The Affinity between Qualitative Methods and Community Psychology

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Abstract: Basically community psychology is not associated with a certain methodology but there are good reasons why qualitative methods are chosen in many investigations in community psychology. Characteristic features of the community psychology approach are nearness to everyday life, multiperspectivity, partiality, and process orientation. These characteristics become relevant if complex psycho-social processes like empowerment, social networks etc. are investigated. In this contribution I will discuss in which way qualitative methods today can contribute to a better understanding of these processes in community psychology research.

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1. Introduction

In looking back at the history of community psychology one can see that there are similarities in the development between qualitative social research methods and community psychology. In the following I will present some of the common ground shared by the two fields. First, I will provide a brief overview of the history of community psychology. [1]

MERITT, GREENE, JOPP and KELLY (1999) described the history of community psychology on the basis of their own experiences. They pointed out that there had been a number of developments that influenced the new discipline at the Swampscott Conference, which usually is considered as the starting point of community psychology. In the USA a number of clinical psychologists were discontent with the individualistic approach in psychotherapy. Professionals in the area of psychiatry experienced a change of paradigms, "when it became apparent to military psychiatrists that environmental stress associated with

combat contributed to mental illness and that treatment in non-institutional settings produced favourable outcomes" (MERITT et al. 1999, p.3). Moreover, it became obvious that African Americans and women, whose cooperation in the industry during World War II was necessary, were treated differently compared to the white male workers. Furthermore they received lower wages. Sexism and racism and its consequences for individual health and the development of the community became clear. Changes in the political context went hand in hand with this development as it could be seen in the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam and against racism. Both demonstrations produced a sense of civil commitment and "fostered among some psychologists an awareness of their community responsibility and the salience of social action" (MERITT et al. 1999, p.6). [2]

All that resulted in a relatively quick institutionalisation of community psychology as Division 27 of the American Psychological Association. However this new Division differed from the traditional positivistic orientation—theoretically as well as methodologically. On one hand community psychologists wanted to investigate general psychological processes, "that link social systems with individual behaviour in complex interaction" (BENNETT et al. 1966, p.7). On the other hand they wanted to develop action programmes, which aimed at improving the functioning of individuals, groups and social systems. As a result ISCOE and SPIELBERGER (1970) stated: "Community psychology's emphasis on the community as a unit of analysis and an area of inquiry, combined with its action-orientation, established the field as a potential innovation to be defined by its own substantive base of theory and knowledge" (cited in MERITT et al. 1999, pp.9-10). [3]

As in the USA, clinical psychologists in Germany also became interested in community psychology in the seventies. This interest was developed parallel to the student movement in the context of social and community psychiatry. A number of young clinical psychologists were discontent with the individual centred clinical approach. The main argument was that in psychotherapy there is always the danger to individualise social problems. Simultaneously there was a growing discontent with the nomothetic approach in psychological research. It was argued that important social problems could not be adequately examined in this way. Since clinical phenomena are embedded in a context of social conflicts, it seemed necessary to examine complex social situations on different levels e.g. the interaction of people, institutional settings or the economic and ideological factors at the societal level. During this time many clinical psychologists turned away from research and went into practice. They hoped to produce the appropriate knowledge by changing institutional conditions according to the ideas and theories of social and community psychiatry, of "anti-psychiatry" and of the "democratic psychiatry" in Italy. In the eighties new topics were added to community psychology: the new economic uncertainties, environmental threats, health risks and problems in the relationship between men and women to name a few (FALTERMAIER, KRAUSE JACOB, FLICK & BÖHM 1992). [4]

2. Characteristics of the Subject of Research in Community Psychology and Its Methodological Consequences

In the following, important characteristics of the subject of research in community psychology will be discussed like proximity to everyday life, partiality, contextuality, empowerment and participation and its methodological consequences. [5]

2.1 Person in context

According to ORFORD (1992) community psychology can be characterised by the assumption that people must always be seen in their context. They are not only part of a social system but person and context are intertwined inseparably. If we talk about social context we mean that people are always a part of social groupings; small or big. The groups are nested like family, clan, work organisation, cities, countries, cultures etc. Therefore, community psychologists fundamentally define the human being as a social being. Their perceptions, feelings, thoughts and actions develop in close connection with other human beings and can only be described and understood in this context. It is supposed that attitudes, thoughts, actions and emotional reactions are the product of the social field. This social field is simultaneously changed and influenced by the actions of the person. Such a definition has a number of consequences and poses certain demands on theoretical concepts and empirical methods. This will now be shown in more detail. [6]

