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Doing Equitable Work in Inequitable Conditions: an Introduction to a Special Issue on Transformative Research Methods in Gender-Based Violence

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Abstract

The purpose of this special issue is to explore how researchers, evaluators, and practitioners use community-based, participatory research (CBPR) approaches to prevent gender-based violence, support survivors, and transform communities and systems. In this introduction, the editors define gender-based violence (GBV) and briefly discuss how systemic inequities exacerbate the prevalence of GBV. The authors featured in this special issue aim to dismantle these inequities by engaging in research approaches that center those who are most impacted by the social issue, ensure that community members guide the research process, build community capacity, and aim to transform oppressive conditions. The issue includes six empirical studies across the United States that cover the process and outcomes of conducting transformative CBPR. It also contains six commentaries from GBV adult practitioners and young people who provide pertinent insights on their experiences working with academic researchers and/or engaging in participatory research. The articles in this special issue cover the major themes of defining community, working in inequitable conditions, and transforming individuals and communities.

Keywords Community-based participatory research · Gender-based violence · Transformation · Oppression · Liberation

Gender-based violence (GBV) is the physical, psychological, social, and political violence perpetrated by individuals, groups, or institutions against others based on their actual or perceived gender (UN General Assembly 1993). GBV can affect men and women and is rooted in structural gender inequities, patriarchal belief systems, and power imbalances. For this special issue, we include types of GBV that disproportionately impact women, such as domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual violence, teen dating violence, family violence, sexual assault, stalking, hate crimes, and violence against caregivers and sex workers. GBV results from interlocking forms of oppression and systems of power that marginalize, coerce, pathologize, and exploit people who hold less social power (Hooks 2000). These systems of power and oppression create the conditions for and reflect the violence that occurs interpersonally (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005a, b). Inequity based on race, class, nationality, language, ability, and sexual orientation (among other forms of identity) exacerbates experiences of GBV for those at the margins of society (Dasgupta 2005), increasing their vulnerabilities for experiencing violence and reducing or even eliminating their access to necessary resources and support (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005a, b).

Since the mid 1970s, scholars, survivors, and community activists have built extensive knowledge of GBV, including its prevalence (Smith et al. 2017), risk and protective factors of survivors and abusers (Campbell et al. 2009), and the impact and cost of violence on individuals, families, communities, and nations (Holmes et al. 2018; Peterson et al. 2017). This robust evidence contributed to the development of programs and policies across the social ecology which support

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survivors, reduce perpetration, and create accountability systems. This evidence has, along with a multitude of grassroots and community organizing, contributed to radical shifts in public awareness of GBV and in the passage of national GBV policies and practices, such as the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 (Richie 2012).

Despite this progress, significant knowledge gaps remain in the GBV field and in efforts to end it. For example, much of the evidence developed over the years has centered the experiences of white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class, ciswomen (Sokoloff and Dupont 2005a, b). Much less is known about —and thus fewer programs and policies are developed specifically for— individuals at the intersections of (often multiple) oppressed identities.

These gaps may persist because of how the field develops knowledge about GBV. Many researchers and practitioners aim to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, the violence people experience by understanding and stopping the patterns of power and control that remain critical to the maintenance of GBV. Despite this aim, the majority of evidence in the field about GBV is generated through traditional research approaches that can reify these same patterns of power and control. Traditional approaches typically involve researchers who primarily work and live outside of a specific community (e.g., academic researchers, evaluators from large firms) and collect data on survivors, sometimes soliciting the help of community-based agencies to recruit survivors to participate in the study. Researchers typically work alone or with other colleagues or students to design and implement most—if not all—phases of the study. Inequities in power between researchers, agencies, and survivors are often unacknowledged and unaddressed. Researchers rarely have a plan to use study findings to improve conditions in the settings where they conducted the research. At best, such researchers leave communities in the same way they found them. At worse, they exploit these settings for personal academic gain providing few tangible benefits, if any, for those who participated in the research. Traditional researchers can also worsen the organizational conditions for staff by increasing responsibilities that distract from their work with survivors and in communities.

This scenario can lead to exploitative dynamics wherein researchers use their funding and resources to extract the information they want without meaningfully giving back to the survivors or agencies or communities that participated in the study. Researchers using these traditional approaches rarely engage those most impacted by GBV in the research conceptualization process, such as developing research questions that are important to them and their communities; choosing methods that are relevant and sensitive to their experiences; analyzing data in ways that consider their full human experience; or disseminating results using formats that are accessible, interesting, and inspiring. As a result, findings from studies that use traditional research approaches often lack context, nuance, and utility. For oppressed communities whose voices and lived experiences have not traditionally been centered in the GBV field, research that ignore their context ultimately does little to illuminate their unique experiences (Richie 2012). Many of these communities experienced long histories of harm and abuse at the hands of researchers (Freimuth et al. 2001). Traditional approaches to research can look like more of the same, so some practitioners and survivors may choose to opt out of participating in this type of research altogether (West 2005), further reducing available knowledge about their experiences.

