
Article

Expanding the Action Project Method to Encompass Comparative Analyses

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Abstract

This article is an exploration of the possibility and pragmatics of conducting between-groups comparative analysis in action theory and the action project method of qualitative research. After establishing the need for such a procedure and describing the compatibility of these analyses with the paradigm assumptions of action theory, the authors describe a specific set of procedures for conducting qualitative comparisons within the action project method. They also discuss limitations of the procedure and future directions for continuing the expansion of methods of comparison in qualitative research. Finally, they present a case illustration of the use of this comparative analysis method.

Keywords: qualitative research, methodology, comparative analysis

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Despite continued controversy regarding their legitimacy, methods of conducting comparative analyses are gaining strength in qualitative research (Ayers, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003). The following is a discussion of the possibility and pragmatics of conducting between-groups comparative analyses within a specific form of qualitative research: the action project method. In this article we describe the most recent development of this method: expansion of the action project method to allow for between-groups comparisons to be made while remaining consistent with the qualitative paradigm assumptions of the method. In addition, an example of the use of this method will be provided to illustrate the utility of this method for generating richer understandings of a specific phenomenon (how parents and their adolescent children jointly work to promote the adolescent's future career) than would be possible without some form of comparative analysis.

As will become evident in the subsequent sections, a between-groups comparative analysis in the action project method is designed to provide more elaborate qualitative descriptions of phenomena; that is, the process of identifying similarities and differences forms a richer understanding of the action-related phenomenon under study. However, if the primary purpose of comparison in action theory-oriented qualitative research is descriptive, and descriptions of phenomena can be generated from the existing action project method, then a question naturally arises: Why develop a new between-groups analytical procedure at all, especially when between-groups comparison has a contested position within qualitative research as a whole? At a purely pragmatic level, the answer is that action theory researchers have demonstrated an inclination to make between-groups types of conclusions, even in the absence of such a procedure (e.g., Young, Ball, Valach, Turkel, & Wong, 2003; Young, Logan, Lovato, Moffat, & Shoveller, 2005). These kinds of findings would be easier to justify if a clearly described set of procedures for conducting comparative analyses within action theory existed. Prior to pursuing the issue of comparative analysis, however, it is necessary to become familiar with the method as it currently exists as well as the theoretical framework that underlies it.

Theoretical framework and existing method

The action project method is a constructionist, consensus-based method for conducting qualitative research, which has been used to explore phenomena in vocational psychology (e.g., Young, Valach, Ball, et al., 2001), health psychology (e.g., Young, Logan, et al., 2005), and clinical psychology (e.g., Michel, Dey, Stadler, & Valach, 2004). Within the method action is conceptualized as encompassing three equally important perspectives: (a) manifest behavior, (b) internal emotional and cognitive processing, and (c) the meanings that people construct around their experience when describing it to others (Valach, Young, & Lynam, 2002). What defines action as action is that it is goal oriented. The action project method was designed to explore and describe the actions of persons (typically pairs of individuals who are connected in some meaningful way) who are jointly engaged in achieving some goal or future state. As such, it is different from many other qualitative methods in that the unit of analysis is the dyad. Rather than being focused on the experiences and meanings that are constructed by individuals, it was designed to access the understandings that pairs of connected people (e.g., romantic couples, parent and child, therapist and client) co-construct about a phenomenon. Another distinctive feature of the method is the emphasis on process: Not only is the content of their co-constructions important, so, too, is the process; that is, how the members of the dyad engage together to achieve their goals over time.

The need to address the possibility of between-groups comparative analysis emerged from the experiences that researchers had with actually using the action project method. In several studies engagement with the data revealed the presence of potentially distinct groups or clusters of

participants that would be worthy of further exploration. Unfortunately, because there was no systematic way to conduct between-groups comparisons in the action project method, the authors had to rely on other strategies. To address the possibility of differences due to ethnicity that were present in their study of career development in parent-adolescent dyads (Young, Valach, Ball, et al., 2001), the authors conducted a separate analysis of only the Chinese-Canadian participants in the data set (Young, Ball, et al., 2003). Instead of separate publications for different groups within a data set, the strategy that Young, Logan, et al. (2005) employed in identifying and contrasting distinct sets of participants in their study of families' skin cancer prevention projects was to state that there appeared to be distinct patterns of action for different kinds of families and provide case examples as evidence.

Neither of these solutions is entirely satisfactory, however, because there is no way for readers to evaluate the adequacy of the comparative analysis process or for other researchers to understand how to conduct between-groups comparisons in their own research. What has been missing in the literature is a set of clear procedures that action project method researchers can employ systematically to conduct qualitative between-groups comparisons when distinct groups appear to be emerging in their data sets. However, prior to developing a set of between-groups comparison procedures, it was necessary to establish that conducting such analyses is, in fact, compatible with this form of qualitative research.

Establishing that between-groups comparisons fit with the action project method is important because the notion of comparison is much less well developed in qualitative research than in quantitative research. Many qualitative researchers are ambivalent as to whether it is theoretically appropriate to compare findings between individuals, to say nothing of comparing sets of individuals. McGrath and Johnson (2003) have identified several relevant concerns: The process of aggregating data across participants for subsequent comparative analysis might be perceived as reductionist, involving an unacceptable loss of the unique information and context from each specific participant who contributes to the aggregated data. Moreover, given the historical use of between-groups comparison in psychology, this type of analysis is associated with a tendency to seek linear connections among variables and test causal hypotheses, both of which are antithetical to many qualitative approaches to research. In fact, in some qualitative paradigms individuals' experiences are perceived to be incommensurable, making any form of comparison inappropriate.

Even when it is deemed acceptable, the question of how to perform comparative analyses is answered in different ways by different qualitative methods. Procedures for conducting between-groups analyses appear to be dependent on the paradigm assumptions of the method in question as well its procedures for conducting noncomparative analyses. As a result, what is appropriate in one form of qualitative research might be unacceptable in another. For example, authors describing multisite ethnography (e.g., Freidberg, 2001; Gille, 2001; Hannerz, 2003; Marcus, 1998) have (a) emphasized the appropriateness of defining and selecting appropriate sites for comparison, (b) discussed the possibility that advocacy might be an inherent component of comparing different sites, and (c) described the use of analytical techniques that are generally consistent with noncomparative ethnographies despite some differences in the depth of understanding that can be obtained when having to move from site to site (e.g., grounding understanding in fieldwork, close engagement with the data, or flexibility and openness to exploring new directions that emerge). In contrast, researchers using the critical incident technique approach between-groups comparisons in a very different manner: The analysis process is more structured, attending primarily on frequency of occurrence to identify similarities and differences across different groups, and bolstered by numerous procedures to confirm the validity and reliability of both the findings and the process (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005; Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). Paradigmatic and procedural differences can exist even

within a single “type” of method, as is illustrated by the contrast between Yin’s (1982, 1993) postpositivist, tabular, frequency-dependent approach to comparison in his case study method and Stake’s (1995, 2006) preferred constructivist approach to comparing multiple cases, which involves considerable reflexivity and engaging the dialectic between research questions and specific case contexts. It is evident from these examples that there is no such thing as a “one size fits all” approach to comparative analysis in qualitative research. Instead, it appears important to ground any procedure for between-groups comparison in the paradigm assumptions that underlie the specific method that will be used to frame a study, and to remain consistent with the essential aspects of that method.

Paradigm assumptions underlying the action project method

The action project method was developed out of a specific theoretical perspective: action theory. Because various theories of action are present within the psychological literature, it is important to clarify that action theory in this context refers specifically to Young, Valach, and colleagues’ contextual theory of action (e.g., Collin & Young, 1992; Valach, 1988; Valach et al., 2002; Young, Valach, & Collin, 1996). This definition excludes other theories of action and goal-oriented behavior (e.g., Little, 1999). Despite the similarities in name, action theory and the action project are also distinct from action research/participatory action approaches (e.g., Hugentobler, Israel, & Schurman, 1992; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Although both are qualitative methods, they have different theoretical assumptions, research practices, and underlying purposes for engaging in the research process. For example, although changing the lives of participants is usually a central criterion for success in action research, it is considered to be a beneficial but not crucial side effect in action theory.

