Community-Engaged Research Ethical Principles

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Overview

In 2020, Simon Fraser University's Community Engaged Research Initiative set out to expand and deepen our resources pertaining to community engaged research ethics.

As part of this work, we identified and distilled ethical principles from a broad base of literature including community-led research ethics documents (e.g. Research 101: A Manifesto for Doing Research in the Downtown Eastside [Boilevin et. al, 2019]), Indigenous-led resources (e.g. Ethics in First Nations Research [Assembly of First Nations, 2009]), and a range of academic journal articles and literature reviews across disciplines.

Each principle includes a set of practical questions that a community engaged researcher might consider as part of their process. This document has been visually designed as a user-friendly resource for community members, early career scholars, faculty, staff, and organizations.

We hope this resource helps you to carry out community engaged research that prioritizes a complex and thoughtful approach to ethics.

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1 Harm and Risk Reduction

CER projects should be designed and carried out with significant attention to potential risks for community and participants, including to the broader social, political, and economic fabric of a community. Risks should be collaboratively evaluated and actively mitigated in an ongoing manner.

Overview

The Hippocratic oath practiced by medical doctors is "no harm," which entails a commitment to thinking through and mitigating potential risks to patients, and ensuring that actions taken are in the best interest of patients. In the CER context, community engaged research paradigms have emerged in large part as a response to historical instances of exploitative research relationships with marginalized and underserved communities, and the recognition that research has the capacity to inflict unintended harm. Where Indigenous communities are engaged, CER researchers have an added responsibility to understand past injustices: "By acknowledging the historic debt to First Nations that is created by the unjust research practices that have been inflicted upon them, the research community can consider a path forward by designing mechanisms that strive to prevent further harm and to expand upon the benefits of good research" (Assembly of First Nations, 2009, p. 5). Taken together, CER literature cites the overt priority that research processes must protect participants from harm, minimize risks, and be non-malificent (Chou & Frazier, 2019; Ross et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2018).

Tips and Considerations:

Account for additional risks in less controlled environments
As CER, by definition, shifts research into more complex and "real world" environments, usually with explicit goals for university researchers to relinquish control, the potential realm of potential risks expands. Isler and Corbie-Smith (2012) offer this example: "Engaging community partners and participants, particularly within the environments where they already receive health care or other services, may lead to conflation of the obligations, risks and benefits of research participation with other clinical or social services they receive" (p. 907).

Acknowledge historical trauma and harm caused by research in and with specific communities
This acknowledgement of the past should be paired with an active commitment to develop mechanisms that prevent harm and bolster benefits to communities involved (Assembly of First Nations, 2009).

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Consider different types of risk that may be broader or more systemic

"Traditional attempts to avert risk have focused primarily on physical harms, whereas relationships with communities introduce the potential for broader emotional, psychological and social harms. The context and influence of relationships with communities broadens the potential risks to be experienced, who conceives and receives the benefits of research, and determination of outcomes." (Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012, p. 907).

Undergo collaborative risk assessment with community

"Evaluation of risk is done in partnership with the community, as investigators may not be in the best position to consider the full range of potential harms that may occur within the community context" (Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012, p. 908).

Enact additional protections for vulnerable populations

"Consideration is given to what additional protections, if any, are needed for vulnerable populations" (US Department of Health and Human Services as qtd in Ross et al., 2010, p. 34).

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- How will the community take part in risk assessment?

- What are the potential risks associated with this research project?

- What are concrete measures that are being taken to mitigate risk and avoid harm?

- What additional protections or considerations are required for this participant / co-researcher group?

- At what phases of the research will there be intentional examinations of the potential for harm and risk? (Consider building in time / conversations for multiple points throughout)

- Has this community had a history of being harmed by research? How will this history be acknowledged and utilised to ensure that similar harms/risks do not play out for this project?

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2 Community Participation

CER projects aim for high levels of community participation during all phases of research, including the identification of a research question, study design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination and knowledge mobilization. Community partners and community members should be involved in leadership and collaboration to the extent that they desire, and whenever possible, their labour should be paid or otherwise reciprocated.

