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Kruger, D. J. (2003). Integrating quantitative and qualitative methods in community research. The Community Psychologist, 36, 18-19.

Practitioners of community research hail from a number of academic fields with diverse theoretical orientations and training in research methodologies. The variety of perspectives has the potential to strengthen community research by providing broad approaches to issues and multiple forms of analysis. As community researchers, we are challenged to integrate this diversity into both a coherent theoretical framework and effective research and dissemination strategies.

One of the current debates in the social sciences involves the evaluation of quantitative and qualitative research. All of the articles in the December 2002 issue of the American Journal of Community Psychology present quantitative analyses, ranging from frequency tables to hierarchical multiple regression and factor analysis. I found this surprising, considering both the abundance of qualitative methodologies in the conference presentations of community collaborations I have attended, and the presence of examples of qualitative works in previous AJCP issues (e.g., Rappaport, 2000).

Each type of methodology has advantages and disadvantages. Quantitative methods allow us to summarize vast sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time. Comparisons are necessary to evaluate improvement, a critical criterion for community interventions and funding agencies. However, quantitative methodologies can be quite complex and require considerable investment for proper understanding and use. Community members (and undergraduates, etc.) may “tune out” elaborate statistics, creating difficulties in the utilization of the products of research.

Critics of quantitative methods have also commented that it is difficult to get the “real meaning” of an issue by looking at numbers. Aggregate statistics are a relatively recent arrival in

human history, which might explain our difficulties in comprehending probabilities and other statistical phenomena (Gigerenzer, 2000). It is apparent that we must devise ways of translating statistical information into a form comprehensible to our target audiences.

Qualitative description provides a rich flavor for issues and circumstances. Some psychologists have suggested that people organize their experiences in the form of narratives. It certainly seems reasonable to suggest that one may have a better understanding of a community member's situation by reading a descriptive passage than just looking at demographic statistics. However, it may be difficult to generate substantial project funding or otherwise convince others of the value of an intervention based on a few anecdotes.

Unfortunately, the conference presenters I have encountered appeared to fall into two methodological camps, each extolling the benefits of one approach and deriding the other. These are not mutually exclusive techniques. Not only can one use multiple methodologies in the same research project, one may even be able to synthesize quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain the benefits of both techniques and reduce the drawbacks.

There are several ways to combine quantitative and qualitative techniques, ranging in ease and complexity. One basic approach would be to generate areas of concern from a focus group. For example, neighborhood residents could respond to quantitative items on how well public transportation operates in their neighborhood and how important this issue is to them. Residents could also describe some of their experiences with public transportation. The research team could then examine the distribution of responses and select a few passages representative of various viewpoints across the spectrum.

For a more sophisticated approach, one could code the frequency of each type of statements and create a few prototypical responses with statements in proportion to their occurrence in the larger sample. This would enable readers to gain an understanding of the variety of perspectives without having to read hundreds of passages. This technique could also be used to

sort evaluative statements along the dimensions of positivity and negativity. One may also create a correlation matrix for the appearance of statements, to determine how beliefs are interrelated.

There is a false dichotomy between using either quantitative or qualitative methods. Our research projects would be strengthened by making use of the range of available methods. Quantitative methods facilitate an understanding of the distribution of views in the population, which would be quite useful in a needs assessment of a community. These techniques are invaluable in evaluations of interventions and other types of comparisons. Qualitative methods allow one to capture the subtle nuances of a situation and present information in a way that the general population can relate to. Combining quantitative and qualitative techniques would provide a comprehensive description of an issue in a format that can easily be digested by a diverse body of stakeholders.

#### References

Gigerenzer, G. (2000). Adaptive thinking: Rationality in the real world. New York: Oxford University Press.

Rappaport, J. (2000). Community Narratives: Tales of Terror and Joy. American Journal of Community Psychology, 28, 1-24.