
ACTION-RESEARCH

Maintaining the Authenticity of Co-Researcher Voice Using FPAR Principles

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This descriptive paper addresses the issue of co-researcher voice suppression, among others, through disclosing my process of presenting the data of a participatory community-based research project at an academic conference. The project in discussion investigated the perceptions of women, who live in Toronto public housing, about what makes a community. Feminist participatory action research (FPAR) and narrative methods are briefly reviewed in this paper as they are influential to the trajectory of presenting this data. The voices of the women who engaged in the project of focus were heard, without compromise, vis-a-vis the approaches and method we used to conduct our research and to communicate their stories to the conference audience. As a doctoral student researcher, I aimed to present this project at the conference in a way that aligned with social justice principles of FPAR, particularly the notion of “power-with,” as discussed by Ponc, Reid, and Frisby (2010). In disclosing this process, I hope to provide insight, in a clear and accessible fashion, to others who will conduct and present participatory research in similar settings.

Keywords: Community-Based Research; Voice; FPAR; Feminist Research; Participatory Research

Introduction

Collaborations between communities and universities are prevalent in today's research (Begun, Berger, Otto-Salaj, & Rose, 2010) and generate significant information that can be used to undertake social issues affecting those involved. The benefits of using this approach warrant this popularity; however, there are various challenges when conducting this form of research. One particular challenge is providing community partners – also referred to as co-researchers (Walmsley & Mannan, 2009) – with the platform to accurately share the data they contribute to collaborative research projects. In other words, they are not able to provide critical information from the stories they share about issues that they feel are most important.

The perspectives of those from oppressed groups (within which many co-researchers are included) are often devalued, disregarded, and pushed to the margins in society. Thus, their voices are consistently muted and ignored while trying to communicate their concerns. Gibson and Hughes-Hassell (2017) discussed how suppressing the voices of marginalized groups is a mechanism of control used to distort public views. They have stated, “Exceptionalist [sic] lore...has always relied on the invisibility of the oppressed and the silencing of voices that challenge a country's (or a field's) view of itself as noble and just” (p. 318). Another form of silencing voice is the practice of reproducing hegemonic discourse and positivistic views. This is an issue that occurs within the academy, as alluded to by Gibson & Hughes-Hassell (2017). Burns, Hyde, Killelt, Poland, and Gray (2014) have revealed how this silencing also exists in organizations. These authors conjointly agreed that conducting participatory research (PR), or other derivative forms such as participatory action research (PAR) or participatory organizational research, is one way to alleviate the issue of co-researcher voice erasure (Burns et al., 2014).

This solution was reaffirmed when I used PAR and feminist participatory action research (FPAR) principles in a project to alleviate problems related to co-researcher voice. The project was a community-based participatory research project (CBPAR), which included a focus group centered on “what makes a community?” from women living in Toronto public housing. The focus group derived information on challenges the female residents faced with their housing provider organization, Toronto Community Housing (TCH).

I paid attention to these issues and ensured they were accentuated while presenting our project at conferences and also now while writing this paper. I also discovered other difficulties found in the literature about conducting community-based research that we were able to avoid because of certain particularities of our project – namely, pre-existing relationships and mutual understandings of problems – alongside the use of FPAR principles.

CBPAR Benefits and Challenges

Tremblay (2009) and Curnow (2017) have provided perspectives on some benefits and challenges that may arise from community-university partnerships in community-based research. Tremblay (2009) wrote about the empowering aspects of community-based participatory research. She stated how it is a collaborative approach that involves each partner throughout the whole research process. Also noted is how this research “increases community capacities, broader stakeholder participation in decision-making, and promotes social justice” (p. 1). More specifically, Tremblay (2009) asserted that empowerment through research takes place when researchers control the development of the project, and also when they gain social influence through becoming confident about their own capabilities.

Conversely, Curnow (2017) interrogated the general narrative of community-university partnerships and implementation of community-based research that mainly consists of positive experiences. He has argued that experiences with this approach resulted in his co-researchers feeling isolated, powerless, and disempowered. The sentiments of the researchers were due to discussions they had with their neighbours about certain issues that existed within their communities. Curnow (2017) asserted that the co-researchers greatly depended on the university researchers to take up their political cause. Further, they did not feel they had the ability to follow through with the action piece of their PAR.