Overview

The call for universities to partner with community members and the community at large in research is well articulated in the CER and community engagement literature (e.g. Goemans et al., 2018; Grain & Lund, 2016; Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012; Mikesell, Bromley & Khodyakov, 2013; Mulligan & Nadarajah, 2008; Khodyakov et al., 2016). Indigenous methodologies have long called for an enhanced participatory role for Indigenous communities to take ownership, control, access, and possession over research that affects them (FNIGC, 2011). Despite broad agreement on the value of this university-community collaboration, the literature entails varying approaches to such relationships, and the ethical imperatives behind them.

Tips and Considerations:

Begin with a project that is community-driven
The needs and priorities of the participating community must drive the choice of the study topic and its focus" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

Build a study and ask a research question that is community-centered
The central goals and questions of ethical CER, according to Isler and Corbie-Smith (2012) should be derived from community – not from principle investigators and university researchers. A synonymous term/approach to "community-centered" is "community first". In a 2018 article, Goemans and her colleagues identify the application of a "community-first approach by investigating ways to ensure that CCE partnerships maximize the value created for non-profit, community-based organizations" (p. 62).

Build a study design that integrates consistent attention to equal partnership at every step
"Academic and community investigators [should] actively collaborate in all phases of research and equally share power, resources, and responsibility for the study and its outcomes" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

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Approach community partners as intellectual partners
In community engaged research, Isler and Corbie-Smith (2012) note that "Communities are not only research partners, but the originators of the intellectual research property and as such should be recognized as co-leaders of the research processes through which their questions are answered (p. 904).

Share or co-govern and democratic engagement
CER recognizes that "community" is not homogeneous and that a variety of opposing viewpoints and power differentials can thrive within the same community. For this reason and others, CER requires attention to democratic representation and a commitment to a shared governance structure (Goemans et al., 2018; Van Auken, 2019). "Shared governance models that explicitly move beyond advisory structures often formally describe the roles of all partners and create structures that promote equity in decision making" (Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012, p. 910).

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- What are the goals and values of participants?

- What changes would the community partners and other collaborators like to see at the end of this study?

- In what ways are community collaborators fairly compensated for their labour, time investment, and efforts?

- How have community collaborators been integrated at every step of the research plan?

- What governance structures have been set up to guide decision making for the research project? How do these structures hold space for diverse community perspectives?

- How have university researchers reflected upon their own assumptions and views pertaining to the nature of the community partnership? In what ways do university researchers intentionally frame community collaborators as intellectual partners?

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3 Community Benefit

CER projects should be orientated toward a primary goal of achieving community benefit. The community that is most affected by and involved in the research should take part in goal-setting and should experience the greatest benefits of both the process and the outcomes.

Overview

To prioritize community benefits is to build upon the foundation of harm and risk reduction, and to actually plan for positive outcomes as a result of the research. A community engaged approach to research recognizes that academic research has a long history of primarily benefitting the researchers and powerful institutions that instigate research projects. Thus, not only does a CER project enact CER, therefore, actively aims to identify and achieve benefits primarily and specifically for the majority of community members that are most affected by the research. This requires early and consistent communication with community collaborators about processes and outcomes that would be most likely to generate positive changes as understood by the local community.

Tips and Considerations:

Aim for reciprocity or mutual benefit
Research typically benefits university researchers through a range of avenues such as career advancement, sense of purpose or fulfilment, and transformative learning. Less clear, at times, are the benefits that community members can or ought to receive through their engagement with research. CER is designed with the foremost goal of benefitting community and valuing community collaborators' social capital (Boilevin et al., 2019; VanAuken, 2019).

Recognize and account for heterogeneity in perceptions of "benefit"
There may be differences in what individuals and communities understand to be "good" or "beneficial." Plan to engage in early, transparent, and consistent communication about what would constitute a "positive outcome" for community collaborators and partners.

When CER projects engage with Indigenous communities, hold space for transparent conversations about how the research benefits will enhance the right of self-determination
"The right of self- determination of First Nations includes the jurisdiction and authority to make decisions about research in their communities. The benefits to the communities, to each region and the national effort should be strengthened by the research. Research should facilitate First Nations communities in learning more about the health and well being of their peoples, taking control and management of their health information and assist in the promotion of healthy lifestyles, practices and effective program planning" (FNIGC, 2011, p. 3).