There is a critical need to examine how researchers develop knowledge given the patterns of violence and systemic oppression. Research approaches must align with values of the GBV field and not unintentionally replicate oppressive dynamics and patterns of power and control. These approaches must also generate the contextualized, nuanced, relevant, and action-oriented evidence that the field needs to continue expanding its reach and impact.

Transformative Community-Based Participatory Research

But how does one create equitable research conditions and produce this type of evidence when working in communities and a broader culture marked by historical social inequities and oppression? One strategy is to employ transformative community-based participatory research (CBPR) approaches. Transformative CBPR has tremendous potential to enhance the evidence base in the GBV field, but unfortunately there are limited models on how to do this work well. This special issue aims to fill that gap.

Transformative community based participatory research (CBPR) approaches are a subset of CBPR approaches but focused specifically on issues of power and liberation. They aim to create social change and challenge systems of oppression. Like CBPR broadly, these approaches center the voices of those who are most impacted by the social issue/s being examined and engage them throughout the research process. CBPR requires researchers to consider whether their research is collaborative, purposeful (i.e., it impacts the issue directly), and disseminates products of use (Torre 2014). Transformative CBPR differs because it is rooted in an understanding that certain social groups experience a history of marginalization, disenfranchisement, subordination, and other types of oppression (Mertens 2009). Therefore, these approaches aim to engage community members in raising critical consciousness, increasing access to social power, documenting oppressive conditions, and creating opportunities to improve these conditions (Mertens 2009). Evidence, and the processes to develop

evidence, are tools for liberation—freedom from oppressive social dynamics and wellness and justice for all people (Prillentensky 2008).

Recognizing this power and potential, transformative CBPR researchers often use expanded notions of evidence (Serrata et al. 2017). Such researchers recognize that those who have advanced degrees or work in institutions of higher education are not the only ones who can generate evidence (Appadurai 2006). Practitioners and survivors possess and can produce evidence too (Serrata et al. 2017). These stakeholders know their communities intimately and observe how systems impact their lives and the lives of their loved ones. The Center for Disease Control's framework on evidence describes these kinds of knowledge as their own legitimate forms of evidence (contextual and experiential, respectively) and as equally important as research evidence (Puddy and Wilkins 2011). Transformative CBPR researchers engage community stakeholders throughout the research design process thus incorporating contextual and experiential evidence into the study. Consequently, study meaningfulness, quality, rigor, and robustness is increased given the close collaboration between those who generated the knowledge about, and most impacted by, the issue. Further, transformative researchers work to increase the capacity of community stakeholders to build their own research evidence, espousing the principle that anyone can be a researcher and everyone has a right to research (Appadurai 2006).

However, there are real considerations to CBPR that limit the extent to which scholars can use it to reach liberatory aims. It can require extensive time and resources to build the relationships and communication skills needed to adequately attend to power inequities and to make transformative change (Torre et al. 2012). There are limited funding opportunities available for transformative CBPR approaches. Additionally, some settings and contexts pose particular challenges that do not inherently allow for equitable conditions between researchers and members (Klocker 2015). For example, it can be difficult, albeit not impossible, to complete transformative CBPR in prisons or youth detention centers (for exception see Fine et al. 2004). Participation of research team members can also be difficult to sustain as members' interest in and capacity to work on different aspects of the research process may shift considerably over the course of the research project (Goodman et al. 2018).

However, the potential contributions of transformative CBPR often outweigh its challenges. Many researchers who utilize this approach describe the enhanced relevancy of the study to communities and increased opportunities to contribute to meaningful change. In addition, the methods are more complex, engaged, culturally sensitive, and nuanced to accommodate community needs which increases rigor and validity of findings. Community members drive the research process, which may decrease their feelings of being exploited solely for academic gain. Transformative CBPR provides an opportunity to develop long-term meaningful relationships with community members (Burke et al. 2013).