Although I appreciate Curnow's (2017) perspective and experience in conducting community-based research, my experience and perspective on using this approach is very different. I avoided the dilemmas described by Curnow (2017) by collaborating with a community where I live and thus had a pre-existing connection. I also applied FPAR principles throughout our research process. I have the privilege of working with women residents with whom I have developed meaningful relationships overtime. Some of these relationships I developed through community work, a few through programs I created and implemented, and others through the role of being Tenant Representative for my neighbourhood. All of us consider each other neighbours, and many of us consider each other friends.

Social Location

Before I continue, it is important for me to reveal my background and acknowledge the privileges I possess to “locate myself” (Green, 2009; Langhout, 2006) into our work. I am a Black woman and social work doctoral student who has lived in Toronto Public Housing for 21 years. Public housing communities are sites where residents face marginalization from many (and intersecting) oppressive systems. Despite the challenges I experience, which are linked to my identities, I recognize the privilege of having affordable housing – especially while I complete my degree full-time. I also understand the privilege of higher education, gaining access to benefits from attending a post-secondary institution, and the potential to “think epistemically like the ones in the dominant positions” (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213). However, feminist theory recognizes the fluidity of these positions and affirms how each are “shifting and permeable” (Naples, 2003, p. 49). Therefore, as I do research within my community, I am, according to Acker (2001), simultaneously an insider and an outsider.

The connection I have with my co-researchers also includes a mutual understanding about the intricacies of conducting research within communities such as ours. I am aware of, and understand, the powerlessness of my co-researchers because of the ineffectiveness and exploitation of other research projects conducted by “outsiders” (Collet, 2008) in the past. I also understand my responsibility to use my privilege and power as a doctoral student researcher to facilitate change. It would be highly unrealistic for me to expect my co-researchers to complete the action piece of our project, as expected by Curnow (2017), on their own. Another way I was able to fulfill my responsibility as a supportive researcher was listening to the voices and stories of my peers. Although I was familiar with the information we discovered, it was imperative to ensure that I respected my peers and listened to what they had to share. Through active listening, I was able to use my privilege as a researcher and disseminate the data we produced. I was also able to explain the power of spreading their stories in a space where they may not have had the opportunity, especially with the level of authenticity for which we aimed. Consequently, my experience aligned more with authors such as Tremblay (2009), as well as the ethical and interpersonal perspectives of Cahill, Quijada Cerecer, and Bradley (2010).

Cahill et al. (2010) described their own work in a way that resonates with me strongly. These authors stated, "...our research develops from a place of concern and caring for people who are close to us" (p. 407). These authors made a conscious decision to use the words "we" and "ours" while discussing the FPAR they conducted. They explained their application of these words as a strategy that centers a shared standpoint: an understanding about the collaborative production of knowledge and collective work toward social change by community and university researchers. I also chose to use the words "we" and "us" for this paper. Making the choice to employ the words "we" and "ours" while writing about the research is consistent with feminist praxis, theory, and research, all of which emphasizes the significance of relationships (Cahill et al., 2010).

This paper speaks to the value of relationships by uplifting co-researcher's (community members') voices and provides suggestions on how to support their participation and elevate the knowledge they share. Additionally, I discuss various aspects from the process of presenting our research that assisted with this aim. I then present additional published research projects that display elements of FPAR. Next, I provide a detailed description of our project, followed by information on the methods and concepts that allowed our project to achieve its co-researcher voice amplification and authenticity. I subsequently delve into the notion of power-with and how this form of power allowed our research team to create a balanced relationship that valued each of our contributions to our research. I continue by discussing the steps we took to ensure that the voices of our co-researchers were respected and accurately represented at a conference. Finally, I end this paper by revealing some of the challenges and limitations of doing community-based research related to my roles and identities and also being careful not to overstep boundaries.

PAR and FPAR

PAR aims to achieve social change (Joyappa & Miartin, 1996) through conducting research with those from oppressed groups (Reason, 1994; McIntyre, 2008). As mentioned previously, TCH residents have intersecting identities that place them in more than one oppressed group. In the case of our project, our co-researchers were a part of groups that were racially and economically oppressed and that also experienced gendered oppression. At the core of PAR is the action piece where individuals involved in the research collectively work together towards systemic, systematic, and organizational transformations (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993), in aim of improving the quality of people's lives (Ponic, Reid, & Frisby, 2010). One of the aims of our research was to present our stories to politicians and policymakers so that they had information on policy effect for our specific community and the lives of our residents.

