

Qualitative Social Work

<http://qsw.sagepub.com>

Qualitative Contributions to Resilience Research

Michael Ungar

Qualitative Social Work 2003; 2; 85
DOI: 10.1177/1473325003002001123

The online version of this article can be found at:
<http://qsw.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/2/1/85>

Published by:

 SAGE Publications

<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Qualitative Social Work* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://qsw.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://qsw.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>


ARTICLE

Qualitative Contributions to Resilience Research

Michael Ungar

*Maritime School of Social Work, Dalhousie University,
Canada*

ABSTRACT

The use of qualitative methods can make a substantial contribution to our understanding of the construct of resilience. In particular, qualitative research addresses two specific shortcomings noted by resilience researchers: arbitrariness in the selection of outcome variables, and the challenge accounting for the sociocultural context in which resilience occurs. Qualitative research can help to resolve these dilemmas in five ways. Qualitative methods: are well suited to the discovery of the unnamed protective processes relevant to the lived experience of research participants; provide thick description of phenomenon in very specific contexts; elicit and add power to minority 'voices' which account for unique localized definitions of positive outcomes; promote tolerance for these localized constructions by avoiding generalization but facilitating transferability of results; and, require researchers to account for their biased standpoints. Reference to exemplars of resilience research will be used to make an argument for the complementarity of research paradigms.

KEY WORDS:

arbitrariness of
measures
contextualization
qualitative health
research
qualitative
methods
resilience
risk

Our enthusiasm for narrative accounts of resilience in our popular literature is unwavering. Anne Frank's (1952) *Diary of a Young Girl*, and more recently works such as Frank McCourt's (1996) *Angela's Ashes*, Eric Weihenmayer's (2001) *Touch the Top of the World*, and Denise Chong's (2000) *The Girl in the Picture*, have provided evidence of resilience in lives lived, but without the rigour of structured qualitative analysis to understand the mechanisms which promote healthy outcomes. Authors such as Robert Coles (1967) and William Beardslee (1989) have provided more complete accounts of resilience through the combined narratives of children who struggle within specific contexts. However, with few exceptions, case studies of resilience such as these have not led to a fuller exploration of the systematic and rigorous application of qualitative methods to resilience research. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how qualitative methods can be rigorously employed in the study of resilience to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon in different contexts. This application of qualitative methods can also address the hurdles quantitative resilience researchers acknowledge they face that diminish the reliability and validity of their studies (Glantz and Sloboda, 1999; Masten, 2001). This article, then, will not only explore the challenges that quantitative researchers face when studying resilience, but also review the substantial contribution qualitative research can make to how resilience-related phenomena are studied and understood.

The use of qualitative methods addresses two specific methodological shortcomings, which have been widely recognized by resilience researchers from both research paradigms. First, our determination of what is a risk factor and what is not, as well as which risks are relevant to a particular research question, is an arbitrary decision given the plethora of possibilities from which to choose. Second, social and cultural factors that play a deciding role in determining what are good and bad outcomes, make the notion of resilience a contextually specific and culturally biased construct. This article examines each of these challenges in turn. A review of the contribution qualitative methods can make to resolving these dilemmas is then presented. Qualitative methods are shown to be particularly relevant to the study of resilience in five ways. They are well suited to the discovery of unnamed processes; they study phenomenon in very specific contexts, their trustworthiness strengthened by the thickness of the description of that context; they elicit and add power to minority 'voices' which account for unique localized definitions of positive outcomes; they promote tolerance for these localized constructions by avoiding generalization in favour of transferability; and, they require researchers to account for the bias inherent in their social location.

ARBITRARY DISTINCTIONS

Though definitions of risk and resilience abound, there is a troubling amount of uncertainty reflected in the way both are conceptualized. As Jack Richman and Mark Fraser (2001) note:

[R]esilience requires exposure to significant risk, overcoming risk or adversity, and success that is beyond predicted expectations. Of course, problems arise when researchers and practitioners attempt to agree on what constitutes *significant* risk and *successful* outcomes that are *beyond predicted* expectations. For adaptations to be classified as resilient, should the outcomes be *highly* successful adaptations or can they be adaptations and outcomes that are at the level of *social competence* and *functionality*? (Richman and Fraser, 2001: 6, emphasis in original)

This issue of the arbitrariness of the resilience construct has been dealt with by quantitative researchers through their refinement of measures, the expansion of their data collection to include more contextually relevant variables, and the adoption of powerful tools of analysis such as structural equation modelling. Michael Rutter's (1987, 2001) work demonstrates just such a growing tolerance for the heterogeneity of outcomes. Rutter (2001) notes that: 'research findings consistently show a very large range of outcomes after the most severe forms of psychosocial adversities' (p. 15). It remains unclear however, given this complexity, if we are yet able to account sufficiently well for the relationship between risk and resilience.

