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Exploring Human Action in Counseling Psychology: The Action-Project Research Method

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Qualitative research in counseling psychology in the last 2 decades has been characterized by the introduction and use of a range of methods and corresponding paradigms and conceptual frameworks. The action-project research method, described and updated in this article, is based on an understanding of human action as goal-directed and enacted in context: contextual action theory. We summarize this framework, prior to describing the method's procedures for conceptualizing research problems and questions, collecting and analyzing data from dyads of participants, and presenting research findings. We also discuss recent adaptations to the procedures and how the method addresses core issues in counseling psychology; that is, methodological integrity, culture, ethics, and power. We proceed to describe how the method relates to other qualitative methods and the kinds of research questions asked by the discipline and how the action-project method connects to professional practice issues.

Public Significance Statement





In this article, we present an update of the action-project method for conducting qualitative research in counseling psychology and beyond. In addition to describing its procedures in a way that can be taken up by researchers and graduate students, we highlight recent adaptations of the method that were implemented in response to the changing landscape of research, and we discuss how the method addresses important issues in counseling psychology, including culture, power, and professional practice.

Keywords: action-project method, contextual action theory, qualitative methods, video-assisted data collection

In the 2005 special issue of the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* on qualitative methods, Young, Valach, and Domene (2005) described the action-project method as a qualitative research method for counseling psychology, grounded on an understanding of human action as goal-directed. The action-project method is a

qualitative research method, with a distinct set of procedures, that describes the ongoing joint actions of research participants as they engage with each other. It shares some common characteristics with many other qualitative methods, for example, that knowledge is socially constructed, that recorded data are transcribed and coded, and that findings are presented in the form of rich descriptions. However, the action-project method is unique in its emphasis on the joint action of participants; that is, what the research participants are doing together, rather than on retrospective accounts. The action-project method also distinguishes itself from other methods because of its broad conceptual recognition that human behavior is goal-directed and intentional. The method is based on a contextual theory of individual and group action. It also accounts for actions as embedded in social and cultural contexts.

The action-project method uses a specific set of procedures involving systematic observation of verbal and nonverbal processes and video-assisted recall of thoughts and feelings to collect data from participants, usually dyads, as they engage in meaningful, goal-directed processes in their lives. Data collection relies primarily on video-recording, video-playback, and follow-up mon-

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The authors have no known conflicts of interest to disclose. No prior dissemination of this article has occurred. However, as cited in the text, information from the case vignette referred to in the article was originally obtained and analyzed as part of Domene, Socholotiuk, and Young (2011).

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itoring. Data analysis is based on the identification and description of the goals of the joint action between participants, the functional steps they took in implementing their goals, and the specific behavioral components of the action, for example, words and phrases used in the conversation. Both within-case (dyad) and cross-case analyses are conducted to obtain a description of the research participants' joint actions and projects that answer of the research question. The method has a longitudinal component by following participants over time through monitoring and repeated data gathering sessions in which longer-term series of actions, that is, projects, are identified and described. For example, using this method, Young et al. (2018) described, over a 6-month period, the joint projects of parents (that is, what they did together) of young people with developmental disabilities related to the young person's transition to adulthood. The data were composed of joint conversations between the parents, video-recall of the conversations to access parents' internal thoughts and feelings, and telephone monitoring of the identified project with each parent. Data analysis resulted in the identification and description of three types of parental projects vis-à-vis their young person's transition to adulthood: equipping the young person for adult life, connecting with each other for personal support, and managing day-to-day while planning for the future.

In this article, we inform a new generation of researchers about the conceptualization, data gathering, and analysis procedures of the action-project method, its suitability for research questions in counseling psychology, and counseling and psychotherapy processes, as well as consideration of rigor and quality in light of culture, ethical, and social justice complexities.

Rationale for the Action-Project Method in Counseling Psychology

The practice of counseling psychology is fundamentally a moral and sociocultural action (DeBlaere et al., 2019; Vasquez & Bingham, 2012), evidenced, for example, by the substantial emphasis on social justice in counseling psychology. Thus, the generation of new knowledge in this field should have capacity for producing technical or procedural information and *qualia*, that is, knowledge that is more experiential and subjective (Young & Valach, 2019). Specifically, counseling psychology research must be able to accommodate intentionality, meaning, and worth as well as speak to ongoing processes and the sociocultural context (Gold, 2016; Savickas et al., 2009; Young, Domene, & Valach, 2015). Counseling occurs in an intentional context, that is, the counselor acts according to professional tasks and the client acts in seeking support for short, middle, or long-term life tasks and goals. The field readily assumes the goal-directed nature of action and, importantly, the goal-directed nature of change (Richardson, 2004). Counseling psychology is also a highly relational practice, which fits well with the relational understanding of action (Blustein, Schultheiss, & Flum, 2004). Broadly, we consider virtually all human action as engaged in with others, whether the other is physically present or not. People act in relation to others, and relationships are central to human functioning. Although some actions can be achieved by being physically alone, their meaning as actions are relational. Given this understanding of counseling psychology, Young et al. (2005) proposed the action-project method for qualitative research, based on contextual action theory,

to investigate a range of issues pertinent to counseling psychology. The theory and associated method fit well with counseling psychology.

Conceptual Framework: Contextual Action Theory

Most people assume that human action is goal-directed, including people from different cultures, although how it is named or identified may vary (Boesch, 2017). In contextual action theory, *action* refers to intentional, goal-directed, although not necessarily rational, human behavior. It involves manifest behavior, cognitions and affect, and social meaning or goals. Contextual action theory suggests that as human beings we act, that is, we move to effect change in ourselves and in our environment. This conceptualization of action brings together, among other factors, sense-making, consciousness, cognition, context, agency, and how we engage with others. Importantly, action is understood as a unit of social meaning and involves the actor's subjective experience and manifest behavior. Although there are a variety of theories as far back as Mead (1934); Parsons (1949), and Vygotsky (1978) to which this conceptualization is linked, the specific iteration of action in this presentation began with von Cranach and Harré (1982).