Another key feature of PAR is knowledge production and dissemination (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000). We agreed that it was also important to share our stories in multiple spaces so that more people would become knowledgeable about some of the issues we faced. The purpose of doing this would be twofold. First, it would demystify some of the stereotypes made about public housing residents, which presents them as inherently problematic. Second, it would also potentially inspire people to explore these issues further and possibly consider housing policy change as an important political responsibility.

FPAR is an approach stemming from PAR and informed by feminist theory (Chakma, 2016; Maguire, 1987). Additionally, FPAR emphasizes the value and validity of all knowledge and experiences; however, it centers on gendered and women's experiences (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Placing attention on gendered and women experiences is a political choice; it acknowledges the influence of hegemonic and patriarchal power over the production of "knowledge, data, and expertise" (Chakma, 2016, p. 166). Reid, Tom, and Frisby (2006) summarized these points in their definition of FPAR:

A conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action, while confronting the underlying assumptions researchers bring into the research process. (p. 316)

I decided to focus on the experience of women not only because the majority of residents in TCH identify as female (TCH, 2017), but also because "[a] focus on [women] reveals particular dynamics that have been central to the [spatial politics of public housing] for [all residents]" (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 12).

Chakma (2016) outlined four focus areas of FPAR: (a) feminisms, (b) participation, (c) action, and (d) research. This author stated that feminisms encompass what I have previously discussed with regard to accentuating the importance of gendered and women's experiences. Participation entails the way all individuals who partake in research should be involved in every stage of the research. Some of these stages include establishing the research problem, collection and analysis of data, and transferring knowledge. The area of action requires the efforts of the researchers to produce structural changes working against injustices. Lastly, research pertains to generating new knowledge as a result of FPAR research and projects.

Research Projects with Elements of FPAR Principles

There are various community-based projects which display other key elements of FPAR research and presenting data in an effective and illuminating way. I highlight the ways in which these projects provide a platform for their co-researchers to use their voices and share stories. There are certain aspects of these projects that show similar characteristics to our project. One example is the use of direct quotations from co-researchers' discussions when sharing the findings of projects. There are also methods that differ from what I used but still align with FPAR principles. The following scholarly work can be used as guidelines for doing community-based research and efficiently presenting data.

Chakma (2016) wrote about how FPAR research was used by a feminist network in Asia Pacific to support capacity building in grassroots communities. As a result of this work, Chakma (2016) affirmed that there had been structural change and that feminist movements across the Asia Pacific region had strengthened. Chakma (2016) made note of how researchers were provided training to help them speak publicly at international forums. This is a valuable skill to teach and learn since it provides community researchers with more independence when talking about findings or other facts they want to make known. A researcher that is a member of a community may not have experience in presenting information to large groups. Thus, they may feel uncomfortable attending events, such as conferences or meetings with politicians, where they are expected to speak. Others are then left with the responsibility to articulate the stories of their absent co-researchers. This leaves open the possibility for their co-researcher's voice being suppressed (as it is not their own message or story).

Yoshihama and Carr (2002) conducted FPAR research with Hmong women and their experiences of domestic violence. In the early stages of their project, they realized that the discussion of violence in the home of Hmong women was forbidden. These authors decided to expand the scope of their research project so that they could continue to do beneficial research with this group of women. A series of workshops were provided to the Hmong women to help familiarize them with FPAR research. The Hmong women also used photovoice as a method to document their everyday lives. Photography helped them to share their stories. For example, the Hmong women took photographs of deteriorating buildings in their communities to expose their inadequate living conditions. Photovoice was able to break language barriers by allowing the Hmong women to communicate through images. This approach allowed them to tell their own stories and present their data to a larger audience. Our project, which will be described below also consisted of approaches to assist our co-researchers with sharing their stories.

Our Research Project History

Our community is located on the east end of the city of Toronto, Canada. It was formerly known as Donmount Court and now called Rivertowne. Donmount Court was explicitly a Toronto Community Housing neighbourhood that provided subsidized housing for low-income families. It was eventually revitalized to include both rentals (most of them subsidized), and privately-owned housing (TCH, 2019b). A property developer purchased the land of Rivertowne and rebuilt this neighbourhood. However, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) continues to operate the rental homes.