Ann Masten (2001) notes that there is a tentative consensus among developmental psychologists and others as to a shared set of common risk and protective factors that predispose children to specific outcomes across many different contexts. However, 30 years of study has left us with a knowledge of risk and resilience related factors that, according to Masten, is still rudimentary. Masten views the analysis of both sets of factors as highly problematic. Risk factors, for example, can accumulate over time, co-occur and are typically bipolar, with elusive processes that determine their effects. She argues there is an 'arbitrary naming' of these predictors, with different outcomes, negative or positive, seldom developed fully or understood for their etiology. We make these arbitrary judgements in regards only to 'the criteria by which the quality of adaptation or developmental outcome is assessed or evaluated as "good" or "OK"' (Masten, 2001: 228), that criteria itself culturally determined (see Ogbu, 1981).

Similarly, Michael Windle (1999) writes: 'there has been a general recognition in the literature that risk and protective factors may function in alternative ways for different age groups, and in alternative ways for the same individual at different periods in the lifespan' (p. 166–7). The dynamic and bidirectional aspects of these factors has been inadequately explored in most of the resilience

literature. Howard Kaplan (1999), in his comprehensive review of resilience research, highlights many of the contradictions in the evidence supporting a resilience construct as distinct from other health-related phenomenon. What we decide are indications of resilient-like outcomes depends entirely on the causal model we use to explain those outcomes:

If, on the basis of the causal model an individual were expected to reach a particular undesirable outcome but in fact did not reach that outcome, the person would be judged to be resilient. The same person who, on the basis of the appropriate causal model, was predicted to have a particular outcome and in fact achieved that undesirable outcome would be judged to be not resilient. In short, resilience is relative to the putative causal model and the nature of the outcomes, as well as the desirability of the outcomes. (Kaplan, 1999: 35)

When addressing the arbitrariness of outcomes as negative or positive, and definitions of children as resilient or vulnerable, a lack of congruence can be observed between theories of resilience and the findings upon which they are based. A child who shows success in one domain such as school or home, may still remain vulnerable to other emotionally challenging forces in his or her life. Resilience is so broad and contextually heterogeneous a construct that it is not possible to argue beyond the simplicity of a particular causal model which children are resilient and which are not. Thus explanations of resilience have been based on models that are both heuristic and teleological, predetermining findings as a result of their constrained and biased constructions.

To argue this differently, if one does not test for the variables which may potentially demonstrate a child's resilience, but instead examines other dimensions of the child which are biased towards identifying or labelling less successful child behaviours, one could come to the erroneous conclusion (a crime of omission if one will) that the child was vulnerable instead of resilient. For example, Kerry Bolger and Charlotte Patterson (2001) show a causal relationship between the risk factor of abuse and the outcome of peer rejection. They demonstrate that the outcome of peer rejection is associated with problem behaviours and being at-risk of abuse, noting: 'chronic maltreatment was associated with both increased aggressive behavior and a greater likelihood of being rejected by peers' (Bolger and Patterson, 2001: 563). While this finding is heuristically sound, it reflects the assumption that the child's aggressive behaviour is a problem, rather than a solution that is improperly transferred from one life domain to another. Despite consequences with peers, there are in fact many good reasons for a child's constructive use of aggression (Cirillo, 2000).

CONTEXTUALIZING RESILIENCE RESEARCH

Reified as a list of factors and behaviours, we can neglect with our shorthand notation to encompass the multiple dimensions of risk and resilience phenomenon, such as the variable impact a particular risk factor has over time (Windle, 1999). A history of parental alcoholism, for example, poses one type of risk to the young child, but a very different type of risk when that same child is a young adult being enculturated into a family pattern of substance abuse. The infant may experience the drinking as a disruption in his or her attachment to parents, while the older individual may experience parental alcoholism as negative modelling. The result, according to Windle, is that 'there needs to be an additional emphasis on the *consequences of problem behaviors on risk and protective factors across time* to complement the current emphasis on problem behaviors as outcomes' (Windle, 1999: 167, emphasis in original).

This differential impact of risk is not just temporal (see also Bender and Losel, 1997) which we accept, but also geographic and cultural, constructed within the context of class, gender, race and other broad social forces. While we might account for several of these dimensions within the confines of quantitative research, we are unable to account fully for the contextual variability that informs the relative importance of a myriad of factors in each individual case. While daunting, this accounting for diversity in individual contexts is necessary to produce authentic results that reflect the lives of the people studied (see for example Gilchrist, 1997, for a discussion of research in aboriginal communities). While 'authenticity' (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) is an evolving benchmark for the quality of qualitative research, it is less evident in the discourse of quantitative researchers (Ungar and Nichol, 2002).

Mark Fraser has approached this same terrain slightly differently. He argues that the large number of factors which create risk are best understood ecologically. Fraser and his colleague Maeda Galinsky (1997) liken this approach to identifying the keystone in a stone archway. 'Keystone' risk factors provide an intriguing view of risk, as one is forced to never lose sight of their embeddedness in a complex and interdependent structure. Fraser and Galinsky speculate that there may also be 'keystone protective factors', though they say that so little is known about protective factors at this time that it is difficult to determine if these exist in more than theory. This emerging trend in resilience research to investigate chains of events or factors and processes that protect over time (Anthony, 1987; Carver, 1998; Garmezy, 1983, 1985, 1993; Rutter, 1987; Seifer and Sameroff, 1987), rather than static variables, provides fertile ground for the use of qualitative methods. This terrain, however, is far less developed than the study of more stationary targets for investigation such as distinct risk factors. As Garmezy (1993) observes: 'The suggestive evidence of the power of protective factors has begun to challenge investigators, but it remains a younger

and less mature sibling to the older and more adequately studied effects stemming from actualized risk factors' (p. 127).