2.2 Proximity to everyday life and high complexity

Community psychology investigations do not take place in the laboratory because of the importance of the everyday social context. On the contrary, researchers are explicitly interested in investigating the developments of everyday life. They are particularly interested in processes, which had already developed or are developing during the study. By studying them, they hope to gain a better understanding of possible developments. In this approach, not only the people are studied but the social connections in which they are embedded are also examined. [7]

This becomes obvious if one looks at the community psychology topics like social networks, social support, participation, empowerment, crisis intervention, prevention etc. There, social processes on different levels and of different scope are always involved. For example, if one looks at the research collected in "Studies of Empowerment" by RAPPAPORT and HESS (1984) it is apparent that all of the researchers described the wider social context. They reported how groups of people successfully freed themselves from a position of powerlessness and developed action plans that helped them to gain more control of their lives and their living conditions. If one studies e.g. empowerment processes in a poor area (e.g. SERRANO-GRACÌA 1984, MAAGER 1994) many factors on different social, political and economical levels must be analysed in order to make orientation possible for all people involved. The methodological challenge lies in

the fact that everyday life is very complex and that this complexity has to be reconstructed and made visible. At the same time the complexity also has to be reduced in order to allow action and intervention at central points. [8]

Many of the early studies in which the qualitative methodology was developed could also be seen as community psychology studies. Two of these studies initiated by different research groups will be briefly discussed. They can be understood as early prototypes of research strategies appropriate to community psychology. [9]

The representatives from the Chicago School of Sociology exerted a considerable influence on the development of social research methods through authors like GLASER and STRAUSS. Researchers from this school presented investigations on everyday life. This development is described in detail by VIDICH and LYMAN (1998). "The polish peasant in Europe and America" (1918) by THOMAS and ZNANIECKI serves as a good example for this type of research. It shows that dealing with complexity can go hand in hand with great methodological and theoretical creativity. It becomes evident that it is possible to develop theoretical statements about social change and migration by analysing qualitative data consisting of letters, documents and autobiographic reports. [10]

The second important study is the work of JAHODA, LAZERSFELD and ZEISEL (1975) about "The unemployed of Marienthal" in which proximity to everyday life and complexity were closely connected. The everyday situation of people was studied who lived in the little village called "Marienthal" near Vienna. Due to the closing of a fabric factory—the only employer in the region -people became unemployed and fell into poverty. The researchers went into the field without a predetermined theory or research design and used different methods in the course of the study to collect the data. Though they proceeded on a guiding principle, which is formulated by JAHODA (1991) as follows: "Each member of the study should take over a constructive function in town to obtain the confidence of the people" (pp. 120f). This meant that the people also received active support from the researchers in form of clothing, medical care, work with youth etc. This led not only to a better contact to the people but also helped them directly. Moreover, it fulfilled further demands of community psychology, as indicated below. [11]

The method principles, which were published by LAZERSFELD in the "Vorsprung zur neuen Auflage 1960", are summarised by JAHODA (1991) as follows:

1. "To comprehend the social reality, qualitative and quantitative methods should be used.
2. Objective facts and subjective attitudes must be collected.
3. Present observations must be supported by historical material.
4. Participant observations of the spontaneous life and direct, planned interviews should be used" (p.121, translation by the author) [12]

The results show that due to the use of different methods an extremely complex situation can be described and theoretically registered. On the one hand this situation includes the subjective attitudes of the involved individuals and on the other hand the social, economical and political situation. This study is a good example to show how complexity can be reduced to a minimum, so that the whole figure can be shown and at the same time the complexity is not ignored nor erased. On the basis of this data and the cooperation with the research partners it becomes possible to develop strategies which could help in supporting the people in their everyday life. [13]

One could say that in complex, community oriented research, above all certain procedures should be used, which could be combined under the label "discovering methods"[1]. The very first book by GLASER and STRAUSS (1973) addressed this subject starting with the title "The discovery of grounded theory". They wrote at the very beginning: "In this book we address ourselves to the equally important enterprise of how the discovery of theory from data / system-atically obtained and analysed in social research—can be furthered" (p.1). [14]

