

Article

Questioning the Meaningfulness of Rigour in Community-Based Research: Navigating a Dilemma

Bethan C. Kingsley

Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP)

Faculty of Extension

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Sherry Ann Chapman

Community-University Partnership for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families (CUP)

Faculty of Extension

University of Alberta

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

© 2013 Kingsley and Chapman.

Abstract

As community-based research (CBR) continues to emerge, CBR practitioners are beginning to ask, “How do we know if we are doing CBR well?” For some, this question may bring to mind the concept of rigour. Yet, how meaningful is rigour among diverse CBR partners from community, government, and academia? Using an exploratory approach, we engaged in dialogue a group of seven CBR practitioners from diverse contexts and asked the question, “Is rigour a meaningful concept in CBR?” We used interpretive description to analyse the interview and guide the application of findings in CBR practice. The findings are presented as three themes: Obligation, Representation, and Turn to Action. Participants expressed a sense of obligation to meet often competing expectations to do CBR well. The fulfillment of one obligation sometimes meant compromising another, thus presenting a dilemma to CBR practitioners. Representation outlines participants’ beliefs that some obligations can be met through the analysis, interpretation, and carefully contextualized presentation of research findings on behalf of CBR partnerships. In Turn to Action, participants described their desire to participate in the co-construction of understanding and identified a need to conceptualize the meaning of doing CBR well. We recommend that practitioners of CBR continue to form communities of practice in which to engage in dialogue about rigour; together, we can navigate the identified dilemma and collaboratively construct what it means to do CBR well. Specifically, we recommend that communities of CBR practice strive to: (a) be transparent during CBR collaboration, (b) be in dialogue with other CBR practitioners, and (c) co-construct the meaning of doing CBR well.

Keywords: rigour, quality, community-based research, practitioners, group interview

Acknowledgements: We thank all of the members of the talking circle for sharing their time, energy, expertise, and experience.

Author Note: Correspondence should be addressed to Bethan C. Kingsley, Faculty of Physical Education, W1-34 Van Vliet Centre, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Canada, T6G 2H9, or email bkingsle@ualberta.ca

In this article, *community-based research* (CBR) is used as an inclusive term to encompass forms of participatory, action-oriented, and collaborative research approaches. As communities of practice of CBR in North America continue to emerge, those who practice CBR are beginning to ask, “How do we know if we are doing CBR well?” From the view of academically-based members in CBR partnerships, this question may bring to mind the concept of rigour. Furthermore, within academia, conceptualizations of rigour vary according to paradigmatic and disciplinary foundations (Morrow, 2005). Yet, how meaningful is the concept of rigour to diverse CBR practitioners (i.e., people who practice CBR from across community, government, and academia)? The authors broadly conceptualize rigour as doing CBR “well” and with quality. As members of a community-university partnership engaged in CBR, we wished to learn how CBR practitioners—the variety of individuals that engage in CBR—across diverse locations of practice are thinking about and discussing rigour in their work.

With the emergence of qualitative inquiry, academic researchers have witnessed considerable change in conceptualizations of rigour over the last 25 years. Debates have ranged from rigour as a legitimizing standard to rigour as a malleable “soft place” relative to particular forms of research (Lather, 1986). For those who are situated in academic contexts and practise CBR, discussions of rigour in CBR appear to be in formative stages, with a limited amount of literature on this topic. As literature about CBR continues to emerge, so too does discussion regarding rigour and quality. For example, Melrose (2001) argued that the concept of rigour is necessary to demonstrate that CBR is a legitimate way to generate knowledge. McTaggart (1998) has suggested that conventional discourses of quality are not well suited to CBR because knowledge claims are expected to be separate from the methods, politics, and context of their production. Throughout this article, conventional is interpreted and used by the authors to describe research that is situated in a post/positivist paradigm. Furthermore, Waterman (1998) has argued that rigour in CBR is related to upholding the philosophical ideals of CBR. She believes that CBR practitioners have a moral responsibility to demonstrate sensitivity and ethical practice in support of people’s lives and that such practice enhances the rigour of a project. More recently, discussion has begun to explore what to do about this need to understand rigour in terms of CBR. Mercer et al. (2008) have identified a need for consistent means through which to determine standards of quality in CBR and have provided a set of guidelines to enable funders to assess and compare application proposals. Springett, Wright, and Roche (2011) have also called for criteria through which to define quality and suggest these standards align with the core principles of CBR. Jagosh and colleagues (2012) emphasized a need to address the complexity of evaluating the quality of CBR and conducted a realist review of studies with a CBR approach in the published and grey literature. As a result of this work, they presented a number of mechanisms they believed could lead to quality outcomes in particular contexts.

Even as this literature demonstrates diverse perspectives on rigour among CBR practitioners, much of it has derived from those who are located in academic contexts. CBR practitioners, however, exist in many contexts, often outside of universities and colleges. Jagosh and colleagues (2012) adopted a partnership approach with non-academic partners for their review of rigour in CBR; however, no other published literature has explored whether rigour is a meaningful concept across different locations of practice, which potentially highlights the literature’s only partial understanding of what constitutes quality CBR.

What makes for quality CBR may vary for partners as they collaborate from various contexts, such as universities, service-providing organizations, government, community, or industry (Martí & Villasante, 2009; Melrose, 2001). Nolan, Hanson, Grant, Keady, and Magnusson (2008) have warned that partners situated in a university setting often determine what counts as valuable knowledge and this may be influenced by an expert-focussed and driven knowledge system.

