Relationality and Reflexivity in Community-based Research: Reflections from the Field

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Abstract:

Relationships, and the establishment of them, are a fundamental component of our work in community whether in service-learning settings or in conducting community-based research. Yet, seldom do we articulate how we develop, negotiate, maintain, and manage or even understand these interactions. Reflection, a critical and necessary component underlying community-based practice, can be used to explore these aspects. In this paper we present the reflections of women who have been homeless and student researchers who were involved in a community-based research project related to women and homelessness. The reflections share their common journey of moving from uncertainty and fear to becoming increasing comfortable in the process of collaborative community-based research. This journey occurs through the creation of a shared purpose related to both individual empowerment and creating social change and social justice for other women who are marginalized by poverty and homelessness.

Key Words:

Community-based research, reflections, participants, students, researchers.

Introduction

Relationships, and the integration of them, are a fundamental component of our work in community whether in service-learning settings or in conducting community-based research (McHugh Engstrom, 2003; Strand, Cutforth, Stoecker, Marullo, & Donohue, 2003). Yet, seldom do we articulate how we develop, negotiate, maintain, and manage or even understand these interactions. Research can be enriching for both the researchers and those who are the 'subjects' of the research. Relational research practice, based on building and sustaining connections with others, enhances the quality of the research and the experience of the research for all involved (Dutton & Dukerich, 2006). At the same time, being involved in the research process and building these connections with others affects and changes each person in unique ways. Reflecting on how we have influenced and been influenced by the research processes helps people to discover their own values and beliefs and to learn more about themselves within these relationships (Etherington, 2007). Through relational research practice and reflection, research can also become a social justice tool (Paradis, 2000), involving those who are most affected by the issues in finding solutions. Reflexivity is also critically important for community-based research where "a self-reflective, engaged and self-critical role" is encouraged for all researchers (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998, p. 181). In this paper, we present the reflections of women who have been homeless and student researchers who were involved in a community-based research project related to women and homelessness.

These reflections arose from the research study, *Home: Perspectives of Women who are Homeless*, conducted in a western Canadian city during the summers of 2007 and 2008 (Walsh, Rutherford, & Kuzmak, 2009). The study was conducted under the auspices of the Downtown Community Initiative (DCI), a partnership between the university and an organization that operates one of the city shelters for those experiencing homelessness (Rutherford, Walsh, & Rook, in press). The primary goal of the research was to more fully understand the nature of home among women who were homeless. A secondary goal was to document and use community-based participatory research methods to enable and empower women who were currently using the shelter systems to share their concerns and advocate for their needs. The women shared their stories and perspectives through the use of digital storytelling (a 4-5 minute video with digital images and narration), photovoice (mounted displays of images and text), qualitative interviews, creative writing (poetry), and a design charette (a process used in urban planning to consult with stakeholders about design).

The reflections that follow show how two of the women involved with the research and the four student researchers learned through these processes and the meaning that these experiences had for each of them.

Dawn's Story

Dawn is a young woman who has experienced homelessness on a number of occasions. She has recently moved to a British Columbia where it was easier to find living accommodations. She was a participant in the Photovoice project, one of the components of the 'Home' study and has assisted in organizing and was a featured speaker at an awareness raising rally held in Calgary in January 2008.

She also spoke at an international conference in Victoria trying to get people to listen to the issues that surround homelessness for women.

I found working and volunteering for the DCI really cool. The students I've come across are really great. They're understanding and try to be non-judgmental, which really helps. I've also found being involved in the planning committee good because they treat me like an equal. They don't treat me differently because I don't have a degree or anything. They listen to me and treat me with respect.

It's funny though. I've become this sort of activist person, which is something I never saw myself being. I give speeches and people listen to me. I'm not just ranting to no one anymore; people are listening. I never thought I would be giving speeches or doing this kind of thing, but it's really good because it gives me a purpose. I can't work, and I can't do much else because of my health issues, but I'm trying to help people and that gives me that purpose and something to work towards.

I find there are some drawbacks though. There seems to be a lot of talk and not much action taking place. It seems everyone is interested in talking about the methods we used in the study, but they aren't interested in the results. I think it should be more about what we found out and where the changes should be rather than always talking about what we did. I do understand that's the way academics work, but it seems like we could make things better if we used the information more.