Aim of inquiry

The aim of inquiry in action theory is to understand people’s experiences in daily living, not to formulate general laws or predict future behavior. As such, the product of research using the action project method is a thorough description of a phenomenon of interest, not establishing the strength or direction of relationship among a set of variables, or to find the underlying cause of observed differences. Therefore, the types of comparative analyses that are typical of quantitative research are not appropriate for this method. Instead, any comparative analysis that occurs within this method must be descriptive in nature: identifying and describing the patterns of action that occur for distinct sets of individuals within a larger sample, in order to gain a more elaborate understanding of the phenomenon being studied than would otherwise be obtained.

Incorporating comparative analysis into the action project method has the potential to provide researchers with a richer understanding of a phenomenon; that is, when distinct kinds of participants seem to be emerging within an action project study, important patterns of findings might be missed if the sample is examined only as a whole.

To use a concrete example, Young, Marshall, et al. (2006) used the action project method to study the ways in which parents and their adolescent children work together on the adolescent’s career development. The authors were able to delineate the participants’ mutual career-related goals and projects, actions that they engaged in over time, barriers that they encountered, patterns of communication that emerged, and the links between career projects and other important life projects (identity formation, individuation and independence, maintaining family relationships). During the analysis, two distinct sets of participants appeared to emerge within the data set: families with specific and focused career development goals, and families with nebulous, frequently changing, or otherwise diffuse goals. Describing the ways that “focused” and “diffuse”

families worked on their career development projects would allow for (a) confirmation (or disconfirmation) of the existence of the distinct kinds of goals that seemed to be evident, and (b) description of the similarities and differences in the patterns of findings for the different kinds of families. Describing career development projects in light of the focus/diffusion of people's goals provides a richer understanding of the phenomenon than would otherwise be possible.

Ontology and epistemology

The ontology of action theory is predominantly relativist, although it is a somewhat different form of relativism than that found in most other constructivist forms of research. Specifically, even though phenomena are intersubjectively defined and have multiple valid interpretations, they are still conceived as occurring in an external world that exists independently of the observer (Valach et al., 2002). Action theorists consider participants' verbal descriptions to be somewhat inconsistent and unreliable because these phenomena occur in the external world and have some existence and qualities that are independent of people's constructions. This action-referenced relativism is reflected in the data collection procedures of action project studies, which combine interview and self-reflection data (reflecting socially constructed reality) with behavioral observations (e.g., Young et al., 2001) or physiological measures of emotional reactivity (e.g., Michel et al., 2004). Similarly, this action-referenced form of relativism also manifests itself in the epistemology of the paradigm. According to the principles of action theory, although knowledge generation is viewed as primarily a constructive process (with findings that are intersubjective creations rather than objective facts), such constructions must also be grounded in collected data (i.e., the externally present actions that were present within the research). Turkel (2003) used the label *grounded subjectivity* to describe this epistemological stance. In summary, although the action project method is grounded primarily in a postmodern, constructivist paradigm, there are some elements of postpositivism inherent in its ontological and epistemological assumptions.

The tension inherent in the ontology and epistemology of the action project method has implications for conducting comparative analyses. It should be accepted that the findings, the similarities, and differences that are identified are constructions rather than an objective representation of reality. At the same time, however, these constructions should be evident in the data, preferably triangulated through multiple forms of data. To continue the earlier example, it may be concluded that career projects with focused goals tend to involve maintaining a close parent-adolescent relationship, whereas projects that are diffuse are characterized by negotiation and disagreement about the degree of autonomy that the adolescent should have. If so, then the closeness of dyads with focused projects should be evident in both the content of their interviews, and the way they interact in observed conversations with each other. Similarly, the self-reports and observed behavior of the diffuse dyads should feature less closeness and more instances of negotiation/disagreement.

Forms of data and knowledge accumulation

Data generated in action project method studies are predominantly textual and visual (videotapes of observations) in nature, with the meaning of individual participants' words and actions being of central importance. Although the specific contexts and circumstances of the individual dyads are of primary importance, it is considered legitimate in action theory to examine a set of data for themes and meanings that tend to be present across participants: Published action-theory studies often make conclusions about findings that emerge in the sample as a whole and the patterns of action that tend to be present across the different participants (e.g., Michel et al., 2004; Young, Ball, et al., 2003; Young, Valach, et al., 2001). Consequently, action theory accepts that it is

possible and sensible to speak of findings that are common or typical across an entire set of participants as long as this aggregation does not involve abstraction or data reduction to such a degree that the findings are no longer evident from the original information and experiences provided by individual participants. However, to extend the same principle to data aggregation in the context of between-groups analysis, a further assumption must be made: that it is permissible to juxtapose two or more groups of participants and draw conclusions about the similarities and differences in how a phenomenon is manifested within those groups.

There are several arguments for accepting such an assumption. The primary argument is based on the assumption that action theory makes about how knowledge is accumulated. Action theory accepts that findings do not exist in a vacuum but must be understood in relation to prior knowledge (Valach et al., 2002); that is, if an action theory researcher generates a set of findings from one study and then conducts another study examining the same phenomenon, then he or she would be permitted (in fact, required) to discuss the findings from the latter in relation to first study. This discussion will usually include a summary of the ways in which the two sets of findings support and contradict each other, which is a form of comparison. When the participants in the first study differ from those in the second study in some systematic way, situating the results of the second study in light of previous research requires some discussion of the characteristics of the samples that were used in the various studies. If it is possible to compare the patterns of findings from two studies, it must also be possible to compare the findings when data for the two studies are collected and analyzed simultaneously. Therefore, because action theory accepts the paradigm position that knowledge accumulates over time, the comparison of findings associated with distinct groups of participants must be acceptable within an action theory framework.

A second argument for accepting the possibility of between-groups comparisons in action theory emerges from the fact that it is self-evident that there is variation among individuals' actions concerning any phenomenon of interest (due to different life histories, sociocultural contexts, and subjective interpretations of experiences). When variation in action is systematically affected by a specific historical experience, contextual factor, or subjective perspective that is shared by some but not all participants within a research sample, it might be meaningful to group participants according to that construct, for subsequent exploration of the interplay between that construct and the manifestation of action. If doing so yields a richer understanding of action than only examining the group as a whole, then why would researchers not engage in comparative analysis?

Limits of between-groups comparison

The fact that some comparison of data across groups is compatible with action theory does not mean that all forms of between-groups comparison are permissible. The theoretical tenets and paradigm positions of this theory impose a number of restrictions on the comparative analysis process and the kinds of conclusions that can be made. First, the theory precludes drawing conclusions about a phenomenon based only on a single perspective of action (Valach et al., 2002). Instead, when engaged in the comparison process, it would be necessary to consider information from the perspectives of manifest behavior, internal processes and social meaning. Second, it is evident that any comparison between groups must be compatible with the forms of the data that are acceptable within action theory; that is, it must be based primarily on visual/textual information. Finally, it would be erroneous to draw conclusions about directionality of influence, or to make inferences regarding the causal prominence of the construct that guided the formation of groups. Making such conclusions would be going beyond what is warranted by the descriptive nature of the action project method as a whole. Instead, the grouping construct is primarily a way to organize the data in order to attend to a particular aspect of the context in

which action occurs. It should therefore be viewed as having the same explanatory strength as any other contextual factors that are present in the lives of the participants; that is, it can be understood as only one aspect of the total context that influences the manifestation of action. The grouping construct might be an important factor that facilitates an improved understanding about a phenomenon, but it cannot be assumed to be the cause of the variation that is observed.

A more complete answer to the question is that a between-groups analytical procedure can provide researchers with a richer understanding of phenomena than within-case and cross-case analyses alone. Systematically exploring and delineating an additional layer of contextual complexity (provided by the grouping construct) increases the depth of information that can be obtained through the action project method; that is, when different kinds of participants seem to be emerging within a research sample, within- and cross-case action project analyses might not fully uncover the patterns of findings that are present in people's actions around a phenomenon. For example, gender-related differences in siblings' joint actions would be difficult to identify if all the participant dyads are examined individually or across the entire sample without an examination of sister-sister dyads as a group in relation to the brother-brother dyads as a group. Therefore, addressing the problem of between-groups comparative analysis in action theory will increase the utility of the action project method and better capture the complexities of some social phenomena than is currently possible.

