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WHERE EVERY 'ONE' KNOWS YOUR NAME: THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF QUALITATIVE APPROACHES IN COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH

ABSTRACT

Using an autoethnographic lens, we explore our transition from external observers, scholars, and experts in our field to integral members of the community with whom we work. More specifically, this essay focuses on the pivotal role qualitative research played in this transformation, fostering deeper engagement, mutual understanding, and collective action among all stakeholders—coresearchers and researchers alike. Researchers can immerse themselves in community settings using qualitative approaches such as ethnography, qualitative case study, and phenomenology, leading to a deeper connection and genuine partnership with community members. Qualitative methods integrated with participatory evaluation approaches engender trust and communicate respect, which is crucial as researchers move beyond mere data collection (and their titles) to become co-creators of knowledge with the community, a community where everyone knows their name. Researchers who dispositionally embrace humility and reflexivity—continuously reflecting on and adjusting one's role in relation to the community—are much more likely to experience positional shifts with the organizations and people with whom they are working, becoming a part of the collective. Becoming an 'Us' is where researchers learn about the community and from it, leading to a shared identity and purpose. This transformation is critical for conducting research and program evaluation that is not only about the community but for and with it, leading to outcomes that are truly beneficial and supported by those involved. We aim to showcase how embracing the community as partners and co-researchers can lead to more impactful and sustainable changes. We provide a platform for discussing how to navigate the challenges of this transformation and how to effectively leverage the collective power of community and research expertise for social change.

Keywords

Qualitative research; Community; Partnership; Program evaluation; Transformation.

1. Introduction

Qualitative research is a recursive set of processes aimed at achieving a deeper understanding of a particular phenomenon or case that identifies and describes the common and unique aspects of human experiences (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Common data collection methods for qualitative research include document analysis, participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups (Busetto et al., 2020). Most of these involve face-to-face interaction with participants who are generally experiencing the phenomenon of interest. Field notes and audio recordings are often transcribed as part of the analysis process and may involve the use of qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) for coding. To enhance and assess the quality of the research conducted, various criteria can be applied, such as checklists, reflexivity, purposive sampling strategies, piloting, co-coding, member-checking, peer review, and stakeholder involvement. Similarly, qualitative program evaluation can be particularly effective in understanding processes, essential for assessing impact. It provides an opportunity to thoroughly examine process-related issues while amplifying the voices of marginalized and vulnerable populations in social science evaluations (Busetto et al., 2020).

We argue that community-based qualitative research (e.g., evaluation, needs assessment, grant development) can facilitate meaningful relationships between scholars and community members by providing mutual benefits and opportunities for growth. Qualitative researchers are uniquely positioned to engage deeply within community environments through methods such as ethnography, qualitative case studies, and phenomenological research. These immersive approaches allow researchers to understand the dynamics of community programs and those they serve and create authentic partnerships with community members and stakeholders.

By viewing community members as partners and co-researchers, researchers can facilitate impactful and sustainable transformative changes. This collaborative approach enhances the relevance and applicability of research and program evaluation findings, ensuring that they align with the community's real needs and aspirations (Milacci et al., 2024).

A highly adaptable and flexible research plan is essential for overcoming the challenges that may arise during this transformational process. In this essay, we explore how to effectively harness the combined strengths of community insights and research expertise to drive social change while remaining anchored in stakeholder engagement and culturally sensitive practices. This approach not only enriches the research experience but also empowers communities to influence their own futures and has the potential to transform those involved.

2. Two Models of Stakeholder Involvement

Involving stakeholders is a crucial element of program evaluation. Evaluators have increasingly recognized the significance of context and culture, leading to the development of professional standards that acknowledge the role of cultural competence in promoting stakeholder participation.

This involvement can also enhance the cultural competence of both the evaluation process and the evaluators themselves (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2014). The American Evaluation Association defines cultural competence as a "stance" in its Public Statement on Cultural Competence in Evaluation (American Evaluation Association, 2018). When cultural competence and meaningful stakeholder engagement are present, evaluators can produce higher-quality evaluations that are more likely to yield useful findings, ultimately resulting in more effective programs (Gill et al., 2016). **Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) and Empowerment Evaluation** are two program evaluation models that emphasize stakeholder involvement.

Community-based participatory research (CBPR) encompasses terms like action research and feminist participatory action research. It focuses on collaboration with marginalized communities to address identified injustices and inequities. The aim is to create fair evaluation processes among researchers, evaluators, and community members (Israel et al., 1998). CBPR involves all partners equally in the research process, acknowledging each party's strengths. It begins with a community-identified research topic and ultimately combines knowledge with action to promote social change and improve health outcomes while reducing disparities (Kellogg Foundation, 1992).