Issue Importance

This issue began as a collaboration of GBV researchers who utilize transformative CBPR approaches (Goodman et al. 2018). Many of the collaborators work in academic institutions or at institutes within the Domestic Violence Resource Network (DVRN), an HHS-funded network of national training and technical assistance providers. Our collaborative initially convened to develop Power Through Partnerships: A CBPR Toolkit for Domestic Violence Researchers (www.cbprtoolkit.org). This online resource provides a myriad of tools and detailed guidance on conducting effective and ethical CBPR studies. In working on this toolkit, our collaborative recognized the need to elevate and disseminate strong examples of current CBPR studies addressing GBV. As editors, we wanted to find examples of researchers, evaluators, and activists who use CBPR approaches to address GBV and transform communities and systems. Often the transformative element of CBPR studies goes unstated, unexamined, or even unintended, so we wanted this special issue to uplift the participatory research models that specifically aimed to shift the status quo.

Given the wide range in definitions of community-based, participatory and transformative research, we included several components in the call for papers to illustrate the kinds of transformative research we desired. We required that community partners were authors on the submitted manuscript given that they would have collaborated on all aspects of the research design and dissemination. We also requested that potential authors include a brief history of the study collaboration so that we could assess: 1) the equity of the relationship, 2) how the different stakeholders approached the collaboration, and 3) what each member contributed to and gained from their participation in the collaboration. Last, we asked for authors to highlight the individual, organizational, and/or community changes that happened because of the partnership because we did not want to just highlight studies that simply allow for researchers to gain more valid findings (though important!). We also wanted to know if the community had been changed for the better because the study happened.

We received over 50 abstracts in response to our initial call making it clear that this topic area is ripe for discussion and greater exploration. We were overwhelmed with the reception and impressed by the range of study designs, the types of GBV examined, and the roles of community partners. Yet, we also immediately noticed that even with our detailed specifications, we received numerous examples of research that would be better described as community-placed rather than

transformative CBPR. These studies took place in community settings, but they did not engage community members throughout all phases of the study or in meaningful decision-making processes. Some authors submitted studies that involved community partners who were primarily used to collect data or recruit participants from marginalized communities. Others described studies that featured community members as participants, not as co-collaborators. Further, few of the community-placed studies we reviewed mentioned transformation as key elements or an overall aim of the study. Likewise, such studies did not illustrate a commitment to shifting the status quo for participants or communities.

This wide range in the responses to our call reflects a broader lack of conceptual clarity on CBPR, and particularly transformative CBPR. It also illustrates a need for strong examples of transformative CBPR studies that can concretely illustrate strategies and processes that align with those values. Accordingly, this special issue begins to help address an important knowledge gaps for the field and makes by offering valuable examples of transformative CBPR. Moreover, we are excited with the extensive research as well as the contextual and experiential evidence presented throughout the articles and commentaries in this special issue.

Overview of Special Issue Articles

This special issue includes six empirical articles that serve as powerful and nuanced models for conducting transformative CBPR studies. We also invited six community-based youth and adult experts in the GBV field to submit commentaries and share their experiences with and perspectives on CBPR. Each have unique experiences participating in research and evaluation studies. The adult experts have engaged with various researchers throughout their careers in the GBV field and provided important insights about how patterns of power manifested within these relationships. The commentaries that centered YPAR researchers highlighted the multitude of transformative possibilities that young people experience when adult researchers engage them meaningfully in research design and implementation. These reflections on power and examples of transformative change provides readers insights on what it means to engage in CBPR from the practitioner vantage point.

Who is the Community?

There is an impressive diversity, breadth, and depth of community engagement across the studies and commentaries. The communities where authors conducted research and the community members with whom they partnered differed vastly across studies. For example, Thomas and colleagues (2018) describe an ongoing CBPR research collective made up of domestic violence researchers and practitioners in the

northeastern region of the United States. Bhuyan and colleagues (2018) conducted a CBPR study with migrant caregivers in Toronto and Quebec, Canada. Rodriguez and colleagues (2018) conducted their study with Latino youth and young adults attending a family violence intervention program in Atlanta, Georgia. The articles also differed in their structure and format. Some are outcome-oriented, describing a successful transformative CBPR study and emphasizing the study outcomes, findings, and impacts (Bhuyan et al. 2018; Rodriguez et al. 2018). Others are process-oriented, providing in-depth information about how a CBPR study was conducted, the experience of being a part of it, and the lessons learned (Ghanbarpour et al. 2018; Lichty et al. 2018; Pk 2018;Villa et al 2018; Beatriz et al. 2018; Haskie-Mendoza et al. 2018). Finally, three articles provide a macro perspective on relationships between GBV researchers and communities, examining how systems of power and privilege shape the context, meaning, and impact of these collaborations (Burk 2018; Gill 2018; White Starr 2018).

How Do We Engage in Equitable Work in Inequitable Conditions?