The existing action project method

The procedures involved in the existing action project method are described in Young, Lynam, et al. (2000) and Young, Valach, and Domene (2005). Although the method is presented sequentially in the literature, the actual process of data collection and analysis occurs simultaneously in practice; it is the norm for action project researchers to be in the latter stages of analysis with some dyads of participants by the time they begin data collection with other dyads. For any given dyad within a study, the sequence of data collection and analysis is as follows: an initial data collection interview, followed by preliminary analysis, then a presentation of that analysis for feedback in a second interview, next a monitoring period where participants complete self-report logs and, finally, a third data collection interview, followed by an overall analysis for that dyad. After this within-case analysis has been completed for all dyads, the findings are examined across the entire sample to generate an overall cross-case description.

Data collection

The first data collection interview is conducted in several distinct stages. The initial stage of the interview is an introduction period involving the dyad members and two interviewers. At this stage, participants are asked general questions about themselves, their perspectives and goals around the phenomenon of interest, and each person's role in working on their joint project. The introduction period serves to increase the participants' comfort with speaking while being recorded in the research setting and primes them to think actively about the topic being studied. Following this initial stage, the dyad is invited to engage in a 15- to 20-minute conversation in the absence of the interviewers. Interviewers suggest that the participant discuss one or more of the topic-related issues that were raised in the preceding discussion. Ultimately, however, participants are permitted the freedom to direct the course of the conversation for themselves. The self-directed nature of the resultant conversation allows a dyad to communicate using its natural, ongoing style of interaction. On conclusion of the joint conversation, each participant separately engages in a self-confrontation procedure with one of the interviewers. This final portion of the first interview involves the participant viewing a videotape of the joint conversation, pausing the tape at regular intervals to comment on his or her internal processes. The interviewer explicitly

asks the participant to describe his or her cognitions and emotions for each segment of the conversation. All stages of the first interview are video- and audiotaped for accurate collection of data.

An initial analysis of the information from this first round of data collection is then conducted to (a) generate a description of each participant's opinions and intent during the conversation and (b) tentatively identify the joint projects that the dyad is engaged in around the phenomenon being studied. Three narrative summaries of the resultant information and conclusions are then constructed for presentation to the dyad in the second interview, two reflecting the perspective of each individual dyad member and one reflecting their joint engagement in ongoing projects.

In the second interview the two narrative descriptions of individual dyad members' perspectives are first presented to them alone to elicit feedback regarding its accuracy from that participant's perspective and to correct any errors in interpretation. Then both dyad members and both interviewers engage in a group discussion together to allow participants to share their narratives with each other and negotiate which of their ongoing joint projects should be the focus of their subsequent research involvement. The interviewers take an active role in this negotiation to ensure that (a) the chosen project is one in which the dyad is presently engaged in their daily living (to guard against participants selecting something entirely new, due to their involvement in a research study) and (b) the choice is one that has some relevance to the phenomenon being studied. The nature of their chosen project is also clarified, to some degree, by embedding it in specific activities (e.g., "If the project is working, we will be talking more openly and will find out about disabled student support services at the local colleges"). It is recognized that projects often shift over time.

Subsequently, participants complete log entries concerning their engagement in project-related activities in a monitoring period, usually lasting several months. Log entries include a description of the activity, the participant's internal reactions at the time, and his or her intended goals. Each member of the dyad is asked to complete his or her own log and to respect the privacy of the other participants' records. In addition to this self-report data, the interviewer working with each participant maintains fortnightly telephone contact to discuss progress toward the joint project, which the interviewers record in their own logbooks.

Following the monitoring period, the third interview occurs. This interview is similar to the first interview, with participants engaging in another joint conversation and self-confrontation procedure related to their project. After the self-confrontations, short semistructured individual interviews are conducted with each dyad member to follow up on any pertinent issues that might have emerged over the course of the monitoring period. Interviewer notes and videotaped records of all stages of the final interview form the data sources in this portion of the action project protocol.

Data storage and retrieval

Although specific storage media have changed over time (ranging from audiotapes and paper transcripts to digitized video and electronic storage of documents), most action project studies retain common sets of information. Typically the data record consists of (a) video or audio recordings of all sections of all three interviews; (b) written documents of the three narratives presented to participants in interview two (including any changes that were made); (c) participant and interviewer logs from the monitoring period; minutes or audiotaped records of research team meetings; (d) memo books, where research team members record all their reflections and thoughts about the study throughout the research process; (e) written summaries of the product of the final within-case analysis for each dyad; and (f) transcripts of the joint conversation stages of

the interviews (transcripts are initially generated by transcribers hired for that purpose but reviewed for accuracy by the original interviewers).

Depending on storage medium, possibilities for data retrieval include pulling documents and tapes out of physical files kept in filing cabinets and/or electronic retrieval from computer hard drives. Because within-case data analysis precedes cross-case analysis, the data record is indexed primarily by case except when doing so violates standards of research ethics (e.g., participant screening forms, which contain identifying information, must be stored separately) or makes no sense conceptually (e.g., the storage of researchers' memo books, which often contain reflections of the process in its entirety). In addition, contained within the output of the preliminary and final within-case analysis are clear references to the raw data from which findings are derived. For example, the summary display document might contain the statement, "The daughter perceived the mother to be supportive of her efforts (FASC: I23-A25)," meaning that this claim is supported by data from Interviewer Comment 23 to Adolescent Comment 25 of the final adolescent self-confrontation interview.

Within-case data analysis

The process for extracting themes from the various data that are collected from a dyad relies primarily on a team of analysts inductively scrutinizing the data and discussing possible interpretations until a consensus understanding emerges. This discussion of potential interpretations involves repeatedly referring back to the theoretical understandings of action that are a part of action theory as well as the original textual material itself. In addition, the preexisting perspectives and knowledge bases of the individual members of the research team enter into the analysis process because any given team member's understanding of the data will be influenced by who he or she is. This discussion to reach consensus while incorporating multiple sources of information forms the heart of the analysis process in the action project method. The process is primarily inductive, with specific themes and patterns emerging from the data rather than being coded beforehand. At the same time, however, the propositions of action theory and the researchers' preexisting knowledge bases provide a framework for the extraction of themes. The purpose of this within-case analysis is to understand the dyad's goals and action, and identify any other important themes that may emerge, as they worked toward achieving those goals over a period of time. The product of this within-case analysis is a written summary describing the themes, issues, and experiences that were the most salient for each dyad over time.

Cross-case analysis

After the within-case analysis has been completed for all participants in a study, an analysis of data across all cases occurs. The cross-case analysis permits researchers to identify and discuss the general characteristics of the findings: what goals, actions, and other themes emerge across the entire sample. The cross-case analysis process attends not only to the aspects of a phenomenon that are similar across the group but also to those aspects that are unique to a specific dyad in the sample (e.g., Young, Ball, et al., 2003; Young, Valach, Ball, et al., 2001). Cross-case analysis involves research team members reviewing the themes and categories present within each dyad and reaching decisions as a group regarding what material should be regarded as salient for the sample as a whole. The procedures for conducting the cross-case analysis have differed across specific action project studies but typically involve reviewing and examining the summary displays of the within-case analysis process to identify salient themes across the sample. Decisions are then made regarding which themes are important, based on the consensus opinion of the research team and specified criteria for what makes a theme worthy of note as being present across cases.

The criteria that are usually used in action project cross-case analyses are (a) the importance and significance of the themes and (b) frequency of occurrence within the sample. For example, in a recent study of family career development projects in Chinese-Canadian families, the authors described their guideline for including a theme in the cross-case section of their findings as being the presence of “significant similarities across the data sets for most of the families” (Young, Ball, et al., 2003, p. 292). The final stage of the cross-case analysis entails a return to the within-case level to confirm that the conclusions made across all participants do, indeed, reflect the data that emerged from the specific dyads in the sample and to ground those findings within examples. Again, this review process is informed by discussion and working toward consensus among team members. Several iterations of this review process, moving back and forth between the themes for the sample as a whole and the actual data provided by individual participants, might need to occur to construct a satisfactory set of findings about the sample as a whole.

