

BRIEF REPORTS

Relationships, Reflection, and Response: An Iterative Collaborative Research Process to Address Mental Health inequities.

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The authors share insights about methodology learned through a three-year (and counting) community-based participatory research (CBPR) process centered on enhancing the mental health of Bhutanese youth in Cincinnati, Ohio. We will illustrate how we collaboratively designed, paused, responded to community and societal concerns, redesigned, and enacted our research goals through multiple iterations, and explain how others might use this process in their own research. By uniting community organizations, university researchers, and the support of Robert Wood Johnson Interdisciplinary Research Leaders we are using this deeply iterative process to address the implications of global and local racism and address mental health inequities. We end with specific suggestions for how researchers can learn from our experiences to enhance the potential for future research to support social justice.

A passion to both identify and work to transform sources of inequity and social harm has long called researchers to utilize participatory and action research methods (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Fals-Borda, 1987; Snyder, 2009). These methods are rooted in collaboration with communities impacted by particular social issues and valuing expertise that comes from the different vantage points community members, researchers, and other relevant social actors provide. Furthermore, these methods embrace a cyclical and iterative process wherein action and reflection, and theory development and deep engagement, are all considered essential aspects of the methodology. Although many have noted the inherent complexity and “messiness” of this approach to research (Cook, 2009; Dancis et al., 2023), insight given into the specific setbacks, pauses, and pivots that can occur within the “mess” often is not sufficiently described in published research. The purpose of this paper is to discuss a community-centered iterative methodological process that responds to existing and emerging understandings of justice issues that can impact research and action.

The process described in this paper centers a methodology learned through a three-year (and counting) community-based participatory research (CBPR) collaboration focused on enhancing the mental health of Bhutanese youth in Cincinnati, Ohio. The initial development of this project grew out of a multi-year relationship with members of the local Bhutanese community and the partner organization, Cincinnati Compass. Members of the Bhutanese

community turned to Cincinnati Compass for support related to mental health challenges among their youth. Together as a team that also included two university researchers, we began developing initial plans for a participatory research and action process aimed towards identifying and addressing mental health challenges that prioritized the cultural values and wisdom of both youth and elders in the Bhutanese community.

In 2020, we gained funding support from the Robert Wood Johnson Interdisciplinary Research Leaders (IRL) program to conduct this participatory research. Engaging in this work involved deepening understanding of the injustice Bhutanese families faced during the refugee resettlement process, racist and mental health implications of the pandemic, navigating university policies that were not designed to support community research, and the complexity of existing relationships among community members and organizations. Our iterative approach thus took a community-centered focus as we sought to thoughtfully respond to the different societal and local factors that impact the research and action process. We will share the different cycles of our project, with attention given to how we incorporated a justice-oriented ecological consciousness and how that influenced our collective decisions and actions.

Positionality Statement

Examining how different ecological factors impact our phases of research and action begins with reflection upon how our own identities and past experiences impact our relationships and capacity to comprehend the issues we sought to address (Muhammad et al., 2015). None of the authors (two university professors and the director of the partner organization) are members of the Bhutanese community. Thus, central to our initial work together was a thoughtful effort to gain an understanding of the historical and contemporary experiences of the Bhutanese community, both in learning from community members themselves and external resources. Although each of the authors hold both privileged and marginalized identities, we did not hold any expectations that we understood the experiences of the Bhutanese community, including what it was like to move to the U.S. as refugees and subsequently navigate life in the Midwestern United States. Identifying similar, as well as divergent, experiences that result from holding marginalized identities at times became a source of connection among the authors and the community members. Moreover, it was a shared passion to seek greater equity in our city, dismantle racist barriers, and use research to promote youth mental health in a culturally appropriate and just manner that foregrounded our collective work.