Many others, such as Meyer Glantz and Zili Sloboda (1999), echo the growing call to contextualize the study of resilience:

We propose altering the common concept of resilience from that of the often hypothesized basically undefined inner personal trait to the concept of resilience as adaptive or compensating (positive) behaviors and factors. Relatedly, we propose that models of problem behaviors and negative outcomes attempt to account for outcomes not merely by identifying and tallying negative influences but by investigating the ways in which different sets of positive and negative factors interact leading to different outcomes. (Glantz and Sloboda, 1999: 118)

There is a burgeoning literature which has tried to do just this, studying the effect of resilience related variables such as race, culture, class, gender, sexual orientation and abilities.

Of particular note is Hamilton McCubbin and his collaborators (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson and Fromer, 1998; McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson and Futrell, 1998) who have brought together both stories and studies of the contextually specific aspects of resilience found among African-American, Immigrant and Aboriginal families. Though a few of the articles include qualitative data, the development of tools like the Family Resiliency Model (McCubbin, Fleming et al., 1998) and the Mutual Psychological Development Questionnaire (Genero, 1998) are attempts quantitatively to conduct more inclusive research which can measure strength-based dimensions of families not otherwise noted. In studies of African-American youth and their families, McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson and Futrell (1998) write:

The resiliency framework is built upon the premise that even in the most chaotic situations where youth and family dysfunction appear to be the predictable outcome, the family unit and its members have competencies and abilities. This strength, particularly in the context of the community, albeit limited, allows the family to transcend the obvious deficiencies, seize opportunities to improve upon themselves, and fulfill their shared responsibilities to promote the development of its members. (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson and Futrell, 1998: 295)

They go on to note that, 'applying standard measures to families of color has numerous limitations, just as there are limitations in taking African-American family and youth measures and applying them to other racial or ethnic groups. This . . . suggests the need for a planful effort to develop measures which include ethnic considerations, but which are directed at common features of youth and family coping common across groups' (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson and Futrell, 1998: 322). We are a way from such considered

research, with development and use of these measures still at the 'embryonic stage'. Given this need for development, it seems surprising that qualitative methods have not been more widely embraced given the issues confounding researchers. It seems our limited success quantitatively begs us to switch horses midstream, and to take a closer look at what differences make *the* difference between individuals.

COMPLEMENTARY APPROACHES

In a few instances, qualitative methods have been shown to complement well quantitative studies of resilience, achieving a finer grain in the description of health and coping phenomenon (Rank, 1992). Peggy Thoits' (1995) examination of the relationship between identity-relevant life events and psychological symptoms in adults is one of the very few examples of how qualitative methods in health-related research has been used by the same researcher to address the shortcomings of his or her quantitative analysis. Thoits' initial study with 532 adults involved structured personal interviews spaced two years apart which measured psychological distress and substance use as related to identity-salience. Thoits (1995) hypothesised that 'events occurring in highly-salient identity domains should have a greater impact on psychological well-being than events occurring in less salient domains' (p. 75). From the perspective of research on resilience, this work helps us to understand the relationship between negative (risk factors) and positive life events and outcomes, as mediated by the relevance of the events to a person's identity. Thoits' hypothesis received little support in her quantitative study: 'high salience negative events do not consistently increase psychological distress and alcohol/drug use across subgroups, and high salience positive events rarely decrease distress and substance use significantly. High, moderate, and low salience events sometimes influence psychological symptoms in directions opposite to theoretical expectations' (Thoits, 1995: 76).

The qualitative research that Thoits chose to undertake as a follow-up to her study was, however, able to account for the complexity in the data and its lack of significant findings. Thoits found through a random sampling of fifty of the participants from the original study that her initial work had failed to account sufficiently for the way ongoing role strains (such as marital difficulties) impinge on role identities. She noted that her study failed to account for the ordering of multiple events within a single role domain, which meant respondents were unable to answer questions in ways that reflected the variable relationships they have with problems over time. Thoits also found that negative events might actually bring with them substantial emotional relief, such as when a divorce, or death of a loved one who is ill, is anticipated and welcomed. Thoits (1995) concluded that: 'detailed knowledge of contextual circumstances seemed especially important for understanding psychological outcomes when individuals

had had a mix of positive *and* negative life changes in multiple role-identity domains' (p. 79). She went on to say, 'quantitative analyses (which used counts of generic events, as in most conventional studies) could not capture such nuances in meaning' (Thoits, 1995: 79).

