Practising Community-Based Participatory Research

Stories of Engagement, Empowerment, and Mobilization

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PURICH
BOOKS

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Introduction

"Research That Belongs to Us"

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Although this book deals with research methods, it isn't a typical research methods text. It is best described as a collection of stories about doing community-based participatory research (CBPR) with an eye toward social justice. Throughout the book, the authors discuss the impetus for their research, how it came to be implemented, and how communities and policy advocates are using it to effect change. They believe that individuals and communities who are excluded from and/or negatively affected by public policy have much to contribute to policy dialogue. However, though their experiences and insights are invaluable to social science researchers, many have come to distrust researchers, and for good reason. For example, Smith (1999) chronicles how Western forms of knowledge have been used as tools of colonization. In Canada, we have seen the deeply damaging effects of misguided research and public policies, which gave us Indian residential schools (TRC 2015) and the Sixties Scoop (Johnston 1983). For Indigenous people and others who have been socially and economically excluded, a deep distrust in research is understandable – they have seen little evidence of its value and much evidence of its harm.

All the research described in this volume was conducted with organizations and individuals who work and live in socially and economically marginalized Manitoba communities. Many chapters focus on Indigenous communities. Manitoba has a very large and growing Indigenous population, which measures poorly against a host of social and economic indicators (Fernandez, MacKinnon, and Silver 2015). As highlighted throughout the book, colonial policies and systemic racism continue to

leave a trail of trauma. The authors recognize that if we are to engage with marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous ones, to shift the policy discourse in a meaningful way, our starting point must be the establishment of trusting relationships in which research is guided by communities and all contributors are recognized for their strengths.

Although Manitoba forms the backdrop for the stories included here, the issues they address are not unique to the province. They occur in urban centres and rural and Indigenous communities throughout North America and beyond. The research methods and the policy solutions that are put forward here can be used – probably are being used – in communities everywhere. We believe our stories will be informative to scholars and community practitioners who wish to undertake research that is sensitive to the negative effects that "outsider" research has had for many communities.

CBPR Defined

A vast literature describes research models and methods that, to varying degrees, are participatory and action-oriented. The idea of involving communities in the research process is not new. For example, in the 1930s, Kurt Lewin suggested engaging "minority groups" in "action research" as a means to "overcome the forces of exploitation and colonialization" (Adelman 1993, 8). Reason and Bradbury (2001, 2) note that action research is about "working towards practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding." Some commentators suggest that action research has a "conservative influence" on community-based research, failing to acknowledge class conflict (Strand et al. 2003), whereas others trace its evolution to Marxist theories and Freirian pedagogies that emphasize the need to move beyond the generation of knowledge to action – praxis. Gramsci's theory of the organic intellectual also lends itself well to participatory research practice (Reason and Bradbury 2001, 3).

Participatory research (PR), participatory action research (PAR), and CBPR are similar in that they value engaging non-researchers in the research process. This can vary from minimal participation in design and implementation to full involvement throughout. Green et al. (2003, 419) describe PAR as "systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or

effecting social change." Although PAR is not limited to research with marginalized and oppressed communities, many researchers who work in this context and with transformative aims do employ it (Gatenby and Humphries 2000; Khanlou and Peter 2005; Mertens 2008). PAR has also been called a "process and a goal" that entails collaboration and the incorporation of local knowledge; eclectic, diverse, and case-oriented, it involves emergent processes that link scientific understanding to orientation (Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy 1993).

Engaging marginalized communities in research has become quite common in the health field, and the term CBPR is most often used there. As Israel et al. (2005, 8–9) explain, health-related CBPR is guided by certain principles: acknowledging community as a unity of identity; building on strengths and resources with the community; facilitating collaborative, equitable partnerships in all phases of the research, involving an empowering and power-sharing process that attends to social inequalities; fostering co-learning and capacity building among all partners; integrating and achieving a balance between knowledge generation and intervention for mutual benefit; focusing on the local relevance of public health problems and on ecological perspectives that attend to the multiple determinants of health; involving systems development using a cyclical and iterative process disseminating results to all partners and involving them in the distribution; involving a long-term process and commitment to sustainability. Since it has become increasingly clear that health outcomes are determined by social and economic factors, it makes sense that CBPR focused on public policy has emerged as a common practice.