In our elaboration of the notion of human action, we refer to systems of actions, specifically, (a) actions that occur in the moment, (b) projects that are series of actions occurring over a midterm length of time and constructed as having common goals, and (c) career, which is not limited to its occupational sense, as the series of related projects over much longer periods (Young et al., 2005; Young et al., 2015). For example, one's career as a parent may be constructed as goal-directed, involving a series of different projects over an extensive period. In turn, a person can appreciate the variety of actions, mostly with others, that contribute to parental projects and, in turn, to the parental career. In using the term career, we refer to a relational concept that delineates a long-term human process in personal and social terms as pioneered in the social sciences (Goffman, 1961).

In addition to the systems of actions, contextual action theory refers to the three ways in which action is organized. Specifically, the conscious and unconscious behaviors engaged in during an action and the resources used in its implementation are referred to as action elements. Typically, the elements of an action provide structure and can be observed, for example, the specific words, linguistic terms, or nonverbal elements used in a conversation. The functional steps of the action contribute to its flow toward the goal. Their function refers to how they contribute to the goal. Finally, the goals of action refer to the meaning that these action processes have, based on the actor's assessment and social convention. The systems and organization of action described in contextual action theory inform the data collection and analyses procedures within the action-project method.

Procedures for Conducting Action-Project Method Studies

In the 15 years since the publication of Young et al. (2005), researchers' application of the method suggests that it is useful for obtaining in-depth and complete understandings of action in context (Young & Domene, 2018). The method aligns well with Levitt and colleagues' (Levitt et al., 2018; Levitt, Motulsky, Wertz,

Morrow, & Ponterotto, 2017) recommendations for promoting methodological integrity by incorporating procedures to establish adequacy of data, manage researchers' perspectives, ground the analysis in both data and theory, present findings in a coherent way, and engage in contextualization at all stages of the research process. In this section, we first describe the refined core procedures of the method (also see Figure 1) and then discuss various adaptations that have been introduced to the method since 2005, in response to circumstances encountered in the field.

Brent and Bella, a Case Vignette. Our description of the action-project method procedures is illustrated by Brent and Bella, a composite case from Domene, Socholotiuk, and Young's (2011) study of how youth and their mothers jointly facilitate the youth's transition to adulthood. Bella (48 years) heard of the study through a friend. She and her son, Brent (19 years), were invited to participate following a telephone screening call, in which the purpose of and time commitment involved in the study were explained and sufficient information collected to determine that the dyad met the inclusion criteria. The dyad then participated in the multipart data collection sessions and subsequent 6-month monitoring period. Brent and Bella's experiences are interspersed with the following description of the action-project method procedure.

Research Questions

Crucial to the formulation of research questions for action-project method studies is conceptualizing the topic as involving goal-directed action. Procedurally, the action that is the focus of most action-project method studies has been the joint actions of dyads engaged in projects, for example, a dating couple, coach and athlete, parent and child, pairs of friends, or counselor and client. With goal-directed action as the center, the method is well suited for addressing questions about people's action in daily life and in counseling and psychotherapy, to discern intentions or to identify action sequences over time in the service of their goals. See Table 1 for examples of research questions used in recent action-project method studies.

Research questions the action-project method can address are related to and guided by the research paradigms for which the method is suited. The method has the flexibility to be employed

from several paradigmatic perspectives (Young et al., 2005), for example, social constructionism (Wall et al., 2020), or moderate constructionism (Socholotiuk, 2015). In other studies, contextual action theory is presented as a unique paradigm that guides the use of the research method (e.g., Klaassen, Young, & James, 2015). More broadly, Valach, Young, and Domene (2015) identified contextual action theory as having a relational epistemology and ontology (Causadias, Updegraff, & Overton, 2018; Clegg & Slife, 2005; Overton, 2015). Essentially, this relational epistemology suggests that gaining knowledge is a relational process.

Data Collection

Sampling and sample size. In action-project method studies, participants are selected within the boundaries of the topic being studied as defined by a priori inclusion criteria. The method makes no assumption of generalizability or saturation. Consequently, there is no requirement that the full range of possible experiences or characteristics be represented within the sample. Nonetheless, researchers typically seek to obtain a variety of experiences and characteristics within the boundaries of the topic. For example, researchers studying newcomers' postimmigration adjustment may recruit different categories of newcomers, such as immigrants and refugees, from a variety of different countries. Different participants will have different migration goals framed in a life-experience language such as "start a new life with better possibilities for economic and social advancement," "escape political persecution," or "obtain a desired education or training." A consequence of the desire to obtain a variety of experiences without needing to achieve representativeness or saturation is that sample sizes are highly variable, although action-project method studies published over the past 15 years have typically reported fewer than 25 dyads. As sample size increases, a wider range of possible actions and projects may be captured.

The Brent and Bella vignette. In this study, the sample was composed of 18 dyads comprising one parent and a 17- to 21-year-old offspring, living in the same household at the start of the study. We recruited youth in different life situations, that is, in education or employed or neither employed nor in education, and from varied cultural back-

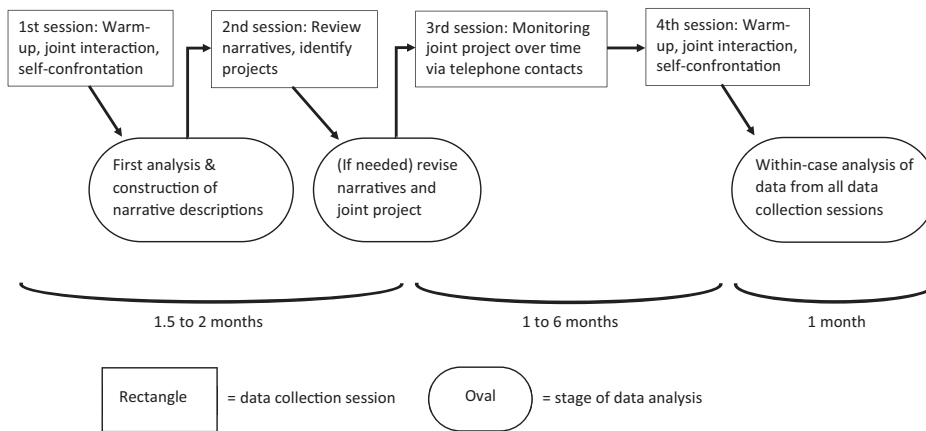


Figure 1. Sequence of action-project method data collection and analysis procedures for one case, with approximate time frame.