The discussion of heuristic methods had been carried on intensively by the different representatives of the qualitative methodology. Especially in Germany KLEINING (1995b, 1998) should be mentioned here as he described his methodological approach explicitly as "qualitative heuristic": "In sum: qualitative heuristics try to bring back the qualities of exploration and discovery into psychological and sociological academic research" (see KLEINING & WITT 2000, par.6). To characterise his approach KLEINING formulated:

> "The heuristic method, as it is understood, aims at registering relations, circumstances, relationships or structures. These are not understood as stiff but as flexible. Structures are always biographic or historic. Heuristic methods must be qualified for discovering the blind relations and movements of socio-scientific circumstances" (see KLEINING 1988, p.120). [15]

He demanded openness from the researchers concerning all aspects of the situation (openness concerning the subject of research, the methods, the data and the field of study). He also requested a method that allows collecting and analysing information systematically (for more information see KLEINING & WITT 2000). In addition to the openness he requested a method that allowed for collecting and analysing information more systematically. [16]

2.3 More options of perspective

If within the scope of community psychology it is assumed that a person is embedded in a social context and that there are other people who watch the same situation but have a different point of view. Now we will show how these different views are dealt with in a community psychology research project. Should

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1   There are also such approaches in the quantitative method. TUKEY (1977) wrote a book titled "Exploratory data analysis", in which he showed, how different procedures can be used to simplify data in a way that the significance for the researcher can be realised more easily.

they be understood as incorrect perceptions of the situation, as indicators of conflict of interests? Or can we construct beyond any further conceptualisations for such discrepancies? [17]

In the philosophy of science and in the discussion about the basics of qualitative research, different authors discussed the problem of perceptivity. On the one hand it was understood as a source of error in the objective description of reality; on the other hand the productivity of different perspectives for the production of knowledge had been discussed (see BREUER 1989, 1999). BATSON (1982) provided a metaphor in which the gaining of knowledge is developed due to a greater range of perspectives. He argued that by switching from monocular to binocular vision, differences occur, which produce information of a "different kind of logic". Due to the differences in the pictures, the dimension of the depth arises. In continuation of the thought BREUER (1999) came to the following conclusion: "The programmatic search for different perspectives of the people involved and the discussion of the divergences—contrasting the points of view—can be seen as another basic knowledge-heuristic, which forms the relationship with the research participants" (p.276). [18]

One of the most important strategies for the production of more options of perspective and of productive differences in the qualitative research is triangulation, which was introduced among others by DENZIN (1989). Triangulation is nowadays understood as a necessary research strategy that helps in obtaining richer, fuller and deeper information on the subject of research (see FLICK 1992). [19]

For the community psychology such an understanding of perspectives is of considerable importance. It allows on one hand to disclose the various interests of those involved and on the other hand it helps due to the analysis of the differences to gain a more complete knowledge about the object of research. In this way some possibilities of action become detectable, which otherwise are hidden for individual subjects. [20]

2.4 Partiality

One of the basic demands of community psychology is to be on the side of those who are socially disadvantaged. Community psychologists pointed out from the beginning that they choose their practice on the basis of value decisions. They specifically applied their effort at improving life for individuals, groups and their social systems as formulated by BENNETT et al. (1966). [21]

Community psychology research tends to be biased. Purposely topics are chosen in which social exclusion exists and the members are underprivileged. Community psychologists address the task to examine the particular living conditions and provide ways to improve these conditions. Thus partiality refers to the subject of research and the perspective of the intervention. KEUPP (1987) suggested: "The basis of a community psychology perspective is a topical consciousness, which corresponds to the necessity of a drastic social chance in highly industrialised

capitalistic societies as a precondition for reducing individual misery and supporting positive subjective potentials" (p.92, translation by the author). [22]

As a matter of course partiality should not be used to collect data to present desired results. Partiality means thorough reflection and clear choice of interests of research. This social commitment in the German-speaking area mainly came from the critical debate of the student movement concerning the political situation in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. At first this commitment was demonstrated in an effort to help the inmates of psychiatric clinics to find possibilities to live outside the clinic (BÖHM, FALTERMAIER, FLICK & KRAUSE JACOB 1992). This movement continued to develop by dealing with the problems of social isolation (LAUTH & VIEBAHN 1987), working class families (BUCHHOLZ, GMÜR, HÖFER & STRAUS 1984), social networks (KEUPP & RÖHRLE 1987), poverty (KOM-MER & RÖHRLE 1983), psycho-social counselling (NESTMANN 1997) etc. [23]

