

Lessons Learned: Participatory Action Research with Young Aboriginal Women



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Aboriginal Women's Body Image

- Focus on the “white, thin, toned, and flawless body” (Blood, 2005)
 - Focus on the “obesity epidemic” (Marchessault, 1999)
 - High prevalence of body dissatisfaction among Aboriginal women (Gittelsohn et al., 1996)
 - Few studies have highlighted the voices of Aboriginal women
 - Young Aboriginal women have voiced the need for action (Fleming et al., 2006)
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Participatory Action Research (PAR)

- Aboriginal communities *must* be given the option of a PAR approach (CIHR, 2007)
 - Youth want to develop the “capacities that will help them to tackle their own challenges” (RCAP, 1996)
 - Few methodological frameworks for engaging in PAR processes with Aboriginal communities
 - “Lessons learned” could be valuable to others (Fletcher, 2003)
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PAR with Young Aboriginal Women

- Within this project we worked primarily with a core group of seven young Aboriginal women from Nutana Collegiate (a high school in Saskatoon) to develop initiatives that created action at the individual, school, provincial, and national level.
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Main Contributions

- Implementation of ***action*** at various levels (individual, school, provincial, national)
 - Action was focused on three general goals:
 - Promoting positive body image experiences (e.g., Wellness Policy)
 - Self-expression (e.g., Writing Group)
 - Creating awareness (e.g., Media Opportunities)
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Purpose

- To highlight some of the methodological challenges and considerations that were addressed in our recent school-based participatory action research (PAR) project with young Aboriginal women in Saskatoon.
 - Specifically:
 - Defining the community
 - Obtaining informed consent
 - Developing and maintaining relationships
 - Ensuring participant collaboration
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Defining the Community



Defining the Community

- Single most important ethical principle is that Aboriginal peoples should have control over their own knowledge (Battiste, 2002)
 - Aboriginal peoples must be involved throughout the entire research process
- Defining the community and community representatives is a critical first step in the research process

Our Experience

- Nearly half of the students who attend Nutana self-identify as an Aboriginal person
- Sought support from the Aboriginal Elder who was associated with Nutana
 - Work with students to define community, as communities are “self-defined” spaces

Multiple Communities

- Nutana Collegiate
 - Other smaller communities embedded
 - Linda Smith's (1999) notion of "nested identities"
- Core group of young Aboriginal women
 - Aboriginal women may constitute their own community

Informed Consent



Informed Consent

- Required to protect the rights of participants, universities, and institutions
 - “Process of consent is inherently hierarchical” (Haverkamp, 2005)
 - Researchers often assume that acquiring consent is a “non-event” (Knight et al., 2004)
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Our Experience

- Consent process can serve as a barrier to establishing shared authority in PAR
 - Particularly when parental consent is required

“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? ...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.”

Importance of *Negotiation*

- Not simply an ethical process in which the participants tick a box (Smith, 1999)
- Continually engaged youth in conversations about processes of consent
 - Critical in terms of understanding the broad range of perspectives

Developing and Maintaining Relationships



Developing and Maintaining Relationships

- The most critical phase of community-based participatory research is the initial contact and relationship building (Fletcher, 2003)
- Research ethics is about “establishing, maintaining, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relationships” (Smith, 1999)

Our Experience

- First three months were instrumental in terms of developing and maintaining relationships with school members
 - Importance of these processes in developing relationships
 - Familiarization
 - Making connections
 - Giving back
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Our Experience

- Process may be more important than the outcome
 - The research process played an important role in the development of effective initiatives
- Ending relationships at the end of research
 - Importance of communication and honesty

“Tara did a lot during this school year and the students and staff are really disappointed she has to leave ...especially me; her and I had a lot of fun hanging out and working together”

Ensuring Participant Collaboration



Ensuring Participant Collaboration

- Collaboration is key to ensuring that participants benefit
 - PAR can involve various degrees of participation at different stages
 - Aboriginal peoples should be given the opportunity to engage in writing processes
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Our Experience

- Little interest in participating in the overall writing of the research results of the PAR project
 - Did contribute pieces of writing from action initiatives
 - Did not want participants to feel that they *had* to engage in writing processes
 - Importance of consultation
 - Research partners have expertise in different domains, and are *equal* in terms of contributions they make (Boog, 2003)
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Summary

- PAR methodological processes are often overlooked when publishing findings
 - Lack of guidance for methodological processes should not deter others from engaging in PAR
 - Future researchers or community members can hopefully optimize on our “lessons learned”
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Thank you