Bradbury and Reason (2003) have added to this concern, stating that narrow views may exist regarding considerations of “legitimate” research and evidence. Judgments of quality may consequently exist that are not relevant for all CBR practitioners.

A need exists to enhance understanding of quality in CBR across varied locations of practice so that rigour can be defined and judged in a way that is relevant for all CBR practitioners. Reason and Bradbury (2001) have suggested that the wider “community of inquiry” (p. 450) come together to reflect on issues of quality in CBR. Springett and colleagues (2011) encourage such reflection across the broad community of CBR practice and suggest that quality be defined through a collaborative process, which is consistent with a CBR orientation. CBR is an approach to creating knowledge characterized by collaboration, relationship, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge (Springett et al., 2011). CBR involves an inclusive, empowering process through which partners learn from each other (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998). Jagosh and colleagues (2012) have begun this collaborative process of exploring quality in CBR by forming a partnership between academic researchers and “end users” to conduct their realist review. Nevertheless, an extensive review of the literature suggests that exploring rigour through a process of collaboration is still relatively new.

The social-constructive nature of CBR presents an opportunity. Through CBR, we develop shared understandings, practices, and language (Schwandt, 2000). In this study, we applied a social-construction lens to consider quality in CBR and engaged CBR practitioners from various contexts in discussion about the concept of rigour. Specifically, our purpose was to explore whether rigour is a meaningful concept in CBR in relation to quality. We engaged in dialogue a group of CBR practitioners by inviting participants to discuss rigour; we asked the question, “Is rigour a meaningful concept in community-based research?” With the intent to apply the generated knowledge to the practice and study of CBR, we adopted an interpretive-description methodology (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997) for the study.

Methodology

As CBR practitioners, we turn to interpretive description, an approach for creating knowledge that can be applied in particular practical settings. The intent of interpretive description is to identify themes and patterns in practitioners’ experiences to inform their work (Thorne, Kirkham, & O’Flynn-Magee, 2004). We anticipate that an interpretive description will continue to contribute to developing contextual detail to enhance understanding about doing CBR well among CBR practitioners.

Participants

In May 2008, a conference, “Conversations on Community-Based Research (CBR): Engaging Communities with College Faculty and Students,” took place at Douglas College, Coquitlam, British Columbia, Canada. The conference delegates comprised CBR practitioners from across varied locations of practice. The second author of this article, who is a member of a community-university partnership, facilitated one of the concurrent sessions within the conference. Early in the conference, organizers announced to delegates that this particular session regarding the meaningfulness of rigour in CBR would be videotaped as part of a research project.

Sampling was theoretical (Schwandt, 2007). The authors knew that the conference delegates would be people who were interested in and had various experiences with CBR (i.e., CBR practitioners). Session participants had three opportunities to decide whether they were methodologically motivated to engage in discussion about rigour in CBR (Creswell, 2007): in

response to the abstract in the conference program, to the plenary announcement about videotaping, and to the description of the research project at the beginning of the session. Those who chose to participate in the research project were people who perceived that they could make relevant contributions.

Once the facilitator described the research project, session participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms. They were invited to participate in both the session and the project, or to participate in the session only. Session participants, regardless of their choice to participate in the research project, were asked to review and sign standard performance release forms for videotaping purposes. Regarding those who chose not to participate in the project yet remained in the session, the researchers did not include their data in the analysis.

Nine people participated in the session and seven chose to participate in the research project. The participants were all CBR practitioners, meaning they had some level of involvement in the practice of CBR. Early in the session, the participants described a diversity of experience with CBR across several locations of CBR practice. Three participants practiced in community contexts (i.e., two First Nations communities and an adult-literacy, service-providing context); one participant straddled a campus context and a later-life care setting; one participant had facilitated post-secondary programming in an arms-length government office; and two participants self-identified as faculty members in post-secondary institutions. All of the participants indicated some completion or experience with graduate studies. In this variety, participants brought a mix of diverse perspectives to the session; such a mix is consistent with the nature of the practice of CBR.

The Talking Circle

The method for collecting data was a group interview, which was facilitated as a “talking circle” by Sherry Ann Chapman. There were a total of three rounds of discussion during the 45 minute session. At the outset, the facilitator asked one question, inviting each participant, in turn, to consider whether rigour is a meaningful concept in CBR. The facilitator referred to rigour in terms of “quality.” More narrowly defining the term would have imposed ideas about rigour, which was not our intention. The practitioners were invited to speak or to pass in a consecutive order, and they were asked to state their names before commenting. After the first round of responses, the facilitator briefly summarized initial observations. She invited open discussion and offered one possible path, by asking about what language could be used in CBR to discuss rigour. Following the second round, the facilitator briefly summarized again, asking for clarification where necessary. An open, wrap-up discussion followed.

The session was videotaped and transcribed. This textual transcript was the primary focus of and for analysis; the video footage served as a secondary resource for clarification purposes. Prior to analysis, the researchers forwarded a copy of the transcript to each participant to invite confirmation and/or clarification of their contributions in the transcript.

Analysis

We drew upon interpretive-description techniques to analyse the data (Thorne, 2008; Thorne et al., 1997, 2004). Our intent was to gain sufficient contextual understanding to guide the application of evidence in practice (Thorne, 2008). We wished to enhance understanding regarding the meaningfulness of rigour in CBR.

