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Lessons Learned

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Lessons Learned: Participatory Action Research with Young Aboriginal Women

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Abstract

All participatory action research (PAR) projects are unique, with a wide range of methodological challenges for participants and researchers. This paper highlights the manner in which methodological challenges and considerations were addressed in a recent school-based PAR project with young Aboriginal women in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Specifically, we outline: (a) potential challenges of defining the community in school-based PAR, (b) issues associated with negotiating informed consent, (c) processes of developing and maintaining relationships, and (d) challenges associated with ensuring participant collaboration throughout the research process. The intent is not to offer simple answers to such challenges, but to highlight the manner in which such processes were addressed. This research may provide practical insight for future researchers and community members who have similar goals of engaging young Aboriginal women in PAR to address important health issues.

Key words: Aboriginal women; participatory action research; body image; consent; collaboration; community; relationships; Canada; youth

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Introduction

Despite alarming statistics suggesting that body image concerns are common among Aboriginal[2] women, few researchers have included young Aboriginal women in qualitative research projects that highlight their unique experiences. Our previous research with young Aboriginal women (Fleming et al., 2006; McHugh and Kowalski, in press) includes some of the first Canadian studies with an exclusive focus on Aboriginal women's body image. This research suggests more positive experiences than previous quantitative research has suggested, and highlights the need to develop strategies with young women to positively manage their body image experiences. This paper highlights some of the methodological challenges and considerations encountered in our recent school-based participatory action research (PAR) project with young Aboriginal women in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. Specifically, this paper outlines the: (a) potential challenges of defining the community in school-based PAR, (b) issues associated with negotiating informed consent, (c) processes of developing and maintaining relationships, and (d) challenges associated with ensuring participant collaboration throughout the research process.

In developing research projects involving Aboriginal peoples, CIHR's (2007) Guidelines for Health Research Involving Aboriginal peoples states that communities should be given the option of a participatory research approach. PAR emerged as a deliberate form of resistance to traditional research practices that were perceived as a colonizing tool by research participants (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). Its primary goal is to create positive social change by involving participants as researchers; this involvement will educate participants to make the changes they need (Fals Borda, 2001). The term "collaborative research" is often used for action research or participatory research (Harrison, 2001). Harrison (2001), in her book on collaborative programs in indigenous communities, explains that collaboration refers to sharing responsibility and authority. Given that shared responsibility and authority were key processes within this research, the terms "PAR" and "collaboration" are used throughout this paper when describing the project.

The strength of engaging in PAR with Aboriginal communities has been highlighted by a number of Aboriginal scholars (Bishop, 2005; Smith, 1999, 2005). Wheeler (2001) advocates the use of community-based approaches to research when working with Aboriginal peoples because

2. "Aboriginal peoples" is a collective name for those who identify themselves as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996).

> history has demonstrated that outside 'solutions' for the 'Indian problem' simply do not work in our best interests. We are the only ones with the insight and capabilities to identify our 'problems' and come up with our own answers. (p. 101)

PAR is particularly useful with Aboriginal youth; the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996) indicates that Aboriginal youth want to develop the skills and capacities to tackle their own challenges. Given that youth spend so much of their time in school settings, Heilman (1998) recommends considering schools as areas for implementing change.

Given the strong justification for engaging schools in creating change, a school was chosen as the research site for our recent community-based PAR project with young Aboriginal women (see McHugh, 2008 for a detailed description of the research processes and action initiatives that were implemented). We worked with a core group of seven young Aboriginal women from Nutana Collegiate (a Saskatoon high school) to develop initiatives for action at the individual, school, provincial, and national levels. We spent ten months in the school, building relationships and working collaboratively with participants to create and implement action. Eight action initiatives were focused on the goals of promoting positive body image experiences (e.g., development of school wellness policy), encouraging self-expression (e.g., through weekly writing group), and creating awareness (e.g., through various media). The success and relevance of the various action initiatives were demonstrated by the words of the participants, the overall support of various school members, and the commitment of the core group to the goals of this PAR project.