Table 1
Some Recent Examples of Published Action-Project Method Studies in Counseling Psychology

Topic	Research question	Participants	Study procedures	Example of study findings and types of projects described
Young adult couples transitioning from postsecondary education into the labor force (Domene et al., 2012).	What kinds of projects for future work and life together do young adult couples jointly construct and pursue as they transition from post-secondary education into the labor force?	Heterosexual couples ($N = 18$; lesbian, $n = 1$) from Western Canada ranging in age from 19–29 years ($M = 25.7$; $SD = 2.7$).	Series of three data gathering sessions, and monitoring of joint projects via participant journal entries, over 6–8 months per dyad.	Individualized projects were identified for each dyad, which were reflected in 5 emergent themes across the sample: (a) pursuing future occupational and educational plans, (b) balancing multiple priorities, (c) deciding where to live, (d) progressing in the relationship, and (e) joining lives together.
Aboriginal adolescents' educational and occupational futures (Marshall et al., 2011).	What are the joint projects constructed, organized, and carried out in urban-residing Aboriginal families that are intended to further adolescents' career development?	Dyads ($N = 11$) from eight First Nations in Western Canada, including mother–daughter ($n = 6$), mother–son ($n = 4$), and one father–daughter ($n = 1$) pair. Youths' in grades 8–10; mean age = 15.09 years	Series of two data gathering sessions and telephone monitoring of joint projects over 6–8 months; final data gathering session was a talking circle.	Analysis revealed discrete projects for each dyad. Study findings included four clusters of joint projects shared across dyads: (a) navigating toward a safe future, (b) negotiating school continuance, (c) intergenerational continuity through tradition of care, and (d) family survival.
Parental grieving as a relational and spiritual process (Klaassen, Young, & James, 2015).	How do spiritual/religious bereaved parents grieve jointly for their deceased child?	Heterosexual married, Protestant Christian couples from Western Canada ($N = 5$). Male mean age was 60 years ($SD = 4.29$); female mean age was 61 years ($SD = 7.66$).	Series of three data gathering sessions and telephone monitoring of joint projects over a 3-month period.	Analysis identified distinct projects for each dyad, with findings taking the form of key assertions reflecting the most significant findings across dyads: (a) loss of a child had a pervasive impact, (b) relational grieving was an important dimension of parental grief, (c) disconnection and stress impeded relational grieving, (d) spirituality was multidimensional and pervasive.
Parent-led weight restoration for adolescent anorexia (Socholotuk, 2015).	How do parents participate in the weight restoration of their adolescent as they recover from anorexia nervosa?	Six parents (individual parent participants = 4; dyad = 1) of 5 adolescents between 13 and 18 years of age ($M = 15.20$; $SD = 2.17$) from Western Canada.	Series of two data gathering sessions over a 3-month period.	Distinct projects were identified for each case. Key assertions summarized significant findings across cases (e.g., the social meaning of weight restoration, the functional role of parents' emotions in motivating weight restoration actions, weight restoration as influenced by social structures and parents' access to resources).
Counseling for the transition to adulthood (Young et al., 2011).	What are the goal-directed actions and projects that counselors and their clients jointly construct, articulate, and enact relevant to the transition to adulthood?	Counseling dyads ($N = 12$), representing 37 sessions, between clients ($n = 10$ female, 2 male) and their counselors ($n = 5$ female).	Series of four data gathering sessions over 4 weeks (immediately following each session).	Individualized projects were identified for each counseling dyad, which were subsumed under 4 broad project headings: (a) the client-counselor relational project, (b) relational projects outside of counseling, (c) identity projects, (d) educational/vocational projects.

grounds, although English fluency was required because of the nature of the research involvement. Difficulties with recruiting fathers led us to focus specifically on the mother-youth relationship.

Data collection procedures. Data collection in the action-project method involves obtaining information on what actions participants engage in and how they engage in these actions relevant to the research topic, and to their own lives. This exploration of action occurs through a multistep process involving the

observation of participant engagement in joint action, frequently in the form of a conversation and eliciting their thoughts and feelings about the action. Data collection then proceeds over time with monitoring and a final observational meeting of participant joint action. Data are typically collected by two researchers working with each participant dyad. All stages of the data collection process are recorded and transcribed. Data adequacy (Levitt et al., 2017) is established through the capacity of the procedure to capture all

aspects of the organization of action proposed by contextual action theory and to incorporate information from observation, participant descriptions, and their reflections about their actions.

First data collection session: Exploring joint action. The first data collection session begins with a “warm-up” period intended to help participants identify topics pertinent to the research question and their engagement with it. Participants are asked general questions about themselves and the topic of interest, encouraged to identify issues they have discussed relative to the topic, and invited to engage with each other on these issues. This step increases participant comfort with the setting and prepares them for the second step. Following the warm-up, participants are typically invited to have a conversation on one of the topic-relevant issues they identified in the first step. However, other forms of joint action, such as inviting a parent and young child to play together or engage in other relevant tasks (e.g., Zaidman-Zait, Marshall, Young, & Hertzman, 2014), may be appropriate depending on the research question. The interviewers leave the room, allowing participants to self-direct the conversation and communicate more naturally. This joint action typically lasts between 10 and 20 min, depending on the specific research context. Video-recording captures verbal and nonverbal manifest behavior.

The third step of the first data collection session is the “self-confrontation” procedure. Each participant is paired with one researcher to review and reflect on the playback of the video recording of the joint conversation they have just completed. The recording is paused at regular but meaningful intervals for participants to describe their cognitions and emotions—one-minute intervals is often used as a guideline. As such, the self-confrontation facilitates collection of data about each participants’ thoughts and feelings that occurred during the joint action. The social meaning of action also emerges as participants describe their understanding of the joint action to the researcher. In studies with joint conversations of 20 min or less, the entire conversation is reviewed. In studies with longer joint conversations, only a segment of the conversation may be reviewed. In these cases, the same segment is reviewed by both participants.

