

Researching the Research: A Self-Reflective Case Study of a
Community-Driven Collaborative Project

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Introduction

The project described in this paper was initiated by a women's centre within an inner city, urban neighborhood. The project had two complementary goals. Our primary goal was to talk with women who lived in the community in order to better understand their educational needs, their reasons for accessing (or not accessing) existing educational options, and their recommendations for educational programming. Reports have been prepared that summarize our primary findings for presentation to different audiences (e.g., community members; community-based service providers). A second, critical part of our project, however, was to conduct a self-reflective case study of our collaborative processes in order to: (1) describe our community-initiated research project, and (2) generate constructive feedback and advice for effectively and respectfully undertaking research initiatives in communities. This paper presents what we learned in this project about conducting respectful, equitable, community-driven research.

In order to achieve our primary objective (i.e., consulting women in the community regarding existing and desired educational options), three women came together from three different organizations to co-coordinate the project. These women were from: (1) the community's women's centre; (2) a local learning disabilities association, and (3) an education faculty at a university. Next, an advisory committee was established comprising community members, personnel from community support agencies, and university personnel. Finally, three women were hired to serve as co-researchers, two from the inner-city community, and one with experience in community-based research. These co-researchers analyzed and summarized findings from individual interviews and focus groups. Their summaries were pulled together to produce the final primary research reports.

The Self-reflective Case Study

Many researchers have argued that collaborative research is preferable to traditional research because all participants are involved in each stage of a study, and the usual hierarchical relationship between *researcher* and *researched* is broken down (e.g., Chataway, 1997; Simonson & Bushaw, 1993). However, many researchers have also described challenges inherent in conducting participatory research. For example, Austin and Baldwin (1992) note that true collaboration between researchers and community members "raises issues of power, influence, professional identity and integrity" (p. 2). As a result, a challenge exists in fairly distributing power and credit among individuals from different institutions. Among the challenges that Dirom (2000) describes are a lack of fit between community issues and narrow specializations common in universities, universities' reluctance to fund research that is relevant to communities, the difficulty of sharing power and decision-making, differences in modes of work between universities and communities, and the problems communities might have when working within systems that "tend to foster competitive and individualistic values" (p. 21). As a final example, Simonson and Bushaw (1993) caution that communities may not actually be empowered within collaborative projects. To address these types of challenges, Dirom recommends establishing clarity regarding the goals and terms within university-community partnerships, flexibility, openness to new ways of doing research, and ongoing assessment of the processes. Building from this prior research, the project team established what was hoped to be a fair, transparent, self-critical, and dynamic approach that would circumvent challenges encountered in previous projects. This self-reflective case study was designed to evaluate the success of those efforts.

Research Processes. To collect data for the case study, one of this paper's authors interviewed co-coordinators, co-researchers, and the members of the advisory committee (at one or several points in time). In addition, the case study researcher attended and documented advisory committee meetings. Additional data sources included co-researcher summary reports, advisory committee minutes, records of other meetings and correspondence, administrative records, and documents describing community organizations and educational opportunities. Three researchers collaboratively reviewed these data to identify emergent themes, using a variation of the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998).

Research Findings and Conclusions

Successes. Project team members identified many successes experienced in the project. For example, the three co-coordinators described how they worked together flexibly and supportively. Moreover, the three reflected that they were able to effectively share their individual expertise and establish useful "divisions of labour." Team members perceived each other to be respectful, flexible, and willing to adapt and make changes. The advisory committee played a formative and meaningful role ("not just a rubber stamp"), and advisory meetings invited respectful, productive discussions with open sharing of perspectives and ideas. Project team members personally gained (e.g., insights) through the process of collaboration.

Challenges. While the co-coordinators and advisory committee worked well together, the three co-researchers had difficulty working effectively as a team. Their effectiveness was undermined by poor communication, different working styles, and an imbalance in privilege, skills, and resources. Co-researchers thought that more group-building and training at the beginning of the project would have helped them to work better together. Bureaucratic requirements (e.g., for cumbersome consent forms), unwieldy structures (e.g., for paying community researchers), and a shortage of funds also created barriers for project team members. In spite of considerable efforts, difficulties were also encountered in establishing and sustaining connections with the First Nations community.

Critical Issues & Conclusions. A key concern of project team members was that the findings from the primary project be of use to the community, especially to the women whose insights, knowledge and experiences informed the findings. Emphasis was given to the need for research findings to be owned and adopted by the community, rather than sitting on a shelf or being recognized only in institutional contexts (e.g., by the University). Further, although project partners worked towards common goals, each also had to remain cognizant of her individual accountabilities (e.g., to communities, organizations or institutions). Advice for future community research collaborations centred on the need for valuing and sharing expertise from different contexts and "locations." In this project, collaboration was successful when differences were valued, when people looked beyond categorizations (stereotypical or systemic) to flexibly work together on common goals, when project goals were negotiated openly, and when team members were willing to learn and adjust their thinking to accommodate varying perspectives. Specific advice included creating collaborative spaces wherein diverse life and professional experiences would be valued, and within which people could be supported to work productively together. In interviews and meetings, project team members often described ways in which, in this project, these recommendations were successfully enacted.

References

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