As part of the preliminary phases of the analysis, we immersed ourselves in the data through repeated readings of the transcript and initial coding. In this early stage, breadth is recommended rather than an overemphasis on precision (Thorne et al., 2004). As we studied each participant's contributions and the exchanges between participants, we also maintained a view of the larger context of the talking circle. The transcript was therefore broadly coded, yet closely reflected the data (Sandelowski, 2000). Throughout the analysis process, questions such as "What is happening here?" and "What are we learning about this?" (Thorne et al., 1997) guided us as we reflected not only on the data but also on what is already known about rigour in CBR in the peer-reviewed literature. Through this iterative process, and informed by the constant comparative technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we identified commonalities and differences across the data and then identified categories and themes. Categories comprised coded data that were grouped according to conceptual commonalities. If we perceived that several categories were interrelated conceptually, we identified them as themes. We met frequently to discuss the emerging codes, categories, and themes. In addition, we identified "threads" in the data. A thread was a conceptual idea that linked themes together and ran across the entire data set, helping to explain interrelationships between the themes. These threads consequently provide a vantage point from which to view the overall discussion.

Findings

In this section, we present our findings in terms of three themes: Obligation, Representation, and Turn to Action. Categories are discussed within each of the themes. We draw on participants' words as examples to illustrate the nature of each theme. To conclude this section, we discuss two overarching, conceptual threads: Dilemma and Transparency.

Obligation

This first theme pertains to the sense of duty that the talking-circle participants described in doing CBR well. An obligation to meet often competing expectations of rigour created a dilemma for them as CBR practitioners. On the one hand, the dilemma was evident in participants' sense of responsibility to practice core aspects of CBR, such as working in reciprocal ways with partners, responding to mutual need, and being honest. Rigour was therefore dependent on ensuring that practice was consistent with a CBR value orientation. On the other hand, participants recognized the expectations of conventional rigour from parties such as funders, academics, and research ethics boards. They highlighted hierarchical dynamics at play and the influential position such parties often hold. In this section, we explore the theme of obligation in terms of three categories: expectations, sense of responsibility, and core aspects of CBR.

Expectations.

The sense of obligation derived partly from what was expected of CBR practitioners in their roles by others who may or may not practice CBR and partly derived from the expectations they placed on themselves as those who do CBR. Particular external sources of these expectations included funders, academics, service-providing practitioners, and members of a community connected with phenomena or issues being studied. One participant described the type of expectation that can arise when sharing results, for example in conference settings, when she said that, "doing this type of research, people really want to know. How do you *know* those results are valid? How do you *know* that is rigorous?" (Community-based practitioner). The talking circle participants felt an obligation to fulfill expectations placed on them by others.

The participants also had expectations of themselves. One participant described a conditional element to practicing CBR, stating that she “can’t see doing research within a community unless it’s participatory, unless people are involved at all levels” (Service-providing practitioner). She appeared to strive for a completely co-participatory approach to CBR compared with an approach in which partners participate in select stages of a project. She demonstrated a high sense of responsibility for doing CBR well, in a particular way.

Sense of responsibility.

The sense of obligation placed on CBR practitioners can be influenced by power dynamics. A hierarchy may exist whereby certain parties hold more power than others. These parties may have influence over the type of rigour that is sought by CBR practitioners and the manner in which research findings are analysed. Yet practitioners felt a sense of responsibility to do CBR in a way that serves the interests of the participants in a study. One practitioner demonstrated this struggle. She described how she believed that she had enhanced the rigour of a project by using art to facilitate discussion about the meaning of some findings among partners who had limited literacy skills. This method, however, was unconventional in her university setting at the time. As a graduate student seeking to complete her degree, she faced pressure to demonstrate conventionally rigorous methods: “So my advisor freaked out because this wasn’t how you’re supposed to do it and how could you check it and all that. But what worked out was this dialogue that went on back and forth” (Service-providing practitioner).

Another participant pointed to a sense of obligation, when determining rigour, to consider who is directing the research and their purpose. Specifically, he described agencies that fund CBR projects as highly influential: “funding often comes from agencies that want an academia kind of rigour. So, this, yeah, [rigour] is important but also in terms of who is calling the shots” (Post-secondary based practitioner). While recognizing that these funding agencies may be highly influential, the same participant also observed that, given the power-sensitive nature of CBR, the community that is involved with the issue being studied *should* direct the research. Obligations of rigour are consequently influenced by power dynamics, and the interests of different parties may be in competition.

Talking-circle participants also pointed to competing interests between research ethics boards and community interests, in terms of CBR:

So from my perspective as the researcher, we have to meet the demands of our ethics board to be able to even do what we are doing in the community. I think our [ethics-review] system can sometimes be perceived as slowing down if not on occasion stalling what’s happening in terms of being able to be responsive to community need in a timely fashion. (Campus-care straddling practitioner)

This participant shows that it is necessary to meet the “demands” of some people while being responsive to the needs of others.

Across the talking circle, the CBR practitioners appeared to lament a disadvantaged position of community partners in discussions of quality CBR and felt an obligation to advocate on behalf of that perspective. With a sense of responsibility to community members, the need for reciprocity was identified as an important aspect of rigour in CBR. Academically-based CBR practitioners were specifically identified as having a powerful place in the knowledge-creating hierarchy and were viewed as having a responsibility to “use their influence to act” (Service-providing practitioner).

Core aspects of CBR.