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Prioritize Benificence

CER should have demonstrable benefits to the community involved in research. The Belmont Report and other medical research documents suggest that "beneficence" as a core ethical principle aims to maximize the benefits to those involved in research, and diminish or eliminate the risks. "Research activities must result in tangible benefits to the participating community; investigators should be ready to address individual participants' needs uncovered in the course of research" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

Ensure that research funds go to the local community or region that is being engaged

Sometimes, research funds go to an institution or to a national organization to disseminate, and thereby they can lose their efficacy in understanding local contexts. Whenever possible, research funds should go directly to organizations, individuals, or communities that are embedded in the local sociocultural context (Assembly of First Nations, 2009).

Make a contingency plan for generating community benefit

CER, like traditional approaches to research, rarely goes exactly as planned. For this reason, CER researchers may be well advised to create a contingency plan in case the original goals for community benefit do not materialize. Community collaborators, in tandem with researchers, should create a mutually agreeable "backup plan" with associated timelines.

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- How does this research serve the community collaborators and broader community in terms of process? (e.g., How might capacity building or the process of reflection aid a community in skill building or healing?)

- How does this research serve the community collaborators and broader community in terms of outcomes? (e.g., How might research data be used to gain funding for some infrastructure a community has been seeking?)

- What kinds of resources might be generated from the research for long term knowledge mobilization within a community?

- What are the different understandings of "benefit" or "ideal outcome" that exist within the heterogeneous community? How can the project negotiate this spectrum so that as many people as possible are happy with the outcome?

- What happens if the community does not feel they have benefitted from the research? What contingency plans are in place so that this situation can be avoided and/or recovered from?

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4 Action Orientation

An action orientation to CER situates research as a powerful driver of political and systemic change both within a community and within broader systems that affect that community. CER projects should begin with a responsiveness to community issues and assets, and should aim to generate actionable changes at multiple levels.

Overview

CER should, through process and/or outcome, lead to or constitute advocacy, impact, policy changes, active response, and knowledge that may be used by the communities involved (Chou & Frazier, 2019; Khodyakov et al., 2016; VanAuken, 2019). An action orientation leans into the potential for research to be highly political, and to be a potential catalyst for systemic changes such as policy transformation and advocacy work. In research with Indigenous communities, this means active labour to decolonize the production of knowledge as per the First Nations OCAP Principles (Ownership, Control, Access, and Control). In particular, the "Control" principle mandates that: "The aspirations and rights of First Nations to maintain and regain control of all aspects of their lives and institutions include research and information. The principle of 'control' asserts that First Nations, their communities and representative bodies are within their rights in seeking to control research and information management processes which impact them" (FNIGC, 2011, p. 14).

Tips and Considerations:

Respond to community issues and conflicts
Chou and Frazier (2019) use the term "respond" as one of their "4 Rs", wherein this ethical principles "serves as a reminder to initiate an appropriate course of action to the extent that it is ethically advisable, safe, and feasible, even if only to disclose transparently that a solution is yet unclear, and that time to confer with others is needed" (p. 4).

Produce useful and applicable knowledge
"All research must produce useful knowledge, help advocate for vulnerable community needs, lead to policy changes, and/or have a real world impact" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

Embrace the political nature of research
Politics is highly visible in what counts as action research, what should be the focus of enquiry, whose practice is being studied by whom, and whose theory is valid" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006, p. 9). An action orientation to CER calls for a researcher to simultaneously be involved in the construction of knowledge and advocacy/activism for the community with whom they work.

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Reflect on your own values and how you might hold space for different worldviews and values

"Action researchers believe that people are able to create their own identities and allow other people to create theirs. They try to find ways of accommodating multiple values perspectives" (McNiff & Whitehead, 2002, p. 17).

? # Questions to Ask Yourself

- What is the plan for the generation of practical research that is understandable to (and usable for) a broad audience?

- How can this research be used as evidence that demonstrates a particular community need?

- How can this research be used as evidence that supports or bolsters an existing local movement?

- What are some systemic barriers facing the community, and how might this research begin to transform or eliminate such barriers?

- How can the researchers and their affiliated institutions leverage their power and privilege to change policies and advocate for high level change (e.g. institutional, governmental)?

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5 Power Examination & Active Redistribution

Key to CER is the research team's attention to issues of power, privilege, and positionality. In addition to an examination of power, a community engaged research team has the responsibility to commit to action that aims to redistribute unequal power relations.

