

Editorial

The complexities, challenges and successes of applied, innovative, and community-based research: Introduction to the special issue on applied research methodologies

Lauren J. Breen

Edith Cowan University, Australia

Dawn Darlaston-Jones

University of Notre Dame, Australia

Welcome to our special issue dedicated to applied research methodologies that are directly relevant to community psychologists and fellow travellers. Community psychologists have a history of exploring innovative methodologies that allow their research and/or practice to reflect the applied nature of their work. This is often tempered though with the imperatives of funding agencies, academia, and other bureaucracies which demand a prescribed set of criteria for research. This conflict presents a tension that community researchers often negotiate with difficulty and frustration, constantly feeling the need to justify the methodologies they employ.

The idea for this issue came directly from our experiences – between us, we teach/have taught research to psychology, behavioural science, and health science students, and both of us engage/have engaged in various research projects, yet we found that research is often taught and reported in a sterile and ‘clean’ manner, which we didn’t think reflected the ‘true’ process of research. Instead, we wanted to read about the process of research directly from other researchers that engage in applied, community-based research, and we wanted to provide a forum for this to occur.

As such, we decided to dedicate a special issue of *The Australian Community Psychologist* devoted to showcasing applied and innovative methodologies and their use in, or relevance to, community psychology. We sought papers that provided quality examples of applied approaches and methodologies that are directly relevant to community psychology research and practice. In particular, we were interested in manuscripts that demonstrated the specific character and processes of applied research and practice, rather than examples of polished research. We encouraged authors to reflect upon and demystify the applied

research and practice they have been or are currently engaged in, provide alternatives to commonly (and often uncritically) accepted methodologies, explore alternative methodologies and new forms of enquiry.

The call for papers was distributed nationally and internationally through community psychology email listserves, including Commpsy (Australia), Society for Community Research and Action (SCRA, United States), and COMMUNITYPSYCHUK (United Kingdom). We were inundated with emails, telephone calls, and manuscripts from around the world. In all, 18 manuscripts were selected for the review process and 14 of these are included in this issue. In addition, potential contributors commended us for taking a "really interesting angle" (a professor from the United Kingdom) and for attempting to produce an issue that “will be of great interest and very useful for my classes here” (a professor from Canada).

The number of manuscripts submitted for consideration was a first for an issue of ACP and for each of the 18 selected for review we had to find two reviewers who were willing and able to review them within a short space of time. We would like to acknowledge and thank these reviewers for their time and efforts. They (in alphabetical order) were – Brian Bishop, Diane Broderick, Ali Browne, Lynne Cohen, Ann Dadich, Catherine D’Arcy, Neil Drew, Maria Fernandez, Adrian Fisher, Colleen Fisher, David Fryer, Darrin Hodgetts, Vicky Hovane, Elizabeth Kaczmarek, Bridgette Masters-Awatere, Wendy Nolan, Moira O’Connor, Amiee-Jade Pereira, Julie Ann Pooley, Rosemary Pynor, Harriet Rademacher, Rob Ranzijn, Anne Sibbel, Meg Smith, Christopher Sonn, Sasha Stumpers, Margot Trinder, and Eleanor Wertheim. In addition, we would like to acknowledge and

thank Anne Sibbel for her assistance and expertise in producing the Journal each time.

We have organized the surviving papers into three themes. First, we present two manuscripts that are primarily about the '*thinking*' processes that are required before the researcher embarks on the research; these provide the foundation for applied and innovative research methodologies and for this special issue. Second, we present the manuscripts that are primarily about '*doing*' the research; that is they are exemplary illustrations of applied research methodologies. Finally, we include the manuscripts that are primarily about '*reflecting*' on the process of conducting applied and innovative community-based research. While we recognise the somewhat arbitrary nature of this categorisation as there are many ways in which the papers might have been organised, this structure allowed us to emphasise the key components within the research process. Naturally we recognise the fact that this form of categorisation misrepresents the complexity of the research process as the thinking, doing and reflecting rarely occur in such a simple and linear manner: Indeed they often occur at the same time! We also realise that many of these papers would just as easily fit across more than one of these categories so we ask the forgiveness of the authors if they feel that our structure inadequately positions their work.

The special issue opens with a paper from Brian Bishop identifying the values and worldview inherent in qualitative research and the ways in which researchers attempting to utilise them might experience the 'pull' and dominance of positivism. This theme is continued by Dawn Darlaston-Jones as she draws on her PhD research exploring student experiences in higher education to illustrate the relationships between epistemology and methodology and the connection with the researcher's worldview.