Developing trustworthiness and maintaining integrity during the research process were also discussed in relation to rigour. These were identified as core aspects of CBR and as necessary for doing CBR in an ethical and rigorous way. One practitioner stated that,

If what you're doing is deemed to be true and trustworthy by the people with whom you are working in the community, then in a sense I think that is one of the most important elements that you can bring to it [CBR]. (Campus-care straddling practitioner)

Another practitioner emphasized an obligation to maintain a level of fidelity to CBR participants, and they described an experience during a data collection process where interviews became counselling sessions:

So what was going to happen was: [shffpt] we'll just nip it in the bud. Cut this out. But then all the repercussions for that participant and for the interviewer were huge. Right? But this was data that wasn't really data because it becomes something else. So the idea of staying with this person, you know, that was hard, and that's where it got really messy. (Service-providing practitioner)

Another talking-circle participant also discussed "staying with" CBR participants, despite the risk of influencing data collection, from a conventional perspective:

So some people would say we became a bit contaminated because the researchers working with them stayed with them and helped them through those emotions, essentially put them back together again before they sent them off, which meant they were spending more time with that individual. ... I personally, then, don't think it's ethical to send them out of the room in tears. (Campus-care straddling practitioner)

Making ethical decisions intuitively during the research process, sometimes at the expense of the data by conventional academic standards, is what makes CBR a "messy" practice according to the talking-circle participants. Despite the messiness, the previous example demonstrates that CBR practitioners may perceive that rigour can be maintained while conducting ethical practice. Another practitioner stated that rigour is not only maintained while making ethical decisions, but that rigour *begins* with ethical practice: "[Rigour] starts with the ethics to not lie. That means not lie to the people you're reporting to, certainly not lie to the community that you're speaking with. ... You have to tell the whole story" (Post-secondary educator on CBR). This participant felt that telling the "whole story" during the research process was an important part of CBR and a fundamental aspect of rigour.

By recognizing competing expectations, a high sense of responsibility to community participants, and the need to maintain core aspects of CBR, such as trustworthiness and integrity, talking-circle participants in effect were outlining a dimension of obligation in their understanding of rigour. They also explored rigour in terms of a second theme, the representation of CBR findings.

Representation

Talking-circle participants perceived that *some* of their obligations to do CBR well could be addressed through the representation of their work. Representation refers to the ways in which CBR practitioners seek to analyse, interpret, and present the research to audiences on behalf of a CBR partnership. Representation should be thought of in terms of "How is knowledge

represented?” in addition to “Who does this knowledge represent?” Participants showed a desire to communicate findings with care for all who have been involved in a CBR collaboration; however, achieving these representation goals is not easy. In this next section, we explore the theme of representation in terms of three categories: the overall philosophical framing of CBR design, methods for analysis and interpretation, and documentation.

Philosophical framing of CBR design.

The participants discussed the philosophical framing of CBR in terms of the research process and research outcomes; they highlighted the pressures to justify the legitimacy of their work according to conventional standards and emphasized the lack of separation between the researcher and participants of a study.

Participants identified a parallel with the qualitative/quantitative debate and how CBR practitioners are feeling pressed to justify the legitimacy of their work according to conventional research standards. Recalling experiences from the 1990s, one participant described that, “much of our concern over terms like ‘rigour’ and ‘qualitative research’ was really trying to meet the rules of an earlier paradigm, to claim a legitimacy” (Post-secondary based practitioner). Talking-circle participants voiced concern about the need to augment a CBR design in a way that responds to conceptualizations of rigour in conventional research. One participant stated, “In all honesty, sometimes we introduce some of the quantitative elements ... for some of the credibility around some of the data that we’re gathering” (Campus-care straddling practitioner). Yet, acknowledging an emergence in recent decades of social constructivist and critical-theorist perspectives, participants also described a new openness to CBR from parts of academia. For example, one participant highlighted how a research process that “in older paradigms would be regarded as contaminated” may be the same process “that we now prize” (Post-secondary based practitioner). Another participant described the relationship between CBR practitioners, themselves, and a project’s participants:

Certainly, we have come a long way from where we understood researchers to be outside looking at the other. We are not part of the other because we can’t separate ourselves from contaminating or influencing in some way the outcome of the research.
(Community-based practitioner)

For this reason, being explicit about the relational nature of CBR is important to account for this lack of Cartesian separation between subject and object.

Methods for analysis and interpretation.

In the discussion, research design in CBR was addressed. One participant felt that where “rigour can come [is] in [the] methodology” (Campus-care straddling practitioner). The nature of analysis and interpretation impacts the ways in which findings are represented and who is represented in these findings. One specific procedure described was inter-rater analysis, an analytic process that seeks agreement between raters. Interestingly, inter-rater analysis was described as helpful due to its “different nature” [compared to how it may be understood by conventional academics], in adapting conventional analysis to be collaborative across CBR partners. To ensure that all partners are reflected in the representation of findings, participants described interpretation processes that seek a broad consensus, in keeping with the nature of CBR. Achieving agreement between partners regarding data interpretation was one of the suggested ways for ensuring quality.

Documentation.