Ninety percent of TCHC residents are low-income, and almost one-third of families are single-mother led (TCH, 2017). Most of the residents are also racialized (TCH, 2019a). This demographic played a role into why I decided to begin an inquiry about the relationship of gender, race, and policy – with a focus on Black women – in Toronto Community Housing (TCH). I also became interested in the ways in which the women of TCH cultivate spaces. Since I was particularly interested in communal spaces, the notion of community these women held was also of interest to me. My supportive advisor presented me the opportunity to pursue my interest through completing a research project under her supervision. We discussed the approach I would use to retrieve data and agreed a focus group would be an accessible and interactive way to work with the women in my community. There was one question leading this focus group: "What makes a community?". This project was approved by Wilfrid Laurier's Research Ethics Board.

Co-researchers

In August of 2016, I contacted one of the community leaders in Rivertowne and asked if she knew of anyone who was interested in joining the focus group that would be conducted. The criteria of those eligible to take part in this research would be an individual who identified as a woman, over 16 years old, and a resident of TCH for five years or more. I used the same procedure for another neighbourhood (Alexandra Park) and asked a woman with whom I went to high school if she knew of anyone who was interested. For both communities, I placed flyers inside residential buildings and community centres. Six women from Rivertowne and five women from Alexandra Park expressed interest.

At the time this project was conducted, four out of the six co-researchers from Rivertowne were mothers. All women are racialized: five are Black with Caribbean backgrounds, and one Brown (from East Asia). Three of the women are actively involved in the community. They attend community meetings on a regular basis, plan events, and facilitate programming for young children. Four out of five women from Alexandra Park are seniors, two which are Black and the other two White. All of these women are mothers and grandmothers. The youngest woman was my high school peer. She is also a mother of two, a daughter to one of the senior co-researchers, and of mixed race. It is notable to mention that I personally contributed to the discussions within the focus groups. Some may argue that this could have interfered with the data we collected. However, Cahill et al. (2010) asserted that self-representation is one of most important elements of (F)PAR research. Equal participation, another critical component of FPAR, would then include the self-representation from all researchers of our project. I was able to relate to many of the topics in discussion due to some of my own personal experiences, and my identity as a woman resident of TCH.

Focus Group: "What Makes a Community?"

The focus groups took place within their respective communities. In Rivertowne, two focus groups were conducted. There were two separate groups of three women. In Alexandra Park, there was one focus group that included all five women. The location of each focus group was decided upon by my co-researchers. One Rivertowne focus group was completed in the recreation room of a building in our community. The other focus group took place on the porch of one of the co-researcher's home. The focus group for Alexandra park occurred in their neighbourhood's community centre. We rented out a room in the centre to use in private.

I explained to my co-researchers that our research would partly be used for my dissertation. I also informed them that our research may be presented at conferences and to produce journal articles. This information was also provided in the consent forms, which were signed by everyone who participated. I recorded each focus group session on a voice recorder. The recordings were then transcribed and analyzed.

Participatory Analysis with Co-researchers

As co-researchers, it was also the role of those who participated to also be involved in the analysis. One way these women were able to do so was by meeting with me to review and explain what they had stated during focus groups. I also received feedback about some of the themes they were able to see throughout our discussions. Each co-researcher would focus on the community within which they live. We completed this analysis through phone discussions and meeting up subsequent to the completion of transcribing our audio recordings of focus groups. This method is also known as direct scribing, which will be covered more in detail later on.

Key Findings

Overall, we found that the answer to our focus group question ("What makes a community?") greatly depended on the advocacy, community involvement, and strong relationships developed among residents. However, there were various themes that emerged from each focus group and the narratives of my co-researchers. The women from Rivertowne decided it was important to share data connected to two themes. The first theme we discovered focused on matters concerning neighbourhood revitalization. The second theme was about personal and conflicting relationships between TCHC and their residents. These themes reflected issues that were most relevant to the discussions of Toronto Public Housing in the media, and by our municipal government at the time (TCHC, 2016). These women wanted to provide a counter narrative to the prevailing idea that mixed-neighbourhoods are the grand solution to public housing neighbourhood dilemmas. My co-researchers in Alexandra Park, a neighbourhood that is currently in the process of being revitalized, primarily focused on their enthusiasm about their community rebuilding. Alexandra Park is a cooperative community, which means residents oversee most of the logistics and relations of their neighbourhood. The women from this community spoke of the autonomy they had and how their community flourished once they were able to slowly detach themselves from TCHC.