I also know that it's not necessarily the DCI or anything they're doing wrong. It's about trying to get people to listen. It's about trying to get the people who make the decisions to see the results and start making changes. Even small little changes would help, but that's the difficult part convincing the shelters to change. I used to work in marketing, and I think if they put it together like a marketing research report that might help because really that's what we're doing here, isn't it? Present it like a marketing research study with percentages and graphs and numbers so that they can understand it and see how it might apply. There's no application of the information, not that I've seen anyway.

Laura's Story

Laura is an older woman who has struggled with homelessness for much of her life. She was a participant in the digital storytelling aspect of the 'Home' study. Her involvement has led to speaking at local events, planning and presenting at a rally to promote awareness of homelessness, co-authoring a review of the book All My Sisters by Susan Scott and participating as a member of the DCI Planning Committee.

I have been with the DCI "since day one." I was excited at the idea of the project-- that they were taking students away from book-learning into practical real life experience. Students could actually see the people, talk with them, learn from them. The idea was great, but there were some difficulties. The first time we did a research project it felt like we were "subjects," like they were giving us gifts ("bringing us pizza") to get the information from us. We talked about this, and the second project was much better in that we felt like it was our job. We were seen more as people than as subjects. We were able to do the work of the project, and the students were there to support and

help us. We were given licence to choose what to shoot our movie about although we all agreed to the general topic of homelessness; we could express it in our own way. We were free to make our own mistakes and because we were getting "paid" for it ($50 in vouchers), it felt more like a job. Even though we are all homeless, we are all unique people and the way we did the movies allowed us to show that. The student's role was more to guide us in the making of the movie, in the steps required and helping us get the shots we wanted to get.

I found myself in the teacher role often because I am a teacher and that's easy for me. So I felt I was teaching maybe more than I was learning. We helped them put together the CD's for the films, polish the final product, etc., and it really felt like we were partners in the project rather than the subjects.

I feel it has been a good experience, but I still have continuing questions, for example, who's going to hear our stories? What's the benefit from all of this? How will this [research] change things? I would like to see an impact beyond just a research project. There have been some good things that come from it, like the rally and the presentation at the university, and I was able to get my movie on YouTube and shown at a local disability film festival, but I think there needs to be more. We should have been given, for example with the movies, the proper avenue to use them and maybe clear goals at the beginning might have helped with that. I'm always asking: Where are we going with this? Have we gone far enough? I would like to see the information out there in the mass media. I want to get our stories out there further to the mass public, help them to understand. Perhaps the agency can use our stories for advertising or fund raising, something so that they can be useful.

I also felt that at times our voices were drowned out by all the talk about the DCI and the student's experiences. Don't get me wrong, they were great and were trying to increase their understanding and all, and they didn't do it on purpose, but, for example, at the rally the focus was on representatives who were not themselves homeless.

Finally, there really seems to be a lack of continuity between the years. Now that we're getting into the third and fourth years of the DCI, it seems like some of the students are asking the same old questions, and the information from previous years doesn't seem to be passed as effectively to the next students coming through. We need to work out a way to use previous information to modify and build new questions. Build the future work on the old information rather than starting new every year and being asked the same questions over and over.

Natasha's Story

Natasha is an Environmental Design student who worked as a researcher for the 'Home' study. She recently completed her Master's on understanding the factors related to siting homeless shelters.

Working in the DCI was one of the most challenging and stressful experiences I have ever had. Initially, I did not know how to interact or engage with the clients of the homeless shelter. I did not know what was appropriate or inappropriate to talk about. I had a dichotomy structured in my head where I was a "privileged" person and the clients were not. This affected what I thought was appropriate for discussion: I did not feel

comfortable talking about my avid bike racing or any materialistic consumption or anything else that I felt that might make clients uncomfortable. I constantly questioned whether or not it was appropriate to walk into the shelter with a coffee while people lined the walls of the shelter waiting for lunch or someplace to stay. Should I leave my bike locked outside of the shelter? Should I talk about what I did on the weekend? Would clients be able to relate? Would they take offense? I soon began to realise that many of the clients did not begrudge other people for their situations and that probably many of the clients really did not care if I walked in with coffee or ate a lunch that I made at home.