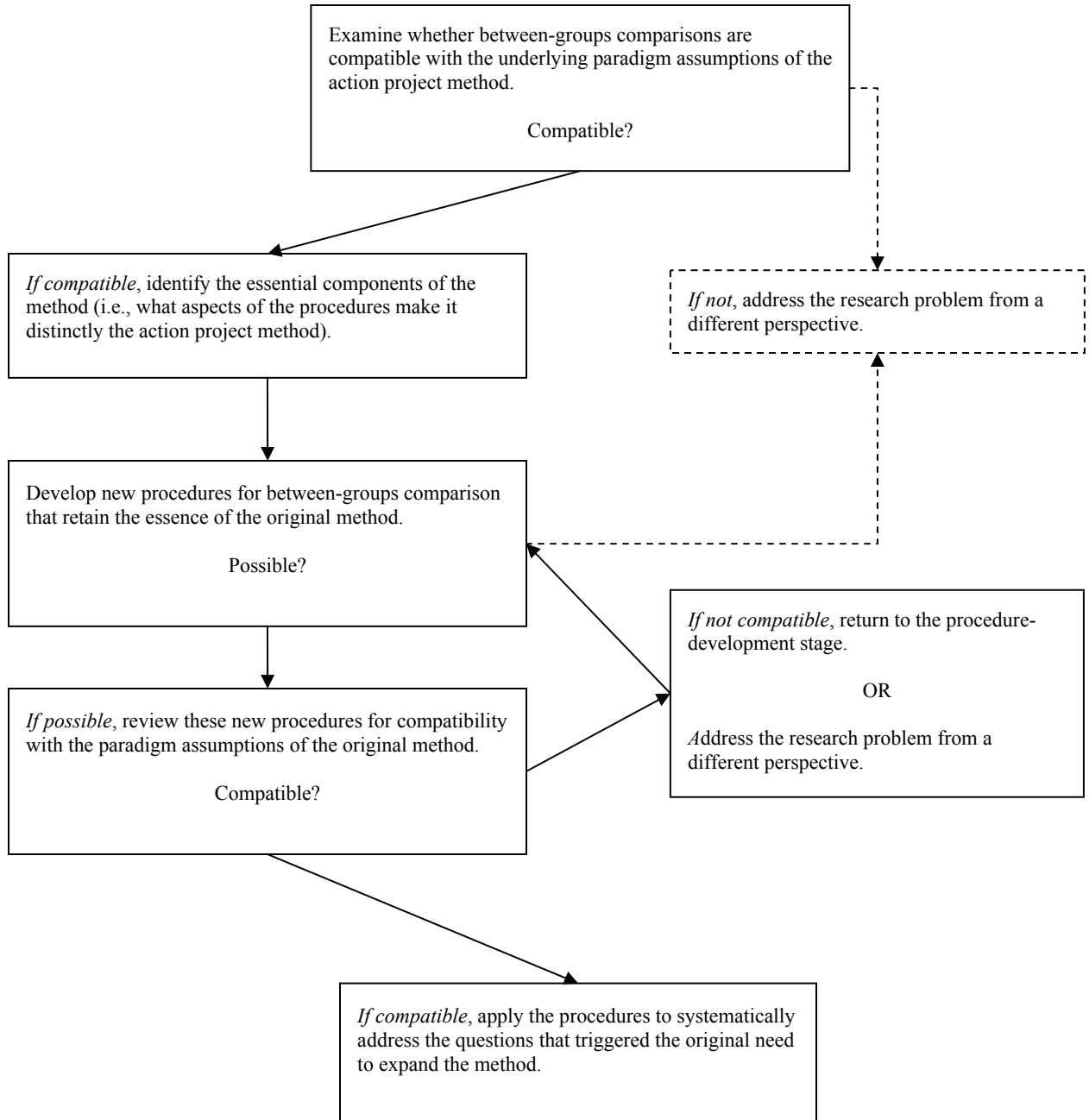
A number of components within this description of data collection and analysis are essential to the action project method. At the level of data collection, it is necessary that a phenomenon be understood from all three perspectives of action (i.e., manifest behavior, internal processes, social meaning). Usually multiple sources of data (e.g., participant self-reflection, observations of their interactions, and self-reports) are required to capture all three perspectives adequately. Another essential component of the method is that the unit of analysis in an action project study should be the dyad, not the individual: The purpose is to describe phenomena and processes that emerge when people engage together to fulfill their goals. In terms of the analysis process, as with virtually all methods of qualitative research, close engagement with the data and cycling back and forth between data and interpretation are essential. In addition, reaching conclusions through the use of consensus decision making between multiple researchers is central to determining what patterns of findings are present in a data set. Consequently, the involvement of a research team, working together to form common interpretations, is another required component of the analysis process. Another commonly found, though not necessarily essential, feature is to collect data longitudinally rather than through retrospective interviewing alone. Specifically, it is important to collect data about people’s engagement in joint action over a sufficient length of time to be capable of uncovering any changes that might occur.

Although data from an action project study could conceivably be subjected to between-groups analysis using any number of comparative procedures, doing so increases the risk of drifting away from the underlying paradigm of action theory and the essential nature of the essence of the action project method itself. To prevent that from occurring, development of the between-groups comparison procedure was guided by a process outlined in Figure 1.

Between-groups analysis in action theory

The task of qualitatively comparing groups of participants in an action project study has several distinct parts. First, it is necessary to identify meaningful groupings of participants to compare. Then, there needs to be a procedure for identifying the themes that characterize each group. It is also necessary to evaluate the patterns of similarity and difference in the themes that emerge in the different groups. Finally, it is important to ensure that the findings that emerge from this data reduction process are consistent with the original data provided by the participants. The procedures that were developed to complete these tasks in a way that retains the essential characteristics of the action project method are summarized in Figure 2. Each step in the procedure will now be described in detail and illustrated through a concrete demonstration of its use with an actual action project data set.

Figure 1. This diagram presents the process of developing the between-groups comparison procedure for the action project method as a sequence of tasks and questions to be addressed. For completeness, paths that were possible but not taken (e.g., what to do if such comparisons were not compatible with the action theory) have also been included as dashed lines and boxes.



The demonstration data set

Participants

The study from which the demonstration data set was drawn is Young, Marshall, et al.'s (2006) exploration of the relationship and career development projects of a sample of 20 early adolescents and their mothers. Data were originally collected over a 3-year period (autumn 2000 to spring 2003) in a small urban center in British Columbia, Canada. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of British Columbia's Research Ethics Board. Parents and adolescents individually provided signed consent/assent to participate before data collection began.

Adolescents in the sample were 12 to 14 years of age at the beginning of their research involvement and lived with the participating parent. The mothers were 32 to 51 years old. Three of the mothers had immigrated to Canada within the previous decade, and 11 had a language other than English as their first language. Nine of the mothers were single parents at the beginning of their research involvement; the others were in heterosexual marital relationships. Three of the households were blended families. The number of children in the families from which the participants came ranged from one to three. Information on socioeconomic status was not collected, although it was noted that participants came from two neighborhoods with average family incomes (as reported by Statistics Canada) of approximately Cdn.\$70,000 and \$60,200. The average family income for the region where the study was conducted was \$66,200.

Figure 2: Summary of the between-groups comparison procedure developed for the action project method.

The within- and cross-case analysis in a standard action project method study suggests that there might be groups of distinct participants in the data set. (Data have been collected using the standard procedures of the action project method.)



Stage 1: Data are systematically reviewed to divide all participants into groups for subsequent comparison in terms of the contextual feature that appeared to be a distinguishing feature. All the dyads that are similar to each other but different from others are placed into a single group. Patterns in the data as well as the research team's preexisting knowledge bases are used to form the groups.



Stage 2: Within each group that is formed, the researcher examines the data set to identify the patterns and themes that tend to emerge for that group, using the criteria of importance and frequency of occurrence across cases. Consensus-based analysis is used.



Stage 3: The researcher examines the findings that emerged from each group in relation to each other, using practical significance as a guideline. Through consensus-based review and analysis, decisions are made as to the ways in which the groups are similar and different.



Stage 4: The researcher reviews preliminary conclusions about similarity and difference in light of the original data obtained from the participants to confirm that they remain consistent with the individual participants' experiences. (Charts might facilitate this review process.)