Such findings demonstrate the need to approach our study of health-related phenomena with a plurality of methods and caution as to arbitrary distinctions of good and bad coping, implied causalities, and a lack of contextualization. As shown above, these aspects of research on resilience have all hindered our understanding of the phenomenon. Arguably, introducing methodological diversity in the form of the rigorous use of qualitative methods offers a way to resolve these challenges.

QUALITATIVE METHODS: SOLUTIONS TO THE MUDDLE?

Five aspects of qualitative research are particularly pertinent to the resolution of these problems. In the following section, each of these five aspects will be discussed and their specific application to resilience research demonstrated.

Discovery of Unnamed Processes

Qualitative methods which involve lengthy engagement with participants, files, or institutions places the researcher sufficiently close to his or her data to discern patterns that might not be evident otherwise (Gilgun, 1996, 1999; Rodwell, 1998; Silverman, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The collection of data and the search for variability in the sample results in the rich description of lives lived and pathways followed (Gilgun, 1999; Patton, 1990). As Kerry Daly (1992) writes of his qualitative studies of families: 'the versatility of qualitative methods is a good match for examining the diversity of family forms and experiences. With qualitative methods, the focus is not on identifying structural or demographic trends in families, but rather on the processes by which families create, sustain, and discuss their own family realities' (p. 4).

While quantitative studies typically deal with fewer variables and larger samples, qualitative studies examine fewer cases with a high degree of variability across the sample. Developments in the field of qualitative research have been propelled forward in large part by researchers needing to account for the complexity of peoples' experiences and relationships with one another embedded in social and political contexts. There is a growing hesitancy to 'partialize' experience under the myopic gaze of objective inquiry. Qualitative inquiry provides a forum in which research participants help the researcher to delimit the scope of the study to variables and relationships particularly salient to them in their 'lifeworld' (Habermas, 1979). In so doing, the researcher is able to ask of his or her data questions about patterns and trajectories which lead to better accounts of the experiences of participants (Fine et al., 2000; Lincoln

and Guba, 1985; Seale, 1999; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Though both art and science, it is the rigour of the methods, the detailing of the process of inquiry, the sustained engagement with participants and data, and the courage to appreciate novelty, which allows for this discovery of unnamed processes. As a result, findings frequently contribute new information to explanatory models.

For example, the construct of peer pressure was examined by Michael Ungar (Ungar, 2000; Ungar and Teram, 2000) as part of a larger study investigating the relationship between the process of empowerment and the mental health of a group of 41 high-risk adolescents. Despite the common belief that peer pressure is experienced by youth (Clasen and Brown, 1985), careful analysis of naturalistic data gathered from matched cohorts of vulnerable and resilient adolescents, triangulated through a process of dialogical reciprocity (ongoing member checks and theory development), clinical file reviews, family interviews, and focus groups, pieced together a theory which better explained adolescent peer group interactions and revealed peer pressure to be a myth. High-risk adolescents argued that they adopt the behaviours and appearance of their peers as a strategy to enhance their personal and social power in the social discourse that defines them. Understood this way, the peer group is a forum in which a youth's mental health is maintained through recognition of powerful self-defining labels. Most quantitative studies of peer pressure reify the power of the social group over teenagers, ignoring the personal agency of individuals (see Bauman and Ennett, 1996; Clasen and Brown, 1985; Santor et al., 2000).

Contextual Specificity

An axiom of qualitative research is that it focuses on context. In the case of resilience, qualitative research celebrates the highly individual and contextual specificity of the solutions at-risk populations find to cope with high-risk environments. Qualitative methods allow for an examination of uniqueness and are more apt to discern in a particular context the intelligibility of patterns of behaviour. Because qualitative research seeks to describe, or explain, a phenomenon grounded in people's experiences, studies strive to bolster the transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), not generalizability, of their findings. This deeper, or thicker, description of a particular reality construction, is more likely to produce data which reflects the standpoints of marginalized people, and their less privileged social discourses (Fine, 1994; Ungar and Nichol, 2002). The present growth in qualitative methods, which are at an exciting evolutionary crossroads (Gergen and Gergen, 2000), reflect best what Steinar Kvale (1996) characterizes as a 'broader historical and cultural questioning and construction of social reality' (p. 45).

For example, efforts by mental health services evaluators to conduct a national evaluation of children's mental health services in the USA have been greeted with loud and persistent calls from indigenous peoples that the research

lacks authenticity (Roundtable Discussion, 2001; see also Gilchrist, 1997). They argue that the research employs standardized instruments inconsistent with the cultural context in which they are administered and that results reflect biased judgements as to which outcomes are considered indicators of healthy functioning. The national evaluation team that heard these complaints promised to work on solutions. However, they also noted the threat such changes would pose to the generalizability of their results and the lack of standardization across all test sites. Interestingly, qualitative alternatives were given scant consideration by the national researchers.