Also in the USA, MERITT et al. (1999) came to the following conclusion after a critical discussion on the "Society for Community Research and Action":

> "The division has increasingly listened to the differentiated voices of women, ethnic minorities, students, younger community psychologists, and applied community psychologists. These constituencies persist in calling for equal opportunities for participation, respect, and recognition within the division and the field." (p.28) [24]

BANYARD and MILLER (1998) examined these topics and they have been discussed in two of the most important community psychology journals in the USA for the past 30 years. They discovered that the main values: "manifoldness", "contextuality" and "empowerment" still play a role as it did in the beginning of community psychology. Above all, under the conditions of poverty and oppression in Latin America the necessity of clear value statements becomes obvious and is considered in carrying out research (SERRANO-GARCIA 1990). [25]

With the claim for disclosure on the interest of research, community psychology met with other fields of research, which on their part have highly influenced the development of qualitative methodology. It must be mentioned that the claim to disclose own interests and values was first discussed in the German scientific debate in the paper "Erkenntnis und Interesse" by HABERMAS (1968). Claims for partiality had also been made from various fields of research. In qualitative research in the tradition of the Chicago School, the claim for partiality had been made very early. In his description of the history of the Chicago School, FISCHER-ROSENTHAL (1991) described a situation in which the top officials at the University of Chicago supported the sociology department over other department with the expectations that it can help in solving the social problems of the city. [26]

Based on the experiences of the feminist movement it had been pointed out by feminist researchers that research is not, as insisted in the nomothetic approach, apolitical and value-free, but always takes place in political contexts (GRIFFIN & PHOENIKS 1994). The feministic research produced important impulses for the

development and the use of qualitative research methods. OLESEN (1998) provided an overview of this development within the feminist research. A similar impulse for the development of qualitative methods was created through the research with underprivileged groups and minorities. With these groups new methodological approaches had to be developed and the particular perspective had to be reflected very thoroughly (STANFIELDE II 1998). [27]

2.5 Participation and empowerment

The aim of partiality in community psychology is determined by two concepts: participation and empowerment. Both concepts occupy a central position and at the same time are difficult to understand. They include the scale of values, intentions, processes, and ideas about the results. This is evident in RAPPAPORT's attempt (1984) to define empowerment: "Empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their lives" (p.2). [28]

The set of values is clearly defined in this definition. RAPPAPORT wanted to consider the mental and social processes from a perspective that people and social groups will be enabled/able to manage their lives on their own, meet their needs and overcome limits and challenges. It also implies that the focus has to be on the people and groups who do not have the opportunity to master their life with self-determination. [29]

The difficulty in understanding this concept empirically is demonstrated in the footnote in which RAPPAPORT (1984) referred to the uncertainty involved in this concept: "The idea is more important that the thing itself. We do not know what empowerment is, but like obscenity, we know it when we see it. The idea stimulates attempts to create the thing itself" (p.2). In Germany, where processes of empowerment were examined and described in combination with the development of chronic mental patients and with self-help groups, it can be ascertained that the concept of empowerment is rather used as a trend-setting concept than as a tool that directly guides the practice or the research. The concept reflects more an attitude than a developed theory (STARK 1996). [30]

In my opinion two main methodical consequences can be deduced from this situation. On the one hand you can only approach this vague concept if you use a heuristic method. This means a method, which allows the development of a concept of the research subject in the course of the research and provides the room for verification and further development during the process. In this respect qualitative methods seem to be appropriate, which are explicitly constructed for the discovery of relationships, as it already was mentioned above. [31]

On the other hand the concept of empowerment requires that the research participants in the study be considered partners as opposed to the traditional role of objects of research. Recently such participation of the objects of research was discussed in various contexts. Suggestions and considerations regarding participatory research came among others from the feminist research approach,