Overview

Key to CER is the university researcher's understanding of, exploration of, and attention to issues of reflexivity, positionality, and power. Without an inclusion of these components, knowledge continues to be conceptualized in positivist, empirical paradigms that position the researcher as a potentially objective individual who can bracket out biases and access absolute truth. In addition to an examination of power, the community engaged researcher has the responsibility to commit to action that aims to redistribute unequal power relations. In research with Indigenous communities, this means active labour to decolonize the production of knowledge as per the First Nations OCAP Principles (Ownership, Control, Access, and Control). The active redistribution of power may mean that the community engaged researcher leverages institutional resources to better support underserved community organizations, or it may mean that the research is used to advance institutional or systemic policy changes. Whatever the case may be, power in CER is simultaneously examined and actively redistributed.

Tips and Considerations:

Share power in all phases of research
Academic and community investigators [should] actively collaborate in all phases of research and equally share power, resources, and responsibility for the study and its outcomes" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

Spend time and effort examining researcher positionality
University researchers should engage in ongoing critical reflection regarding their identity, biases, assumptions, and associated implications. CER requires that the researcher examines their own attitude and considers how power plays a role in the research processes (Wilson, Kenney & Dickson-Swift, 2018).

Critically examine Western epistemologies and assumptions
"Reframing engagement as a relationship between academicians and community members allows specific attention to issues of power, control and trust that have received limited attention in traditional approaches to research." (Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012, p. 905).

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Take up "Reflexive Evaluation"
"Reflexive evaluation involves a critical reflection on the positionality of participants in relation to the processes they are engaged in and attempting to influence" (Goemans, Levkoe, Andrée, Changfoot & Christopherson-Cote (2018, p. 61).

Consider populations that are historically, persistently, and systemically marginalized
Community engaged research often takes up the goal of generating or enhancing empowerment for systemically marginalized individuals including refugees, rural populations, Indigenous people, people living with addictions, people living with mental health challenges, and people living in poverty (Bacon et al., 2013; Boilevin, 2018; Chou & Frazier, 2019; Stoecker, 2012).

Take action in redistribution of power
"Collaborative insider-professional researcher knowledge generation and application processes in projects of social change that aim to increase fairness, wellness, and self-determination" (Greenwood & Levin, 2003, p. 145).

? # Questions to Ask Yourself

- In what ways has the primary researcher examined their own power and positionality vis-à-vis the community with whom they are working?

- How do key community partners and individuals understand the power relations in this project? (It is not unusual for an institutional researcher to have a very different understanding than the community partners in terms of power relations).

- How and when do open conversations about power arise throughout the project?

- How can issues of unequal power be addressed and discussed without reinforcing those differentials and/or exacerbating them?

- How does power show up in each phase of the research? How might power relations affect processes such as recruitment, planning, data collection, analysis, and dissemination?

- In what ways can this research project contribute to the redistribution of power in the research process itself?

- In what ways can this research project contribute to the redistribution of power in the ways that the findings are disseminated and used?

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6 Anonymity, Confidentiality & Privacy

CER projects prioritize the safety of participant and community identities, and any sensitive data that they may share. Attention to anonymity, confidentiality and privacy in a CER project involves a close collaboration with community to understand and enact both institutional and community systems of protection, while also recognizing that individuals have the right to be identified if they choose to be (and if it is safe) through informed consent.

Overview

In traditional research paradigms, anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality are typical expectations in order to protect research participants and sensitive data. Anonymity can be described as "the degree to which the identity of a message source is unknown and unspecified; thus, the less knowledge one has about the source and the harder it is to specify who the source is among possible options, the more anonymity exists" (Scott, 2005, p. 243). In subtle contrast, confidentiality is a state in which a researcher may know the identity of the participant, but that information is not made public. In CER, these ideas are also of utmost importance, but they become more complex notions (and less discussed in the literature) when participants are also involved as co-researchers and/or co-authors. For this reason, sometimes the anonymity of a participant-researcher might stand in opposition to their agency to be named and acknowledged as a co-researcher. Indeed, there are some community collaborators who wish to be named in a study for a variety of reasons, including recognition or pride. Regardless of tensions that arise, it is the primary researcher's job to ensure the anonymity, confidentiality and privacy of participants insofar as they would like to have it, and insofar as it reasonably mitigates risk. Included in this principle is the safe and secure storage of data in locations that are determined not only by the research institution, but also and especially by the community whose data has been collected.