The Power of Marginalized Voices

The reflexivity of qualitative methods in which participants and researchers engage in a process of dialogical reciprocity (Fine, 1994; Rodwell, 1998) allows for multiple truth claims to emerge through the co-construction of meaning. Giving voice to those who are otherwise silenced in the production of knowledge contributes to a deeper understanding of the localized discourses of resistance that permeate disadvantaged communities. Researchers, academics, students, policy makers, and other community members, who become the audience to the lived experiences of research participants, are forced to consider the truth claims of others through these 're-presentations'. These may differ substantively from representations privileged through popular discourse. Consumers of such research, including the communities from which knowledge is generated, become aware that they are being encouraged 'to have differing interpretations of the stories told, rather than a single story being imposed' (Seale, 1999: 169). Member validation, which Clive Seale (1999) characterises as researchers seeking reassurance from the community of participants for the authenticity of the products of the research, ensures that there is both accountability and trustworthiness in the findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) have demonstrated that trustworthiness, a concept in qualitative research parallel to reliability and validity, can be rigorously defended through careful methodological considerations. Data is most credible (the qualitative equivalent to objective) when it reflects the voices of participants. Recent advances in qualitative methods strive to re-present these voices with the least intrusion and interpretation by the researchers (Fine et al., 2000). By giving voice to alternative constructions of phenomenon, research becomes a fairer exchange (Daly, 1992) in which participants benefit equally from the production of 'knowledges' about them.

In a study of 30 adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18, Cynthia Lightfoot (1992), provided evidence of the power of such constructionist interpretations to the field of developmental psychology. Lightfoot (1992) conducted personal interviews with each youth providing the teenagers with scenarios related to group cohesion and risk-taking delinquent behaviours. Her

findings are very similar to those of the peer pressure study discussed above, explicitly supporting a postmodern understanding of youth culture as socially constructed out of personal narratives in socio-historical contexts. Lightfoot found that adolescents placed great value on 'the importance of sharing a novel experience' (Lightfoot, 1992: 237) and that these experiences, even when they involve deviant behaviours, accrue benefits to participants. Adolescents who participate in risky activities, like smoking marijuana, say the activity has positive effects on the developmental course of their interpersonal relationships. Such activities help to maintain social cohesion in groups and more clearly define a child by giving him or her a forum in which to say, 'This is me', or, 'This is not me'.

Transferability

Providing a forum through research for the re-presentation of these minority voices invites with it a tolerance for localized constructions and resists the generalization of findings. As Mary Rodwell (1998), writing from the perspective of a constructivist qualitative social work researcher, notes:

Generalizations are nomothetic or lawlike in nature. In order to use them for prediction and control, generalizations must be applied to particulars. This creates a kind of knowledge problem, called entrapment in the nomothetic/ideographic dilemma. What is interesting about generalizations is that they should apply to a specific instance, but they generally do not, so one is left wanting/needing the ideographic, when only the nomothetic is possible . . . generalizations cannot provide the description of range or depth necessary to relate a holistic picture of a phenomenon under investigation. (Rodwell, 1998: 31)

Rodwell goes on to say that, 'If the findings transfer, it is the responsibility of the reader of the inquiry report to make that determination, since it is only the reader, not the inquirer, who can be familiar with the time and context in which transfer of the findings might be possible' (pp. 31–32). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, the researcher 'can provide only the thick description necessary to enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility' (p. 316).

In practice, few qualitative researchers seek the transfer of data from one study to the next, even when comparisons across studies reveal a high degree of similarity in results (Seale, 1999). James Garbarino (2001) found in his examination of youth violence that 'all acts of violence express a need for justice. . . Such behaviors may be warped and distorted and difficult to fathom from the outside, but if we dig deeply enough and listen openly enough, we may hear of the need to restore justice by personally acting on the feelings of shame that come from being rejected, denied, abused, and deprived' (pp. 84–5).

During interviews with boys in a maximum-security youth prison Garbarino notes the irony of what he finds:

These children over and over again talked about how – for the first time in their lives – they do not have to watch their backs every minute. At the same time, they are immobilized by their situation. They do not have access either to girls or to drugs; they have no jewelry, guns, cars, expensive stereos, or designer clothing. What is left for them? What can they do? They can only go upward and inward, through a process of reflection, introspection, meditation, religious involvement, spiritual concern, and reading. (Garbarino, 2001: 93)

Because Garbarino's study focused on a specific context and allowed participants a space to speak, incarceration was reframed as a protective process rather than an indicator of failure and risk. The transferability of such unique and powerful constructions are possible only in so far as Garbarino's description of the research participants is sufficiently thick for others to identify commonalities across samples. The onus is on the consumer of the research to judge its transferability.

Researcher Standpoint Bias

When using qualitative methods, the researcher is the research instrument, and as such must deconstruct his or her relationship with participants and their data. As Michelle Fine (1994; Fine et al., 2000) has noted, there is a need to understand the nature of the separation that exists between the 'self' of the researcher and the 'other' which is the participant. Fine and her colleagues encourage researchers to flex their 'reflexivities', making explicit researchers' subjectivities that contribute to the findings. Researchers filter through their cultural baggage predeterminations as to outcomes, processes, relationships, and the meaning of language. The danger, from the qualitative researcher's point of view, is that the bias of the researcher goes undiscovered, and that the researcher as instrument is unable to document the phenomenon under study as it exists for those who experience it.