Brent and Bella’s first data collection session. Brent and Bella were met in the research setting by the researchers Kim and Khari (pseudonyms). After completing the informed consent process and agreeing to take part, Brent and Bella responded to some general questions about their interest in the study, leading to more focused questions about Brent’s future and their relationship. During this warm-up, Kim and Khari tried to help Brent and Bella feel comfortable talking in the presence of the recording equipment and to identify relevant topics for them to discuss together. After approximately 20 min, Kim and Khari judged that the participants were ready to continue their conversation on their own. They then invited the participants to continue the discussion on their own and left the room. Brent and Bella were somewhat hesitant at the start, but then became engaged in the conversation, listening and responding thoughtfully to one another, initiating and changing topics, asking each other questions, and expressing their opinions. They spent 12 min discussing Brent’s plans to leave home to pursue education and how Bella might assist Brent to become more independent in preparation for his departure. They decided when to end the conversation. Next, Kim met with Bella to review the video of the conversation, while Khari did the same with Brent. The researchers paused the video approximately once per minute, asking such questions as “What were you feeling in that minute, as you heard him say those things?” and “what were your

thoughts then, as you asked Brent about living off campus?” The self-confrontation shed light into the participants’ internal processes and intentions behind their verbal and nonverbal actions in the conversation. Bella completed her self confrontation with Kim in 38 min. Brent’s self-confrontation with Khari’s lasted 32 min.

Second data collection session: Participant review and project identification. Data from all steps of the first data collection session are transcribed and analyzed using the procedures described below in the “First Analysis” section. From this analysis, the researchers write narrative summaries of each participant’s action and also a narrative of their joint action. In the latter, the researchers tentatively identify the joint project(s) in which the dyad appears to be engaged. Scheduled as close to the initial data collection session as practical, the second session begins with each researcher meeting with one member of the dyad to review that participant’s individual narrative. The purpose of the review of the individual narrative is for member checking and to remove any content that the participant does not want to share with the other member of the dyad. Next, participants and researchers reconvene together to share an overall joint narrative and to finalize a description of their joint project. Researchers ask questions to determine whether this project is an ongoing one or one created for the study.

Brent and Bella’s second session. No requests for change or correction emerged in the conversation between Bella and Kim. Brent requested that Khari correct the name of the education program he was thinking of applying to. Then all four met to share the individual narratives, with Brent and Bella commenting that everything seemed to make sense, and there were no real surprises. They also agreed with the identification of their transition-to-adulthood project, “Working together toward Brent’s increasing responsibilities as an adult, including renegotiating his level of independence and developing the skills that he needs to manage next year in school.”

Third data collection session: Monitoring over time. Data collection then continues over time, with participants engaging in a “monitoring period,” typically lasting one to six months depending on the research topic, participant availability, and researcher resources. The purpose of this stage is to monitor the dyad’s engagement with their identified joint project and collect information on what joint actions are undertaken together to pursue their project. Monitoring period data were originally collected through self-report logs (Young et al., 2005). However, our experience in the past 15 years has been that these logs yield suboptimal data. We now recommend regular monitoring telephone calls, where participants are asked to describe their project-related actions since the previous call.

Bella and Brent monitoring period. During the 6-month monitoring period, Bella and Kim had eight telephone conversations (M length = 16 min.), whereas Brent and Khari spoke six times (M length = 12 min.). In these conversations, the participants described their overall impression of changes and goal-attainment on their project. Bella, in particular, noted positive change in how the two of them interacted to facilitate Brent’s growing independence. They also provided specific examples of goal-related joint actions that they had undertaken such as going to the bank together to talk with someone about student loan options.

Fourth data collection session: Reflection and validation. At the conclusion of the monitoring period, a final meeting is held, following the same multistep format as the first data collection session. In this session, participants are invited to discuss and reflect back on the project in which they have been engaged during the joint action. In addition, at the end of the session, the researchers follow up on any issues that emerged during the monitoring period and address any general questions that the participants may have about the study. This data collection session serves broadly for participant review of the project that was identified and engaged in by the participants.

Brent and Bella's final session. Brent and Bella reported making substantial strides toward their goal despite various unexpected life circumstances. For example, Brent was not accepted to his first choice of university and, instead, was attending a local university while living at home. Their final joint conversation, eight minutes in duration, was somewhat more strained than the first. Brent took the lead in sharing information and attempting to gain Bella's input and approval regarding several issues that came up in the discussion. Bella's responses were often minimal and perfunctory. In her self-confrontation, Bella disclosed that she was upset that Brent has "ambushed" her by raising the issue of her treatment of his new girlfriend, which Bella considered to be outside the bounds of the research conversation. In contrast, Brent framed his raising the issue of his girlfriend with Bella as evidence of shifting to a more adult relationship, and his increased comfort with challenging his mother's actions. There were no outstanding issues or questions raised the end of the session.

Data Analysis

The primary goal of data analysis is to understand people's actions and projects as revealed in the joint actions during the data collection sessions and over the monitoring period. Contextual action theory informs the underlying assumptions and all stages of data analysis (Young et al., 2005). These assumptions include accepting the action as the unit of analysis, not the individual or the dyad. The analysis process is also based on the assumption that the study is oriented toward actions and projects related to the topic of interest. Although qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo has been used in some action-project method studies, such software is not required. In many studies, we have found that Microsoft Word combined with simple video-playback software, has sufficient flexibility to accommodate to the specifics of the analytic process.

First analysis. The first data analysis occurs between the first and second data collection sessions. It is designed to describe the actions of participants during their joint conversation, and infer their ongoing joint project as manifest in the action. This first analysis and the subsequent one involve taking both a top-down and a bottom-up perspective on the data, informed by contextual action theory. The top-down perspective focuses on "how": asking how participants achieve their joint action goals reveals functions, and asking how they achieve these functions reveals action elements. The bottom-up analysis focuses on "why." Specifically, asking why participants use particular elements reveals the functions of action, and asking why they enact particular functions reveals their goals. Researchers focus on both the how and the why in a circular way, until they achieve a clear understanding of the dyad's joint action captured in the video-recording.