Participants were recruited through local area schools, with interested adolescents being asked to have their parents contact the research team by telephone. Telephone screening involved further explanation of the time commitment required of participants and asking a number of questions to ensure that all dyads met the age and living arrangement requirements of the study. A number of potential participants were excluded from the study at this stage because of lack of interest in committing the requisite time and energy, failure to meet the inclusion criteria of the study, or ethical limitations to their involvement (one family was excluded because the parent had a dual relationship with one of the researchers).

Collected data

Data were collected from each participating dyad using a number of modalities. For each dyad there were three semistructured interviews, held over a period of 8 months, and two video observation sessions of parent-adolescent conversations. The observation sessions included conducting self-confrontations with each participant individually, which involved having each participant view the videotape of the joint conversation to reflect on the conversation and discuss his or her cognitions, emotions, and intentions during the conversation. In addition, each participant maintained a log of his or her project-related activities for a 6-month period, during which time participants received brief, regular phone contact from interviewers to monitor their progress.

The resultant data set included approximately 7 hours of interview records, 10 hours of videotaped conversation between each mother and adolescent, and 70 hours of self-confrontation records. This was supplemented by narrative descriptions of each dyad's joint project (constructed by the researchers) and participants' journal entries describing their project-related actions over a 6-month monitoring period (233 entries in total). The original analysis yielded a rich description of (a) the kinds of joint projects that these participants engaged in around the adolescents' future career and (b) participants' patterns of communication about and engagement in those career projects over time (see Young, Marshall, et al., 2006, for a complete description of the findings). Note that the authors of the original study focused on generating findings about all 20 dyads as a whole; no effort was made to identify or compare subgroups of participants within the sample.

Research team

The research team was composed of three persons, two of whom were also involved with the original study from which the data were drawn. Two team members conducted the initial division of participants into groups and identification of similarities and differences. The findings generated out of this initial review were then presented to the third researcher for further discussion until a consensus opinion emerged. It must be noted that although this additional researcher's role might be classified as that of an auditor in other forms of qualitative research, an individual undertaking this task within an action project method study is considered to be an integral member of the team, whose voice carries equal weight in the analysis process (Young, Ball, et al., 2003; Young, Logan, et al., 2005).

The team was composed of (a) José Domene, who at the time of the analysis was a doctoral candidate in the Measurement, Evaluation, and Research Methodology program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) with a background in career development, child and youth mental health, and family therapy; (b) Rübab Arim, a doctoral student in the Development, Learning, and Culture program at UBC with a background in adolescent social development, family relationships, and counseling psychology; and (c) Dr. Sheila Marshall, a professor in the School of Social Work and Family Studies at UBC, who was the co-investigator for the study for which

the data were originally collected. Her areas of expertise are adolescent social identity development and adolescent-parent interactions. Dr. Marshall served as the third analyst in this study and was therefore not involved in the first stage of analysis.

Analysis Stage 1: Formation of comparison groups

The comparison procedure is designed primarily for use in existing action project research when researchers begin to suspect that distinct kinds of participants exist within their sample and wish to explore that possibility in a systematic way; that is, researchers might notice that certain characteristics or features are present in some participants but not others and become interested in discovering what other ways (if any) this particular group of participants might be different from the other participants in the sample. Forming groups from the patterns that appear to be emerging out of the within-case and cross-case analyses improves the likelihood that the participants have been divided in a substantive way and that the process will generate meaningful findings.

In the demonstration data set, over the course of the Young, Marshall, et al. (2006) study on family career projects, members of the research team began to suspect that some parent-adolescent dyads had projects that were “focused,” whereas other dyads appeared to have “diffuse” projects. The possibility that projects can be focused or diffuse had previously been proposed in other action project research on healthy behavior promotion to prevent skin cancer (Young, Logan, et al., 2005), where focused projects were defined as being understood in a similar way by both members of the dyad and featuring actions that tended to be congruent with their project goals. In contrast, diffuse projects were defined as those where the dyad had differing understandings of the goals of their project and either engaged in conflicting strategies to attain their project or failed to engage in their health project at all because some other life circumstance took precedence.

To explore the possibility that focus/diffusion is an important contextual feature in understanding the career development projects of these participants, two members of the research team scrutinized the career development data set for the presence of focused or diffuse projects and discussed whether each dyad would fit better into the focused or the diffuse group. Researchers individually scrutinized the data set and then met to review the potential grouping over a series of three meetings. Using the previous work done on focus and diffusion and the way that participants engaged in their projects as a guide, they discussed which group would be the best fit for each dyad. They came to an agreement about the classification of 19 of the 20 dyads. No consensus could be reached about the final dyad (which exhibited some characteristics of both focused and diffuse projects), so we decided to exclude it from the comparison.

Specifically, 11 dyads were categorized as having projects that were mutually understood by both dyad members and where the specific actions that the participants engaged in were congruent with achieving those projects. For example, in one mother-daughter dyad where their project was “to continue with and expand upon their conversations about the daughter’s possible future careers and other aspects of her current development,” the mother conceptualized her role as “continuing to initiate conversation topics, providing suggestions and advice, and actively listening,” and the daughter strived to be “engaging in conversation . . . providing information and opinions, and developing strategies to direct the topic of conversation more often.”

In another 8 dyads, the joint project was either understood in different ways by different members of the dyad and/or contained aspects that were in conflict with each other. Moreover, in these dyads there was far less congruence between their daily action and the projects that they were attempting to accomplish. For example, in one mother-son dyad, where the project was “to

develop and promote a balance between the son's increasing independence and responsibility," the mother saw the project as an opportunity for the son to accept more adult roles, including taking responsibility for his own schooling, home duties, and other obligations. In contrast, the adolescent's goal was to obtain greater freedoms to engage in activities that he enjoyed doing because "I do want to become an adult, but not immediately." Lack of congruence between participants' projects and their actions is illustrated by a dyad where a goal for the project was for the daughter to become more trustworthy and deserving of freedom but where the daughter engaged in actions such as lying to her mother about her whereabouts and companions, subsequently getting caught by her mother.

Despite the inability to classify one dyad of participants, the focused or diffuse nature of the projects appeared to be a viable way to group participants for subsequent comparative analysis. Although the concept of focused and diffuse projects existed previously in the literature on joint projects (Young, Logan, et al., 2005; Young, Valach, Dillabough, Dover, & Matthes, 1994), the grouping was emergent because the possibility that the projects of this particular sample of participants might be focused or diffuse arose only through the process of reviewing the data (for the entire sample).

The decision to exclude one dyad from the comparative analysis warrants further discussion. When participants do not clearly fit into any of the existing groups, one response is to remove them from the analysis. However, a better strategy might be to examine these ambiguous cases for the possibility that there is sufficient commonality among them to form a coherent group of their own and include that new group in the comparative analysis. For example, in studying the interplay between joint career-related actions/projects and the temporal focus of participants' projects, it might be found that a number of participants could not be classified as having either short-term (i.e., within the next school year) or long-term projects (i.e., after completing all future education). If the research team examined these ambiguous dyads and concluded that the temporal focus of all of these projects fell somewhere in between the other two groups, then it could be useful to label them as having medium-term projects. This would allow the subsequent between-groups analysis to delineate the similarities and differences in career development projects in light of three different time orientations rather than just short or long term. This strategy could not be used in the demonstration data set because only a single dyad did not fit the focused or diffuse groups, making it impossible to determine whether they represent a third kind of project group or were a unique case.

Analysis Stage 2: Identifying the patterns that characterize each group

Once distinct comparison groups have been formed, data for all members within each group can be examined to determine what themes and findings tend to occur for that kind of dyad. This process is identical to the previously described cross-case analysis process of the action project method, except that a separate analysis is conducted for each group.

In the demonstration data set the research team examined the data from the 11 dyads with focused projects to determine the patterns of action and kinds of project content that were evident in each group as one group. Then they repeated the cross-case analysis for the 8 dyads with diffuse projects. The guidelines used to decide if a particular theme was characteristic of each group as a whole were that the theme needed to be present across several different dyads within the group or a dyad made the explicit claim that a particular action was central or important in their project. A number of findings emerged as dominant tendencies for each group. These findings covered a range of issues, including the nature of the projects that were selected within each group, the

degree of progress made toward those projects, the barriers that were identified, the kinds of project-related activities that occurred, and aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship that manifested as they engaged in their joint project.