"participatory action research" (FALS-BORDA 1959, FALS-BORDA & RAHMAN 1991), which was highly accepted in Latin America (SERRANO-GARCÌA 1990, WIESENFELD & SÀNCHEZ 1991), the "action science" (ARGYRIS & SCHON 1994) and the development of "co-operative inquiry" by HERON (1996). REASON & HERON (1995) summarised the basic difference between the approach of the "co-operative inquiry" and the conventional research as follows:

> "One of the critical differences between co-operative inquiry and orthodox research is that for the former the primary source of knowing, and thus the primary 'instrument' of research, is the self-directing person within a community of inquiry, and method is a secondary expression of this; whereas for the latter, method is primary and the subjects are subordinate to it" (p.123). [32]

A participatory method which is very consistent and comes very close to community psychology principles, is the approach of "intervention research" developed by FRYER and FEATHER (1995). It was developed in the research concerning unemployment, in which the informants were people "who are low in confidence, who have limited communication skills, who are confused, demotivated, apathetic, emotional fragile, distressed, suspicious of or hostile towards research ..." (p.231). The basic idea of this approach is to involve the research partners in a way that is useful for them: "Specifically, we intentionally set out to intervene in informant's circumstances in ways which increase their opportunities to gain both personally and collectively, and preferably in a very tangible form, as part and parcel of the research process" (p.233). [33]

Later on FRYER (1999) followed up on this basic approach and extended it to groups that usually do not participate in the research process. Concerning research with people with dementia he argued that this research method is appropriate and it facilitates the understanding effectively as there is respect for the work and solidarity with the person involved and over a longer period of time. Also in the German-speaking area action research played a significant role especially in the seventies (HAAG, KRÜGER, SCHWÄRZEL & WILDT, 1972). The idea of participation of the research partners was taken up once again by the "Praxisforschung" (HEINER 1988). In this case the main concern was to inspire the social workers to get involved in their own research field. [34]

2.6 Process

Community psychologists frequently examine processes of change, e.g. the course of events in the life of people and groups affected by the empowerment process. They want to gain knowledge about the conditions of such processes. Therefore, LORION (1990) required that not only the development of the individuals should be examined but also the development of organisations. "Community psychology's challenge is to establish comparable developmental indices to differentiate the maturational stage of the programs and organisations that it studies." (p.33) [35]

Therefore, community psychologists need a method that is able to document dynamic processes to state how development is made and promoted. It then becomes essential to know which methods are available in qualitative social research that register such processes. [36]

KLEINING (1995a) suggested a classification system for the methods of qualitative social research. In addition to the methods that are related to a subject or an object, he mentioned an additional group of methods, "methods rather orientated towards development" (p.118). These are characterised to be "genetic, historical and dialectical and refer to a development, chance, alteration of the individual, of groups and the society" (pp.118f). He mentioned e.g. the paper by Friedrich ENGELS, "Situation of the working-class" (1970) in 1845, in which he analysed the situation and the development of the working-class based on "his own view" and on "authentical sources", that is to say using participatory observation and various documents. The registration of developments with dialectic methods were followed up by others in the "Kritischen Theorie" of the "Frankfurter Schule" and recently by KLEINING (1995b) in the technique called "principle-dialogue". [37]

There are special research areas where it is important to register the change of time that lead to methodical developments. This is especially relevant for those disciplines that investigate successful as well as unsuccessful human development. In psychiatry at the end of the 19th century the question arose whether the causes of mental disorders, respectively diseases can be found in the biography of the people. A biographical method was developed in form of medical history and case report. This method was widely used by FREUD and his successors as a foundation of scientific knowledge for the development of mental disorder (THOMAE 1991). [38]

In the developmental psychology qualitative analyses of development were made in the beginning of this century. Biographies of babies and infants (e.g. PREYER 1882; STERN 1914) served as foundation for the theories of development. These approaches continued on in the thirties in various studies about the development of infancy, adolescence and adulthood (see MONTADA 1982). In the psychology discipline PIAGET had already developed his "clinical method" in 1926 which emerged from his research. This method was mainly individually centred and casuistic in its approach and helped him to get access to the thought and logic of the child. Today there is extensive biography research both in psychology (JÜTTEMANN & THOMAE 1998) as well as in sociology (KRÜGER & WENSIERSKI 1995) that uses qualitative methods. It deals with research that implemented different interview techniques and document analysis as well as "qualitative experiments" (KLEINING 1998) already realised by PIAGET. [39]