Despite the well-documented need for PAR approaches with Aboriginal peoples, and Aboriginal youth in particular, there were relatively few methodological frameworks to support our work as community-based researchers. Fletcher (2003) outlines key principles for implementing a community-based participatory research approach with Aboriginal peoples, highlighting some of the practical considerations in community-based participatory research. Our interest in developing this paper was sparked by Fletcher's comment that although all projects are unique, the "lessons learned" in building relationships and engaging in the research process may be valuable to other community members and researchers.

Recognizing that our lessons learned could make a valuable contribution to the health literature, this paper provides practical examples of how we (researchers and participants) addressed various methodological chal-

lenges in our research project. The action initiatives that were implemented have been described elsewhere. In this paper, the intent is to provide useful insight for those in need of respectful approaches by describing some of the methodological challenges we encountered.

Defining Community

The single most important ethical principle of Aboriginal research is that Aboriginal peoples should have control of their own knowledge (Battiste, 2002). Customary approaches to research distance Aboriginal peoples from the construction and legitimization of knowledge. Bishop (2005) notes that Aboriginal peoples have many concerns about who is in control of the research and who will benefit. The only way to ensure that Aboriginal peoples are in control of research is to involve them throughout the whole research process (Battiste, 2002). Thus, identifying the community and community representatives in a PAR project is a critical first step in the research process. Some provinces and territories, like the Northwest Territories for example, indicate in their licensing guidelines that community consent must be granted before research can be undertaken with Aboriginal communities (Fletcher, 2003). Similarly, CIHR (2007) indicates that researchers should consult Aboriginal community leaders and gain consent to engage in research, prior to contacting community members.

Students of all ethnicities are welcomed at Nutana, nearly half of whom identify themselves as Aboriginal. Nutana is part of the Saskatoon Public Schools Division, and it adheres to an Integrated School-Linked Services (ISLS) model. The intent of ISLS is to ensure that the complex and diverse needs of youth at risk are met by providing services in ways that are inclusive and responsive to student needs (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2006). Nutana is situated in an urban centre; dozens of Aboriginal communities are represented by their students. Thus, our PAR team was faced with the challenge of identifying the community and appropriate community representation. It quickly became clear to us that identifying a single Aboriginal community within this urban high school would be difficult. Recognizing this challenge, I, Tara-Leigh McHugh, spoke with the Aboriginal Elder associated with Nutana and sought his support for the project and advice on how to define community. He argued that because there are a number of different Aboriginal communities represented within Nutana, I should consider working with students to define community. His concept of the term community is similar to that of Smith (1999) who explains how people can

belong to a number of different communities; these layers of belonging are often referred to as "nested identities." Smith further explains that the term community implies an intimate and self-defined space. Recognizing that communities are often self-defined, our team realized that it was critical to involve the core group in defining our research community(s).

Despite various definitions of the term community, the young women from the core group and I decided that we agreed with Smith's (1999) and Robertson and Minkler's (1994) concepts of communities. Smith argues that communities can form around the goals and interests of a particular group. Similarly, Robertson and Minkler (1994, p. 303) describe community as "a group of people living in the same defined area sharing the same basic values and organization." They explain that a community can be any group of people who share the same central interests; the core group and I used this basic definition when trying to identify our research community. As a school-based PAR project, we wanted to be inclusive of all who might want to participate in the various initiatives, so the community was initially defined as Nutana itself. More specifically, the students, teachers, support staff, and principals of Nutana constituted our community; the school principal, community school director, and the Aboriginal Elder associated with the school all served as community representatives who provided active input on all of the research processes. By defining Nutana as a community, we supported Harrison's (2001, p. 36) belief that a community in a collaborative program may be a school "or any other group of indigenous people who consider that they are related as a community."

As the PAR project progressed throughout the school year it became apparent that there were smaller communities embedded within Nutana. Again, this recognition of multiple communities supports Smith's (1999) argument that people have nested identities. In this PAR project, the young women in the core group identified themselves as a community, and appropriate community representatives, because the core group was specifically focused on the goals and interests of the research project. The core group comprised young Aboriginal women interested in developing action initiatives focused on managing body image experiences. By defining themselves as a community, the core group supported Smith's contention that communities do not need to be defined by geographical space and that indigenous women may constitute their own community. Although the inclusion of the broader school community within various action initiatives was important, it was the smaller community, the core group, that was instrumental in

the overall productivity of this PAR project. Actively involving participants in defining the research communities was critical in ensuring that the appropriate community representatives were involved throughout the project.