A fundamental principle is recognizing the expertise of community members as legitimate and authoritative. These members are engaged throughout the research process, from identifying issues to disseminating findings (Wallerstein et al., 2018). The primary goal of CBPR is to empower participants and facilitate social transformation, with community involvement ideally spanning all project aspects. The role of knowledge users in research is increasingly recognized in global health systems research, as they are considered experts within their domains, which drives social change (Jull et al., 2017).

CBPR emphasizes collaborative partnerships to set research and evaluation agendas, stemming from advocacy for government involvement in policy development (van Bekkum, 2016). While it strengthens the evidence base for health systems research, implementing CBPR often requires more time, effort, and financial resources than traditional research projects (Graham & Tetroe, 2007).

Fetterman and Wandersman (2005) describe **empowerment evaluation** as enhancing the program being evaluated by fostering the skills and autonomy of its participants, including program staff and stakeholders. This approach promotes a culture of research and trust. Trust is particularly valuable in program evaluation, as it facilitates better relationships, improves data collection, and enhances the transferability of results (Milacci et al., 2024).

Researchers collect and analyze trustworthy qualitative data, identifying the next steps while engaging participants as trusted co-creators in the evaluation process. Empowerment evaluation addresses concerns related to relevance, trust, and the practical application of evaluations. This model helps develop skills and tackle significant evaluation needs within the community. In empowerment evaluation, program staff, participants, and community members take control of the evaluation process. Meanwhile, empowerment evaluators may act as coaches to ensure the process remains on track, rigorous, responsive, and relevant (Fetterman, 2019).

Empowerment evaluations can benefit small groups and large-scale community change initiatives. This approach is integrated into the planning and management of programs or organizations.

Empowerment evaluation is a tool that helps stakeholders achieve their desired outcomes and reach their goals. It is typically applied in two main ways: practical and transformative.

Practical empowerment evaluation resembles formative evaluation in that it focuses on improving program performance and productivity. It is managed by program staff, participants, and community members and emphasizes practical problem-solving, program improvements, and measurable outcomes (Fetterman, 2019). Transformative empowerment evaluation prioritizes social justice by addressing systemic inequities and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. It emphasizes stakeholder inclusivity, cultural competence, and actionable outcomes that drive meaningful change. This method fosters sustainable improvements, and critical reflection on power dynamics and structural barriers within programs and systems.

2.1 Community-Oriented Policing Grant: Empowerment Evaluation in Action

In 2023, our local community police department sought federal grant funding to develop and implement a co-response program that pairs police officers with mental health clinicians. The primary goal of this project was to alleviate the burden on law enforcement when responding to individuals in mental health crises. Research has shown that co-response programs can decrease the number of crisis calls for service and reduce repeat calls to the same addresses, as indicated by one-year follow-up data (Peterson et al., 2020).

Additionally, we anticipated that the number of individuals with mental health disorders involved in the criminal justice system would decrease. Individuals with serious mental illnesses are often overrepresented in this system (Dobmeier et al., 2017; Kolodziejczak et al., 2018; Pope et al., 2013), which can increase stress and exacerbate mental health symptoms due to the lack of adequate treatment options. Furthermore, we expected this program to improve police-citizen relations in mental health crisis cases. Poor interactions between police and citizens can significantly undermine perceived trustworthiness, while positive interactions have only a modest positive effect (Myhill & Bradford, 2012). Moreover, individuals with greater preconceived biases tend to have lower trust in the police (Madon & Murphy, 2021).

Our evaluation team has been involved in this project from the beginning and has played a key role in developing the project design, methodology, and evaluation plan. After the project was funded in 2023, our team met with key stakeholders from the police department and the behavioral health organization responsible for providing mental health clinicians.

Photo elicitation. In line with the principles of empowerment evaluation, we proposed using photo elicitation as the methodology for our formative evaluation. Photo elicitation is a qualitative method that uses photographs to prompt discussion and gather insights during interviews or focus groups (Bates et al., 2017). The use of visual stimuli can reveal deeper meanings that may be overlooked in verbal methods by evoking emotions and memories. This approach helps bridge cultural gaps, enriches data, and empowers participants to engage with pre-selected images or create their own.

Its participatory nature makes photo elicitation particularly valuable for community-based research, especially with marginalized populations (Harper, 2002). In this evaluation, project participants take photographs of personally meaningful subjects related to their job duties. For instance, a police officer might take a picture of a bridge where they encountered a suicidal client.

As we moved forward with our project, the unexpected resignation of the clinician only two months into the methodology presented significant challenges. This shift necessitated expanding our methodology to incorporate a case study approach, broadening our interview pool beyond the initial photo elicitation participants. This adaptation aligned with our goals to deeply understand the potential successes and challenges of the co-response program by capturing a wider array of stakeholders' experiences.