Practitioners felt that being upfront and transparent in the documentation of the research process and outcomes is critical. One participant felt that this should occur in funding proposal development. For example:

The researcher has to declare very clearly in their research proposal their beliefs and their values and, to be upfront, put their cards on the table right from the get-go as to what they think about what they're about to do. (Community-based practitioner)

Another practitioner discussed the need for transparency during a CBR project. He described the potential for "a kind of careless misinformation" (Post-secondary based practitioner). One way to avoid potential carelessness is by being open with CBR project participants and providing the opportunity to check if "what they've said is being properly reflected in the work" (Community-based practitioner). Talking-circle participants discussed transparency in relation to potential users of CBR information. One participant discussed how being transparent with her process put her at ease when she was questioned about the rigour of her project, for example in conference settings:

And I think sometimes, you know, being really transparent and open with your process is difficult sometimes, especially because you're sharing every step that you're going along and you're accountable for everything you're doing. But I've found that, personally, doing that also puts me at comfort because, you know, coming to the end of a project where results are coming to fruition, you don't have to wonder: how did I get here, and how accurate are these? (Community-based practitioner)

Providing details and clear rationale for decisions made through documentation was also suggested as a procedure for enhancing rigour, which draws upon accepted practice in qualitative inquiry. As one participant stated, "if you can document what you are doing and provide clear rationale, it's just a different kind of rigour, I think" (Campus-care straddling practitioner). Similarly, another participant emphasized the need to document the research process to account, to all partners and audiences, for the messiness of CBR. He perceived that the process needed to be "very carefully documented in some way so that the messiness is understood ... There's method in the messiness" (Community-based practitioner).

During the talking-circle, participants were moved to discuss how they represent their collaborative-research findings through ways that conventional researchers might question. Participants were identifying with aspects of qualitative inquiry and seeking to describe their practices in terms of overall philosophical positioning, research design, and documentation.

Turn to Action

The third theme arises from talking-circle participants who described necessary action to conceptualize rigour in terms of CBR. Participants described that an understanding of rigour in CBR is in its "infancy" (Post-secondary based practitioner). They suggested that existing definitions of rigour are not appropriate in a CBR context as they may not resonate with diverse perspectives of CBR practitioners, relative to their diverse contexts or the need to be flexible. In light of the identified obligations and representational challenges they faced, participants offered practical suggestions to support the development of rigour in a CBR context. Language such as "need," "have to," and "should" figured prominently. Participants viewed certain practices as essential when considering rigour in CBR. In this section, we explore the theme of turn to action

in terms of three categories: a need to define rigour anew in the context of CBR, a need for informed language, and a need for a new set of principles regarding a CBR-type of rigour.

A need to define rigour anew in CBR.

Regarding a need for a new definition of rigour in CBR, the participants described rigour as being in its “infancy”; trying to conceptualize it in terms of CBR was “new ground” (Post-secondary based practitioner). A conceptualization of rigour can be problematic due to the relative nature of rigour in CBR. One practitioner described how rigour “means different things to different people” in varying contexts (Post-secondary based practitioner). Participants also discussed the relative importance of rigour based on other concerns in CBR, such as the utility of the research and the ways information is distributed. With this relativity in mind and acknowledging the distinct nature of CBR, one practitioner suggested, “rigour has to be re-looked at in a [CBR] context” (Post-secondary based practitioner). Another practitioner said, “You have to be very adaptable, so I think you have to find new ways of defining what rigour means. This won’t be perfect, but the one thing we try really hard to do is to try to account for all those disparities” (Campus-care straddling practitioner). The definition of rigour therefore has to reflect the messy nature of CBR and allow for the recognized need by CBR practitioners to be adaptable or flexible in dialogue with each other.

A need for informed language.

Similar to the need for a definition of rigour in a CBR context, talking-circle participants discussed the need for informed distinctions in the use of concepts and terminology surrounding rigour in CBR. Participants recognized the challenges they faced in representing their findings with regard to competing expectations, and they highlighted the implications of using particular language. In response, participants discussed the need to use different language and pointed out certain language that should be avoided, language that could not be avoided, and language that might be appropriate in its reflection of the nature of CBR. Trustworthiness was a particular concept that practitioners felt reflected the nature of CBR. One participant compared the use of “trustworthiness” with “validity,” suggesting that the latter had ontological implications that may detrimentally impact considerations of legitimacy. He said:

I think trustworthiness is probably an appropriate term to use in regards to what we are talking about here because there are ways when we talk about validity where again we’re thinking about: is this right, or is this wrong? What are the numbers to prove that it’s either way? However, trustworthiness has a completely different aspect to it.
(Community-based practitioner)

This participant observed that the type of language used in relation to the rigour of a project would carry with it some philosophical questioning to determine quality in a CBR project. Using the term “validity” may therefore lead audiences to expect a certain type of research that does not necessarily reflect the nature of a CBR project. Another participant also perceived that trustworthiness was useful, and expressed that it reflected the relational nature of CBR:

[Trustworthiness] ... is an incredibly useful term because if what you’re doing is deemed to be true and trustworthy by the people with whom you are working in the community, then in a sense I think that is one of the most important elements that you can bring to it.
(Campus-care straddling practitioner)

In addition to suggesting language that may have relevance in describing rigour in a CBR context, practitioners also discussed language that was deemed inappropriate. One practitioner referred to conventional research language that does not account for the unique nature of CBR as “highfalutin’ academic talk that doesn’t always reflect the messiness of working with people” (Service-providing practitioner). Consistent with the discussion about the appropriateness of particular language for describing rigour in CBR, another participant recognized that sometimes use of language is determined by the need to speak the same language as those in a more powerful position in terms of their influence on the kind of rigour that is required and sought. She referred to the need to use the term “rigour” in such circumstances, and she explained:

I’m not scared of the R-word [i.e., rigour]. I think in terms of getting any kind of funding, if you want to play in the sandbox with the big boys, you have to use those words. But even if we didn’t have to play in the sandbox, I’d still say: don’t be scared of the R-word. (Post-secondary educator on CBR)

Considerations of language must not only take into account what might be most appropriate for CBR specifically, but must also consider the need to use a form of language that appeals to particular audiences. Participants therefore considered an informed use of language to be an important means for conceptualizing rigour in CBR.