Stage 3: Drawing conclusions about similarity and difference

Once the cross-case analysis is completed for each group in an action project data set, the themes that emerged from those groups must be examined in relation to each other to identify the ways in which the two groups might be considered similar and the ways in which they differ. The criterion of practical significance is used to facilitate this comparative analysis. Following Kirk (1996) and the underlying principles of action theory (Valach et al., 2002), practical significance in a comparative action project study can be defined as a difference of sufficient magnitude to be useful in the real world; for every theme that emerged, the researchers would need to make a judgment as to whether the ways that it manifested in the two groups would be noticeable in daily life. As Miles and Huberman (1994) have suggested, in the absence of statistical tests to determine the significance of a difference in qualitative research, it is the practical implications of a potential difference that becomes the standard for judging the noteworthiness of a difference between two units of qualitative data (and, by extension, more complex patterns of qualitative findings). Implicit in the concept of practical significance is the notion that themes do not need to be completely identical across the groups for them to be classified as similar. Distinctions that are trivial, in the sense that they have no impact on how a theme manifests in participants' daily life, would result in a judgment that the theme in question is similar among the two groups. After all, if identified "differences" have no practical impact on the phenomenon being studied, then can they really be considered to be differences?

As for the actual process of evaluating the practical significance of the ways in which a particular theme manifests in each of the comparison groups, it is proposed that researchers use the same analytical method that is found in the existing action project method of analysis: team-based, consensual decision-making grounded in close examination of the data but also informed by the action theory and researchers' background knowledge. Deciding what degree of difference will be considered practically significant is based on researchers' knowledge about the phenomenon in question, the standards of the discipline that the study is located in, and the degree of difference that would be useful for the primary audience of the study. This decision process might involve substantial negotiation between team members, as alternative possibilities and perspective are discussed and evaluated. In theory, it is possible that no consensus opinion will emerge, in which case some themes (or in the worst case scenario, the entire data set) will be considered unsuitable for comparison.

In terms of the demonstration data set, the process comprised individually reviewing the results of the previous analysis and then meeting together to discuss whether the patterns that emerged in the focused group should be considered similar or different to those in the diffuse group for each emergent theme. In contrast to the previous stage of analysis, the process at this point involved reviewing the themes that were dominant for the entire group rather than the individual dyads. Given the somewhat different disciplinary backgrounds of the research team, it is not surprising that a lot of time was spent discussing the meaning of practical significance during the analysis of the demonstration data set. The researchers drew on their disciplinary and life experiences in attempting to come to an agreement about practical significance. For some themes, such as the degree of independence/control taken by the adolescents, consensus was quickly reached. For others, the process involved considerable challenge and negotiation until a mutually acceptable interpretation was constructed. Two themes were particularly difficult to evaluate: the progress that participants made toward their projects over time and the amount of conflict they

experienced. This was surprising, given the fact that previous research would suggest that these issues are what defines the difference between focused and diffuse dyads. In both these cases the teams were eventually able to come to a decision but were somewhat less confident in their interpretation than for other aspects of the data.

Stage 4: Returning to the original data

Constructing a between-groups comparison process for the action project method is complicated by the fact that although data must be organized in such a way that the predominant themes of each group can be juxtaposed and compared, the full configuration of data for each dyad must also be retained for consideration: Ignoring the details and context of the individual cases would be a violation of one of the central tenets of action theory. One tool to facilitate the comparative analysis process without losing important information from individual dyads is to chart the patterns of themes visually for both groups, including which individual cases confirm or disconfirm the theme within each group. By referring to this kind of chart, the research team can easily return to the original data for all dyads that contributed to a theme. After discussion about a particular aspect of the groups has occurred and a consensus decision of similarity or difference has been reached, the researchers would examine the next theme, and so on, until all the themes that were identified for each group of participants had been compared.

It should be noted that the purpose of this kind of chart is to assist researchers in organizing the patterns of themes in such a way as to preserve the complexity of each participant's experiences during the between-groups analysis process. Using the chart in a purely reductionist way, where judgments of similarity or difference are made by attending solely to the number of cases in each cell rather than the full configuration of information that is represented by each case, would be contrary to the essential characteristics of the action project method. Although the frequency with which a particular theme occurs is certainly a useful piece of information in making judgments about whether the groups are similar or different, it is more important to refer back to original data from the individual cases to decide whether there is a practical difference in the way that a theme emerged in the two groups.

In the demonstration study one of the team members (José Domene) constructed a chart by tabularizing the conclusions that were arrived at in the previous analysis meetings into a single chart to facilitate the comparative process. This chart was then used by the team as a "map" to guide their review of the original data and subsequent discussion about whether the conclusions that emerged were consistent with the experiences of the participants. Referring back to the original data generated by participants contributing to each theme permitted the researchers to identify a number of subtle nuances in the data that would otherwise have been missed. For example, attending solely to the numbers of cases where some degree of conflict emerged as participants worked on their projects gives the impression that dyads with focused projects are very similar to dyads with diffuse projects on this particular theme. However, the picture that emerged when the original data were reviewed revealed that the conflicts were more intense and tended to be accompanied by much higher levels of hostility in the diffuse project group. This was apparent only after reviewing the videotapes of the conversations and rereading the transcripts of the self-confrontation reflection interviews for each dyad where the theme of parent-adolescent conflict was present. This final review process led the team to change their original conclusion that the groups were similar in terms of this particular aspect of their joint career projects.

Nature of the findings

Consistent with the aim of inquiry in the action theory paradigm, the product of this qualitative comparative analysis is an extensive and detailed description of the patterns of similarity and difference in the themes that are present in distinct groups of participants. Together, the processes of identifying distinct groups of individuals within a larger action project data set and comparing the themes that are present in each of those groups should yield a deeper understanding of the nature of the phenomenon of interest. Because participants are grouped via some contextual feature that emerged as prominent within the phenomenon being studied, the resultant description provides a greater understanding of the connections between that contextual factor and the phenomenon than would be possible without the comparative analysis. If the main finding is that the themes from each group are predominantly similar, then the existence of distinct kinds of people within a sample must be questioned, and it might be more appropriate to conceptualize and report on the findings for the sample in its entirety; that is, if the comparative analysis adds little or no new information, then it might be an overinterpretation of the data to frame the study in terms of different groups of participants.

Results from the demonstration data set

In the concrete example of using the comparison procedures, attending to the focused or diffuse nature of the projects proved to be useful for deepening understanding of the nature of parent-adolescent career projects. The following set of findings emerged.

There were several noteworthy differences in the types of projects that dyads within the two groups tended to engage around. For participants whose projects were focused, their joint career exploration and planning for the future was very much embedded in the maintenance of parent-adolescent relationship. For example, one mother-son dyad was engaged in a project “to continue to maintain their shared relationship while exploring options for the son’s future social and academic life, leading to young adulthood.” For virtually all of the families in this group, a primary component of career development was to foster or maintain a close, supportive relationship between the adolescent and his or her parent. As one adolescent claimed, “[the project] went good because I tried to bring a strong relationship with my Mum.”

Although relationship maintenance was evident in the ongoing interactions of many of the diffuse project dyads, a more meaningful theme that emerged in this group was the desire to work on achieving appropriate levels of independence and negotiating (with varying levels of success) the amount of autonomy that the adolescent should be granted. As one diffuse group dyad perceived it, the main purpose of their project was to “develop and promote a balance between [the adolescent]’s increasing independence and responsibility.” It must be noted, however, that issues of autonomy and control were not entirely absent in the focused group. Instead, it appeared that because the mothers and adolescents with focused projects were in relative agreement about what is appropriate at that particular stage in life, independence and autonomy were not issues that they needed to explicitly negotiate or work on as they engaged around the adolescent’s future career development.

Across both groups most of the mothers and adolescents engaged in a range of project-related activities, including casual conversations, formal discussions, use of humor and good-natured teasing, and taking the time to talk while engaged in other activities, such as driving to the adolescent’s sporting events. (Note that so many different kinds of activities were reported that

the researchers found it more cumbersome to attempt to include them in the visual chart than to simply attend to the original data records.) Dyads reported sharing personal thoughts and emotions, as well as their concerns with each other.

