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Adjusting to Disruption: My Experience with Community-Based Research During Covid-19

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Community-based research is a medium through which fully immersive and genuine learning can take place. Crucial to community-based research is collaboration. This quality begs for the absence of pride and the abundance of open-mindedness which allows for the necessary transmission of holistic and transformative knowledge to be shared in a way that plays on the strengths of community partners and researchers alike.

Jones (2018) was correct in their observation that, “every successful network has its own mixture of driving forces and moving parts” (para. 9). During the sudden turmoil that COVID-19 put the world and my research internship into, it was paramount to trust in and rely on the strength of the networks already established between our community partner, professors, graduate student mentor, faculty advisor, and university staff. Indeed, it was in the strength of our network that we were able to address challenges with recruitment and building rapport and overcome pandemic disruption during our project.

I was introduced to my community partner, the Coalition of Muslim Women (referred to here as the Coalition), through a research internship with the Centre for Community Research, Learning, and Action at my university, Wilfrid Laurier. My research team was tasked with designing and implementing a research project that identified the social, professional, and personal impacts of the Coalition on the lives of its members. This project continued the work the 2018-2019 internship cohort completed; however, we did alter the research question slightly to shed light on the contribution of men to the efforts of the Coalition.

The Coalition is unique in that it is the only not-for-profit, grassroots organization that is managed exclusively by Muslim women in Ontario. They emphasize empowering a diversity of Muslim women and outreach to the larger Kitchener-Waterloo region in Ontario, Canada, to create an understanding and mutual respect among Muslim and non-Muslim community members. In hosting events that center on art, community outreach, and leadership training, they provide supportive spaces and skill-building to empower Muslim women to share their ideas and be leaders in their community.

Prior to this experience, my previous community outreach experiences had been enriched through my interactions with populations differing vastly in age, often operating in a clerical or assistant capacity to aid in programming for the elderly and toddlers. In this university internship, the enrichment came from the exposure to cultures different from my own and working with an organization that affirms and empowers my identity as a minority woman. The experiences I had in attending the Coalition’s events and in learning about their work entrenched me into the work to be done.

Coupled with the field placement with the Coalition was a class component that integrated our field observations with concrete concepts and theories. The evolution of

research was emphasized continually throughout our two terms of classes. What once was a segment of academia that was wrought with human rights abuses and unethical research design has evolved into research approaches intended to meet community needs and even bring about change. Community-based research now strives towards becoming a field that champions interacting with the community in a way that shares power, is respectful, and transparent through learning from examples like the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the Stanford Prison Experiment (Katz et al., 2008 & Zimbardo, 1973). In *Ethics and Community-Based Participatory Research: Perspectives From the Field*, Bastida et al. (2010) outline key ethical considerations such as encouraging community involvement in research, ensuring that communities benefit from the research, and data collection and sharing. It is in these ethical considerations where researchers must recognize the role of power dynamics in negatively or positively affecting these key ethical considerations – especially in marginalized populations. Drawing, again, from the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, it is evident that dynamics like race, socioeconomic status, class, and gender intersected and were abused such that the marginalized group – the participants – experienced more marginalization (Katz et al., 2008). With the knowledge that I would be working with Muslim women - a group of people who have continually been vilified and marginalized - I felt a personal responsibility to represent the Coalition in as accurate a manner as possible to prevent further marginalization and extreme power dynamics. As researchers, we have the power to affect public perceptions about a group or community in a way that has far-reaching consequences that can span generations. This is the responsibility we take on as researchers and my professors made me starkly aware of this.

In cultivating a relationship with the Coalition, I acted as the communications and scheduling person; as a result, my scope of focus stretched from the more clerical side of research to the immersive, human-centered side that is interviewing. The following observations and reflections come exclusively from my experience in the roles I had during the project.

As with any research involving human participants, building rapport was a priority leading up to the recruitment process and we were able to do this by attending the Coalition's Ladies Night Gala. The Ladies Night Gala is an annual event where members of the Coalition and broader Waterloo Region communities come together to celebrate women and culture. I believe our attendance at this event was a crucial first step in building rapport with the members of the Coalition and aided in reaching as many members as possible. This event provided a more personal way to interact with Coalition members that could not be accomplished through an impersonal recruitment email and flyer.

Attending this event helped us marry the analytical aspects of our project with the crucial relationship building processes that rapport hinges upon. Being at this event helped to introduce me to the importance of relationship building in research – something that is especially crucial to community-based research. I believe having this familiarity prior to recruitment changed the perception of the case study from a research project conducted by Wilfrid Laurier University students to a conversation among allies in the Waterloo community.

While conducting research with marginalized communities and gaining a more in-depth understanding of the obstacles faced by these communities, it is likely that empathy will breed a sense of allyship which is something I felt. In this feeling of solidarity, it was

important for me to recognize that the individuals in the Coalition are the experts on their reality, and no amount of research will come close to the value in their lived experiences. Being aware of this is essential in the construction of knowledge that is holistic and gives voice to invaluable perspectives.