The political locations of researchers are that much more important when understanding phenomenon which are intimately related to power and culture (Olesen, 2000). We can only see what we have language to describe, and yet, as M. M. Bakhtin (1986), the Russian philosopher wrote, 'Words belong to nobody, and in themselves they evaluate nothing'. As Mary and Kenneth Gergen (2000) explain, critical self-reflection and reflexivity with research participants expands vision and vocabulary, making the products of research more reflective of the knowledge of others:

investigators seek ways of demonstrating to their audiences their historical and geographic situatedness, their personal investments in the research, various biases

they bring to the work, their surprises and 'undoings' in the process of the research endeavor, the ways in which their choices of literary tropes lend rhetorical force to the research report, and/or the ways in which they have avoided or suppressed certain points of view. (Gergen and Gergen, 2000: 1027)

The absence of structure commonly found in the emergent designs of qualitative research allows for wider latitudes of inquiry (Padgett, 1998).

Personal disclosures by researchers help consumers of findings to understand the context in which they are produced. The ethnocentrism inherent in studies is unmasked, an important consideration when researchers work with those who are 'other' to themselves. For example, among studies that have looked at delinquency and deviance in the context of identity and gender, the authenticity of findings is enhanced when researchers have made clear their awareness of the ways they might filter their data. Mark Totten's (2000) qualitative study of 90 male street youth, their group behaviours, constructions of masculinity and patterns of abusive behaviour toward girlfriends, shows that these youth construct identities around male power and privilege. Though Totten found it difficult to tolerate the graphic depictions of violence towards women and minorities he documents, Totten shows nonetheless how he was able to look beyond his own repulsion and come to an understanding how for many of these young males, under the tutelage of fathers, male violence towards women and minorities is pursued as an effective way to find status when other paths are blocked. Using himself as the research tool had both strengths and weaknesses:

The in-depth interviews benefited from my ability to develop trust and investigate the participants' feelings, motives, justifications, and understanding through conversation. I realize that because I alone assumed the duties of observer, recorder, theorist, interpreter, and counsellor, certain limitations are placed upon my study... My personal motivation and position as a social worker and manager in the social services field for the past 17 years contribute to the fact that this is not detached, objective research. (Totten, 2000: 15)

Totten is explicit that his primary objective was to increase the safety of abused women. He positions himself at the outset as someone who will not defend the marginal positions of the males he interviews. And yet, by attending to his bias, Totten was able to provide an account of those young men's lives, an account which they told Totten was an accurate reflection of their experience.

QUALITATIVE STUDIES OF RESILIENCE

There are a growing number of studies of resilience that employ qualitative methods. This brief introduction to some of these demonstrates that qualitative

research can complement quantitative methods. Both research paradigms form a dialectic in which some combination of the two may produce the most informed findings. As discussed above, the arbitrariness and contextual problems that plague resilience research can be addressed through the use of qualitative approaches.

Research currently underway by the author and his colleagues across 10 sites on 4 continents seeks to establish a working relationship between adherents to both research paradigms while specifically addressing the methodological challenges discussed above facing resilience researchers. Leaders in the field of resilience research from different disciplines and cultural backgrounds, who bring with them methodologically diverse approaches, are attempting to develop a methodology that addresses the arbitrariness in the selection of outcome variables and the challenge of accounting for the social and cultural context in which resilience occurs. Production of knowledge that avoids these methodological shortcomings is to be achieved through the very specific selection of research activities and sites. In the case of qualitative methods, how focus group participants are selected and which individuals are observed or interviewed in order to understand the phenomenon under study will be negotiated with key informants from each of the 10 sites. Results from this qualitative research will help to inform the design of standardized instruments that will also include specific questions sensitive to each setting. Innovation will be required in how data is pooled and analysed across these multiple sites, each with its unique additions to the research. Specifically, by integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches it is hoped that research at each site will produce credible findings that can account for how resilience is understood by local populations. Meanwhile, aggregating data across sites will allow the researchers to discern generic qualities of resilience across cultures and contexts. It is the complementarity of the research paradigms that is most intriguing in this endeavour. Qualitative methods and the selection of diverse research contexts are wholeheartedly embraced by the entire team, which includes researchers who have only worked quantitatively. The team hopes through their collective efforts to challenge a Eurocentric bias in health research that has predetermined outcomes and measures.

The ideas underpinning this research, related to the content of this article, are not marginal to the field of resilience research. Researchers such as Michael Rutter who have made their careers investigating these phenomena, hint at the relativism of the resilience construct, which is best dealt with through the use of qualitative methods. As Rutter (2001) notes:

The phenomenon of resilience requires attention to a range of possible psychological outcomes and not to an unusually positive outcome or to supernormal functioning. Similarly, there is no necessary expectation that protection from stress and adversity should lie in positive experiences, nor indeed is there any

assumption that the answer will lie in how the individual copes with a negative experience at the time. The starting point, then is simply that in all studies of risk experiences, children's responses vary enormously. (Rutter, 2001: 13)

The five aspects of qualitative research discussed earlier support inquiry into such experiences of risk (and resilience).

