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# **We're Here, You Just Don't Know How to Reach Us: Conducting Research with Citizens on the Socio-Economic Margins**

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**Abstract:** In this paper, methodological challenges that emerged when conducting research with socially and economically disadvantaged young adults in a semi-rural community are examined. Recruitment and retention issues related to ethics protocols, trust, and economic disadvantage are addressed. Strategies governing bodies can employ to support research with difficult to reach populations are suggested.

## **Introduction**

In this paper, methodological challenges that emerged when conducting ethnographic educational research with economically disadvantaged young adults in a semi-rural community are examined. First, an overview of the study that informs this paper is provided. Next, participant recruitment issues faced by researchers who work with difficult to reach citizens and who must adhere to ethics boards and regulations are addressed. Retention concerns and ways researchers may help participants stay involved in research are discussed. Strategies governing bodies can employ to support research with difficult to reach populations are suggested.

## **Study Overview**

This paper draws from a critical ethnographic study that examines how socially and economically disadvantaged young people, living in a post-industrial Atlantic Canadian community, experience and perceive social and economic health. Social and economic health is defined here as participants' sense of comfort and security that their social and economic needs are, and will continue to be met, in their community.

### *Neoliberalism and Disenfranchised Youth*

Economically disadvantaged young adults, in small post-industrial communities across Canada are seeking social and economic health. Their efforts take place in a globalized economy often marked by limited employment prospects and reduced social and economic support. In a neo-liberal era of the supposed *classless* society (Walkerdine, 2003), young adults are told opportunities abound to create their own success. Training and upgrading in economically disadvantaged communities teach people to recreate themselves, making them employable even if there is no work where they live. Social policy focused on investment in human capital through lifelong learning has not been supported by increased social welfare support (Banting, 2005). Thus, as the economic gap continues to expand in Canada (Yalnizyan, 2007) so, too, does the educational gap (Banting, 2005). In a social climate in which dependency is perceived to be a character flaw (Fraser and Gordon, 1994), citizens that desperately need social and economical networks to assist them in their reformation are often perceived from the outside as inept.

### *Adult Education and Community*

From this perspective, how can the scores of Canadian communities affected by the impact of global retrenchment survive? Cape Breton Island is a region of Atlantic Canada struggling with this question. As an educator in the field of communication education, I argue community-based adult education which embraces local historic and social realities may contribute to the survival of economically disadvantaged communities vulnerable to globalized social change. Particularly, when citizens are provided the resources needed to critically discuss, document, and act upon their accounts and visions of a sustainable future. Central to these discussions must be citizens, such as economically disadvantaged young adults, who are most often excluded from such dialogue. Hence, an aim of this study was to work with young adults to gain insights regarding assets and barriers that contribute to their social and economic health; including the impact of gender, class, education, and community historical circumstance.

### *Critical Ethnography*

A critical ethnographic approach was adopted for this research. Critical ethnography may be described as a politically- oriented research methodology that aims to expose mechanism of power that support injustices. Ethnography has been successfully used to explore issues of education, class, and gender among young adults and youth (Skeggs, 1997; Weis, 2004). Cook (2005) calls for critical ethnographic health research, stating it is most likely to address inequalities in health status. Research methods adopted for this study included focus groups, interviews (with young adults and community workers), participant observation, and culturally relevant strategies that are discussed later in this paper.

Young adult participants included five females and five males, ages 19 to 30. They all experienced, or were still experiencing, significant barriers that impact their social and economic health. Issues include: 1) lack of employment and paid and volunteer work experience, 2) lack of adequate income, 3) homelessness and lack of adequate housing, 4) inadequate formal and informal social support, 5) lack of formal education, 6) learning disabilities, 7) substance addiction, and 8) victimization as a result of crime and violence.

## **Issues of Recruitment and Retention**

### *Recruitment*

The intent to conduct research with a disadvantaged population does not automatically translate into willing participants. Many of the typical processes of participant recruitment, laid out by ethics regulating bodies and designed to protect participants, create significant barriers to participation for less dominant members of society (Jansson & Benoit, 2006; Leadbeater and Glass, 2006). Research with economically disadvantaged young adults, living in a semi-rural, post-industrial community, presented unique challenges that were often exacerbated by ethics policies.

Months prior to the 'official' research start, I became involved in the youth community where I intended to conduct my research; meeting people who worked with disadvantaged young adults, volunteering as a communication workshop instructor for young adults, and taking a seat on the board of directors for a local youth outreach centre. I also met with the young adults and solicited their advice about recruiting participants. The feedback provided by the young people and the youth workers indicated trust must

be established with potential participants. However, ethics protocol limited the approaches I could take to make initial contact.