Although the participatory nature of action research, PAR, and CBPR does differ from project to project, all three models are designed to be more inclusive than their traditional counterparts and to conduct research that builds capacity. However, some models are rooted in an understanding of oppression. For example, in the 1960s Paulo Freire asserted that the oppressed should be engaged in education connected with research and action as a means to emancipation and social justice. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2006, 65), Freire states that a critical stage in their emancipation is an understanding of their oppression, leading to an active role in their liberation. A methodology that enables participants to have a voice and be empowered through their storytelling is also consistent with Indigenous

research methodologies. As Smith (1999, 127) writes, "community action approaches [to research] assume that people know and can reflect on their own lives." This is especially important for the Manitoba Reseach Alliance (MRA), given the significant number of Indigenous people who participate in our research. Developing a research paradigm that acknowledges the importance of cultural identity and the role of colonization and oppression in shaping lives can contribute to consciousness raising, empowerment, renewed cultural identity, individual emancipation, and movement toward systemic transformation. Social science researchers who are schooled in Western research methods and are interested in systemic transformation have some work to do. As Guba and Lincoln state, social science research "needs emancipation from hearing only the voices of Western Europe, emancipation from generations of silence, and emancipation from seeing the world in one colour" (quoted in Chilisa 2012, 3).

Although there are similarities among the participatory approaches described above, levels of engagement and ownership differ, and not all approaches move from research to action. Because CBPR has become increasingly popular in recent years, we believe that researchers must clearly articulate what it means to them. It entails much more than simply undertaking research in a community. We have heard far too often of incidents in which a university researcher asks a community-based organization for a letter of support, claiming that his or her project is grounded in community-based research, even though the organization itself has had no input or awareness of the project. A university colleague once asked me, "How do I find a community organization that would like to work with me on my research?" She seemed surprised when I explained that in my experience, the best CBPR unfolds in the opposite direction – the community brings an idea to a researcher with whom it has established a relationship of trust. The researcher then works with the community to move its ideas forward in a way that is meaningful to it. My colleague's somewhat superficial understanding of CBPR is not uncommon. Nor should it be surprising, given the context in which university researchers currently operate. In the age of neoliberalism and corporatization of universities, research for the sake of expanding knowledge is devalued, and the emphasis shifts to that which responds to market needs (Brownlee 2015). In part, the trend toward university-community collaborations has

emerged due to necessity, as funding agencies increasingly prioritize research that involves partnerships beyond the academy.

The blossoming interest in CBPR is also due in part to the intense pressure on universities to demonstrate that they are not merely ivory towers, detached from the world. It also reflects community concerns with situations in which outside experts have done research *on* communities rather than collaborating *with* them and recognizing their expertise. Learning from their negative experiences, some communities now refuse to participate in research unless they are accorded greater control and something useful is left behind. In addition, many researchers are genuinely interested in CBPR but don't know how and where to begin.

It is also the case that the structures in place to finance research are based on the Western paradigm. This presents a dilemma for both universities and community researchers who wish to pursue egalitarian approaches that value diverse forms of knowledge. Although research-granting bodies are increasingly encouraging "community collaboration," requirements and models of practice remain hierarchical in design, placing higher value in academic credentials than in organic and Indigenous knowledge (Chilisa 2012).

Our Approach to CBPR

The approach outlined by Strand et al. (2003) aligns well with what we do. It is influenced by the idea of praxis and by "popular education models that emphasize the involvement of people in educating themselves for social change." Strand et al. (ibid., 4) move beyond more conservative action research approaches to participatory models that "emphasize the involvement of people in doing their own research for social change." Such models entail collaboration between academic researchers and community members and the validation of multiple forms of knowledge, methods, and dissemination practices, with the goal of working for social justice. We are guided by Indigenous researchers who remind us that Western ways of knowing do not have primacy over Indigenous ways of knowing or the knowledge that comes with lived experience (Chilisa 2012; Smith 1999; Wilson 2008).

We also aspire to the approach of Mertens (2008, 5), which pushes beyond the participatory notion of research toward what she describes as

a "transformative" research paradigm that challenges oppressive social structures, embraces inclusion, establishes trusting relationships with communities, and disseminates findings broadly and in diverse ways that support social justice aims. Like the models described above, the CBPR presented in this book intends to move beyond the generation of knowledge to that which empowers and mobilizes communities to engage in public policy change. CBPR means different things to different people. For us, it is conducted *with* communities, but it doesn't stop there. It is guided by the belief that communities can use research to advocate for policy change in hopes of creating a more equitable world.

Many of the research stories told in this book are more accurately described as *community-driven* rather than community-based, because the research ideas and methods were identified by people in communities where social and economic injustices are experienced daily (see Chapters 1, 2, 11, and 12). Working alongside trained researchers, they sought to explore and expose issues as well as propose and advocate for public policy solutions to improve social and economic conditions in their communities. For us, CBPR relationships that move from research to action and/or that produce tools for use by communities best reflect the spirit of social-justice-focused CBPR.