The researchers who conducted the first data gathering session examine the video-recording and transcripts of the first session, using a coding strategy that combines an inductive stance toward the topic of inquiry with deductive coding grounded in contextual action theory. Researchers typically begin with an a priori, empirically informed list of action elements to guide the coding. However, following the concept of attunement of a method to strengthen a qualitative analysis (Levitt et al., 2017), the initial code-list is typically modified following engagement with the data. This empirically grounded coding is supplemented by inductive analysis of the explicit and implicit content present in the data, attending particularly to participants' reflections in the self-confrontation. As such, the transcripts of the joint conversation are typically coded according to segments corresponding to the pauses used in the self confrontation. Subsequently, the functional steps and goals of the joint action are identified. The researchers summarize their coding in three written narratives, one for each member of the dyad, and one reflecting the dyad's joint action and tentatively identified project(s). These narrative descriptions are considered tentative until they are shared, changed if needed, and affirmed in the second data collection session.

Within-case analysis. In the action-project method, the purpose of the within-case analysis is to construct a systematic and thorough description of the dyad's actions and project(s) across all data collection sessions. To that end, after each dyad's fourth data collection session, the data set is examined using a content analysis strategy. This analysis is informed by a contextual action theory understanding of the organization of action; that is, action elements, functions, and goals (Young et al., 2005). Researchers focus on both how and why in a circular way, until they achieve a clear understanding of the dyad's actions and projects in the video-recorded joint conversations and also in daily life, as described by participants during the monitoring period.

As part of the process of managing researcher perspectives (Levitt et al., 2017) in the action-project method, the within-case analysis process involves discussion of possible interpretations among the research team members at every stage of analysis. The analysis relies primarily on consensus-based discussion among a team of researchers attending to the theoretical tenets of contextual action theory, explicit and implicit content from the data collection sessions, and the researchers' own perspective on the topic of inquiry. Analytic decisions are arrived at through ongoing discussion until a consensus about the most plausible interpretation is achieved. Although the process often proceeds smoothly, considerable discussion time may be required to reach consensus. This consensus is based on the researchers' information and skills grounded in contextual action theory and their familiarity with the everyday communication culture of the participants being studied.

Qualitative data analysis using a consensus approach raises the question of how power imbalances in the research team are addressed. For the consensus process to function well, team members must be aware of and vigilant to the ways in which the discussion may be influenced by social power dynamics and perspectives of more powerful members. The responsibility to ensure that the findings that emerge from the team based analysis reflects a genuine consensus falls more heavily on the researchers facilitating consensus processes. These researchers, who often hold more power than other team members, must understand the forces of socialization, and that research team members will make sense of

their perceptions and experiences through their particular cultural lens. It may be helpful to begin data analysis meetings by naming the subtle ways consensus processes may inadvertently silence voices and by openly acknowledging the role of privilege and oppression socially and within research specifically. The facilitator must also be willing to do the work of spotting and interrupting forces of privilege and oppression when they occur and lead the team to engage critically with the dynamic so that it is addressed with sensitivity, openness, humility, and integrity.

This analysis process combines an inductive stance toward the topic of inquiry with deductive coding grounded in the theoretical framework of contextual action theory. Researchers use the coded action elements from the first analysis, and this theoretically grounded coding is supplemented by inductive analysis of the explicit and implicit content present in the data. This theoretically grounded coding is supplemented by inductive analysis of the explicit and implicit content present in the data. These deductive and inductive processes are used to develop an understanding of the dyad's project related to the topic being studied, their patterns of action as revealed in the first and fourth data collection sessions and in the monitoring period. The use of both inductive and deductive processes reflects the theoretical grounding of the method in goal-directed action and the systematic attention to observational data. This movement between induction and deduction can be referred to as abduction, a process increasingly used in mixed methods and qualitative research (Morgan, 2007; Shani, Coghlan, & Alexander, 2020). The product of the within-case analysis is a rich description of a dyad's project related to the research topic, individual and joint actions they have taken over time to achieve their project, and how the project is situated in their life context. The following excerpt from Brent and Bella's 21-page within-case description identifies three themes that were constructed in the action-project method analysis process for this dyad.

Brent and Bella within-case analysis: Adapting and maturing. During the course of the study, Brent underwent a shift in his thinking that led him to adopt many of his mother's ideas and opinions. This was reflected in Brent becoming more responsible and taking such steps as finding a part-time job, saving his money, letting go of his expectation that his parents buy him a car, and beginning his university studies. Brent's progression toward a more mature and responsible orientation was strongly influenced by his trust and respect for his mother, and his desire for her approval. In turn, as Brent began to make responsible choices, Bella was able to relinquish some of her control while still being available to support him when he needed her. This was a shift from her initial stance, which simultaneously involved wanting Brent to act more independently than he was prepared for while maintaining a high degree of involvement in his day-to-day activities.

Brent and Bella within-case analysis: Family relationships. The importance of family influenced Brent's decisions and Bella's actions. To maintain a strong connection to his brother whose company he valued, after realizing that he would be living at home, Brent decided to continue sharing his bedroom rather than move to the basement where he would have his own space. To gain his mother's acceptance, Brent adapted to her ideas about what he needs to do as he approaches adulthood. Bella expressed her caring for the son through her actions, by helping him with the practicalities of adult obligations, such as offering advice and accompanying him to an appointment with a financial adviser.

Brent and Bella within-case analysis: Shift in motivation. At the outset of the study, Brent's motivation to be a responsible adult was fueled extrinsically by his mother's beliefs and expectations, and he did not appear to be ready to take on many of the responsibilities she expected of him. During the study, however, Brent developed the intrinsic motivation necessary to make responsible choices, not only to gain his mother's approval, but also because he realized that he also wanted what his mother wants for him. This shift appears to have been related to his increase in maturity.