Adolescents reported seeking the advice and assistance of their mothers, whereas the mothers reported providing advice, support, reassurance, and practical assistance (e.g., helping to prepare a résumé). There were also examples of arguments, disagreements, and situations where the adolescent was selective in what he or she chose to share with the mother. A number of dyads reported engaging in civic activities together (e.g., volunteering at a soup kitchen) or working together at the mother's place of employment, and using both these kinds of situations to discuss the adolescent's future. Some dyads even used recreational activities (e.g., shopping together, watching movies or television, going to amusement parks) in the same way, with parents taking the opportunity to turn that activity into an opportunity to reflect on possible careers. Many dyads also recorded instances of simply having fun together, whether it was as simple as going on bike rides together or as momentous as taking a trip to Europe together without the rest of the family. Contrary to the researchers' expectations, no practically significant difference in the types of activities that were engaged in by participants with focused projects and participants with diffuse projects was found. Examples of each of kind of activity described in the previous paragraph could be found in both groups and were about as common within each group.

However, where the focused or diffuse nature of the project became a distinguishing feature was in the frequency of participants' joint engagement in their project-related activities. Dyads with focused projects tended to have many more instances of joint action over the 6-month monitoring period than dyads with diffuse projects. For the former group project-related activities appeared to be an integral part of participants' schedules, a naturally occurring part of their mutual relationship. For example, one adolescent from a focused project dyad repeatedly talked about how she and her mother identified and discussed potential career options while they were shopping and people watching. In the diffuse project group, project-related activities were more sporadic and appeared to be less well integrated into participants' daily living.

In terms of the progress made on their projects over time, the data revealed substantial within-group variation for both groups. However, all the focused project dyads achieved at least some progress, and many characterized their progress as substantial (sometimes to the point where they perceived their project to be completed by the time of their final interview). As one mother explained,

[Engaging in the project] pushed me to say this is what we gotta do. It pushed [daughter] into saying we want to try this . . . the reward at the end of it is being able to talk, with her having this openness that we didn't have before.

Rather less progress was made for many dyads in the diffuse project group. Given the fact that this group is, in part, defined by a lack of congruence between their daily activities and their verbally stated projects, it is perhaps not surprising that these dyads made relatively little progress on their projects over time or experienced periods of progress alternating with periods of stalling or even reported being further away from achieving their projects at the end of the study than at the beginning. The equivocal success that was experienced by the diffuse dyads is captured by one mother's statement:

I don't know how much of the career exploration we got to because, you know, we were focusing on things that he really wanted to do, like the circus and things like that, and going to the juggling place and things like that. So he's explored some, but he hasn't explored all of them.

For some dyads in this group the project was perceived as successful by one member but not the other. This difference in perspectives was most blatant in the following discussion, where a daughter was trying to convince her mother that their project was a success (but was also evident in other dyads):

- P:* I know how we can do it, so that's, as far as the question that you had why I didn't reach my goal? So that I'm serious why I didn't reach my goal with this bank card, and you buying your things, I didn't reach my goal.
- A:* But you did reach your goal because you said what you were feeling. If you would have gotten angry and yelled at me and not given me a chance to speak then you wouldn't have reach your goal. But now that we've talked about it, and we've talked about it before also, I believe you reached it.
- P:* I don't know if that is reaching the goal or not. Because,
- A:* Well, our project,
- P:* I don't know if I, I don't know if I got through.
- A:* Our project was to like, umm, what she said was to remain connected and learn about each other more and our expectations and me growing up as a teenager. But all that has to do with talking, and [cut off]
- P:* Yeah we talk.
- A:* Yeah we do but how much of that talking actually is something rather than just, than [cut off]
- P:* Yeah, but, but yeah ok. So that's why I don't know if I'm answering the question there correctly or if you're answering it correctly.
- A:* Well it's all your own opinion. Everyone has different opinions on how they've reached their own goal, and I think mine is [cut off]
- P:* And my goal, my reaching the goal, I don't think I did reach it.

When dyads were asked to identify barriers to the success of their projects, the dominant response of participants within the focused project group was that they lacked sufficient time to engage in activities together. For example, one focused mother stated,

Just timing again, in you . . . You're a family of five and he's not the only child, and there's other people who need the time and attention; and fitting in the time to do, to carry on the conversations.

Although a number of dyads in the diffuse group also experienced having insufficient time to engage in their joint project, the most common barrier for this group was emotional friction leading to intentional avoidance of each other. As one of the daughters in this group disclosed, "I tend to get angry right away whenever Mum calls my name." On another occasion, this same participant reported, "My bad temper can still get in the way of talking . . . I'll just go up to my room and lock myself in." Although lack of time was also important to participants with diffuse projects, the most salient barrier for this group was a relational pattern of mother and adolescent experiencing emotional friction and conflict in their relationship, followed by a period of needing to avoid each other. This pattern was largely absent from the dyads with focused projects.

It must be recognized that this difference cannot be explained solely by the amount of conflict that was present in the two groups. Despite the fact that one group was defined by having similar understandings of their joint projects whereas the other group was defined by the presence of conflicting understandings of their projects, virtually all the dyads across both groups experienced some disagreement and conflict as they engaged in their career development projects. Instead, the

key difference between the groups was in the intensity and hostility of their conflictual interactions. The dyads with diffuse projects were also the dyads with more intense and hostile disagreements.

One potential contributor to this difference was that many parents in the diffuse group tended to respond with high levels of emotional reactivity when they experienced disagreements with their son or daughter. For example, one of the diffuse mothers repeatedly reported reacting to her son with such frustration, anger, and fear that she needed to remove herself from the room. Although this was an extreme case (the mother reported that the son's actions triggered memories of her abusive ex-husband), strong emotional reactions were typical of the dyadic relationship for many of the participants with diffuse projects. In contrast, very few of the focused project mothers reported reacting so strongly in their discussions, and when strong reactions did emerge, they made efforts to manage their emotions; for example,

I was reminding myself to stay calm, to listen. Inside I was freaking out that he had to be exposed to this [violence and drug-use in the school], but relieved he would want to talk about this with us.

These findings expand on Young, Logan, et al.'s (2005) original conceptualization of focus and diffusion in joint projects by indicating that a key component of the distinction between the two kinds of projects is in dyad member's ability to manage emerging conflicts and regulate their emotions as they engage in their joint projects. It might be much more difficult to come to a mutually accepted understanding of a project when disagreement occurs in an emotionally charged atmosphere or tends to precipitate avoidance rather than further negotiation.

These findings illustrate that the comparative analysis technique can yield findings that go beyond what is available from examining a sample as a whole. Specifically, several differences emerged between the two groups. Dyads in the focused group tended to have projects that emphasized maintaining the relationship between the members of the dyad, whereas those with diffuse projects tended to focus on negotiating the adolescent's level of independence or autonomy. Focused dyads achieved their projects to a greater extent and were more systematic in their engagement in project-related activities. In contrast, the diffuse project group was characterized by a relatively low level of progress on their projects, a lack of systematic engagement in their project-related activities, and a tendency to experience emotional friction and avoidance as they engaged in those activities. A number of similarities also emerged in terms of the types of activities that participants engaged in as they pursued their career development projects, the existence of some degree of conflict as they pursued their projects, and the perception of lack of time as a barrier to achieving those projects.

The understandings that emerged from this study go beyond what had been previously described in Young, Marshall, et al. (2006) study, from which this data set was taken. Two of the similarity themes (i.e., the presence of conflict, the perception of time as a barrier) had been identified and described in the original study. However, all the differences that emerged from the comparative analysis were new and revealed complexities in the data that were not reported in the original study because they were not evident from the within- and cross-case analyses alone. Furthermore, examining and comparing the two separate groups of participants also generated suggestions for how the definitions of focused and diffuse projects might be expanded and refined. Although the findings remain descriptive rather than inferential, it is evident that engaging in comparative analysis yielded a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of parent-adolescent career projects than was possible in the original Young, Marshall, et al. (2006) study.

Discussion

Until recently action theory researchers interested in gaining a deeper understanding of distinct groups that appeared to be emerging from their data have been silent as to whether engaging in such analyses would be consistent with the qualitative, constructivist nature of action theory. Although comparative analysis might not be acceptable in some other forms of qualitative inquiry, it has been shown to be compatible with Young and colleagues' action project method of research.¹ The action-referenced relativism of action theory's epistemological stance, the somewhat unorthodox constructivism that it adopts, and its assumptions concerning the accumulation of knowledge all permit some forms of comparative analysis.