References

- Anthony, E. J. (1987) 'Risk, Vulnerability, and Resilience: An Overview', in E. J. Anthony and B. J. Cohler (eds) *The Invulnerable Child*, pp. 3–48. New York: Guilford Press.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1986) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. V. W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas.
- Bauman, K. E. and Ennett, S. T. (1996) 'On the Importance of Peer Influence for Adolescent Drug Use: Commonly Neglected Considerations', *Addictions* 91(2): 185–98.
- Beardslee, W. R. (1989) 'The Role of Self-understanding in Resilient Individuals: The Development of a Perspective', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 59(2): 266–78.
- Bender, D. and Losel, F. (1997) 'Protective and Risk Effects of Peer Relations and Social Support on Antisocial Behaviour in Adolescents from Multi-problem Milieus', *Journal of Adolescence* 20(6): 661–78.
- Bolger, K. E. and Patterson, C. J. (2001) 'Developmental Pathways from Child Maltreatment to Peer Rejection', *Child Development* 72(2): 549–68.
- Carver, C. S. (1998) 'Resilience and Thriving: Issues, Models, and Linkages', *Journal of Social Issues* 54(2): 245–66.
- Chong, D. (2000) *The Girl in the Picture: The Kim Phuc Story*. Toronto: Penguin.
- Cirillo, I. (2000) 'The Relationship of Constructive Aggression to Resilience in Adults who were Abused as Children', unpublished doctoral dissertation, Smith College for Social Work, Northampton, MA, USA.
- Clasen, D. R. and Brown, B. B. (1985) 'The Multidimensionality of Peer Pressure in Adolescence', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 14(6): 451–68.
- Coles, R. (1967) *Children of Crisis: A Study of Courage and Fear*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.
- Daly, K. (1992) 'The Fit between Qualitative Research and Characteristics of Families', in J. Gilgun, K. Daly and G. Handel (eds) *Qualitative Methods in Family Research*, pp. 3–11. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fine, M. (1994) 'Working the Hyphens: Reinventing Self and Other in Qualitative Research', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, pp. 70–82. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Fine, M., Weis, L., Weseen, S. and Wong, L. (2000) 'For Whom? Qualitative Research, Representations, and Social Responsibilities', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, pp. 107–32. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Frank, A. (1952) *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. New York: Scholastic Book Services.
- Fraser, M. and Galinsky, M. J. (1997) 'Toward a Resilience-based Model of Practice', in M. Fraser (ed.) *Risk and Resilience in Childhood: An Ecological Perspective*, pp. 265–75. Washington, DC: NASW Press.

- Garbarino, J. (2001) 'Making Sense of Senseless Youth Violence', in J. M. Richman and M. W. Fraser (eds) *The Context of Youth Violence: Resilience, Risk, and Protection*, pp. 83–95. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Garmezy, N. (1983) 'Stressors of Childhood', in N. Garmezy and M. Rutter (eds) *Stress, Coping, and Development in Children*, pp. 43–84. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Garmezy, N. (1985) 'Stress-resistant Children: The Search for Protective Factors', in J. E. Stevenson (ed.) *Recent Research in Developmental Psychopathology*, pp. 213–33. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Garmezy, N. (1993) 'Children in Poverty: Resilience Despite Risk', *Psychiatry* 56(1): 127–36.
- Genero, N. P. (1998) 'Culture, Resiliency, and Mutual Psychological Development', in H. I. McCubbin, E. A. Thompson, A. I. Thompson and J. A. Futrell (eds) *Resiliency in African-American Families*, pp. 31–48. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gergen, M. M. and Gergen, K. J. (2000) 'Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions and Transformations', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn, pp. 1025–46. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gilchrist, L. (1997) 'Aboriginal Communities and Social Science Research: Voyeurism in Transition', *Native Social Work Journal* 1(1): 69–85.
- Gilgun, J. F. (1996) 'Human Development and Adversity in Ecological Perspective, Part 1: A Conceptual Framework', *Families in Society* 77(7): 395–402.
- Gilgun, J. F. (1999) 'Mapping Resilience as Process Among Adults with Childhood Adversities', in H. I. McCubbin, E. A. Thompson and A. I. Thompson (eds) *The Dynamics of Resilient Families*, pp. 41–70. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Glantz, M. D. and Sloboda, Z. (1999) 'Analysis and Reconceptualization of Resilience', in M. D. Glantz and J. L. Johnson (eds) *Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adaptations*, pp. 109–28. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Guba, E. G. and Lincoln, Y. S. (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Habermas, J. (1979) *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy. Boston, MA: Beacon Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Kaplan, H. B. (1999) 'Toward an Understanding of Resilience: A Critical Review of Definitions and Models', in M. D. Glantz and J. L. Johnson (eds) *Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adaptations*, pp. 17–84. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lightfoot, C. (1992) 'Constructing Self and Peer Culture: A Narrative Perspective on Adolescent Risk Taking', in L. T. Winegar and J. Valsiner (eds) *Children's Development within Social Context*, vol. 2, pp. 229–45. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Lincoln, Y. S. and Guba, E. G. (1985) *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McCourt, F. (1996) *Angela's Ashes*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- McCubbin, H. I., Fleming, W. M., Thompson, A. I., Neitman, P., Elver, K. M. and Savas, S. A. (1998) 'Resiliency and Coping in "At Risk" African-American Youth and their Families', in H. I. McCubbin, E. A. Thompson, A. I. Thompson, A. I. and J. A.