Cross-case analysis. After completing the within-case analysis for several dyads, action-project method researchers conduct an additional analysis across the sample (Young et al., 2005). The cross-case analysis relies on Stake's (2006) multiple case study approach in which each dyad becomes a case and then all the cases become the basis for a multicase study. Both the action-project method and Stake's multicase approach adopt a primary focus on action, where the action-project method seeks to understand action in context and multicase study seeks to understand how the situational uniqueness of action appears in different contexts, that is, the different cases. Further, both approaches assume the case itself represents dynamic, goal-directed actions over time (Stake, 2006; Young et al., 2005). The action-project method uses both within-case and cross-case analyses. As described heretofore, the within-case analysis is extensive and rigorous. Nevertheless, cross-case analysis can contribute additional understanding of the action being considered in the research, without losing the richness and variability of individual cases. Practically speaking, in combining the two approaches, cases are grouped for their description of different aspects of the processes being researched and the opportunity they provide to learn about complexity and contexts. A single common explanation for all cases is not expected, thus there are no outliers. Instead, information from single cases can hold as much value as an identified pattern across cases and, as explained in the Presentation of Findings section below, action-project method researchers value and publish descriptions of individual cases. The analytic strategy draws from both within-case and cross-case approaches, proceeding from an intensive within-case analysis to understand how each individual case answers the research question(s), followed by a cross-case analysis.

This cross-case analysis again relies on a team-based process, this time informed by the findings from the within-case analysis as well as the tenets of contextual action theory. The team reviews three or four cases at a time to identify recurrent patterns in the actions, projects and other aspects of the data across the subset of cases. The analysis is not focused on numerical frequency of recurrence; instead, consensus based discussion is used to inductively identify what is meaningful or important to attend to across the cases, in light of the data and contextual action theory. In alignment with Levitt et al. (2017), explanations for apparent discrepancies across different cases are discussed to promote coherence in the findings. The subset review process is repeated until all cases are reviewed at least twice, with the analysis of later subsets of cases being informed by the cross-case analysis of earlier subsets. Finally, another review of each individual case is conducted to confirm that the cross-case findings adequately reflect the actual experiences of dyads and to ground the cross-case analysis in specific examples. When completed for all participant dyads, the cross-case analysis provides a detailed description of the overall patterns of actions and projects and other conclusions about

the topic. See [Table 1](#) for a sample of the range of findings that have emerge from studies using this method.

Presentation of Findings

The findings of action-project method studies have been presented at the within-case level, such as in published case studies, at the cross-case level in journal articles, or both when space permits, for example, in a dissertation. At the cross-case level, the presentation of findings involves organizing the identification of projects, actions, and other content in a way that addresses the guiding research questions and illustrated by quotations from participants. For example, in a study exploring how parents and athletes jointly navigate the transition to competitive figure skating, [Wall et al. \(2020\)](#) identified three kinds of joint goal-directed projects of parents and athletes: negotiating commitment, progressing toward skating goals, and maintaining a developmental focus. These researchers described each theme in turn, grounded their description in specific examples from their participants, and explained what each kind of project revealed about parental involvement in the decision to pursue early specialization sports at an elite level.

Current Procedural Adaptations

The procedures for action-project method are designed to produce a rich description of dyadic action and projects and have successfully been used to explore a variety of topics. However, these procedures are flexible to allow for adaptations to fit the context, resources, and purpose of the research. What is critical is that the research problem is framed from the perspective of goal-directed action and that action is the unit of analysis. Over time, researchers have proposed and anticipate adaptations to these procedures.

Adaptations to reduce time. The action-project method can require a relatively large time and resource commitment. For example, a study with 20 dyads and a 6-month monitoring period may take up to three years to complete. These time requirements are perhaps felt the most keenly by students attempting to use the method for thesis research. One adaptation to address these requirements is to end data collection after the second data collection session with a dyad, in other words, studying specific actions. The primary benefit of omitting the monitoring period and final interview is to allow data collection and analysis over a shorter period. However, this adaptation may compromise the capacity of the method to explore dyads' actual pursuit of projects over time and narrow the kinds of research questions that can be addressed. An alternative approach to reducing the time demands of the method is to retain the full protocol but implement it with a smaller number of dyads.

Accommodating larger groups of participants. The complexities of exploring the interactions among three or more people, and the exponential increase in time required during the self-confrontation to reflect on the internal processes of all participants, have made it difficult to collect data from whole families or larger groups at one time. A partial solution to this problem has been to adapt the method to focus on a dyad within a larger unit, with other members of the unit taking on a secondary role in the research. For example, in [Marshall and colleagues' \(2011\)](#) exploration of career

development in urban-residing Aboriginal families in Canada, the researchers collected data from parent-adolescent dyads in the first three data collection sessions, and, for cultural reasons, subsequently invited other family members to participate in the fourth data collection session. Although the data analysis process considered the perspectives of all participating family members, the primary contributors of data remained the dyad. Creating additional adaptations to overcome the limitations of focusing on dyads is an important step in expanding the utility of the method in the future.

Establishing Methodological Integrity

The methodological integrity of studies using the action-project method is established in using multiple sources of information that systematically attend to all perspectives on action. These include the content of participants' statements over time, direct observation of dyads' actions during the video-recorded portion of the first and fourth data collection session, and information about participants' internal emotions and cognitions obtained through the self-confrontation procedures ([Young et al., 2005](#)). These procedures produce a more comprehensive understanding than retrospective interviews alone, and align with [Levitt et al. \(2017\)](#), and [Levitt et al. \(2018\)](#) standards for data adequacy. Systematically attending to manifest behavior, internal processes, and social meaning in both the within- and cross-case analyses creates confidence that a rigorous, theoretically consistent understanding of a dyad's action has been achieved.

Participants and researchers consensually determine the social meaning of projects reflecting participants' language and culture through discussion in the second data collection session, the telephone monitoring, and at the end of the fourth session. Furthermore, triangulation of the researchers' perspectives through the team-based analysis process enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and reduce the likelihood that conclusions are overly influenced by any individual researcher's perspective. Finally, action-project method researchers also maintain a detailed audit trail, including descriptions of potential and actual participants, data collection session transcripts, written documentation of every stage of analysis, and records of data analysis team meetings ([Young et al., 2005](#)).