However, the paradigm assumptions of action theory also impose a number of clear delimitations to the kinds of between-groups comparisons that can be conducted. The data should remain textual and visual rather than numerical, requiring some form of qualitative rather than statistical comparison. The process needs to be holistic (in the sense of attending to entire set of data for each case) rather than reductionist. Finally, the analysis must be descriptive rather than inferential: the comparison will identify patterns of similarity and difference that emerge when participants are organized according to a potentially meaningful aspect of the data set; the emergent differences cannot be specifically attributed to that aspect.

Going beyond theoretical arguments, this article presents a specific set of proposals for how to conduct qualitative comparisons within the action theory framework. In previous action project studies when researchers suspected the presence of distinct kinds of individuals, they had to conduct a separate analysis of only one subgroup of participants (e.g., Young, Ball, et al., 2003) or attempted to describe the emergent subgroups without any formal procedure for evaluating similarities and differences (e.g., Young, Logan, et al., 2005). The analytical procedures described in the present study permit action project researchers to separate participants systematically into distinct groups (on the basis of the findings that emerge from prior within- and cross-case analysis) and examine the themes that emerge from each group in relation to the other groups to determine the ways in which they are similar and different. This process is guided by the standard of practical significance, engagement in consensus-based decision-making, and the use of charts to facilitate organization of the full set of data for every individual within each group. When successful, this comparative analysis produces a greater depth of understanding about a phenomenon than would otherwise be possible within the action project method.

In summary, this article advances the action project method in a meaningful way by presenting a systematic, theory-consistent set of procedures for engaging in between-groups comparison and demonstrating that it can be used to generate useful findings. This between-groups comparison procedure allows action theory researchers to address a greater range of research questions. Specifically, when distinct clusters or groupings appear to be emerging within an action project study, researchers can systematically confirm (or disconfirm) the existence of those groups and identify the patterns of action that appear to be particular to one kind of dyad or another.

This has already begun to bear fruit, in the form of two studies that have used this extension of the method. Similar to the study described in this article, Domene, Arim, and Young (2007) used the procedure to explore the career-related actions and projects of a sample of mothers and younger adolescents. They compared the patterns that emerged for mother-son and mother-daughter dyads, finding many similarities but also several ways in which mothers and sons interacted differently from mothers and daughters in terms of their career development (e.g.,

mother-son dyads were more explicitly focused on short-term goals related to career, whereas mother-daughter dyads were more focused on the maintenance of relationship as a vehicle for future career development).

More recently, Wouterloot and Domene (2007) also found the between-groups comparison procedure to be useful. Suspecting that spirituality might be an important part of the context in understanding the joint transition to adulthood projects in a sample of Canadian young adult women and their mothers, they conducted a between-groups analysis. During their analysis process it became evident that cultural background rather than spiritual involvement was what was most salient. Pursuing that new direction, they were able to delineate a number of intriguing differences in the ways in which young women from minority cultural backgrounds differed from those with a majority cultural background (i.e., Anglophones and Francophones of European ancestry) in terms of how they and their mothers engaged in transitioning the daughters into adult roles.

At a broader level, this study provides an example of what might be possible if researchers using other qualitative methods face the same problem of encountering questions related to similarities and differences between groups and finding that the method in question provides no guidance for conducting such analyses. Rather than assuming that such analyses are solely the provenance of quantitative and mixed-methods researchers or adopting the strategy of informally making such comparisons in the Discussion section of their manuscripts, researchers might find it beneficial to extend their methods to answer between-groups types of questions or at least actively explore whether doing so is consistent with the epistemological and ontological stances taken by that method. The process used to expand the action project method (summarized in Figure 1) might provide a useful guideline for how to proceed. Although neither this process nor the possibility of qualitative between-groups comparisons is unique, it is hoped that this example of one successful expansion of a specific qualitative method will encourage more researchers extend to systematically the boundaries of what is possible within their methodological frameworks.

Limitations of the procedure

One of the limitations on the utility of this comparison procedure is that it requires the presence of subgroups of cases that truly cluster together in terms of their patterns of action. If the phenomenon of interest is one where each dyad's experiences are unique, then it will not be possible to generate a set of themes that characterize each group. Without an identifiable set of themes for each group, identification of similarities and differences among emergent themes cannot proceed. Although the discovery that people's actions around a phenomenon of interest tend to be unique for each dyad might be an important finding in itself, the fact remains that the proposed comparative analysis procedures will not function in this situation.

A second limitation is imposed by the descriptive nature of the aim of inquiry within action theory. The purpose of the comparative analysis must be to explore and develop a richer understanding of human action in context, highlighting one particular aspect of the context (i.e., that which is used to form the comparison groups). The procedure cannot be used to draw the conclusion that the grouping construct is responsible for the differences and similarities that emerge. If a researcher's desire is to isolate and identify the cause of differences that appear to be emerging in a data set, then this way of comparing (and, in fact, the entire action project method of conducting research) is not the best approach to use. Instead, this method of inquiry might be used to generate potential causal hypotheses, which could then be tested in subsequent quantitative research.

In addition, because team discussion and consensus-based decision making are central to the procedure, the quality of the findings that are generated with this method is greatly dependent on the expertise and skills of the team of researchers conducting the analysis. As Hill and colleagues recognized in their description of their consensual qualitative research method (Hill, Knox, et al., 2005; Hill, Thomson, & Williams, 1997), when the analysis relies on achieving consensus from a team-based discussion, the integrity of the analysis process can be affected negatively by conflict between team members or a high level of acquiescence and deference by some team members toward other team members. These potential problems hold true for the analysis process presented here. Identifying and discussing different possible interpretations, furthermore, works best with a team whose members have a range of different backgrounds: If the entire team approaches a phenomenon from a single disciplinary or theoretical perspective, then some valid interpretations might be missed. Because the researchers serve as the primary instruments of analysis in this method, great care must be taken to select an appropriate set of instruments for the task: people who have a range of different perspectives about a phenomenon, are willing to argue their case, but are also willing to listen and consider alternative arguments.

The issues raised in the preceding paragraph reflect the procedure's strong reliance on researcher judgment and the potential risks of doing so. Hoskins (2001) has made several suggestions for promoting the fidelity of qualitative analysis, suggestions that can readily be adopted by researchers' conducting comparative analyses within action project studies. These suggestions include (a) being intentional in examining the congruence between research practice, assumptions, and phenomenon of interest; (b) attending to, rather than filter out, the various simultaneous perceptions generated by their various senses and intuition; and (c) becoming comfortable with groundlessness and letting go of the need to exert tight control over the research process. It is evident that this comparison procedure will never lead to objective findings of the kind that are assumed to exist in quantitative research. Fortunately, there is no need to strive toward objectivity because action theory accepts that multiple legitimate interpretations can be constructed from any given data set. Instead, the ideal is to achieve authenticity and fidelity to the data as one engages in the process of making decisions in research.

Future directions

The comparative analysis procedure presented in this article advances practice within the action project method for conducting qualitative research. It provides action theory researchers with a systematic, theory-consistent way of identifying and describing similarities and differences in the emergent patterns of action of different groups within a sample. Ultimately, however, the development of any research method is a recursive process. It is anticipated that the comparison procedure can continue to be altered and refined as it is applied to new research questions and more data sets.

Nevertheless, sufficient work has been completed to allow researchers to identify patterns of similarity and difference among distinct kinds of participants within their own action project studies in a manner that is consistent with the principles of action theory. Domene and colleagues (Domene et al., 2007; Wouterloot & Domene, 2007) have successfully used this procedure to generate comparative findings in action project method studies, providing encouragement to action theory researchers who wish to address comparative kinds of questions as they design their own studies. The breadth of new questions that can be addressed is limited only by what contextual features emerge as salient as action project researchers notice apparent clusters of participants in their data sets.

Note

1. We are referring here to Young and colleagues' body of work (Collins & Young, 1992; Domene et al., 2007; Valach et al., 2002; Young, Ball, et al., 2003; Young, Logan, et al., 2005; Young, Lynam, et al., 2000; Young, Marshall, et al., 2006; Young, Valach, Ball, et al., 2001; Young, Valach, & Collins, 1996; Young, Valach, Dillabough, et al., 1994; Young, Valach, & Domene, 2005).

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