The quotations below are examples from the transcriptions of the focus group from Rivertowne with brief descriptions explaining the meaning of each statement. They are also quotations that reflect some of the themes discussed prior. We used quotations to keep in line with the practice of direct scribing (Martin, 2018). Subsequent to selecting various quotations, we reviewed them to ensure that there was a mutual understanding of what was being said. We also used pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality.

I feel that (um) what I really appreciate as a resident who lives here... is that when I see the ladies of Safety First and (the ladies) the women's group, (um uh) the women's walk, and there's many different names of them, that's just their different titles when they wanna organize different events. (M, Co-Researcher)

M spoke about her appreciation of the work that women residents of TCH do. There was and still is a small group of women leaders in our community that lead the events and initiatives discussed above.

(Um), so what keeps it together is having strong leaders, I think, in our community. We are—we have a lot of residents who (um) don't – who see through the politics, who see through the (uh) corporate BS. (S, Co-Researcher)

S explained affairs that go on in TCH communities, which involve TCHC employees, politicians, and residents. When she mentioned “politics” and “corporate BS”, she was referring to how matters relating to the interests of the former group are given precedence over the latter group.

I am agreeing with both ladies. (Um) it does again take residents for this community in Rivertowne—especially because I live here— for this community to (um) be successful. However, I cannot take it when Toronto Community Housing is always taking the credit for that initiative. There's been years up on top of years that residents have been trying to do things in the community and once they started Toronto Community Housing just takes it over and (there they) they feel like they're in charge”. (SZ, Co-Researcher)

SZ discussed how some residents of Rivertowne have lived there for many years and have worked hard to build and maintain a strong community. These individuals lived in our community long enough to be residents of Donmount. SZ is frustrated with how TCHC failed to provide resources for Donmount but later appeared to gain interest in our community and the programs the women of TCH created. TCH offered funding for some of these programs but their support came with contingencies. At times, residents were expected to essentially forfeit all their control and decision-making power. This did not fare well with residents because they knew what was best for our community in comparison to TCHC employees that are hired to oversee programming.

Action

This project became a catalyst for advocacy support, including for an eviction one of our co-researchers potentially faced around the time we completed our project. This co-researcher made substantial contributions to our community and was also considered a community leader. She needed character support letters from residents (as instructed by her paralegal) to help support her case. SZ and M asked me to write a letter of support based on some of the information we discussed about our community development in the focus-groups. The co-researcher facing the eviction was mentioned many times in our discussion. Thus, we were able to simply take what we stated about her and apply it to the letters, which essentially professed that this woman was an anchor to our community. We also decided to attend the court hearings and agreed to make similar statements, if called upon to do so. Our efforts proved useful as our co-researcher's eviction was dismissed. This outcome verified the strong and positive impact our voices can have on the oppressions we experience. It also confirmed that the approaches I discuss below were essential to our project, as they assisted in preserving the stories our co-researchers shared.

Narrative

Although social work clinicians may use narrative methods in practice (Miller, 2006; Payne, 2006), the methodological tools discussed in this section, and also used in our work, are for research-based inquiry and investigation. Larsson and Sjöblom (2010) asserted that for many definitions, and across many disciplines, the definition of narrative is synonymous with the word “story” (p. 274). However, the concept of narrative is often reflective of the researcher's background (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). For this paper, I will use a definition of narrative derived from Hinchman and Hinchman (1997), and Moore (2006). According to these authors, the word narrative is “discourse with a clear sequential order that connects events in a meaningful way” (1997, as cited in Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010, p. 274), and “allows us to locate ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations” (2006, p. 617). The definition formed is relevant to my area of study – social work – and to the type of narratives that emerged from our research. This definition is also more applicable

to sociology based narrative approaches as opposed to psychology based narrative approaches (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). For more information on each approach see Andrews, Squire, and Tambouko (2003).