Addressing Power Differences in the Research Process

Not least among the ethical considerations in qualitative research generally is the issue of power differentials between participants and researchers ([Socholotiuk, Domene, & Trenholm, 2016](#)). The action-project method addresses this imbalance in several ways. First, researchers ensure that all participants are volunteers. Both members of a participating dyad engage in a screening interview in which they are fully informed about the research purpose and procedures. Second, in the first data collection session, the research participants themselves decide on the topic and length of the joint conversation they will have, and have that conversation without the researchers present. Third, all participants have the opportunity individually to review and comment on the video recording of their joint conversation. Fourth, in the second session, the participants review and are invited to alter the descriptive summary of their experience prior to sharing that

description with the other member of the dyad. They are also invited to alter their tentatively identified joint project, and to refine that project in a way that best fits their experience. Finally, the ongoing project is monitored by telephone over several months in which the research participants are invited to comment on whether and to what extent their joint project is still current. In these ways, researchers attempt to share control over the research process and findings with participants and are considered equal project participants.

Using the Action-Project Method in Counseling Psychology

Research in Counseling Psychology

Many of the issues addressed by counseling psychology researchers focus on goal-directed processes jointly engaged in by two or more people, which is the nucleus of the action-project method. It has the advantage of shifting away from explanations and descriptions that are lodged within the individual. Many of our experiences as humans are intersubjective, temporal, and dynamic, and influenced by culture. The action-project method can account for these processes in a prospective rather than retrospective manner. The method incorporates important factors such as the constructed narratives of self as they are embodied in actions, projects and careers.

Table 1 provides useful examples of how the action-project method has been used in research. Research problems are initially framed broadly as human actions such as transitioning to adulthood, caregiving for a chronically ill family member, managing chronic musculoskeletal pain, seeking therapy for anxiety, or being included in a new country as an immigrant or refugee. There are, of course, literally hundreds of such processes that are long- and middle-term tasks and goals. Previous research findings, current social and economic contexts, and pertinence to counseling psychology may suggest the need for a specific domain to be considered for research using this method. For example, family based treatment for adolescent anorexia nervosa has been shown to be an effective in recent studies (Lock, 2019). Nevertheless, less is known about the processes or goal-directed actions that parents and adolescents engage in together over time that contribute to the effectiveness of this intervention. Action-project researchers can ask themselves whether this domain reflects a joint process between people and who are the significant parties involved. Subsequently, a rationale for describing the joint projects of these parties, prospectively and in detail, is generated.

Many counseling psychologists adopt a strengths-based, growth-oriented stance in their practice, rather than focusing on the amelioration of symptoms or addressing only the client's deficits (e.g., Magyar-Moe, Owens, & Scheel, 2015). As such, practitioners in our field tend to be interested in clients' goals for the future, and what may facilitate and impede the pursuit of those goals. This focus parallels the way that the action-project method frames research questions in terms of participants' actions and goals/projects, and the way it explores how participants pursue those projects over time. Consequently, the kinds of research questions that the method is well suited to answering are also the kinds of questions that practitioners would be interested in; that is, what

kinds of future oriented projects do participants/clients tend to formulate and how do they pursue those projects through their actions over time.

The goal-directed and contextualized perspective of explanation ensures the agency and intentionality of participants' action are attended to while also privileging participants' everyday understandings of the socially embedded and relational experiences clients bring into psychotherapy. For example, counselors drawing on action-project method research examining weight restoration in adolescent anorexia may find it helpful to conceptualize parents' actions as "weight-restoration projects" with complementary and competing goals between weight restoration and other important projects and careers, especially as related to parent identity processes and adolescent development projects (Socholotiuk, 2015). Although leading treatments for adolescent anorexia do not identify weight restoration a "project," the goals of treatment are clearly and explicitly about parents acting in partnership over time. With its explicit focus on social contexts of surrounding goals and actions, this action-project method study offers a way for counseling psychologists to work congruently within evidence-based theories (e.g., Lock et al., 2010) while maintaining the explicitly goal-directed focus on weight restoration.

Research in Counseling and Psychotherapy Processes

Vermes (2017) makes the case that counseling psychology as a practice has been dominated by the philosophical and cultural values of individualism. To counteract this dominant individualistic perspective, one possibility is to use research methods that address processes that people engage in with others in their daily lives. This includes counseling and psychotherapy processes. The action-project method addresses the counseling process as interpersonal, in the context that the focus is also on the client's actions outside of counseling. For example, Young et al. (2011) used the method to identify the joint goal-related projects of clients transitioning to adulthood and their counselors. This study identified and described relationship and identity as intertwined goal-directed projects within counseling as well as outside of it.

Another informative example pertinent to psychotherapy is the application of contextual action theory and the action-project method to research on suicide and its prevention. In a series of studies, researchers described suicide and suicide attempts as goal-directed joint processes of action, project and career (Valach, Michel, Young, & Dey, 2006). Furthermore, life and suicide-related goal-directed systems were found to be linked (Valach, Michel, Dey, & Young, 2006), where suicide represented a distorted action process (Valach, Michel, & Young, 2016). This line of inquiry resulted in an intervention study, based on the action-project method, in which the intervention (Attempted Suicide Short Intervention program) was shown to be more effective in preventing further attempts than treatment as usual for persons who had attempted suicide (Gysin-Maillart, Schwab, Soravia, Megert, & Michel, 2016).

In another example, Young and Domene (2012) provided an extensive research agenda for career counseling that would profit from the use of the action-project method. For example, they identified emotion as a critical factor in goal-directed projects, yet it is under researched as a central process in which clients and counselors engage together as part of their joint, goal-directed

action in career counseling. Specifically, a research question that can be addressed using the action-project method is, “what emotional processes and shared emotion are linked to specific action and project processes in a joint client-counselor related actions?” Similarly, narrative is a way in which our experiences are “amplified, stabilized, and extended through collective enactments” (Kirmayer & Ramstead, 2017, p. 406). A potentially informative research question that moves the focus away from the individual is how are narratives are used, constructed, and extended in people’s joint actions and projects, including those that occur in therapy.

Finally, the question needs to be asked whether the use of the action-project method itself facilitates participants’ pursuit of their goals during the research process. Gysin-Maillart et al. (2016) have shown that adaptations of the method itself have therapeutic potential. Processes that assist clients to identify goals, and how and with whom they are constructed are worthy of consideration and research in counseling psychology. In addition, the topic of any research and the means of data collection have to be within the professional competences of the researchers. The action-project method has been used by psychiatrists and licensed psychologists, but it has also been used by educational psychologists, family studies researchers, and graduate students. In our view, notwithstanding the potential of the method as an intervention, it is the nature of the research topic and not the method itself that needs to be considered in determining the composition and qualifications of the research team.