A typical first step of recruitment recommends that researchers post recruitment flyers that briefly describe their research study and invite parties to call, email, or attend a meeting for additional information. Often, such flyers can be physically posted in a variety of locales frequented by potential participants and electronically posted in cyber communities likely to be visited by those interested in the research. Such an approach assumes a degree of homogeneity within the target population that makes it relatively easy to determine where posters should be placed. However, as with other marginalized groups (Shaver, 2005), economically disadvantaged young adults are not necessarily part of a homogeneous group. Moreover, some of the characteristics they may have in common do not make them easy to locate. Results from this study indicate many economically disadvantaged young adults move often and do not have regular phone and internet access. With little attachment to formal labour markets and education systems, the structure of their days, requiring them to be in certain places at certain times, is less obvious. Low income and inadequate access to transportation means their visits to the few local restaurants, shops, and entertainment and sporting venues are limited. Consequently, determining the best places to post flyers in the semi-rural community was an initial concern.

Posting flyers also presented a literacy issue. Many young adults I met avoided written material and indicated they were uncomfortable reading. Hence, there was some concern whether potential participants would stop and read flyers posted in a public venue.

Acknowledging the importance of trust, I enlisted the support of local community agencies and workers that seemed to have a positive reputation among young people. Most agencies were unwilling to allow recruitment posters to be hung up randomly. However, many coordinators and their staff were willing to meet with me. Once they were comfortable with the work I was proposing, they agreed to allow me to post flyers. Certain youth workers offered to distribute an initial contact letter to potential participants and to share additional information upon request. From there, interested parties were invited to attend information sessions.

Information sessions posed another set of challenges. Transportation and childcare created barriers that often prevented those interested from attending sessions. Thus, I offered both services. Lunch and snacks were also provided. Attendance at the information sessions was irregular and while some expressed interest relatively quickly after the sessions, others waited a month or more to decide to get involved. Others expressed no interest at all and still others indicated they did not wish to participate but enjoyed attending the information sessions.

Informed consent created further concern. Most institutional ethics review boards create specific procedures all potential researchers must complete before their research is considered for ethics approval and these have become increasingly rigid and restrictive (Leadbeater and Glass, 2006). The amount of information that must be included in the consent form can result in a multi-page document. "These can understate benefits, overstate minimal risks, obscure what the research is about, and even intimidate or overwhelm potential research participants" (Leadbeater and Glass, 2006, p. 254). Once all required material was included in the informed consent form for this study it was four

complete pages-- a potential deterrent to any prospective participants, particularly those faced with literacy barriers. Hence, at information sessions, I read through the form with potential participants, emphasizing issues of confidentiality and their right to refuse to respond to any questions and to withdraw from the study at any time. I also raised these issues every time we met throughout the study.

### *Retention*

Once they decided to participate, efforts had to be made to help participants remain involved in the research for the duration of the study. Attempts were made to facilitate a positive experience for participants and to ensure they felt their contributions were valued and respected. Hence, I attended to issues of reciprocity and flexibility, and used culturally relevant research methods.

Critical ethnography often encompasses a notion of reciprocity in which researchers attempt to disrupt the power dynamics of the research relationship that privileges researchers and their own agendas. Harrison et. al. (2001) describe reciprocity as the give and take in research relationships. It is a way to respect research participants and the knowledge they share, to give back to them and their community, and to collaborate with them to induce positive social change.

I spent a significant amount of time with young adults and youth workers at the centre that became a central meeting site throughout the study and they became comfortable asking me to get involved in projects and activities. Throughout the research process, I offered communication training in group sessions, worked one-on-one with participants who were preparing for interviews or presentations, and offered tips and ideas on public and interpersonal communication related matters when asked. I also provided transportation to and from different locations in the community and helped out with creative projects at participants' requests.

Flexibility was exercised when scheduling time with participants. Some interviews were conducted in cars, on walks, sitting outside, and one was conducted while playing one-on-one floor hockey. Lunch and snacks were provided and comfortable conversations before and after the actual interviews helped to create a climate of comfort and trust.

Traditional practices of qualitative data collection such as interviews, focus groups, and participant observation are valuable and were utilized throughout this study. Still, limitations are inherent in all methods of data collection. Hence, I adopted two additional strategies of inquiry; *critical dialogue* and an adaptation of *photovoice*. Used in a focus group format, critical dialogue involves choosing a piece of media to stimulate group discussions on issues relevant to participants and the research topic (Pasco, 2000). Possible media are film, music, and graphic imaging. In this study, music and song lyrics that dealt with life in a small town were used to spark dialogue regarding participants' experiences of social and economic health in their community. One goal is to limit the researcher's 'control' during the conversation by enabling discussion to emerge without heavily structured questioning. Once songs were played, I seldom had to ask questions other than to clarify, paraphrase, and probe responses.

