

REFLECTIVE NARRATIVE

Lessons Learned Through Community-Based Participatory Research on Employment Experiences of Racialized Peoples in an Ontario City: A Reflective Narrative

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INTRODUCTION

As a group of learners and early career researchers, we reflect on our experiences developing a community-based participatory research (CBPR) project in Barrie, Ontario with the City of Barrie's Anti-Racism Taskforce on employment experiences of racialized community members. The Anti-Racism Taskforce was established in June 2020 by Barrie City Council to work with police services, school boards, community groups, municipal organizations, social services, businesses, and labour and government agencies to develop a strong understanding of the needs of racialized community members and make transformative change concerning racism in Barrie, Ontario.

We were invited to collaborate with the Anti-Racism Taskforce on this research project due to previous anti-racism education events that Erika Campbell, a member of our research team, facilitated with members of the Anti-Racism Taskforce in Barrie, Ontario in March of 2021. The Taskforce was aware of Erika Campbell's research experience and asked for her help to develop a research project that examined the experiences of racialized peoples at their place of work. Members of the Taskforce noticed that while racialized populations were increasing in Barrie, Ontario, many workplaces were still predominately white.

Additionally, from 2020 to 2021, hate crimes in Barrie, Ontario rose by 50 percent, which is deeply concerning for the safety of racialized community members [1]. In a small community like Barrie, Ontario, which lacks diversity, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour are being treated as outsiders within their own society [2]. Racially-biased police violence, non-violent and violent racism, microaggressions, and sexual and gender-based violence affect the day-to-day lives of racialized community members [3]. In workplaces across Barrie that lack diversity, racism towards racialized individuals is especially harmful when perpetrators are often not held accountable for their actions by the employer [4]. Combating racism and building an anti-racist community within Barrie, Ontario are important steps to creating a safer, inclusive city.

By working with the Anti-Racism Taskforce, we gained insights into the value of CBPR via the co-creation of a study that explores employment experiences of racialized people working within healthcare, education, policing, and the municipality in Barrie, Ontario. CBPR, as a methodology, can be broadly defined as the practice of conducting research on community issues in conjunction with those who are affected by the issues – community members [3]. Perhaps the most notable attribute of CBPR is the focus on equitable involvement of all community partners and researchers.

Within anti-racism research, this is especially important because CBPR emphasizes co-production of knowledge by ensuring research is both responsive to the needs of racialized communities and does not reproduce epistemic violence and ontological hierarchies [4]. By using this methodology within our research, we strive to foster meaningful interventions that are beneficial to the community. Through the practice of CBPR, we reflect upon the lessons learned while creating a research proposal with the Taskforce.

RELATIONALITY

In CBPR, relationships are essential to the co-construction of knowledge [5]. However, we rarely discuss the process of establishing and developing relationships between researchers and community members. Relationality within research pertains to the process of building relationships that foster compassion, respect, and reciprocity [6]. Relationality also maintains accountability on behalf of the researcher to meet the research and knowledge development needs of the community [7]. As we established relationships with members of the Anti-Racism Taskforce, we thought critically about our positionality. Each researcher has a unique social location, by belonging to different cultural, racial, ethnic, and national groups. Some members of the research team have lived experiences of racialization and racism, while others do not and belong to groups that have benefited from the social construction of racial categories through white privilege and supremacy. As researchers, we collectively hold power through our role in constructing knowledge due to traditional top-down approaches to research. These approaches position researchers as experts who choose what is researched and what knowledge is generated. As a research methodology, CBPR counters this top-down, researcher-focused approach and instead prioritizes leadership from community partners. CBPR requires us, as researchers, to remain mindful of our positionality as we conduct research with the Anti-Racism Taskforce.

When considering our positionality, we established a practice of consultation within the study, whereby all work is informed, shared, and reviewed by the Taskforce. The objective of the study – to describe employment experiences of racialized peoples working within healthcare, policing, municipal government, and education within Barrie, Ontario, was established by the Taskforce. We then designed a study, including an interview guide, to meet this objective. All feedback and recommendations from the Taskforce were discussed and incorporated to ensure we were creating knowledge to meet the needs of their community. Through this practice we situated members of the Taskforce as experts leading the direction of the research – making them researchers. We actively worked to redress power dynamics within research and this community by establishing a relationship that situates the community as knowledge holders and researchers supporting research to meet their needs.