Tips and Considerations:

Seek out and follow institutional (university-oriented) systems / procedures that are built to protect participants

Institutionally, there must be infrastructure in place to support confidentiality and privacy. Ross and colleagues suggest that in any CER situation "there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of data" (Ross et al., 2010, p. 34). In institutional settings, research ethics boards will require you to write a detailed plan outlining how you will protect the privacy and confidentiality of your participants; Part of this plan usually entails keeping electronic data encrypted in a password protected computer, and any hard copies in a locked and secure area.

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Seek out and follow community-based systems that are built to protect community members

Community organizations typically develop systems and strategies for ensuring the protection and privacy of community members who they serve. Community engaged researchers should align their plans to the community organization or local culture in which the research is taking place.

Identify specific local concerns

Ask community partners and collaborators about which aspects of anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy are of most concern in this community; Assign additional importance and effort to areas identified.

Recognize that for many communities, privacy is not just an individual matter, but also a collective matter

For example, "First Nations share and respect values of personal privacy with other Canadians. However, in addition to personal privacy, First Nations also value community and collective privacy. Recognition of collective privacy interests is based upon the principle that groupings of people, and not just individuals, have an interest in controlling access to information, particularly sensitive information, regarding that specific group or community" (FNIGC, 2011, p. 12).

Maintain confidentiality of documents shared

Many studies involve the sharing of confidential community information and documents, including maps, informal communications, travel records, forms, and other documents; Researchers have the responsibility to maintain the confidentiality not only of the people involved, but also of the authors and people identified in those documents (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008).

Follow data security and storage protocols as determined by the community that is engaged in the research

For example, the First Nations Information Governance Centre mandates that in the case of a national health survey, "All national core raw data will be stored at the FNIGC which assumes the responsibility for all First Nations health information. Raw data will be kept on a server in FNIGC. All data will be password protected and confidentiality of data is maintained as outlined in the Data Protection and Stewardship Protocol and Survival of Confidentiality Requirement of the regional contribution agreement" (FNIGC, 2011, p. 5).

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- To what extent has the community been involved in early conversations about their most pressing concerns related to anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality?

- What types of information are being gathered through the data collection process? To what extent is that information necessary to the study? (Take time to ask why each question is being asked, and consider removing questions that are unimportant or unnecessary.)

- What steps can be taken at the institutional level to ensure the protection of the anonymity, confidentiality, and/or privacy of the information or data?

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- What steps can be taken at the community or organizational level to ensure the protection of the anonymity, confidentiality, and/or privacy of this information?

- In what ways are community partners involved in the conversation about anonymity, confidentiality and privacy? How can they be continually involvement in this aspect of the research?

- Are there circumstances in which community partners or collaborators would rather be identified than anonymized (e.g. for recognition or for co-authorship purposes)? What potential risks are involved in this move away from anonymity? To what degree have there been open conversations about the risks and rewards of identification versus anonymity?

- In relation to the previous question, in what ways has the informed consent process offered participants options related to the level of anonymity and confidentiality they prefer?

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7 Communication, Transparency & Trust

Strong relationships form the bedrock on which CER is built, and those relationships are contingent on effective communication, ongoing transparency, and the long-term development of trust. In order for community to be involved in every step of the research, there must be an explicit commitment to transparent communication in formats that work well for all involved.

Overview

Research participants and/or community co-researchers in CER should have full and complete knowledge of the research including: plans and goals, risks of involvement, rights as participants, how power will be shared, and plans for dissemination. Given that CER often involves populations who are historically, persistently, and systemically marginalized, community partners or collaborators may have experiences of being exploited by government or institutions. For this reason, trust building and relationship building are foundational to CER. Ongoing meetings and updates should be built into CER project designs, and plans are best approached with flexibility and agility; transparent dialogue should be done not only with the intention to share information between university researchers and community, but also with the intention to steer the project according to communications with community.