Photovoice is a research strategy in which participants are given cameras and asked to use photography and narrative to document their experiences, observations, and perceptions of their community. Photovoice gives people whose experiences are often excluded from 'official' accounts to determine and document how they want their

experiences and community to be portrayed (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Participants in this study were given disposable cameras and attended a session regarding ethics, safety, and proper use protocols. Once they took their photos they returned the cameras for development and upon receiving their photos they were invited to discuss their photographs in a focus group with other participants.

Participants responded positively to the use of music and photography as ways to articulate their positions. In critical dialogue and photovoice sessions they articulated a sense of ownership of the discussions. They expressed their comfort with the formats and indicated the music and cameras made the experience interesting and exciting.

The success of the methods of data collection may also be reflective of the amount of time taken to foster relationships with the participants in this study. For three months I engaged with participants a number of times a week. For the following six months I continued to visit with them on a more irregular basis. Having the opportunity to interact outside of the data collection sessions allowed further opportunity to foster a climate of trust.

My actions were taken with the best of intentions of engaging in ethically motivated research. And yet, a decision to attend to issues such as those described here far from ensures these goals will be met. First, recruitment strategies discussed may have excluded potential participants, such as those without connections to the formal networks I contacted or the young adults who utilize those services. Second, attention to issues of reciprocity such as efforts to offer my own skills may not always be the support participants require or want. Third, power relations can seldom, if ever, be completely dissolved in research. Participants may not have the resources or desire to take on a high degree of responsibility for the research (Reid, 2004) such as was required with the photovoice strategy. Initially, participants worried about taking the 'right' photos and some wanted me to tell them what would make a 'good' photo. However, by consistently reflecting on my motives and actions, I aimed to identify ways in which I could reach potential participants who may not otherwise get involved and help them to stay involved throughout the research process. Similarly, I attempted to recognize and acknowledge when I might be inadvertently contributing to inequalities that already exist.

### **Recommendations to Support Research with Difficult to Reach Populations**

Participation barriers in research created by ethics protocols, traditional research relationships, and social and economic disadvantage are not insurmountable. Still, researchers need support in their efforts to engage in research with hard to reach populations. The time required to establish trust and create a climate of reciprocity is significant. Moreover, costs associated with providing food, childcare, and transportation are a financial burden, particularly to those whose work is not funded. Consequently, some researchers may regrettably opt not to conduct research with difficult to reach populations, creating gaps in who is represented in the literature (Leadbeater and Glass, 2006).

Therefore, while it is important that researchers tackle the barriers to participation, research governing bodies can address the issues as well. For example, research ethics boards may need a wider spectrum of representation from local communities, in particular segments of the population that tend to be underrepresented in research (Leadbeater & Glass, 2006). Review boards could ensure the establishment and

implementation of mechanism to solicit feedback and recommendations from university and community researchers who work with difficult to reach populations and the people with whom they work. Regular reviews of procedures and protocols should ensure that new culturally relevant research methods can be effectively critiqued for ethical soundness in ways that reflect the needs of diverse populations and their local communities. In other words, there needs to be a degree of flexibility within guidelines without compromising the welfare of potential participants.

Funding bodies can increase their commitment to research with difficult to reach populations. Funding can more accurately reflect the length of time it takes to enter a research field and to establish the climate of trust necessary to conduct sound, rigorous research. Moreover, funding can better cover participant-related expenses.

Universities can ensure novice researchers and students have information regarding all avenues of financial support that can be accessed to cover costs associated with participants. This may include taxation information explaining what can be claimed as research expenses and assistance in preparing such claims. Such steps may help researchers engage in meaningful research with groups of people who, without support, may not be able to participate.

### **Conclusion**

Adult education theorists have called for collaboration with people who move to challenge social and economic agendas (Miles, 1998). Such work requires a commitment to reflexively interrogate our own research practices to ensure that those who should be included in research are included and to advocate for institutional support to facilitate our work. We can never entirely remove the biases in our research that may play a role in excluding participants and reproducing social inequalities. Yet mindfulness of inherent tension between the emancipatory and socially reproductive nature of research and the governing bodies that regulate our work is important for the development of inclusive research processes. Particularly, research that invites those, whose voices we often do not hear, to participate in the creation of new and meaningful ways to embark on positive social change.

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