THE ROLE OF SPACE IN COMMUNITY RESEARCH

Within CBPR, we must consider the role of space. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, meeting community members in person in Barrie was not possible, therefore we relied solely on virtual communication to connect with the Taskforce. Without living in the community, we struggled to establish a physical connection with the space in which we were doing research, resulting in a physical barrier to conducting CBPR. Our proposal development phase was longer than expected because it was difficult to coordinate meetings to discuss the project, while working remotely. For example, each aspect of the research proposal was discussed with the Taskforce in virtual, synchronous meetings, then written into the proposal by a member of the research team, and finally sent to the Taskforce for approval. While this cycle of virtual communication took more time to develop the research proposal, compared to in-person meetings, it was a necessary process to ensure members of the Anti-Racism Taskforce were leading the direction of the study. Further, the virtual nature of our research necessitated a novel approach to building relationships with community members. During our biweekly meetings, we dedicated a significant

portion of our meetings to *check-ins*, in which we shared the personal aspects of our life. We were able to celebrate each other's successes and support each other through struggles, and in this way, we built trust with one another. We also engaged in self-reflexive activities during these meetings to discuss concepts like white supremacy, misogynoir, and fragility, as well as feminist and critical race theories, to ensure our collective approach was aligned. We discussed news articles, and social media posts from Barrie community members and local anti-Racism organizations to better understand current issues of racism and activism taking place in Barrie, Ontario.

The geographic location, demographics, and infrastructure of a community are unique to that space; therefore, the issues are also distinct [8]. As researchers who are both external to the community and unable to physically be there, we could not embed ourselves in the community to understand the ways different systems and structures contribute to racism and oppression within the workplace. The Anti-Racism Taskforce was essential to teaching us about the ways that racism affects the Barrie community. The Taskforce educated us about the lack of racial parity between the increasing population of racialized peoples in Barrie, Ontario and the lack of racialized peoples employed within major employment sectors: education, policing, healthcare, and the municipality. When we structured the research proposal, we determined that data analysis must be led by the Taskforce, to ensure the themes that emerge during data analysis of interviews adequately and accurately capture the nuanced experiences of racialized community members in their workplaces. We decided with the Taskforce that all results and recommendations put forward through this research will undergo member checking, whereby participants will review the results to ensure an accurate representation of their employment experiences.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS AND COLLABORATION

CBPR is a “systematic investigation with the participation of those affected by an issue for purposes of education and action or affecting social change” [3 p3]. The facilitation of equitable partnerships is a key tenet of CBPR, making collaboration with the Anti-Racism Taskforce essential to our project's success. Members of the Taskforce brought unique insider knowledge to the research that was used to inform the design of our study. For example, the Taskforce members determined that research must be done to explore the employment experiences of racialized people in specific job sectors such as health, policing, education, municipality, since these sectors employ a large proportion of the population and provided services widely used by the community.

Even from initial stages of collaboration with the Taskforce, this research has been directed by their experiences and insights about their community. A critique of CBPR is that researchers tend to be driven by scholarly pursuits to conduct and publish research, whereas community partners are focused on transformation within their community and ensure the research aligns with the community's priorities [9]. As researchers, we have a responsibility to achieve research objectives set by community partners [9]. Through collaboration, we ensured that both the research objectives and community needs were met. To maintain this commitment, we met bi-weekly to discuss the research proposal development and offered workshops that taught different research designs and methods; ensuring Taskforce members have the necessary skills and tools to lead and coordinate all aspects of research in the future. The Taskforce members have strong insights into the needs of their community. We recognized this as a strength, because the Taskforce can set a research agenda that will benefit their community.

However, participants of this study may be colleagues, neighbours, or friends of Taskforce members, or Taskforce members themselves, which could discourage participants from enrolling in the study or sharing their experiences honestly and openly if interviewed by someone they know. Since we do not belong to the community, all researchers felt this may also serve as a potential deterrent for people to participate. We decided to give participants a choice in who conducted their interview. When collaborating on this work together with the Taskforce, we were better able to account for the needs of participants during interviews. Through collaboration and insights of the members of the Anti-Racism Taskforce, we were better able to be of service to the community of racialized peoples living in Barrie, Ontario.

CONCLUSION

We have learned many lessons through CBPR with the City of Barrie's Anti-Racism Taskforce as we co-created a research proposal. We are grateful for the opportunity to continue to learn more about relationality, space within community research, the benefits of community insights, and collaboration in CBPR as we collect and analyze data and share the findings of this study with the community.

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