared these men would not respond or would respond judgmentally. The act of witnessing the men created a space for these stories

to emerge. Through being witnessed, men gained a potentially new understanding of their position in a system of oppression, which inspired some of them to pursue social change, as will be described later in the act of knowing.

### *Act III: The Act of Interpreting*

The major dynamic of the act of interpreting was a shift away from a witnessing relationship with the men toward a more critical analytic engagement with the interview and focus group texts. In the act of interpreting, I re-established my distance from participants and claimed greater authority as researcher with prior knowledge and commitments to values and theories that informed my analysis of the texts.

After relating to the men chiefly as an open and listening witness, it felt awkward to bring more critical analytic perspectives to bear on understanding the men's gendered experiences. I worried that this shift in perspective, which I did not explicitly share with the men during the act of witnessing, violated the implicit grounds of the relationship I had built with the men. But I could not privilege their voice at the expense of mine and of others' that had not been present during the interviews and in the groups. This perspective severely complicated the idea that this qualitative research was "giving voice" to the men's stories.

In the act of interpreting, I attempted to integrate two differing views of qualitative data analysis—one which prioritizes interpretive *accuracy* and the other which emphasizes interpretive *authority* (see Kidder & Fine, 1997). It was necessary to shift my view of the interpretive process from one of "giving voice" to the "correct" story from the participants' perspectives, to "critically appreciating" (Schwalbe, 1996) their experiences within the context of feminist theories of men's gender role socialization and system of masculine power (Clatterbaugh, 1997; Kimmel, 1994). This process involved weaving together competing interpretations of their experiences. On the one hand, the individual men often reported experiencing little power or control over the forces in their lives. On the other, following many feminist interpretations of masculinity, I understood men collectively as having power and control but being afraid of feeling vulnerable and out of control. Kaufman's theory (1994) about men's contradictory experiences of power helped me to integrate these two interpretations and understand both as valid from different standpoints. For example, while men acknowledged extreme competitive-

ness in relationships with men outside of the group, they didn't typically connect such awareness to feelings of distrust or vulnerability with men in the group, or to the larger social problem of male violence.

Rather than thinking that the participants' voices could be "found" in the interview transcripts, this approach "created" the analysis based on my knowledge about their specific lives and about general theories of men's identity, behavior, and socialization. While this approach to interpretation does not purely "give voice" to the men's experiences, it does represent their voices within the broader social context in which they are created. In so doing, it may inspire social action not only by the participants but also by other men who are informed or challenged by the account. Such accounts can thereby facilitate distinct but synergistic pathways to social change, both within and outside of the organizations and communities in which the participants and researchers are embedded.

### *Act IV: The Act of Knowing*

Addressing the question of "what good can my work do for the people that I have come to know through my study," I recognized a need to write and take action outside of the normal scholarly and academic institutions. One of the ways I wanted to transform interpretation to knowledge was directed at articulating differences between my interpretations of men's accounts and their own voices. A graduate student and I wrote an article on men's self-help groups (Mankowski & Silvergleid, 1999–2000) that was accompanied by an autobiographical essay from a men's group organizer and leader (Utterback, 1999–2000). Formats that represent the knowledge of both the researcher and participants may be well suited to the goals of qualitative research to empower participants by giving voice to their stories, to situate phenomenon in broader social context, and to represent diversity of experience.

Knowing can also be understood as the transformation of "reflection [interpretation] into action" (Kelly, 2002). In this sense, my analysis suggested that new men's group settings needed to be created as a resource for other men who might seek support for changing their male gender role. I became motivated to establish this resource for other men. A colleague from a men's group and I formed a new men's group as an extension course at the local YMCA. We believed that men who were reluctant to seek support from other men because of their gender

role socialization might do so more readily under the auspices of enrolling in a class. We encouraged students who had been in our prior course on men and masculinity to participate in the group as a way of deepening their understanding of their lives as men in relation to more theoretical course material.<sup>5</sup>

With group members, I also became involved in developing a series of local men's conferences called "Man to Man" that offered several dozen small group discussions on a wide variety of issues with which men do not typically identify, such as sexual abuse and victimization, domestic violence, and homophobia. One organizer was a member of one of the men's groups that I had studied previously and was responsible for training all of the group discussion leaders in the facilitation processes. Another organizer of the conferences began hosting a weekly call-in radio program, "Man to Man: Can We Talk?" on the local station. A men's group participating in my research aired a live meeting on the show and then answered questions from the host and callers about the need for such groups in men's lives and how their participation in the group had changed their lives. This broadcast of their personal experiences literally "gave voice" on a much wider scale to men's efforts to heal and change themselves, and transformed their understanding from personal to public knowledge.

## CONCLUSIONS

This four-act framework is offered as a way to more completely describe and understand the process of conducting qualitative research in community psychology. Although the research acts have been presented sequentially, the performance of activities within and across acts is iterative rather than linear, more like working on a puzzle than building a house. By focusing on this process, we ask researchers to critically examine assumptions, roles, and practices involved in conducting qualitative research in our field.

The framework highlights key assumptions and difficulties inherent in the use of qualitative research to "give voice" to participants as a way of facilitating empowerment and social change. We find that

the voices of the people of our concern are not simply revealed or amplified by qualitative research, but rather are interpreted and transformed in the research process. We suggest that both researcher and participant bring a desire to contribute something meaningful to the research endeavor and both risk honesty and vulnerability in their respective roles throughout the research process. Yet, the authority of the researcher to interpret participant stories becomes a critical point of departure in the experience of researcher and participant, particularly in work with privileged groups. Throughout the examples of our work, we illustrate the tension between the role of "researcher as ally" and "researcher as evaluator" in relation to participants.

The four-act framework also encourages researchers to consider more carefully the potential pathways that link qualitative research and social change. In our field, there is an overarching value placed on the role of collaboration in research (Kelly, 1986). We suggest that community psychologists consider adding the role of witness to their research repertoire, a role that emphasizes the personal accountability and social responsibility of the researcher. The role of the researcher in relation to participants and the nature of choices made in the interpretation and dissemination of research findings are likely to strengthen connections between qualitative research and social action.

Finally, the present research framework helps researchers evaluate the potential and limitations of qualitative methods in work with both disenfranchised and dominant groups. We feel that community psychology should be distinguished by its values, goals, and methods and not necessarily by its emphasis on working with marginalized populations. We suggest that qualitative methods can be used to further a variety of goals including promoting empowerment and dismantling oppression. Nonetheless, using qualitative methods to facilitate social action is extremely challenging whether we choose to critique or deconstruct the practices of the powerful or to legitimate and empower the practices of the disenfranchised. Describing the nature of the relationship of researchers and participants, attending to the balance of interpretive accuracy and interpretive authority, and broadening our repertoire of ways to transform analysis into knowing and action can help avoid the perpetuation of the status quo with our work.

The present framework is not intended to completely resolve tensions found in conducting

<sup>5</sup>Activities that combine research, teaching, and the creation of settings, present an increased potential of dual relationships with participants. Qualitative researchers must be especially prepared to respond to dual relationship conflicts given that expanded forms of knowing like those described here involve a synthesis of participants' and researcher's interpretive worlds.

qualitative research, nor is it meant to provide specific criteria upon which to evaluate the validity of qualitative methods for the field. Rather, we hope that researchers can use this perspective to elucidate research options, to identify the short- and long-term contributions of their research, and to better acknowledge and use their own voice as researchers to effect social change. We hope that this framework can be a catalyst for further consideration and growth of qualitative research in community psychology.

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