A need for a set of principles regarding a CBR-type of rigour.

In addition to the need for defining rigour in CBR and using informed and appropriate language, participants discussed the need for a guiding set of codes, standards, or principles. Participants also stated that those who are practicing CBR should contribute to the creation of these principles. The idea of a “code of ethics” was discussed seemingly interchangeably with “standards of rigour,” which reiterated the belief that “rigour is attached to ethics ... You can’t divide and piece them all out” (Service-providing practitioner). Participants described that ethical considerations were important if a set of standards for ensuring a rigorous CBR project were to be created. In addition to a need for “agreed upon” (Campus-care straddling practitioner) standards, a caution was also voiced that these standards not be overly prescriptive:

If there were some overarching principles that maybe we can even be a part of crafting, the, you know, this sounds too prescribed, and I don’t mean it in quite this way. But let’s just say there ... were ten elements, and then maybe in terms of rigour maybe protecting the community of interest is more important in one than in another or something like that. (Campus-care straddling practitioner)

This participant perceived that various considerations need to be made throughout a CBR project, and these may vary in relative importance from one project to another. Being flexible around these standards and being prepared for the unknown would be required: “if we created a code of ethics or standards or rigour, we have to be prepared to deal with messiness and not know where to go and not have answers” (Service-providing practitioner). Participants expressed a need for a set of standards yet qualified that these standards must be flexible in practice.

In summary of the findings, the talking-circle participants expressed a sense of obligation to meet expectations of themselves and from various players or audiences. Aware of these obligations, participants described that some of their obligations could be addressed through the representation of CBR. Recognizing the often competing obligations and the representational challenges they face, participants identified a need for action. In particular, they felt it was necessary to conceptualize rigour in terms of CBR with informed language and by developing a

set of flexible principles. Stepping back from the three themes, we identify two threads as conceptual ideas that connect the themes: Dilemma and Transparency. Dilemma refers to the way participants described a need to navigate multiple, and often competing, demands and needs in CBR. Participants highlighted their efforts to legitimize CBR practice to other parties (who hold conventional expectations of rigour) yet maintain a level of fidelity to the core aspects of CBR. Transparency appeared to be a solution-based approach to this dilemma and refers to the way in which the collaborative process should be open, honest, and easily understood. Talking-circle participants identified both an obligation and a need to practice CBR in transparent ways and thereby meet personal and others' expectations of rigour in their practice of CBR.

Discussion

In a group interview, diverse CBR practitioners engaged in dialogue about the meaningfulness of rigour in CBR. In peer-reviewed, academic literature, rigour is identified as a necessary and desired part of research. However, the idea of conceptualizing rigour in terms of the nature of CBR is relatively new, as perceived by the participants in this study in addition to our own extensive review of the literature. In addition, discussions of rigour in the academic literature do not always reflect the diverse contexts in which practitioners of CBR are situated. In CBR, the co-construction of knowledge through a dialogic and relational process is highly valued. Much as the talking-circle participants perceived that collaborative discussion about flexible principles of rigour may be helpful, we agree with Springett and colleagues (2011) that such conversation between CBR practitioners might provide helpful insights for knowing when CBR is done well. By engaging CBR practitioners from varied locations of practice in dialogue, we sought to co-construct understandings, practices, and languages about rigour that are applicable to and consistent with the nature of CBR.

The talking-circle participants indicated that the concept of rigour was indeed meaningful and necessary in CBR. Nevertheless, the participants also extended the conversation about rigour beyond meaningfulness and introduced new concerns. Participants highlighted their efforts to meet multiple and competing obligations, attempting to represent CBR work through transparent means. Participants felt strongly that methods and moral obligations were not to be compromised. Participants also highlighted the need for further co-construction of rigour as it relates to CBR. Specifically, participants identified a need for a new definition of rigour in the context of CBR, a need for informed language, and a need for a set of principles regarding a CBR-type of rigour. In the following section, these ideas will be discussed and links will be made with academic literature. We will also identify areas in which further dialogue and co-construction about rigour in CBR may be necessary.

Participants expressed a sense of obligation to meet expectations from themselves and a variety of players or partners, including funders, people living with phenomena being studied, academics, service providers, and policymakers. At times, power relations may influence these obligations; talking-circle participants recognized that particular players might hold powerful positions, strongly influencing the type of rigour that is sought. For some participants, academically-based CBR practitioners hold some responsibility to community members' voices in equitable decision-making about the CBR. However, participants also recognized that those who hold more power "call the shots" and want a conventional kind of rigour because it is viewed as more legitimate. Martí and Villasante (2009) have suggested that CBR practitioners based in university settings may feel bound to a conventional form of rigour. The findings demonstrate that individuals practicing CBR outside of the university may also perceive these pressures based on identified expectations from legitimizing academic, expert voices. The need to meet the expectations of dominant voices is something that impacts practitioners across the CBR community of practice.

To fulfill one obligation may require compromising another, and attempting to reconcile these two conflicting positions can create a dilemma for CBR practitioners. McTaggart (1997) has provided a different lens to the one presented by the participants; he moves the onus from the CBR practitioner to readers of CBR. Referring to CBR as an explicitly political activity, McTaggart highlights the need for readers to be open-minded in considerations of what counts as evidence. This suggests that readers of CBR may also hold some responsibility when determining the rigour of a project.