Tips and Considerations:

Prioritize voluntary informed consent
> The Belmont Report (1979) asserts that the consent process upholds "respect for persons" and protects autonomy. "Voluntary and informed consent" is also listed as one of the nine functions delineated in the United States' federal regulations on the Human Subjects Protection Program (Ross et al., 2010).

Reflect on, write, and practice speaking openly about the benefits you as the primary researcher will gain from this project
> It is no secret to most community participants that university researchers gain benefits through their research, which can entail any combination of: career advancement, degree acquisition, publications, and visibility / publicity. As a researcher, reflect on these benefits early, and practice speaking openly about them with community collaborators. This open acknowledgement should go hand in hand with discussions about the benefits that the community hopes to gain through this partnership, and a commitment to the fulfilment of those community goals.

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Engage early and often in open communication about goals, responsibilities, and needs

In Chou and Frazier's engagement with the "4 Rs" of CER, they propose particular attention to explicit and transparent communication from the beginning of the project. They begin with an intention "to clearly communicate our overarching goals and align them with our partners' goals help us establish our responsibilities to collaborators and stakeholders, and clarify both competing and convergent needs across both sides of partnership" (Chou & Frazier, 2019, p. 6). Khodyakov and colleagues reiterate that in CER, "motives and decisions must also be transparent" (2016, p. 54).

Communicate openly about risks and benefits

"Not only participants but also community at large must be fully aware of study risks and benefits" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

Collaboratively build and share a communication plan; Build into the research schedule regular meetings and/or project updates

To prioritize communication is to plan for reliable and consistent modes of communication. Even if it is unclear at the outset of a project what might be achieved in future meetings, a responsible CER researcher holds space and intentionally carves out time for this, even if the gathering ends up being more informal.

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- To what degree does the research design include intentional communication meetings among collaborators? (These spaces and times for communication should take place throughout all phases of the research.)

- In what ways has the primary researcher reflected upon and explicitly stated the benefits they gain through this partnership? In what ways has this conversation taken place alongside a discussion of community benefits and goals?

- Are there any divergent or conflicting goals for the research? How will divergent project goals or desires be handled? Who decides?

- What modes of communication work best for community partners and collaborators? (e.g. in-person meetings? Emails? Text messages? Phone calls?)

- How often would the community collaborators like to be updated and/or consulted about the research and its direction?

- Are there any historical traumas or past experiences that this particular community has gone through in relation to working with institutions or researchers? How has this history and related concerns been addressed through the primary researcher's communications?

- To what degree has the primary researcher shared aspects of themselves with the community partners or participants? Does the primary researcher model the vulnerability and openness that they ask from participants?

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8 Attention to Context

Attention to context is vital at all stages of CER projects. Since CER happens in and with community, factors such as history, culture, language, current events, and geography comprise the context in which the study occurs, and inevitably influence all aspects of the research, including design, recruitment, methodology, and dissemination.

Overview

The context in which CER projects take place is of particularly high importance in comparison with traditional research paradigms. The reason for this is due in part to the embrace of different ways of knowing, diverse forms of expertise, and less controlled research environments. With CER's focus on locality, the attention to cultural, historical, temporal, socioeconomic, and geographical contexts becomes paramount. In research involving Indigenous communities, the right to self-determination and emphasis on local governance means that "First Nations community authorities must approve data collection in their region" and that local and regional protocols must be respected (FNIGC, 2011, p. 4).

Tips and Considerations:

Consider cultural traditions and appropriateness
"All study activities and protocols must be culturally appropriate and not stigmatizing" (Khodyakov et al., 2016, p.54).

Seek and respect local knowledge
Researchers should have an understanding of and connection to the local context in advance of the study. Knowledge can be expressed and shared in unique ways depending on the community context, and thus community engaged researchers should heed these modes of knowledge sharing and also aspire to them in dissemination processes.

Reflect on the role of place and geography
Isler and Corbie-Smith (2012) emphasize the importance of a "change of place" as a departure from traditional research that is carried out in the ivory towers of academia. CER that is based within communities "eliminates logistical and practical barriers to research participation, particularly by individuals and groups in underserved communities" (2012, p. 906).

Attend to the temporal location or "moment in time" in which research occurs
Current events and temporal moments often have tremendous impact on research. There is no more poignant or recent example of this than the events of 2020 and the "double pandemic" arising out of COVID-19 and the enhanced attention on systemic anti-black racism. Conducting CER in 2020 means doing research and community engagement in a drastically changed landscape from that of previous years.