In addition, narrative research is useful when learning about stories and providing a platform for disadvantaged groups (Halberstam, 2005). Riessman and Quinney (2005) cautioned researchers about the underlying assumptions of “giving voices” (Byrne, 2017; Dittmann & Jenson, 2014) to marginalized people. Rather than being the “givers” of voice, we should aim to hear and interpret their stories to spread awareness about social issues. One way this can be done is through the way researchers collect and analyze their stories and data.

Direct Scribing

Direct scribing, a technique developed by Canadian social worker, Martin, is a compelling narrative method that was created to assist individuals in writing self-narratives (Martin, 1998). Martin (1998) facilitated the use of this method while working with young people who were coming out of child protection and working towards independence. She explained how youth were disconcerted about the way child welfare workers wrote insufficient notes about personal and sensitive circumstances affecting the youth's lives. The workers would then consider their own personal interpretations as factual.

The practice of producing incorrect information and inadequate analyses of case reports has a potentially detrimental impact on the lives of youth in care. These reports are used to provide necessary supports. They may also be used to assist in evaluations that determine the kinds of supports needed. To counter this malpractice, Martin (1998) asked the youth to write down the stories they wanted to articulate about of their lives. They then collaboratively reviewed stories with the youth over multiple meetings. In doing so, Martin (1998) “ensured that [the narratives] represented as accurately and thoroughly as possible what [the youth] meant to say about their transitional experience” (p. 6). Their narratives were eventually published into books and helped contribute to making social change in welfare practices (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). Furthermore, Martin (1998) was mindful of the inequitable power dynamics that exists between the narrator and the interviewee. She drew attention to how the interviewer essentially holds power in what is conveyed by the respondent, similar to the point I discussed above. We found the method of direct scribing sufficient for the use of our project. Martin worked with the youth in a way that is reflective of the notion “power-with” by Ponc et al. (2010). The succeeding section will elucidate the concept of power-with.

Power-With

Tett (2005) stated the meaning of power-with is finding ways to share power that allows it to expand and grow within a group. VeneKlasen, Miller, and Ruthraff (2004) described power-with as a form of power that helps to build strength among a group and includes a mutuality of interests. Power-with also increases the knowledge and skills of individuals. Power-with makes connections between different groups, which helps them to facilitate social change. Advocacy groups tend to use power-with for building allies and gaining support for their causes (VeneKlasen et al., 2004). Terez (2010) explained that those who use this form of power prioritize commitment and co-creation, value experiential knowledge, and believe that everyone learns from each other.

The power-with framework that “developed from longstanding feminist theorizing and practice” (Ponc et al., 2010, p. 333), and permeates throughout FPAR research, directly aligns with many FPAR principles. One FPAR principle is the validity of all knowledges since everyone teaches and learns from each other and has knowledge to distribute and gain. Power-with demonstrates participation, another salient principle of FPAR. The “with” of power-with places an emphasis on collaboration and inclusion. Participation allows for the input of all members of research projects to contribute in meaningful ways. The research project that we completed would not have been cogent if there was not equal participation. If I had decided to take lead, extract data from my community, and provide my interpretation of what was told to me, many significant points could have been misconstrued. Ponc et al. (2010) described how this overpowering situation creates conflict: “power-over strategies will likely alienate research partners” (p. 330).

Moreover, if I approached this project in a way that indicated that my knowledge was more valuable than my community, my co-researchers would have been reluctant to work with me. Therefore, I also addressed any power dynamics by assuring my co-researchers that their experiential knowledge and the work they do in our neighbourhood makes them experts of our community as well. I was then able to develop the trust that Ponc et al. (2010) stated to be a critical piece of FPAR research. In doing so, I created a comfortable climate with my co-researchers to facilitate dialogue. I wanted to make sure that the concerns of my co-researchers were at the forefront of our project and that their input could be shared in a way that authentically reflected the messages they offered. This fulfilled my main objective of presenting my co-researchers voices without compromise.

Presenting FPAR Without Compromising Our Voices and Message

In 2017, I applied to present this project at a graduate student conference in Waterloo, Ontario. Upon receiving acceptance, I consulted with my co-researchers and asked them what the most prominent information for me was to share with those who attended my conference presentation. I then used the direct scribing method (Martin, 1998) to capture exactly what was required of me to mention in this presentation. My co-researchers confirmed and reiterated the themes I discussed before. I was worried that some of our findings would be redundant and therefore insignificant. For example, there have been many research projects focusing on public housing policy, which reveal the tension between residents and their housing providers (Reid, 2013; August, 2008, 2014). There are also studies where residents have called for the attention of their government to improve their living conditions (August, 2008; 2014).