- Futrell (eds) *Resiliency in African-American Families*, pp. 287–328. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McCubbin, H. I., Thompson, E. A., Thompson, A. I. and Fromer, J. E. (1998) *Resiliency in Native American and Immigrant Families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McCubbin, H. I., Thompson, E. A., Thompson, A. I. and Futrell, J. A. (1998) *Resiliency in African-American Families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Masten, A. S. (2001) 'Ordinary Magic: Resilience Processes in Development', *American Psychologist* 56(3): 227–38.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1981) 'Origins of Human Competence: A Cultural–Ecological Perspective', *Child Development* 52(2): 413–29.
- Olesen, V. L. (2000) 'Feminisms and Qualitative Research at and into the Millennium', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn., pp. 215–56. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Padgett, D. K. (1998) *Qualitative Methods in Social Work Research: Challenges and Rewards*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990) *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, 2nd edn. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Rank, M. R. (1992) 'The Blending of Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Understanding Childbearing Among Welfare Recipients', in J. Gilgun, K. Daly and G. Handel (eds) *Qualitative Methods in Family Research*, pp. 281–300. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Richman, J. M. & Fraser, M. W. (2001) *The Context of Youth Violence: Resilience, Risk, and Protection*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Rodwell, M. K. (1998) *Social Work Constructivist Research*. New York: Garland.
- Roundtable Discussion (February, 2001) 14th Annual Research Conference, 'A System of Care for Children's Mental Health: Expanding the Research Base', University of South Florida, Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute, Tampa, Florida.
- Rutter, M. (1987) 'Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 57(3): 316–31.
- Rutter, M. (2001) 'Psychosocial Adversity: Risk, Resilience and Recovery', in J. M. Richman and M. W. Fraser (eds) *The Context of Youth Violence: Resilience, Risk, and Protection*, pp. 13–41. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Santor, D. A., Messervey, D. and Kusumakar, V. (2001) 'Measuring Peer Pressure, Popularity, and Conformity in Adolescent Boys and Girls: Predicting School Performance, Sexual Attitudes, and Substance Abuse', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 29(2): 163–82.
- Seale, C. (1999) *The Quality of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Seifer, R. and Sameroff, A. J. (1987) 'Multiple Determinants of Risk and Invulnerability', in J. Anthony and B. Cohler (eds) *The Invulnerable Child*, pp. 51–69. New York: Guilford Press.
- Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Thoits, P. A. (1995) 'Identity-relevant Events and Psychological Symptoms: A Cautionary Tale', *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 36(1): 72–82.
- Totten, M. (2000) *Guys, Gangs & Girlfriend Abuse*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview.
- Ungar, M. (2000) 'The Myth of Peer Pressure: Adolescents and their Search for Health-enhancing Identities', *Adolescence* 35(137): 167–80.
- Ungar, M. and Nichol, G. (2002) 'The Harmony of Resistance: Qualitative Research and Ethical Practice in Social Work', in W. C. van den Hoonaard (ed.) *Walking the Tightrope: Ethical Issues for Qualitative Researchers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ungar, M. and Team, E. (2000) 'Drifting towards Mental Health: High-risk Adolescents and the Process of Empowerment', *Youth and Society* 32(2): 228–52.
- Weihenmayer, E. (2001) *Touch the Top of the World: A Blind Man's Journey to Climb Farther than the Eye can See*. New York: Dutton.
- Windle, M. (1999) 'Critical Conceptual and Measurement Issues in the Study of Resilience', in M. D. Glantz and J. L. Johnson (eds) *Resilience and Development: Positive Life Adaptations*, pp. 161–78. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.

Michael Ungar, PhD, is both a Social Worker and Marriage and Family Therapist with experience working in mental health and correctional settings. Now an Associate Professor at the Maritime School of Social Work, at Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, he continues to work extensively with both front-line staff, and professional therapists, conducting workshops on resilience-related treatment and research in Canada and the USA. Dr Ungar has published numerous articles on resilience and work with children and their families in journals such as *Adolescence*, *Youth and Society*, *Child and Youth Care Forum*, and the *Journal of Strategic Therapies*. His present research is titled: 'Methodological and Contextual Challenges Researching Childhood Resilience: An International Collaboration to Develop a Multiple Method Research Design to Investigate Health-related Phenomena in At-risk Child Populations'. Beyond his role at the university, he is also a member of the Child Welfare League of Canada's National Consultation Centre. Address: Maritime School of Social Work, Dalhousie University, 6414 Coburg Rd., Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada B3H 2A7. [email: michael.ungar@dal.ca]