Identifying the obligations involved in CBR and believing that rigour is necessary, talking-circle participants perceived that some of their obligations could be addressed through the representation of a CBR project. How the process and outcomes of a project appear will be relative and contextual. Not only did talking-circle participants consider “rigour for whom?” (Martí & Villasante, 2009), but they also considered an additional question of “representation for whom?” With multiple creators and users of new CBR knowledge, deciding how to present the process and outcomes of CBR presents a dilemma. CBR practitioners need to navigate this dilemma when determining what is deemed appropriate and consistent with the nature of CBR, while also acknowledging the power relations that exist. A situation of divided loyalties may exist between doing CBR well according to those “calling the shots” (Post-secondary based practitioner) and also ensuring care and respect among all who are involved in CBR. Buchanan, Miller, and Wallerstein (2007) recognized the need to balance attempts to meet conventional expectations of rigour in terms of methodology and the need to fulfill particular moral obligations. In contrast to the participants in the study, Buchanan et al. (2007) view ethical and moral standards as independent of rigour, rather than interrelated. The participants in the study viewed methodological rigour and a CBR value orientation as inseparable. Reason and Bradbury (2001) made this link between quality of CBR and relational practice and highlighted the importance of democratic relationships. Springett and colleagues (2011) also made this link, and they believe that standards of quality should consider the importance of a democratic and participatory process in CBR and the impact of the research beyond an academic context. CBR practitioners’ motivation to be caring and respectful through emotional and intuitive engagement may be connected to the value orientation of CBR—to work in reciprocal and mutually beneficial ways. Heshusius (1994) referred to this idea of a caring intuition as having a participatory mode of consciousness, in which mutuality and ethicality are embedded. A participatory mode of consciousness is achieved by relinquishing the need to control the research process in order to represent the research in an unconventional way.

Referring to the third theme, Turn to Action, we recall the “action turn” described by Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 2). The “action turn” reflects the practical nature of CBR and a new phase of research in which CBR practitioners consider how to act in newly informed ways. The talking-circle participants discussed a need for action to move forward in conceptualizing rigour in CBR. Participants offered practical suggestions to support the development of rigour in CBR in terms of a sense of responsibility or expectation.

Participants expressed a need for a conceptualization of rigour consistent with the nature of CBR. For them, a new definition of rigour was not only about semantics but also had implications for CBR practice. McTaggart (1998) shares this view about the importance of language and believes that an awareness of how we talk about quality is crucial when applying conventional research terms to unconventional forms of research such as CBR. Furthermore, he has highlighted the need to reshape the use and meaning of language so that it more appropriately reflects the goals of CBR. The talking-circle participants were not explicit about their familiarity with rigour in the CBR literature. Nevertheless, their views appear consistent with McTaggart’s (1998), which

includes emphasizing the contextual and unconventional nature of rigour and the consequent need to define rigour in a CBR context.

In addition, the talking-circle participants suggested that overarching principles might provide future directions for doing CBR well. The existing literature supports this need for a set of standards, principles, or criteria (e.g., Koch & Kralik, 2006; McTaggart, 1998; Springett et al., 2011; Wulfhorst, Eisenhauer, Gripne, & Ward, 2008). The talking-circle participants did, however, warn that these should not be overly prescriptive and should be flexible enough to allow for the “messiness” inherent in CBR. Stoecker (2003) highlighted the concern of a lack of flexibility in research, for example by stating that oftentimes researchers are overly concerned with doing the “right thing” according to academic standards and become paralyzed by it. Badger (2000) shares this concern and states that demands for methodological rigour can blind researchers so that change does not occur. Furthermore, hiding the realities (and messiness) inherent in the research process can potentially deny the opportunity for generating new understanding (Cook, 2009). A flexible approach to a set of principles would enable CBR practitioners of a particular project to decide which and/or how principles might be most appropriately applied within a given context.

Studying the contributions of a group of CBR practitioners from different locations of practice in a discussion about rigour is important for inviting a greater diversity of voices to participate in the co-construction of rigour in CBR. As a result, we can imagine the emergence of a potentially transgressive nature of rigour in CBR (Lather, 2007). Lather described transgression as the move from “yesterday’s institutions” (p.120) to another place of social inquiry that considers alternative framings. With our findings, we see potential to begin to describe rigour in CBR in ways beyond conventional research boundaries, specifically through the transgression of obligations, the representation of findings, and a turn to action.

To navigate their perceived dilemma, talking-circle participants suggested being transparent. Transparency involves “tell[ing] the whole story” (Post-secondary educator on CBR): being open and honest, true and trustworthy, and above all, accountable. Such elements are considered fundamental to building collaborative partnerships in CBR (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). These elements are fostered through an environment in which contributions from all partners are valued and supported. Such an environment may help to establish equitable power dynamics in partnerships. We perceive that these same elements may enhance the dialogue that appears to be a foundation for conceptualizing rigour in CBR. Following the lead of the practitioners in this study, we feel there is a need for further co-construction of rigour as it relates to CBR. Given the diversity of practitioners situated across varied locations of practice, we encourage CBR practitioners to continue to form communities of practice (Wenger, 2011) to engage in a process of collective learning about rigour in the context of CBR. Establishing and maintaining dialogue as CBR practitioners may be critical for navigating the dilemma about the meaningfulness of doing CBR well. Based on this study, we recommend that CBR practitioners, in communities of CBR practice, strive to: (a) be transparent during CBR collaboration, (b) be in dialogue with other CBR practitioners, and (c) co-construct the meaning of doing CBR well.