The next set of papers describe research initiatives that are illustrations of applied research methodologies, and all focus at one level or another on the value of researching *with* the community of interest. The first of these by Mary Hampton, Kim McKay-McNabb, Bonnie Jeffery, and Barb McWatters discusses a research partnership with Aboriginal youth in Canada

designed to strengthen sexual health. Rachel Reilly, Joyce Doyle, and Kevin Rowley describe the partnerships between researchers and the community to promote health in the Goulburn Valley. Julie Morsillo and Adrian Fisher present their work with a group of year 10 high school students in a socially-disadvantaged area of Melbourne. Harriet Radermacher and Christopher Sonn focus on their use of participatory action research with a disability advocacy organisation in Melbourne and highlight the complexity of implementing empowerment practices. Cyndi Brannen, Kathy Petite, Deborah Norris, Cheryl Baldwin, Barbara Corbett, and Donna Harding illustrate the importance of working with communities that don't fit the traditional profile of 'disadvantage' to promote wellbeing through policy change in Canada. Jacqui Akhurst's paper draws on Activity Theory to develop a model of evaluating the Nkosinathi Community Project in South Africa. Julie van den Eynde and Art Veno discuss their research with outlaw motorcycle club women and explicate the process of attempting to collaborate with and/or investigate potentially dangerous subcultures and criminalised groups.

These 'doing' papers demonstrate the complexities and effectiveness of community-generated and/or community-directed research projects and the manner in which these can strengthen identity and community connectedness. The importance of researchers working in a genuinely collaborative manner with their communities of interest and for the knowledge to reside with the community is highlighted. This relationship between the researcher and the community is one of the distinguishing characteristics of community collaboration research and emphasises the critical importance of reflexivity on the part of the researcher(s).

The 'reflection' section of the issue includes papers that illustrate the nexus between the 'doing' and the 'reflecting' processes of research and illustrate the overlap between these categorisations. It also illustrates the cyclical nature of research with the emphasis on reflexivity with the researcher examining his or her role and position within the research process. Even in a collaborative research partnership there

is a power differential that the research must acknowledge and negotiate. The first of these papers by Katherine Johnson reflects upon the methodological and ethical issues of exploring suicide among the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) community in the United Kingdom. Brian Bishop and Alison Browne examine the complex set of relationships related to natural resource management, and argue that, with the growing national and global concern on natural resources, it is critical that social science research is included in the debate. Bernard and Pauline Guerin draw on examples from their long term work with refugees to illustrate the shortcomings of many of the methodologies employed in racism and discrimination research. Pauline and Bernard's second paper expands this idea by giving examples, again from their own experiences, of how to engage in participatory processes. They discuss the challenges they faced in developing appropriate methodologies and the iterative nature of the *doing* and *reflecting* involved in getting it right, or at least attempting to do so. The final paper in the issue is a reflection from Lauren Breen on negotiating the insider/outsider dichotomy in her PhD study. She describes herself as being 'in the middle' rather than as an insider or outsider to her research and considers the ways in which this positioning influenced the topic, scope, and methodology employed in the study.

We conclude this special issue with a review of Ian Parker's book, "Qualitative psychology: Introducing radical research" by David Fryer, Adele Laing, and Rachael Fox. The reviewers describe the book as "...a devastating critique of the quantitatively dominated discipline of psychology." Parker doesn't limit his critique of research to the quantitative paradigm; he challenges the lack of critical thought applied to much of the research conducted within psychology regardless of the methodological 'flavour', and consequently, the review compliments the papers included in this special issue.

The articles in this special issue describe elements of the process of conducting applied and innovative community-based research, using examples from around the globe. In these papers, the context(s) of the research is delicate and consequences of error can be profound. The

research techniques described by the contributors require a great deal of time and consideration prior to and during implementation. However, rather than arguing that these research methodologies are perhaps best reserved for the more experienced investigator, we believe that it's not so much the prior experience of the researcher that matters, but that sensitivity to the context and issues at hand that is important. We hope that this special issue achieves our aim of providing a forum for the emergence of a conversation around the methodologies we employ and the epistemological roots underpinning them. We invite critique and commentary on these papers and encourage the continued sharing of ideas and debate. Developing this special issue over the past six months has been a rewarding, and at times exhausting, experience. It has been gratifying to realise that other researchers around the world shared our enthusiasm for the project and were willing to contribute their work to the journal.

Address correspondence to

Lauren Breen

l.breen@ecu.edu.au

Dawn Darlaston-Jones

ddarlaston-jones@nd.edu.au