2.2 USAServe Peer Recovery Specialist Grant: CBPR in Action

In 2024, we conducted a USAServe Feasibility Study for a local public behavioral healthcare organization to explore the potential integration of USAServe-funded Peer Recovery Specialists (PRs) into the organization's services. This study, funded by a USAServe Planning Grant, assessed the benefits and challenges of pursuing an USAServe Operational Grant. The USAServe Feasibility Study employed a qualitative methodology focused on gathering insights from key stakeholders to evaluate the potential integration of USAServe-funded PRs into the organization's services. Targeted interviews were conducted with seven stakeholders, including organizational staff, representatives from local partner organizations, and individuals experienced with USAServe grants. The interviews were either virtual or in-person and systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes. Questions focused on participants' motivations to work with USAServe, perceptions of the program, and the benefits and challenges of implementing an USAServe Operational Grant. The qualitative data collection process ensured diverse perspectives and context-specific insights.

Our results highlighted both significant opportunities and challenges. Opportunities: The integration of USAServe PRs could help alleviate the regional shortage of peer support services, lower recruitment costs, and offer members professional growth opportunities through training and education awards. Challenges: The administrative demands of the grant—such as compliance with federal regulations, detailed record-keeping, and ongoing training—presented a considerable burden. Further, there appeared to be a cultural misalignment between USAServe's operational framework and the existing practices of the healthcare organization, which could complicate the integration process. In addition, there is a critical need for a dedicated Grant Administrator, highlighting the complexity of managing these grants.

These findings informed our recommendation to seek alternative funding strategies, given the operational and organizational cultural challenges posed by USAServe grant requirements. This methodology exemplifies the role of qualitative evaluation in aligning organizational goals with external funding opportunities. This project aligns closely with the principles of CBPR by emphasizing stakeholder engagement and incorporating community voices into the evaluation process.

By conducting targeted interviews with stakeholders, local partner organizations, and individuals experienced with USAServe programs, the study prioritized the expertise and lived experiences of those directly impacted by the proposed initiative. This participatory approach ensured that the evaluation was grounded in the specific needs and contexts of the community, rather than relying solely on external perspectives. Furthermore, the study's focus on identifying both benefits and challenges, such as the need for more PRSs and the administrative burdens of USAServe grants, reflects CBPR's commitment to addressing community-relevant issues while collaboratively seeking solutions. By centering stakeholder insights into decision-making, the project demonstrated a commitment to co-creating knowledge and fostering partnerships, which are core tenets of CBPR.

2.3 Our Gold Standard: The Participant Interviews

Participant interviews are a cornerstone of qualitative program evaluation because they provide rich, detailed insights into the experiences, perspectives, and needs of individuals directly affected by the program being evaluated. Interviews allow evaluators to capture the nuanced, context-specific realities that may not be evident through quantitative methods alone, such as surveys or statistical analysis. By engaging stakeholders—such as staff, program participants, and community partners—evaluators can identify both successes and challenges, uncover unanticipated outcomes, and gain a deeper understanding of program dynamics. Furthermore, interviews foster a participatory approach, empowering participants to contribute their voices to the evaluation process and enhancing the findings' relevance and cultural competence. The personal narratives and detailed feedback gathered through interviews can also inform practical recommendations, ensuring that the program evolves in a way that aligns with stakeholder needs and goals. In short, participant interviews provide a comprehensive, human-centered perspective that is critical for meaningful and actionable program evaluation.

Participant interviews, as demonstrated in our qualitative case studies like the adult drug court program (Smith Ramey et al., 2023) and Illness Management and Recovery (IMR) implementation (Smith Ramey et al., 2024), offer powerful insights into program dynamics and stakeholder experiences. For instance, in the drug court study, interviews with multidisciplinary team members revealed themes like the therapeutic benefits of judicial interactions and the impact of courtroom arrangements on participant agency and respect. Similarly, interviews with project staff during the IMR implementation highlighted challenges such as balancing multiple roles and securing staff buy-in while uncovering motivations rooted in a sense of mission and community service (Smith Ramey et al., 2023). These examples underscore how interviews amplify voices, uncover barriers, and offer actionable recommendations for program improvement.

2.4 Our Autoethnographic Lens: Self-Reflection, Transformation, and Growth

In 2024, we began an autoethnographic journal to reflect on and analyze our collaborative work as professionals engaged in community-based research and program development.