We were confident in our initial connections with our community partner and our confidence held through the university Research Ethics Board process and propelled us through to the recruitment process we had laid all this groundwork for. Sadly, COVID-19 progressed around the world and the blossoming interest we had started to drum up with the Coalition members waned as the world was thrown into uncertainty. Around this time, communication with our community partner was understandably not as strong, as the precarious nature of COVID-19 jarred them (and us) and brought an abrupt halt to their day-to-day. The pandemic brought everything to a halt and shrouded the future in uncertainty, making commitments like participating in a study seem trivial in comparison. For a moment, all anyone was concerned about was survival, and our recruitment and research plan suffered as a result.

When communications eventually resumed, some members that initially wanted to be interviewed changed their minds or stopped replying. Recruitment was very slow around this time and we lost a scheduled interview due to the panic she was feeling around the virus. At that point, we had three interviews completed and with only one more scheduled to happen; we fell short of our goal of fifteen interviews. With this unforeseen change of circumstances, we consulted and brainstormed with our mentor and faculty advisor to adjust to a lack of data. We were able to adapt by supplementing our interviews with the previous cohort's interview transcripts to address relevant research questions. We were fortunate to be working on a project that continued and built off of the previous years. Alternatively, we could have explored increasing the compensation amount or perhaps re-evaluating our scope and recruitment tools to include members, volunteers and staff as opposed to just members.

Although we did not reach our goal of fifteen interviews, I was grateful that each member of my group got to experience conducting one interview each. In preparing for my interview, which happened to be the last one, I grappled with the quality of rapport I could build in a Zoom interview compared to the in-person interviews we had initially planned for. By having a face-to-face interview, an interviewer can display body language that conveys openness and warmth which, can subconsciously ease a participant into being more comfortable with their answers. With this being lost, my goal going into the interview was to build rapport through communicating empathetically leading up to the interview and establishing common ground.

During the height of the pandemic, it was as if the world was briefly united in our collective uncertainty and fear, and this provided a shared experience from which I established familiarity and a mutual understanding with my participant. In my email correspondences leading up to the interview, I would always start by conveying my empathy and understanding of the seriousness of the pandemic and continually expressed my gratitude for her willingness to participate in the interview. As the last group member to do an interview, I had a certain level of preparedness from my teammate's experiences. However, nervousness accompanied me as I opened my laptop to connect to Zoom – this eventually subsided as the interview progressed. I was able to connect with my

participant through lived experiences: her being an immigrant to Canada and me being raised by immigrants. I could empathize with her plight and understand some of the obstacles she had faced, as they were obstacles some of my family members had to overcome. I think that it was important to identify this commonality in the way I posed my questions, and it had the intended effect of building rapport and easing awkwardness that can often accompany interviews.

In establishing common ground and mentally drawing parallels between her life experience and the life experiences of my family members, I felt my similarities to my family diminish in comparison. The context of our interview highlighted how differently they navigated the world as immigrants compared to how I navigated the world as a 1st generation Canadian. I realized how I benefited from my family's experience as immigrants while simultaneously benefitting from my identity as a Canadian citizen. I imagined my identities as the daughter of immigrants and as a Canadian citizen intersecting in a way that privileged me more than either identity would on their own. Not only does my Canadian nationality benefit me on an international and local scale that affects me politically, socially, and economically; I also benefit from the rich culture, child-rearing practices, and the spirit of determination that is characteristic of people who are immigrants.

As the pandemic stretched on, I found myself reflecting on how salient things like positionality and privilege became in this project and how striking the differences between myself, our community partner, and the world at large became. Positionality describes “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group” (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Much like community-based research's potential to equalize everyone's position in a project, I was able to orient myself in a way that took into consideration how my position as a student researcher and a woman in society related to that of my peers and community partner.

Positionality and privilege go hand-in-hand in the way they color our world view and affect the unconscious biases with which we operate in research and society at large. McIntosh (2000) beautifully conceptualizes privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 10). As COVID-19 increased disparities between social classes world-wide, I became aware of my privilege and began to conceptualize the word in a broader sense. This project added nuance to the word privilege as I began to see it not as a descriptor for majority groups in society, but as a subjective term that can be applied to any group. Through exploring first-hand, the obstacles members of the Coalition had faced in navigating a predominantly white and Canadian landscape, I came to understand how their lived experiences interacted with the Waterloo Region in a way that made the privilege of others glaringly obvious. Privilege is a relative term and when you view it like this, you are better able to see how privilege can function differently in different people. What once was a word that was often associated with “white” became something I recognized within myself as a black woman, a Canadian citizen, a student researcher, and a purveyor of higher education. We all have varying levels of privilege, and in recognizing how our positionality affects this quality we can begin to foster more productive conversations around this topic.

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