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Research and reflect on the history of the community
Each community is a present-day result of countless previous generations. Community engaged researchers should attend to the histories of both the people and the place in which research is taking place. The historical context of a community may prompt different approaches and lead to different outcomes of the research.

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- What are the diverse elements of context that are at play in this community (e.g. geography, culture, language, race, history, socioeconomic status, etc.)?

- To what extent has the primary researcher integrated and accounted for cultural norms that are acceptable to the people who are most affected by the research?

- What current events are most discussed by this community? How do those current events impact the people and the livelihoods in this community?

- How is knowledge typically shared in a local context? (e.g. through books, dance, music, poetry, storytelling, newspapers?) Does the primary researcher engage diverse forms of knowledge sharing that are relevant to the local context?

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9 Focus on Relationships

At the heart of CER is a focus on relationships – relationships between people, institutions, places, and knowledge (to name a few). Community-engaged research is a framework or approach to research that is especially founded upon sustainable, trusting, and equitable relationships between researchers and communities.

Overview

What characterizes community-engaged research is not the methods used, but the principles that guide research and the relationships between researchers and the community (Lasker & Weiss, 2003; Minkler, 2005). Whereas traditional modes of academic knowledge seeking may put the collection of accurate and rigorous data at the centre of the process, CER firmly positions relationships and particularly community relationships at the centre of the work. Using a strengths-based approach, CER recognizes the strengths of community organizations and individuals, and seeks to build on those collectively.

Tips and Considerations:

Apply a relationship paradigm to the research
Despite the temptation to conceptualize university-community partnerships using familiar notions within the academy (e.g. theoretical constructs or prescriptive checklists), several scholars recommend thinking about it as an ongoing relationship (Grain et al., 2019; Isler & Corbie-Smith, 2012).

Commit long term to relationships with community
Mulligan and Nadarajah (2008) suggest that CER relationships should include a "commitment to maintain relationships for a matter of years rather than months" (p. 81). Though this can be challenging with smaller research projects, it should be considered the gold standard to maintain long term connections where ever possible. In instances where longer term relationships cannot be maintained or committed to, it is worth considering whether or not a project should go ahead as a CER project.

Be realistic, honest, and transparent with expectations and goals
As in any relationship, honesty is vital to trust building. Despite lofty hopes for any project, primary researchers have the responsibility to instill realistic expectations of their own intentions (e.g. how often or for how long they plan to remain involved in the community or project).

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Focus on people first

The cultural framework laid out by First Nations Information Governance Centre asserts that, "From the beginning, First Nations peoples have been taught that we start with a focus on the people – by giving thanks for their caring, honesty, sharing, and strength" (2011, p. 7).

Be clear and consistent about boundaries

Primary researchers often become (or were already) friends and colleagues with community members through CER projects. As in any relationship, it is vital to set explicit boundaries that simultaneously maintain trust with community members, and also address issues of power imbalances and inequity. It is the primary researcher's responsibility to ensure that community partners understand the professional and relational boundaries in any given circumstance. Additionally, the primary researcher should encourage community collaborators to discuss their own boundaries.

Address conflict quickly and constructively

Relationships are bound to face moments of compromise, miscommunication, or even conflict. Regular meetings and transparent, honest communication can often help to mitigate conflict, but in the instance that conflicts arise, community engaged researchers are encouraged to address them as soon as possible through open dialogue, mutual sharing, and an explicit plan for moving ahead (or in some cases, looping back around to attempt certain components of the research process in a different way).

? Questions to Ask Yourself

- Are there any expectations that the community partner has in terms of time commitment required for a research partnership?

- What length of time can the primary researcher reasonably commit to working in and with the community in question? Is this length of time satisfactory to the community itself?

- What relational boundaries are required of the primary researcher based on their institutional policies and professional commitments?

- How does the research plan integrate multiple modes of communication and transparency in order to mitigate potential misunderstandings?

- What are the personal boundaries of the primary researcher, and have those been clearly communicated to the community partners?

- In what ways has the potential for conflict (and an accompanying plan for handling of conflict) been discussed openly with all stakeholders?