Negotiating Informed Consent

Prior to entering the research process, we knew that identifying the appropriate community(s) and community representatives would be a challenge. We did not anticipate some of the challenges of gaining informed consent from the participants. As health researchers we recognize that informed consent protects the rights of the university or institution, as well as the participants. Although developed with the best intentions, the "process of consent is inherently hierarchical" (Haverkamp, 2005; p. 154), and therefore can be a barrier to establishing relationships. This is particularly detrimental in PAR because the hierarchies invoked by processes of consent can create barriers to shared ownership and authority, which are key guiding principles in PAR.

It was important for us, as health researchers, to recognize that obtaining informed consent could be accompanied by participant concerns rooted in the processes of colonization. Smith suggests (1999, p. 1), "scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism," providing a well founded hesitancy for some Aboriginal peoples to consent to research. Furthermore, research in Aboriginal communities is often initiated by agencies from which they receive essential services; therefore, Aboriginal peoples may feel that refusing to consent will result in loss of funding for essential needs (Brant Castellano, 2004). To ensure that participants engaged in free and informed consent, we adhered to Piquemal's (2001) suggestion to establish partnerships and relationships before seeking consent (the detailed explanation of such relationships is described in the following section).

The requirement that participants under the age of 18 years need parental/guardian consent to participate in research added another layer of complexity. Based on their work with youth, Knight and colleagues (2004) argue that researchers often treat the process of acquiring consent as a "non-event." Recognizing processes of consent as a potential source of concern among participants makes it possible to negotiate stronger relationships, founded on trust, with participants (Knight et al., 2004). Our difficulties in acquiring some of the participants' parent/guardian informed consents, highlighted one way university-developed guidelines can inhibit establishing shared authority in PAR. One young woman, 15 years old at the time

of the project, commented that teenagers should have the "right" to determine for themselves whether they want to participate in certain activities and, despite the majority of university guidelines, they should not have to ask their parents for consent.

> Teens want rights too. Yeah, I might be just a "kid" but I have a brain and I can make my own decisions. Why do adults always have to make decisions for us? Why can't we decide if we want our picture taken or if we want to go on a school trip? Why do our parents have to make up our minds for us? All you're doing is killing our brains. Telling us what we can and can't do. Not letting us think it out for ourselves. We might want to do something but if our parents say no and don't sign the stupid little forms we can't. And why? Because we aren't allowed to make up our own minds.

In her discussion on the hierarchical nature of the consent process, Haverkamp (2005) asserts that even genuine attempts to transform participants into co-researchers leave an asymmetrical power relationship between the researcher and participant that can inhibit this transformation. Although Haverkamp recognizes the hierarchy that is established between the researcher and participant with consent forms, the words of the participant within our PAR suggest there is another hierarchy to be considered. When parental consent is required, the participant has to face two hierarchical obstacles, the parent and the researcher.

PAR researchers strive to break down the power hierarchy that is so prevalent in more traditional research (Bishop, 2005). We want participants to view themselves as the experts and to recognize their power to create change. Making parental/guardian consent a requirement for youth to participate in research, sends young people an underlying message that they are powerless without the support of their parent/guardian. Most adolescents are in the developmental stage of pursuing increased autonomy; it is not surprising that some young people in this research had concerns about a requirement for parental/guardian consent.

We were particularly aware of our obligation to adhere to our university's ethical guidelines, and initially unaware of some of the participants' concerns with consent processes. However, through frequent conversations with participants we became aware of their concerns, and made it a priority to actively engage participants in discussions specifically about consent. As suggested by Smith (1999), we recognize that the process of consent is more than an ethical process in which the participants tick a box. Instead, consent is a process of negotiation that requires extensive discussion.