I was intent on developing rapport with the clients, though I felt like I was treating people as "laboratory experiments" at first. I would listen to the clients speak, and soon realised that I could not relate to many of their experiences, which made it difficult for me to feel comfortable to establish relationships with them. However, I began to realise that I did not necessarily have to understand their situations and experiences in order to empathise with them. All I needed to do was listen, not be judgmental and accept that we were all different individuals with different experiences. As I gained more experience in the DCI, I felt more privileged to hear of people's experiences and stories. Some of the stories were so sad and depressing that I would not know how to react and was left stunned for a couple of days. After speaking with so many people, I really began to understand that everyone's lives are their own processes. I learned to respect that people had to grow and change in their own ways and I had to stop imposing my worldviews on other people. That being said, I found that I could only function in the environment with the assumption that most of the people would want to change their situations and integrate with society at some point.

I once went with a couple of clients to the "soup bus." I was extremely wary of leaving the shelter with clients, though I tried to act comfortable and trusting, even though I really had no idea what I was getting into. In the end, it was not a bad experience, though I learned that I should only do what I felt comfortable with and I did not have to trust everyone, even though I was trying to be more open-minded about engaging with people.

At times, I felt like I would become too involved in peoples' situations, and I wanted to help them. However, conducting research forced me to maintain professional relationships with people and not exceed my professional boundaries. At the same time, I thought "I am becoming part of the bureaucratic process that prevents people from actually doing anything or changing anything." So after that realisation I did more of what I wanted. I suggested available apartments to people using the shelter services who were trying to find accommodations and developed more personal relationships with people. I still continued to maintain professional boundaries, though I felt I acted more as a "human being" than a "researcher."

In the end, it was a very fulfilling experience, though I wish that I could have retained contact with some of the people I had met. It was amazing to hear people's stories, to learn what people overcame and the challenges they had to deal with. And it was really important to learn that we are all people trying to find our way in the world, but that we do it in very different ways.

Lesley's Story

Lesley worked on the summer research project as an undergraduate social work student. She was also a student in a community-based research class held at the homeless shelter that integrated students in social work and nursing together with residents and staff of the shelter. She has since graduated and is working as an information and referral specialist with the Calgary Distress Centre.

With respect to engaging with women who are homeless, I learned, quite simply, to be myself. In going into this situation, I was incredibly nervous about how I would be perceived. I understood that power imbalances would be present in the environment, both between workers and residents, and between researchers and participants, and that made me somewhat uncomfortable. I did become more comfortable in interactions, however, when I learned to relax and relate to the "participants" as women, keeping in mind that they were indeed in a vulnerable position. I found that just listening was a great way to begin the engagement process, and I think that many of the women we worked with just wanted to be heard. I think if you go in with warmth, and empathy, and genuineness, then sincere, comfortable relations result. It was definitely important to ensure that the women were informed of our purpose for being there, but that being said, the opportunity to tell their stories was welcomed. Additionally, the openness to listen without judging is highly important in engaging with women experiencing homelessness.

This experience has changed me personally in that I am no longer as demanding as I had been of myself. I now realize that there are some people I will connect with more than others, and that is O.K. Part of working within a team environment is that others can carry part of the burden of connecting with people whose personalities do not mesh with a particular team member responsible for engagement. I do not need to please everyone or be involved in everything. Giving up that control was very liberating. Professionally, I think I have developed some valuable practice knowledge related to engaging with difficult populations, as well as with people in general. It is remarkable how much people are willing to share with you if you are willing to listen to them, and understand where they are coming from.

Alison's Story

Alison was an undergraduate Nursing student researcher for the 'Home' study. She has since graduated and is working as a Registered Nurse in a harm reduction program in Calgary.

I learned that while some women were very open to sharing their stories immediately, the majority were very apprehensive of our intentions. After listening to their stories and hearing how they felt they have been let down by the system and by society over and over, I began to understand why they wouldn't just automatically trust anyone. Some women had had their children apprehended, and they had felt at the mercy of social workers, shelter counsellors, and other professionals. Therefore, developing trust with the participants played a crucial role in engaging the participants. Often the women thought we were affiliated with the homeless shelter in which the research was being conducted and therefore were reluctant to talk with us. Once we

explained that their input would not be revealed to the shelter staff, our office became a safe haven for many of the participants.