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10 Collaborative Analysis and Dissemination

CER collaborations with community do not stop once data has been collected. In fact, some of the most meaningful collaboration and fruitful insights happen at the stages of analysis (meaning-making) and dissemination (knowledge sharing). Analysis and dissemination should be carried out using frameworks and formats that make sense for community.

Overview

> The practice of speaking for others is often born of a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise. And the effect of the practice of speaking for others is often, though not always, erasure and a reinscription of sexual, national, and other kinds of hierarchies.
>
> (Alcoff, 1991, p. 29)

Several theoretical arguments have been formulated to problematize the act of speaking for or representing others – especially those who are marginalized, disempowered, subjugated, or silenced in society. Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, and postcolonial feminist, Gayatri Spivak, have used the term "the subaltern" to describe those groups who are politically, socially, and often geographically excluded from hegemonic power structures. Spivak, in particular, asked the compelling question, "can the subaltern speak?" to theorize the extent to which those who have been subjugated by colonial powers can know and advocate for a liberated way of being when they have often internalized oppressive (racist, patriarchal) power structures. This broad philosophical question is deeply imbedded in the ethical consideration of how – and by whom - community engaged research findings are analyzed, interpreted, and revised. To this end, Linda Alcoff (1991) published a widely read essay entitled "The problem of speaking for others" in which she contends that not only is it impossible to transcend one's location/positionality in research and writing, but also, that "location is epistemically salient" (p. 7) and certain privileged locations are "discursively dangerous" in that "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted in many cases in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for" (p. 7).

These theoretical foundations form the bedrock of the CER ethical principle that community partners and research participants must be involved not only in the earlier phases (e.g. design and recruitment) of the research, but also in the meaning-making and dissemination phases. To this end, Khodyakov and colleagues assert that university researchers should be "ready to involve community in interpretation and dissemination: Study findings should be analyzed, interpreted, and disseminated with the active participation of community partners and community members at large" (p.54). Thus, analysis, interpretation, and revisions in the post-data collection phase, require a significant relinquishment of control on the part of the university research team, and an ongoing, collaborative effort to weave together the (often disparate) epistemological and ontological analyses of study team members.

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💬 Tips and Considerations:

Engage in collaborative analysis
Participants and/or community co-researchers should have the opportunity to collaboratively make meaning of the data (Bacon et al., 2013; Grain et al., 2019; Kodyakov et al., 2016). The First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC) states that, "as far as possible, fact finding and analysis should be participatory allowing communities to determine which aspects of health should be addressed and how" (2011, p. 4).

"Nothing about us without us"
"We [the impacted community] speak for ourselves" (Bacon et al., 2013, p. 1; Boilevin et al., 2018).

Engage in collaborative decision making on dissemination avenues
The primary researcher in CER has the responsibility to discuss collaborative dissemination plans well in advance of data collection. Community partners and collaborators should co-lead the plans for how information will be shared and with whom it will be shared.

Use accessible mediums for dissemination
Considering the context of the community in which the research takes place, knowledge sharing should be premised upon modes that work best locally. For example, if a group faces barriers pertaining to literacy, consider how to disseminate findings in visual ways. If a community faces barriers pertaining to technology and internet access, consider paper or otherwise tangible forms of dissemination. If dance and music are highly valued forms of knowledge sharing, consider a dissemination avenue that includes these modes of expression.

Share the ownership of data and publications
The community participants should have partial or full ownership of the data and publications that arise from the research (Banks, 2013). These terms should be agreed upon in the earliest phases of research, and revisited multiple times throughout.

Prioritize knowledge mobilization
"Get the right information to the right people in the right format at the right time" (SSHRC, 2017; Kantamneni, 2019).

❓ Questions to Ask Yourself

- How would the community like to share the findings from the research study?

- What modes of knowledge sharing and dissemination work best in this community context?

- What modes of knowledge sharing and dissemination have the greatest promise in terms of sustainability?

- Is the community comfortable with academic modes of knowledge sharing (e.g. articles and book chapters)?

- How would community participants and co-researchers like their work to be recognized and acknowledged in dissemination phases? (e.g. would they like to be recognized as co-authors?)

- In ten years from now, if someone wanted to use the data from this study, who owns it and whose permission is required?

- What will be the long-term legacy of this research?

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