Many articles in the special issue describe the challenge of trying to create equitable research practices within inequitable conditions. Gill (2018) describes how intersectional approaches to GBV research, which center survivors' experiences and voices, are necessary to contribute to safer communities and empowered survivors. Demonstrating the legacy of institutional racism within GBV movements, White Starr (2018) juxtaposes how research-community collaborations were developed when she was working in mainstream and culturally-specific organizations. She provides guidelines for researchers on building equitable partnerships with culturally-specific organizations and avoiding exploitative power dynamics that do not account for meaningful differences in resources or contexts. Burk (2018), a long-time advocate in the GBV field, offers researchers insights on how to create more engaged and equitable community partnerships. She emphasizes the tendency for researchers to take ownership of knowledge production, and she recommends subtle shifts in the practices and approaches of researchers that could significantly strengthen their partnerships with community-based practitioners.

Thomas and colleagues (2018) offer a helpful analysis of the challenges their research collaborative experiences in creating equitable partnerships when collaborators have drastically inequitable access to resources. The authors describe not only how such disparities have affected the membership of their collective, but also the strategies they are using to combat this inequity and expand the richness of their collaborative. Lichty and colleagues (2018) provide a related view into the inherent hierarchies and inequities found in relationships on university campuses. Helpfully, this group of authors also

outline several strategies for shifting power, which in turn alter the conditions of campus-based GBV work in beneficial ways.

How are Communities Transformed?

The articles in this issue also illustrate important ways that research can bring about transformation and change across the social ecology. The National Center for Injury Prevention and Control (2018) recommends using an ecological approach to address and prevent violence. The authors attend to issues impacting individual survivors but also focus on the institutions and communities' survivors live within as well as broader sociopolitical issues. Pk (2018) highlights how the YPAR study she coordinated with homeless and unstably housed youth and young adults of color took key steps to reduce barriers for participation and ensure ongoing engagement with the study. In doing so, the study had a lasting impact on the youth leaders. For several, the skills they strengthened and their exposure to alternative research strategies expanded their ability and commitment to be change agents and tackle oppression and inequities, even informing their future coursework and educational aims. Rodriguez and colleagues (2018) outline a similar transformation experienced by the La Voz youth participants. The YPAR study centered on the issues that directly impacted their lives such as immigration, xenophobic policies, fear of polices, and racial discrimination, youth expanded thier skill-sets and gained unique experiences that have helped them pursue future endeavors such as college, law, and trade schools, and participate in future YPAR studies. In another study in California, young researchers stated that their participation in YPAR at the RYSE Center deepened their understanding about the social issues impacting young people in their own communities, and helped them to identify strategies for intervention. For example, researchers found that young people wanted a space to connect with one another without fear of judgement from adults and find ways to support each other. So, YPAR researchers developed a Chat Lounge within the organization for young people in the community (Villa et al. 2018). Another YPAR article described the importance of incorporating a healing approach into YPAR when working with Latinas involved in juvenile justice. The authors noted the important contribution of providing a healing space for the youth to grow into their leadership roles as researchers (Haskie-Mendoza et al. 2018). Uniquely, Beatriz and colleagues (2018) described how peer-engaged prevention programs can go one step further by including youth in the evaluation aspects of a project. Moreover, this same study illustrates how the development of a researcher identity is key in developing youth researchers. Every youth-focused study published in this issue also described ways that the young people presented findings to key stakeholders and advocated for policy and practice changes to improve conditions for those

affected by the issue they studied. Accordingly, these studies collectively show how even primarily individual-level transformations can have impacts that reverberate throughout, and have the potential to change, the social ecology to prevent and address violence (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2018).

Through the extensive training and technical assistant component of their CBPR study, Ghanbarpour et al. (2018) powerfully illustrate how a strong commitment to co-learning can transform both community partners *and* researchers. The authors describe how the research capacities increase for both groups, but also how their shared learning helped them collectively develop a community-led research framework that can benefit the GBV field and support its efforts to creating lasting change.

Finally, Bhuyan et al. (2018) describe how the study they conducted directly challenged the individual, interpersonal, and political marginalization and discrimination of migrant domestic workers in Canada. By bringing migrant workers together, providing opportunities to expand their skills, and documenting the abusive conditions that many of these workers face, the study worked to upend the individual and political isolation of many caregivers. It also increased the power and capacity of communities to organize around this issue and fight against oppressive policies and practices, even at the national level.

Conclusion

This special issue documents the experiences of how survivors continue to create, live, grow and resist while living in inequitable conditions and how researchers and evaluators can support them. We curated this special issue to do numerous things, including to be a point of reference, to serve as validation, to provide information about transformative CBPR strategies and techniques, and to provide outcomes and evidence that matter. Most importantly, we hope that this special issue will be a source of inspiration for those who wish to take a transformative CBPR approach in their work to contribute to survivor well-being by doing research that truly transforms communities.

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