The usage of biography method allows for the analysis of the development of the individual as well as the institutional and social conditions that influenced the developments. Such a method is of considerable importance to the community psychology since its main concern is the co-evolution of the individuals and the society. This can be seen in the study done by KIEFER (1984) in which important

aspects of the group process of empowerment had been worked out on the basis of biographic narration from leaders of various basic organisations. Similarly MAGER (1994) reconstructed an empowerment process of a native woman of Minas Gerais in Brazil that had not been influenced by professionals. Using data from different levels—biographical and sociological—MAGER was able to show the influences of changes in the group and the area where the woman lived. [40]

3. Conclusion

We ascertained that there are many commonalties in the conception of community psychology and qualitative social research. We assume that in most of the mentioned characteristics of the community psychological concept the human beings experience their lives as significant and try to communicate with others about this significance and deal with it accordingly. The exploration of sense and significance seems to be a necessity to execute the community psychological research programme successfully and to understand the others as partners with equal rights. Therefore, we hope that the trend to do research using qualitative methods will increase in the community psychology in the future. [41]

As it can be seen later on, there are some indicators for this hope. Even after an initial acceptance for the use of qualitative methods, community psychologists in USA mainly used quantitative research methods. This methodical trend was about to change again. At a conference, held in September 1988 at the DePaul University in Chicago, they asked for more "adventuresome research". It seemed necessary to include "the contextual nature of information, the utility of divergent views and solutions, ..." (TOLAN, KEYS, CHERTOK & JASON 1990, p.5) in the study. MATON (1990) also requested a greater usage of qualitative methods. He saw its functionality in the description, the generation and in the testing of the hypotheses and during the support of social interventions phases. SPEER and DEY (1992) noticed a change in methodological orientation in syntheses of research methods, including the qualitative methods. Another indicator for a reopening of the discussion on qualitative methods is the issue of the "American Journal of Community Psychology" (1998, 4) published by MILLER and BANYARD, which is explicitly dedicated to qualitative methods in community psychology research. Also in German-speaking countries RÖHRLE, GLÜER and SOMMER (1995) noticed in their review of the development of community psychology research between 1977 and 1993 that even though various research methods were used during this time, qualitative methods were used in most of the cases. [42]

Indeed, it can be stated that in many of the community psychology studies quantitative methods are still being used. BANYARD and MILLER (1998) complained about this situation, which contradicts the claim of the community psychology for new perspectives in research. They pointed out:

> "However, we have remained quite traditional in terms of the methodologies we utilise to study phenomena that interest us. It might be said that we are studying new things in old ways, and have yet to seriously consider whether the addition of

nonquantitative methods might provide new and valuable ways of seeing the problems and issues at hand, and might perhaps lead to more effective solutions as well" (p.487). [43]

The resistance to use qualitative methods surely relates to the criticism that these methods are not adequately developed, methodologically speaking. In the meantime it can be stated that in the qualitative social research a wide repertoire of well-established methods is available (DENZIN & LINCOLN 1998, FLICK 1998, MILES & HUBERMAN 1994). The methodological elaboration has increased and the discussion about special criteria of quality has lead to new and appropriate evaluation criteria for qualitative research work (STEINKE 1999). Consequently, it seems justifiable to use qualitative methods in the field of community psychology. One the other hand community psychology is a challenge for qualitative methodologists. They have to show how highly complex research situations can be handled in which the objects of research participate as research partners. Creative new methods have to be developed and ways of integrating qualitative and quantitative methods have to be found. [44]

The use of qualitative methods in community psychology research is an opportunity to fulfil the above mentioned characteristics of community psychology. Moreover, there are various aspects in community psychology research that need a methodological elaboration inspired by the discussions on qualitative methods.

- The role of the researcher itself should be reflected upon more intensively. This is especially applicable for research involving underprivileged groups and minorities.
- Complex models in the research situation need be constructed more systematically. It is essential to develop strategies where various perspectives complement each other. These models must uncover choices of action, which were disclosed to the subjects till now.
- It is necessary to think more about the claim for partiality and participation. Community psychologists should prefer and develop methods, which help people to express themselves- people whose voices are not usually heard. And these people should have the opportunity to become partners in the study. [45]

Acknowledgements

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