Conclusion

From a need to inform our practice of CBR, we analysed a discussion by a diverse group of CBR practitioners to understand the meaningfulness of rigour in CBR. During a facilitated group interview, these participants indicated that rigour is a meaningful concept in CBR; however, they also perceived potential for moving beyond that term. They discussed a sense of obligation to meet expectations about CBR practice. Often competing, these expectations created a dilemma

for participants. They perceived that some of their obligations could be addressed in how they represent their CBR work. Transparency was recommended as a practical way to navigate the dilemma. Participants described that an understanding of rigour in CBR is in its infancy. They wish to participate in the co-constructions of this understanding. They identified a need to conceptualize rigour in terms of CBR with informed language and by developing a set of flexible principles. We encourage CBR practitioners to take a turn to action; to form a community of practice; and to continue to engage in dialogue about rigour in CBR. Together, we can navigate the identified dilemma and continue to co-construct the meaning of doing CBR well.

References

- Badger, T. G. (2000). Action research, change and methodological rigour. *Journal of Nursing Management*, 8, 201–207.
- Bradbury, H., & Reason, P. (2003). Issues and choice points for improving the quality of action research. In M. Minkler & N. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Community based participatory research for health* (pp. 201–220). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Buchanan, D. R., Miller, F. G., & Wallerstein, N. (2007). Ethical issues in community based participatory research: Balancing rigorous research with community participation in community intervention studies. *Progress in Community Health Partnerships*, 1(2), 153–160.
- Cargo, M., & Mercer, S. L. (2008). The value and challenges of participatory research: Strengthening its practice. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 29, 325–350.
- Cook, T. (2009). The purpose of mess in action research: Building rigour through a messy turn. *Educational Action Research*, 17(2), 277–291.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Heshusius, L. (1994). Freeing ourselves from objectivity: Managing subjectivity or turning toward a participatory mode of consciousness? *Educational Researcher*, 23(3), 15–22.
- Israel, B. A., Schulz, A. J., Parker, E. A., & Becker, A. B. (1998). Review of community based research: Assessing partnership approaches to improve public health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 19, 173–202.
- Jagosh, J., Macaulay, A. C., Pluye, P., Salsberg, J., Bush, P. L., Henderson, J., ... Greenhalgh, T. (2012). Uncovering the benefits of participatory research: Implications of a realist review for health research and practice. *The Millbank Quarterly*, 90(2), 311–346.
- Koch, T., & Kralik, D. (2006). *Participatory action research in health care*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell.
- Lather, P. (1986). Issues of validity in openly ideological research: Between a rock and soft place. *Interchange*, 17(4), 63–84.
- Lather, P. (2007). *Getting lost: Feminist efforts toward a double(d) science*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Martí, J., & Villasante, T. R. (2009). Quality in action research: Reflections for second order inquiry. *Systematic Practice of Action Research*, 22, 383–396.
- McTaggart, R. (1997). Guiding principles for participatory action research. In R. McTaggart (Ed.), *Participatory action research: International context and consequences* (pp. 25–43). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

- McTaggart, R. (1998). Is validity really an issue for participatory action research? *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies*, 4, 211–236.
- Melrose, M. J. (2001). Maximizing the rigour of action research: Why would you want to? How could you? *Field Methods*, 13(2), 160–180.
- Mercer, S. L., Green, L. W., Cargo, M., Potter, M. A., Daniel, M., Olds, S., & Reed-Gross, E. (2008). Reliability-tested guidelines for assessing participatory research projects. In M. Minkler & N. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Community-based participatory research for health: From process to outcomes* (2nd ed., pp. 407–433). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 250–260.
- Nolan, M., Hanson, E., Grant, G., Keady, J., & Magnusson, L. (2008). Introduction: What counts as knowledge, whose knowledge counts? Towards authentic participatory enquiry. In M. Nolan, E. Hanson, & G. Gordon (Eds.), *User participation in health and social care research: Voices, values and evaluation* (pp. 1–13). Buckingham, United Kingdom: Open University Press.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2001). Introduction: Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 1–14). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sandelowski, M. (2000). Focus on research methods: Whatever happened to qualitative description? *Research in Nursing and Health*, 23, 334–340.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2000). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretation, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 189–213). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Schwandt, T. A. (2007). *The Sage dictionary of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Springett, J., Wright, M. T., & Roche, B. (2011). *Developing quality criteria for participatory health research: A discussion paper* (SP I 2011-302). Berlin, Germany: Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB). Retrieved from <http://bibliothek.wzb.eu/pdf/2011/i11-302.pdf>
- Stoecker, R. (2003). Are academics irrelevant? Approaches and roles for scholars in community based participatory research. In M. Minkler & N. Wallerstein (Eds.), *Community based participatory research for health* (pp. 53–76). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R., & MacDonald-Emes, J. (1997). Focus on qualitative methods. Interpretive description: A noncategorical qualitative alternative for developing nursing knowledge. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 20(2), 169–177.
- Thorne, S., Kirkham, S. R., O’Flynn-Magee, K. (2004). The analytic challenge in interpretive description. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(1), 1–11.
- Thorne, S. E. (2008). *Interpretive description*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Waterman, H. (1998). Embracing ambiguities and valuing ourselves: Issues of validity in action research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(1), 101–105.

Wenger, E. (2011). Communities of practice: A brief introduction. Retrieved from <http://wenger-trayner.com/theory/>

Wulforth, J. D., Eisenhauer, B. W., Gripne, S. L., & Ward, J. M. (2008). Core criteria and assessment of participatory research. In C. Wilmsen, W. Elmendorf, & L. Fisher (Eds.), *Partnerships for empowerment: Participatory research for community-based natural resource management* (pp. 23–46). London, United Kingdom: Earthscan Publications.