Addressing Culture

Counseling psychology is a leading discipline in conducting cultural and cross-cultural research using both quantitative and qualitative methods (e.g., Cohen & Kassan, 2018; Drinane, Owen, & Tao, 2018). The action-project method adds to other qualitative methods used to address cultural phenomena for several reasons (Young & Domene, 2018). First, the method, along with contextual action theory, recognizes that the person who acts is at the same time embedded, embodied, and acting within a culture. Thus, within this approach to research, culture is not seen as an independent variable that affects individuals. Rather, individual, social, and cultural processes are jointly constitutive. Culture comes into being through human action. Recognizing these principles, the action-project method begins with action engaged in by research participants. Importantly, the action attains meaning because of the culture and in turn constructs the culture.

The action-project method assumes that the actions, projects, and careers that are the subject of research are cultural phenomena. The data generated using the action-project method are cultural data. It is an action that has a goal rather than a predetermined segment of behavior that is the unit of analysis. The action is meaningful within a specific sociocultural community. Thus, the method integrates the view of the sociocultural community in the data set, together with systematic observation and subjective data. Even the systematic observation aspect of the method is informed by the social meaning of observation within specific sociocultural communities. In the analysis process, the researchers use goals meaningful in such communities to segment a stream of behavior into units of analysis. Ultimately, researchers should have familiarity with the participants’ culture to be able to adequately analyze the data.

Social Justice Perspective

Counseling psychology researchers contemplating the use of the action-project method will want to know its social justice and power ramifications. The action-project method makes several assumptions that are consistent with the place of social justice in counseling psychology (DeBlaere et al., 2019). For example, by examining closely the actions and projects between people, it moves away from highly individualized and psychologized explanations of human behavior. The method values diversity by recognizing that actions have meaning and goals within historical, economic, cultural, and other contexts. For example, the data analysis process of determining social meaning occurs in a group of researchers with shared language and cultural commonalities with the research participants. Furthermore, the method generally assumes and provides the basis for participants to be empowered, goal-directed, and responsible for their actions within given contexts, rather than objects responding to intrapsychic and interpersonal forces.

Researchers using the action-project method can also take seriously the social justice mandate that equal participation in social and political life is not simply a function of individual and psychological factors. Rather, social justice broadly represents the principle of the fair and equitable opportunities and treatment between peoples (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). Focusing on the phrase *between people*, the action-project method allows for research on the action between people, under the assumption that the actions of research participants are not solely reflective of individual capabilities. Rather, human actions are contingent on others with whom they are enacted and the context in which they occur. The links between the relational assumptions of action-project method and emancipatory and indigenous research paradigms (Lincoln, Lynam, & Guba, 2018; Socholotiuk et al., 2016) suggest that the method is consistent with the social justice. The method allows for the investigation of goal-directed processes that contribute to both social and economic injustices and their remediation. It is not individuals by themselves or social interactions alone that determine action; rather, it is both. Thus, the social dimension of human life is central to this method—one can barely imagine meaningful life projects without the involvement of others in them. Similarly, one cannot envision a career (in both the occupational and nonoccupational senses of that word) without institutions, which, in turn, are called upon to recognize equity, inclusivity, and diversity.

Relationship to Other Qualitative Methods in Counseling Psychology Research

The action-project research method has commonalities and differences with other qualitative methods used in counseling psychology. Many of these methods have been influenced broadly by phenomenology (Husserl, 1982). However, as implemented, several qualitative methods focus on the individual, on how individuals have constructed meaning in their lives. They have tended to neglect the social nature of human action and the cultural construction of human life. It is relative to the latter that the action-project method provides an alternative approach for counseling psychology scholars and students to consider.

Every research method is designed to address specific types of research questions (Socholotiuk et al., 2016). Similarly, the action-project method is suited to take up distinct research questions. Researchers using this method do not start their research seeking to confirm or refute specific hypotheses. Rather, they intend to describe the ongoing individual and joint actions of research participants pertinent to a specific domain or topic. The findings describe how research participants lead, control, and regulate their joint actions in a specific domain.

The action-project method uses three perspectives of human action; that is, manifest behavior, internal processes, and social meaning (Young et al., 2005; Young et al., 2015). Its research procedures involve explicitly collecting data at all three levels through systematic observation of joint action, the self-confrontation interview, and monitoring processes as they unfold across time. In contrast, numerous other qualitative methods, such as ethnography and grounded theory, emphasize one or other of these levels of action, and some methods rely solely on retrospective accounts of phenomena. Phenomenology, for example, relies on the meaning of human action, as narrated by the research participant (Eberle, 2014; Kee, 2020). Of course, research participants may refer to their behavior and internal processes in recounting their experience of a phenomenon. But they do so after the event or phenomenon has occurred. The ability of humans to extensively report on their own internal processes and even on manifest actions is very selective and declines with time (Luque & O'Hora, 2016). In addition, in the case of retrospective interview data, research participants tend to provide data in summarizing ways making inferences, attributions, and judgments (Berg, Lei, Beach, Simons, & Simons, 2020). Consequently, the closer the recall interview is to the action being considered, the more likely the better the memory. The smaller and shorter the stream of behavior to report on is, as is the case of 1-min recall segments during the self-confrontation procedure, the more complete the reports are likely to be.

Conclusion

The challenge for counseling psychology is to provide research that has meaning for practitioners and ultimately for the clients they serve and for the lives that clients live. These lives cannot be separated from their contexts and cultures. Framing counseling psychology research in a way that is close to human experience is critical to its relevance as a discipline and to its aspiration to empirically informed practice. With the increased emphasis in theory and research in addressing the complexity and interdependence of behavior and culture, it is expected that a range of research methods are required. In the case of the action-project method described here, it is an integrative and systemic approach that reflects the complexity of human action, and allows researchers to be critical of the status quo. In this way, we suggest and hope that the method has the potential to continue producing critical knowledge in the field and help clients and society change toward meaningful, ethical, and relational futures.

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