To eliminate misconceptions and develop trust it is important to interact casually at first and to engage the women on their own terms. We found that just being present on a daily basis and having an open door policy was very effective to engaging the women. Many women were curious and wanted to know what we were doing, and would come in and ask us questions. Others would walk by for weeks then one day would begin by saying "hello" and then stop in to talk. The engagement was an ongoing process and developed differently with each participant. We also found that word of mouth from previous participants was extremely effective in recruiting new members. As the project continued, I found engaging with the women became a very natural process, as we became more comfortable and confident within our surroundings, and the project itself.

This experience has had a profound effect on me both personally and professionally. Some days I was completely overwhelmed with emotions and found it personally challenging to listen to the participants and listen to their story while witnessing their anger and other emotions. Personally, I felt somewhat abandoned at times and would have welcomed the opportunity to debrief how emotionally overwhelmed I felt. I was not prepared for the emotional challenge the project presented, not only from listening to the participants' stories, but also from the daily happenings in shelter, as well as the downtown environment that I was not accustomed to.

Nevertheless, I felt privileged to be hearing the stories and admired the amount of strength and tenacity these women possessed. I was honoured to be a part of a project that allowed these women a voice and hopefully a chance to make a change. I recognize that the system is broken and we all need to make a stand for change. I believe that as a member of this community and as a nurse, we have the influence to empower and encourage social change and demand that policies be implemented to ensure social justice, especially in those populations that disparities and inequities prevail. This experience has made me realize the nurse that I want to be, and I now hold a higher standard of what a nurse is. I strongly believe that had I not had this experience I may have never wholly understood the magnitude of patient advocacy, which nurses are ethically bound to do.

Amanda's Story

Amanda is an undergraduate Nursing student in the final semester of her program. She is conducting research on the next phase of the 'Home' study and has been able to share her experiences in a number of presentations and peer-reviewed publications.

At the time of writing this, I was about half way through the project, so my reflections are about the early stages of my experiences. When I first started engaging with people at the shelter, I felt very anxious and hypersensitive to power differentials that were present. I remember one day being nervous about bringing a particular brand of coffee on site because it was expensive and "snobbish" in my mind. Then someone politely reminded me to be myself and that really did make life easier. It was much easier to engage with the women when I was more relaxed and less focused on myself and the image I was projecting and more focused on them.

I also recall feeling very overwhelmed at the beginning, worried about how I was going to handle all the heart breaking stories and wondering whether I would be able to handle knowing and caring about these women. Again, it helped a lot to let these ideas go and to go with the flow of things. These women did want to share their experiences once they got to know me, and they did have difficult life situations that had caused them to be where they were today, but the strength and courage of these women was also very evident. As one woman put it with defiance "I'm still here!" At this point, I feel like I have learned more from them as a "person" than as a "researcher."

I have found maintaining professional boundaries more difficult in this type of research because these women are sharing so much of themselves with me. They are sharing personal life stories, their histories, and I can't help but look at homelessness and the women themselves differently. I feel compelled to do something, I can no longer look the other way when someone is asking for change or is being questioned by police and they look like they might be homeless. It has changed the way I view homelessness in general and my part as a citizen in the perpetuation of it. I too have chosen to follow that compulsion and help out wherever I can, especially in house hunting or resume preparation.

I felt privileged to have been able to be guided by people that had gone before me, especially some of last year's summer students and Susan Scott, author of "All Our Sisters." It helped me to put things in perspective, and the timeless advice of "be yourself" really did help me relax. It is important to note, however, that there was huge support from the DCI committee including four formerly homeless individuals. Their help and guidance was indispensable in the course of my research.

Having an interprofessional lens has also helped to broaden my view point as a nurse and helped me to develop a greater understanding of all the elements of a healthy person. In particular, I was never fully conscious of how much of an impact our surroundings can have on our health until I saw the previous research. I was aware of some of the issues going into the project, but this summer has really helped to broaden my scope further and helped me understand the issues in more detail.