Continual conversations with participants about institutional justifications for consent forms, and listening to participants' concerns about them (e.g., concerns about needing parental/guardian consent), led to a better understanding of the various perspectives. In the entire school year of this PAR project, it would not be an exaggeration to say that we had weekly conversations with various participants about processes of consent. As researchers we became more cognizant of the participants' diverse reasons for not wanting parental consent (e.g., they felt that obtaining parental consent meant we were overseeing their authority), and participants became more aware of our ethical responsibilities as researchers. Our experiences in this PAR project suggest that obtaining informed consent is not a simple methodological process that can be quickly and casually handled. Instead, consent, particularly with youth, is a significant process that requires constant dialogue throughout the entire research process.

Relationships

Strong relationships are identified by Boog (2003) and Stringer and Genat (2004) as key factors in the success of PAR projects. Similarly, Fletcher (2003) argues that the most critical phase of community-based participatory research is the initial contact and relationship building. In terms of ethical research with Aboriginal peoples, Smith (2005, p. 97) explains that, at a very basic level, research ethics is about "establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships." Thus, the development and maintenance of relationships with participants was a key focus throughout this entire PAR project. Various researchers (e.g., Bishop, 1996; Stringer and Genat, 2004) have written about the critical need for developing and nurturing relationships; yet it is hard to have a solid understanding of the prominent need for such relationships until actually placed in a research situation where relationships are the foundation of the project's success.

In retrospect, it is clear how instrumental the first few months in the school were in developing relationships with participants. Although there were days in the first few months that we were concerned that the project was moving too slowly, it is now apparent that those first few months of earning participants' trust was critical in this research. With rare exceptions, I spent five days a week from 8:30 am–3:30 pm for the entire school year, integrating myself into the Nutana school community and becoming familiar with the its social and physical environment. Spending so much time in the school opened opportunities to connect with key participants. For example,

I attended previously established groups (e.g., Girl's Mentorship Group) to make connections with young Aboriginal women. As well, as an active member of the school, our team found ways to give back to the school to show our appreciation for their ready welcome. For example, we offered free yoga to all students, shared our grant writing expertise with school teachers and staff, and successfully supported their attempts to obtain funding for school initiatives. In retrospect, we are convinced that the processes of familiarizing ourselves with the school, making connections with key participants, and giving back to the school set the stage for the development of strong relationships.

Developing and maintaining relationships was critical in working collaboratively with the participants to develop initiatives. As Smith (1999) argues, the research process is often more important than the outcome; the process, particularly relationship building, was important in developing effective initiatives. Had we not dedicated the first three to four months to developing relationships, the young women might not have felt as comfortable sharing their experiences and developing subsequent action initiatives. Stringer (1999) suggests the quality of relationships affects people's experiences, and we are confident that the successful action initiatives were largely the result of the participants' positive experiences with this project.

Prior to engaging in this research process, we were unsure how important the relationships with participants would be and how difficult it would be to end relationships at the conclusion of the project. Our previous research (e.g., Fleming et al., 2006) suggests that newly developed personal relationships would make it difficult to leave the field at the end of the research. Similarly, Aitken and Burman (1999) comment that personal relationships frequently develop when a project runs over an extended amount of time; as a result, participants will likely have questions about whether the relationship will extend beyond the research project. Having engaged in a school-based group intervention for young women with eating disorders, Daigneault (2000) argues that some group members will experience a sense of loss when research inevitably comes to an end. A good termination of a group has to be planned by the group facilitator so that students are protected from harm by such feelings. In an effort to guard against possible feelings of betrayal, Haverkamp (2005) suggests that researchers monitor and clarify expectations throughout the duration of the research project. Similarly, Cutcliffe and Ramcharan (2002) argue that researchers should approach their research with an "ethics-as-process approach," so that they re-

main cognizant of the possible ethical issues (e.g., ending of relationships) that can arise at any point in the research process.

Having established many relationships throughout the duration of this research process, we are confident that we met the participants' expectations in the way relationships ended at the conclusion of this PAR. There are two primary reasons why participants reported no unmet expectations. First, because I was constantly communicating with the participants, they understood that I was only going to be part of the school community until the end of the project in June. Second, this research project coincided with the September to June school year, and the participants were familiar with changing teachers, staff, and community partners like myself from year to year. Understanding that I would not be involved in the school the following year, there was no real sense of loss (as suggested by Daigneault, 2000) when this group came to an end in June. In retrospect, I am happy that there was an open dialogue between the participants and I about the relationships as they developed; this open dialogue fostered the successful development and end of the various relationships.