Furthermore, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation has been frequently reported on by major news outlets regarding the mismanagement and lack of maintenance of TCH neighborhoods (Levy, 2012; Pagliaro, 2017; Sylvester, 2016). Nevertheless, I realized that our findings remain relevant because they bring awareness to the ongoing issues that continue to exist in public housing neighbourhoods. This information also displays how our neighbourhoods urgently need resolutions from government, policy makers, TCHC, and their stakeholders.

Ideally, I would have attended the conference with my co-researchers. However, due to scheduling conflicts, I ended up traveling to the conference on my own. To begin the conference presentation, I introduced myself and shared my social location. Next, I provided background information for FPAR and FPAR principles. I briefly discussed our community-based research project. I then talked about narratives and direct scribing as the method and approach used during our research project. It was very critical for me to emphasize that our project was a collaborative effort and that the findings were presented to amplify the voices and stories of my co-researchers. I then talked about the themes found in our research and shared some quotations (similar to this article). I also discussed some of the challenges I faced in presenting community-based research in a way that authentically represented my co-researchers, which will be discussed in the next section.

To finish my presentation, I left the floor open to any questions. The audience showed great interest in the methods I used and as my experience as a co-researcher, as opposed to doing research in a more traditionally academic format. They also shared their thoughts about the ongoing issues that exist in TCH neighbourhoods. I was able to share stories that were told to me to expand on some of the issues I discussed. One person stated that they were very disturbed about some of these problems. Another individual said that they were unfamiliar with TCHC and also unaware of the difficulties public housing residents face. Their responses verified to me that our work is significant and that we need continue to disseminate the knowledge we generated from our project.

Limitations and Challenges

It was challenging at times to transition between my identity as a doctoral student researcher and a community member. I wanted to contribute to the focus group discussions as much as my co-researchers but understood how that could potentially silence others. The tension I hold between being a member of the community and a doctoral student was revealed in a methodological decision I had to make. According to (Langan & Morton, 2009), all FPAR research begins with consultations with the community to plan and implement a project that focuses on a topic chosen from the community. The members of the community where research is being conducted are the ones who essentially hold the decision about the design and direction of the project. That being said, our project did not start with consultation between me and my co-researchers. However, I believe my role as a tenant representative and resident of TCH for over 20 years constitutes enough knowledge about my community to be aware of, and make decisions about, critical research topics. Essentially my shared social location gave me the confidence to make this choice. Manohar (2013) summarized this issue when writing about insider/outsider positions:

Drawing upon feminist interpretations of insider/outsider positions in research, I argue that shared social location is a performative, tenuous and contextual position continually constructed and contested by both my participants and I. (p. 189)

Another challenge was ensuring that I did not mislead my co-researchers about the outcome of our project. I am very enthusiastic about our work and know it has the potential to make change. However, I did not want to leave any false impressions about our work solving all issues within our community and other TCH neighbourhoods. Ponc et al. (2010) coined the term “raised expectations” to delineate this concern. They also discussed potential issues that may rise due to this expectation:

The whole notion of 'raised expectations' because of the presence of partners who have influence over resources and policy has been insufficiently considered in the FPAR literature and deserves further attention because it is tied to a number of conflicting emotions such as, disappointment, and having feelings of hope that may or may not be actualized. (p. 330)

Conclusion

This paper was written to discuss the ways in which I presented FPAR research in a way that did not compromise the voices of my co-researchers. The narrative approach and methods used within this approach (such as direct scribing [Martin, 1998]) allowed me to achieve this goal. The concept of power-with assisted me in working with my co-researchers in a productive manner that maximized their participation and facilitated equal partnership. Although I initially focused on presenting research at a conference, I reviewed literature on FPAR projects and analyzed how these researchers used FPAR principles to prioritize and heighten the story and voices of their community co-researchers. The methods used in our project are simple to use and relatively accessible. Hopefully they may be of use to readers who decide to do community-based research influenced by FPAR principles and are interested in using what Gaventa (2004) referred to as "mechanisms for greater voice" (p. 31) for their co-researchers.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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