This approach allowed us to document our personal and professional growth, focusing on our shared values of service and commitment to marginalized populations. Through this reflective process, we explored how our individual experiences, motivations, and evolving dynamics as a team shaped our collective efforts and outcomes. The autoethnography journal provides a reflective exploration of our collaborative work in community-based research and program development. We reflected on our formative experiences, motivations, and the evolution of our collaborative efforts over time.

The methodology adheres to the principles of autoethnography, emphasizing insider perspectives (emic) while incorporating external validation (etic) to ensure depth and rigor in the findings. As we continue this project into 2025, our data sources will include personal journal entries, focus group discussions, and artifacts from our collective work, such as publications and presentations. A meta-narrative will emerge, highlighting our shared passion for impactful service, trust, and mutual respect as the foundation of our collaboration (Ellis et al., 2011). Some of the key themes include shared values (a unified focus on serving marginalized communities), professional growth (reflections on how collaboration has enhanced our expertise in qualitative research and program evaluation); unique backgrounds (variances in formative influences, such as faith and early career experiences), contribute to their diverse perspectives; and transformative collaboration (the relationship is marked by trust, humility, and a sense of shared purpose), which drives our ongoing projects and scholarship.

To connect participant interviews with our autoethnographic lens, the reflective process documented in our journals demonstrates how participant feedback shaped our understanding of the community and refined our methodologies leading to our individual and collective transformation. Through interviews, we observed recurring themes of trust, collaboration, and shared purpose—insights that resonated deeply with our own reflections. This alignment underscores the value of integrating external perspectives (from interviews) with internal, reflexive narratives to create a more comprehensive understanding of community dynamics and the researcher's role within them.

3. Lessons Learned

Several key lessons have emerged throughout our ongoing work in community-based qualitative program evaluations. First, we learned that human services and public organizations often face significant resource constraints, including high caseloads, substantial administrative responsibilities, and shortages in the behavioral health workforce. These factors limit the time and capacity available for engaging in program evaluation processes. To address these challenges, we adopted flexible and adaptive evaluation approaches. For example, scheduling meetings with stakeholders immediately before or after existing commitments, such as drug court sessions, proved to be an efficient strategy. Similarly, leveraging existing community resources and adjusting methodologies for available data collection enhanced the feasibility and relevance of our evaluations. While these adjustments sometimes raised concerns about methodological fidelity, the iterative nature of qualitative research allowed us to prioritize practicality without compromising the depth or rigor of our findings.

Second, we recognized the transformative potential of building trust and fostering genuine partnerships with community stakeholders. Trust not only facilitated smoother data collection but also enriched the quality of insights gathered, making the findings more relevant and actionable for stakeholders (Milacci et al., 2024). By positioning ourselves as co-creators of knowledge alongside the community, we bridged gaps between academic research and practical application, ensuring that our evaluations had real-world impact and usability.

3.1 Critical Engagement with Limitations

Cultural misalignments also presented significant hurdles. For instance, when integrating USAServe Peer Recovery Specialists into a behavioral health organization, we encountered discrepancies between USAServe' structured operational framework and the organization's established culture. To mitigate this, we engaged in frequent dialogue with stakeholders to identify alignment opportunities and adapt processes to respect organizational practices while meeting USAServe requirements. These efforts illustrate the importance of iterative, collaborative approaches to navigating cultural and operational disparities without compromising project goals.

3.2 Funding Constraints

Community-based participatory research and empowerment evaluations often demand significant resources to support stakeholder engagement, training, and data collection efforts. Organizations with limited budgets may find it challenging to allocate enough funds for these activities, which can lead to compromises in methodological rigor or stakeholder involvement. However, these constraints can be addressed through effective planning in the initial stages of project design by scaling the design to align with the available budget.

4. Final Considerations

Our work demonstrates the vital and potentially transformative role of qualitative approaches in community-based program evaluation. By emphasizing stakeholder engagement, cultural competence, and flexibility, we produced evaluations that were methodologically sound and deeply aligned with the needs of the communities we served. These efforts underscore the importance of viewing community members as equal partners in the evaluation process, moving beyond traditional roles to foster shared ownership and collective action.

As we reflect on our journey, we see the necessity of balancing methodological rigor with the practical realities of community engagement. This balance is essential for producing evaluations that are both credible and transformative. We advocate for continued efforts to integrate community voices into all research and program evaluation stages, ensuring that outcomes are equitable, impactful, and sustainable. By embracing the principles of trust, collaboration, and adaptability, qualitative program evaluation can serve as a powerful tool for driving meaningful social change.

Future directions include expanding the integration of community voices (e.g., photo voice, photo elicitation) to ensure that research remains grounded in real-world contexts and addresses the unique challenges faced by diverse populations. Participatory methods foster collaboration, yielding insights and solutions that are both innovative and actionable.

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