Participant Collaboration

The goal of our PAR project was to collaborate with young Aboriginal women to develop effective strategies for managing body image experiences, and our PAR team is convinced that developing strong relationships facilitated our ability to engage in genuine collaborative research. Our commitment to collaborative research was founded on our goal to engage in research that benefits its participants. As Smith (1999) suggests, by actively collaborating with participants, researchers can be more confident that research does benefit participants. Thus, within our PAR project we actively encouraged the young women from the core group to participate in all aspects of the research project. Nevertheless, the participants were not interested in collaborating on some of the research components (e.g., writing).

Numerous scholars (Battiste, 2002; Haig-Brown, 2001; Smith, 1999) have argued that Aboriginal peoples involved in research should be given the opportunity to engage in the writing process. During many of the action initiatives (e.g., writing group, body talk), participants were asked if they would be interested in working with us to report on how the initiatives were developed and implemented. Despite our genuine attempts to involve the participants, they had little interest in the overall writing of the research results of the PAR project. Therefore, similar to Dickson (2000) who high-

lights this limitation in her PAR research with Aboriginal grandmothers, much of our writing is based on our own interpretations. With respect to their PAR project, Gosin et al. (2003) question whether participants need to be involved in all stages of the project in order for it to be PAR. They argue what is most important is that all partners benefit, and that the skills of all partners are maximized in order to achieve full benefit.

Some (Macaulay et al., 1999) argue that PAR can include various degrees of participation, and the specific roles and contributions of participants and researchers may change throughout the duration of a project. Boog (2003) comments that although all research partners (i.e., participants, researcher) make equal contributions to research, they all have expertise in different domains. The researcher typically has expertise in the application of research methods, while a participant is "an expert in the matters of his or her everyday life" (Boog, 2003, p. 435). The range of expertise was particularly obvious in our PAR project. The participants were experts of their body image experiences, with innovative and detailed ideas for action initiatives (many of which were developed and implemented). As researchers, we had more resources to facilitate initiatives (e.g., supplying lunch for lunch time initiatives, booking rooms for initiatives) and experience in writing about the initiatives. Despite differences in expertise, Hughes (2003) argues that neither type of expertise is dominant over the other. Furthermore, although participants did not fully engage in some of the PAR processes (e.g., writing), researchers must accept different levels of participant involvement within PAR projects; "participation may be more valuable at certain stages of the research process than at others" (Gosin et al., 2003, p. 366).

Given the inherent power that one often assumes in the role as researcher, we as researchers must ensure that participants do not feel that they *have* to take part in the writing process, or other research processes that they may not find particularly attractive. We regularly asked participants if they would like to be involved in writing processes, but we were careful not to make participants feel as though writing was a requirement for participation in the project. Despite the lack of participant interest in writing, it is our responsibility as researchers to write about projects such as this so that others will become more aware of the exciting action that can be developed when working alongside youth. As their academic research partner, we made it our responsibility to consult with participants throughout the writing process in an effort to be respectful of the manner in which this project and the participants were represented. In the description of the ac-

tion initiatives developed as part of this PAR, we used various direct quotes from the participants in an effort to adequately reflect their experiences. Various community representatives (e.g., school principals) provided feedback during the writing of the final research report. Based on the arguments of other PAR researchers (Macaulay et al., 1999), we are confident that this project supported our goal of ensuring collaboration between the participants and the researchers.

Conclusion

When researchers publish their findings from PAR projects, they concentrate on the exciting action that was created. As a result, how they managed PAR methodological processes (e.g., process of consent, relationship building) receive less, if any, attention in the research literature. In an effort to provide some practical insight for future researchers interested in PAR with Aboriginal peoples, particularly with youth, we have outlined how we navigated some of our PAR project's methodological challenges and considerations. Our intent was not to offer simple answers to these complex methodological issues; instead, we hope that other researchers or community members can optimize our lessons and transfer some of our research experiences into their own PAR settings with young Aboriginal women.

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