The Importance of Trusting Relationships

The relationships chronicled in this book have developed due to mutual trust between researchers and community members. These take time to nurture. In many cases, community partners determined which methods would best suit the needs and objectives of the research project. In all cases, findings were disseminated widely and in accessible forms. In some instances, researchers continued to be involved in moving research to action through public policies and program development (see Chapters 4, 5, and 12).

Through the stories of researchers and their community partners, this book provides rich insights into the possibilities of conducting CBPR while also reflecting on some associated challenges and realities. One challenge is the process of writing up the results. Very few service providers and activists are particularly interested in this task. They want to drive the

process and ensure that their opinions are reflected in it, but most are happy to leave the writing to university researchers. For example, in the case of the chapters co-authored by myself, my community partners drove the research and were fully engaged in the writing in that they reviewed and commented on various revisions and gave final approval to be included as co-authors. But they did not take the lead on the writing. This process succeeded largely because we had built trusting relationships with each other and because each person's contribution was respected. The reality is that the stories in this book would not have been written had researchers not taken the initiative. We think this division of labour makes sense, as writing is one of the skills that researchers bring to the work. Our community partners are service providers and activists who have many abilities, but they are not academics, and most are not writers. They are busy doing the work that we write about. They want their stories to be told, and we have negotiated a way to do this respectfully, accurately, and as collaboratively as possible.

Power and Privilege

Although we have made every effort to be participatory and inclusive, it is also true that those who hold the pen or shoot the video wield a certain amount of power over the process, and we need to be mindful of this. As Carole O'Brien points out in Chapter 10, even when we do our best to follow the lead of our community partners and engage them throughout the research process, they typically do not see every frame of film or every word transcribed. If only for practical reasons, we make certain choices in determining which words and images are important. Indeed, our trusting relationships with our partners have allowed us to take some liberties, but we must acknowledge that we have not completely eliminated power and privilege from our process.

How the Book Is Organized

The stories presented in this book are organized in three parts, followed by a concluding chapter.

Part 1 is titled "We're in It for the Long Haul." Every story in this section is an example of research partnerships that evolved over several years,

most of which continue. They show that university researchers can remain engaged with their community partners, using their findings to advocate for policy change.

The second part is titled "Walking Beside." The stories here, which have more clearly defined beginnings and endings, typically involve emerging researchers who were either students or recent graduates when they conducted their studies. The projects were important to them and to the communities with whom they worked. The students acquired a better understanding of what it meant to conduct research *with* communities. For example, reflecting years later on her participatory action research with sex trade workers (Chapter 8), Maya Seshia notes a number of things she would do differently to further engage the women, not only in naming the issues, but also in developing a plan of action toward policy change. Although the authors of these chapters did not remain involved beyond the project, they walked alongside their partners, benefitting from "the best combination of experiential and intellectual learning" (Strand et al. 2003, 10) while also bringing knowledge, policy advocacy tools, and new skills to the community.

Part 3 of the book is titled "Detours." It focuses on research that took roads less travelled, using less typical methods and approaches. These case studies are important because they demonstrate how being open to new ways of gathering and disseminating knowledge can have a powerful impact. MRA researchers have learned of the importance of using tools and methods that extend beyond the traditional formula, which emphasizes research design, gathering and analyzing data, and writing a report for academic publication. Although MRA researchers do this too, our community partners have taught us to be more broadminded. They have taught us to be open to innovative ideas and methods, and to concentrate more on what is useful to the community than on our own personal interests and expectations. Some of our best, most effective, and far-reaching work has been atypical research. This is particularly important when working with Indigenous communities for which Western methods have been deeply damaging. Our community partners, especially those who are Indigenous, remind us of the harm done by outside researchers. The Indigenous people and communities with whom we work will not tolerate

this situation and are keenly aware of the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) that are now firmly entrenched in Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. Nonetheless, research remains dominated by Western methods, and so we continue to follow the lead of our Indigenous partners if they choose to explore differing ways of knowing and telling.

Because of its natural alignment with OCAP, CBPR has become a typical model for research with Indigenous communities. However, it transcends this application because it operates from a basic level of respect for "multiple sources of knowledge and methods of discovery and dissemination" (Strand et al. 2003, 8). It creates a level playing field by removing researchers as "the experts," positioning them as possessing expertise that is valuable but no more and no less than the expertise of others.

The Conclusion, subtitled "Possibility, Promise, and Policy Change," brings us back to the beginning – reflecting further on "what we do and why we do it," and the broader unintended benefits of community-based research as a means of transforming public policy and effecting social change.

For readers who are currently doing CBPR, we hope you will find comfort and familiarity with our stories and perhaps take away a fresh new idea or two. For those who are new to CBPR but are intrigued by its possibilities, we hope our enthusiasm will inspire you. And for those who aren't convinced of its value, we hope that this book will change your mind.

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