Sharing Our Process

The messiness, and its value, in community research was evident from the start of our process. We (the three authors, who will be referred to as the IRL team throughout the paper) hit submit on our grant proposal for this project on a rainy night, right around the time school closures, restricted

travel, and social distancing associated with the COVID-19 pandemic were just beginning to emerge in consciousness and policy. Embracing uncertainty is encouraged in CBPR (Rubinstein-Ávila, 2013; Walton et al., 2015). We were entering a widespread era of uncertainty about what our society, local community, and personal lives would look like, which unknowingly became an asset to our consciousness as we began this research. In this section, we discuss ways our consciousness of uncertainty at various ecological levels and at several moments shaped our collective decision-making and related pauses and pivots.

Power sharing is the cornerstone of CBPR (Dutt et al., 2022; Wallerstein et al., 2019). The IRL team members were keenly aware of our outsider status and the need to center the desires, knowledge, and values of members of the Bhutanese community in all project phases. An advisory team, made up of members of the Bhutanese community, was created to advise on every aspect of the project from research design, community engagement, budget development, and dissemination of findings. As a team — IRL and Advisory — we looked at the full budget to make determinations about stipends for participation, types of activities/events, kinds of training, food and refreshments, and more. It was our team's desire to truly collaborate on this project to ensure we were intentional about allowing the Bhutanese community to steer this project.

To kick off the project, a series of listening sessions with youth, adults, and elders were held to gain an understanding of the landscape of being a refugee, migrating to the Midwest, establishing community, and navigating new societal norms/expectations. During this time, the IRL team members gained insight into the process of resettlement and contemporary challenges refugees faced, with an emphasis on the meaning they attached to the experiences. Our team always had the desire to be culturally responsive and collaborative with the Bhutanese community and it was through these listening sessions that modifications were made to the original research design to prioritize issues and processes important to the community. Language was altered to reflect preferences of the community. For example, we initially planned to host focus groups with youth across the intersections of age and gender. However, our Advisory Team recommended the idea of “conversation circles” to make the engagement feel less formal and more accessible to young people.

Starting in fall 2021, planning meetings were consistent and productive for the first three months. See Table 1 for a detailed timeline of team activities. As we moved into periods of transition (e.g., end-of-year customs/traditions/holidays) with respect to school, work, and sports, the ability to capture the attention of youth waned greatly, making scheduling activities difficult. Our interactions with youth advisory team members revealed the multiple responsibilities they were juggling, which impacted their ability to fully participate in the project. Bhutanese youth were not only going to school full time, but were also serving as a liaison for their parents and elders, including

as translators for parents and elders who did not speak English. When parents and elders had difficulty navigating institutions (e.g., school, employment, social services), youth were there to serve as intermediaries navigating two cultures to help get their family members the support they needed. Youth were working jobs to contribute to their respective households, but also trying to find time to be a “regular” teenager. As a result, young people prioritized sports and time with friends.

These are all issues that would make navigating any project challenging, but COVID-19 complicated life for members of the Bhutanese community in significant ways. Initial activities were planned to accommodate social distancing, which required more meetings with smaller groups of youth. Transportation was an issue and needed to be coordinated across the different types of engagement. However, as meeting dates approached, numerous scheduling conflicts arose. While the core advisory team still met (albeit less frequently) there was consistent communication about next steps and strategies to re-energize the team. By fall 2022, every scheduled “conversation circle” was canceled. Our community partners were indifferent, and our project was in jeopardy of not getting to completion due to the messiness of schedules, life, and the ongoing repercussions of the pandemic.

Reflection among IRL team members revealed that the delayed payments to advisory team members could have played a role in halting the momentum of the project. Our team decided to manage and administer the IRL grant through Cincinnati Compass in an attempt to mitigate university bureaucracy. As with all new programs, the learning curve to get advisory team members paid was longer than initially anticipated. However, as the project proceeded, we were able to take care of payments in a timely manner. By spring 2023, another faction of the Bhutanese community expressed interest in collaborating to address youth mental health. The enthusiasm was welcomed. Plans were immediately scheduled for an “Introduction to Mental Health and Psychotherapy,” community workshop as well as events for data collection. Within a matter of weeks, several activities were scheduled and plans for future engagement were solidified. Collaboration with this new group reignited excitement in the project.