Discussion

Each of the women engaging in this community-based research study, whether as members of community (women struggling with poverty and homelessness) or as student researchers (emerging professional practitioners), describe a journey of moving from uncertainty and uneasiness to a place of acceptance, collaboration and shared purpose. Women in their reflections describe the transition between these two states as supported through deep listening and the feeling of being heard. Dawn and Laura talk about the value of being heard, really heard. They insist that the research relationship must move beyond researcher-subject, characterized by providing token 'gifts' to participants as a means of taking and using their expertise in ways of the researchers' choosing. Students also reject the "laboratory experiments" paradigm of research and struggle with how to situate themselves within relational research, which enhances all members of the research.

Sharing stories emanating from a deeply personal level is, as the women suggest, the beginning. The students report how growth and change in the relationship is accompanied by listening with warmth, and empathy, and genuineness. For Dawn and Laura, however, this is not enough. The research process for them must move beyond this to having their experiences and expertise acknowledged and applied to action, action aimed at developing solutions for the problems they see as meaningful in their lives and others within their community for whom they give voice. The student researchers also underlie the power of sharing stories as they begin to connect as co-researchers, co-creators and, as they articulate, most importantly, as women.

The students share in common their uncertainty in interacting with women who are homeless and the nature of the context itself—a large inner city homeless shelter. They recognize that they come to the research endeavour with privilege and power; they worry about how to navigate differences—differences that might be reflected in something as simple as the brand of the coffee they carry with them. The women researchers express that this engagement is outside of their personal or educational experience thus far and thus they enter into the setting and the relationships with fear and trepidation. As Natasha states, working within a community-university partnership involving clients and residents of a homeless shelter "was one of the most challenging and stressful experiences" that she has ever had. Will I say the wrong thing, will it hurt too much to hear the stories, they ask.

The students also are challenged by managing the multiple roles: student, researcher, friend, advocate, and helper. There are no easy solutions. Amanda advocates for time and to "be yourself," and Lesley advises to relate as a "person" rather than "researcher." In a similar manner, Laura rejects the notion of being treated as "subjects." Students also identify the challenge of their developing professional identities and forming interprofessional teams. The community-based research team they advance should capitalize on each member's ability while allowing for skill development and growth. This must involve, as Lesley advocates, sharing tasks between members. Alison suggests mentorship and support from the faculty researchers is useful in dealing with the emotional complexities inherent to engagement with community members and each other.

Each of the women reflecting here struggles with the research process itself, a research process that takes time and the goal, of which, is often to know further, explore deeper or understand the interconnections more fully. Members of the community feel more connected to the action component of research. Dawn describes gaining voice through the research process, becoming a "sort of activist person…. I give speeches, and people listen to me." Community members want to be part of something that aims to improve the lives and or the context of individuals in a meaningful, direct and timely way. Although Laura is able to describe significant achievement as a result of her involvement, she remains unsatisfied; more needs to be done, in her words, "there needs to be more." Students, particularly those in the helping professions, also share in the frustration of the perceived inability of research to change things. They are driven to ameliorate the burden of harm to which they bear witness. Providing opportunities for activism seemed to fulfill this goal. Sustainability and knowledge transfer were also noted by the women as important to ensure the knowledge arising from the research

could be mobilized in ways that have direct impact in addressing the needs of the community of interest. They caution that these partnerships are fragile and need to be sufficiently supported so that they can accomplish their goals.

The Home study was designed to be empowering for the women participants. As these stories demonstrate community-based research can be life-changing for the both students and members of vulnerable communities. Laura attributes finding her own home and stability directly to the relationships and renewed sense of self she found within the context of the research. Dawn has capitalized on previous abilities to aid in further activism. The working in the DCI influenced career choices for Alison and Lesley; in her professional career, Alison works with members of the homeless community, and Lesley provides telephone counselling and support. Amanda and Natasha chose further educational opportunities to learn more about these issues. Both were awarded scholarships to conduct research relevant to these issues: Amanda a national study of the optimal shelter needs for homeless women and Natasha the issues related to developing homeless shelters in communities.

The challenges inherent in student driven community-based research with marginalized populations offers significant opportunities for empowerment for both community members and the researchers who engage with them. Care must be taken in providing the necessary supports to foster achieving the research goals and maintaining partnerships, while creating pathways to achieving the personal and professional goals of each of the members. Ultimately, the outcome of the research needs to be action toward social change and movement toward social justice for the research to achieve its purpose for both members of the local and academic communities.

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