With the end of the IRL Program — and its funding — fast approaching, we needed to find a way to continue the collaboration. We reached out to a local philanthropic organization that focuses its funding and programming at the intersections of health and racial equity. The IRL team proposed the creation of a fund that supported refugee-led approaches to mental health and well-being. The purpose of the fund is to support refugee-led organizations working to address youth mental health and well-being through community-led programming. This funding is intended to support refugee community generated ideas that amplify community power and enhance a sense of connection and belonging. The learnings from our processes and pivots during the RWJ IRL program informed the structure of this fund that would be coupled with community-based organization support. As a result,

Timeframe	Activities (planned vs actual)	Catalyst for change	Course corrections	Outcomes
5/20/2021	IRB initially submitted	Aimed to do a blanket IRB that would cover lots of possibilities that could emerge in participatory research, since we wanted to make decisions collectively with the community, but IRBs are slow	rejected on 9/17/21 (after three back and fourth requests for more information, because IRB felt blanket was not appropriate)	
Fall 2021	Form an advisory council to create goals and plans for research			Hosted a several listening sessions with the Bhutanese community in Sept and October 2021 - identified Advisory Council members
10/1/21	Advisory council meeting			Identify co-researchers and prospective youth participants
10/12/21	IRL team meets to discuss budget, youth groups, and co-researchers			
10/20/21	New study specific IRB is submitted	Multiple iterations of back and fourth, correspondence taking about 1-2 months to get back from IRB. Responses for requested changes included wanting more detail on potential instruments (e.g., interview protocols that were yet to be developed, wanting more details on relationships with organizations and locations for research, the annoying way readability is determined for the consent forms etc.). Although many requests were reasonable, were not all asked after one review.	We responded as best we could.	
10/22/21	Full Team meeting (IRL, Advisory board and co-researchers) to discuss phase 1 - data collection	Schedules of the youth made it difficult to confirm participation	Be flexible with planning	Tentatively schedule trainings in November and December for data collection to begin January 2022
Fall 2021	Develop a plan for conversation circles	Idea not fully supported by Advisory Council and Co-researchers	Identify a different method to engage with the youth	
Fall 2021	Coordinate trainings for the research team			
January 3 2022	Meet with Dr. Quinn to discuss her offering a training on privacy and confidentiality for the Full Team			Tentative schedule put in place
Early 2022	Facilitate care-giver meetings	Trying to accommodate the schedules for Full Team participation		Scheduled for April 2022
2/2/22	Identified other refugee community partners to plan a grant submission to support refugee communities in Cincinnati			
2/9/23	Grant submission discussion (part 2)		Prioritize were varied and it was difficult to agree on the terms of the grant for the collective.	We all decided this was not the appropriate opportunity for broader collaboration, but promised to stay connected.
3/1/22	Full Team still planning the start of Conversation Circles			Nothing finalized.
3/9/22	First WIP with Team Justice for Native Children			It was great being paired with a team that aligned so much with our topic, interest, and values.
3/11/22	IRB accepted!!			
4/4/22	Full Team meeting to plan for trainings, data collection, and caregiver engagements.	Youth schedules with sports, school, and work	Identify dates well in advance and offer lots of options for engagements	Training dates offered: April 18th or 25th; Caregiver interviews offered: April 23rd and 30th; Debrief proposed: May 2nd, 15th, and 31st
4/18/22	Virtual training facilitated by Dr. Quinn	Due to illness had to be schedule on-line	Was originally designed to be in-person	Full team participation. Focused on historical trauma, criteria for participation, data collection, privacy, and confidentiality.
4/21/22	IRL team check in			Preparation for caregiver engagement
4/23/22	Full team participates in caregiver meeting			Great afternoon discussions learning about caregiver perceptions of opportunities and challenges in the United States
5/2/22	Full Team debrief			Reflect on the meeting with the caregivers and identify next steps for the conversation circle.
Summer 2022	Conduct conversation circles	Difficulty scheduling		Nothing finalized.
7/7/22	IRL team meet to plan for conversation circles	Difficulty scheduling	Conversations circles scheduled for July 12th, 14th, 19th, and 21st	All the meeting got canceled. Scheduling was difficult, losing interest from youth, advisory group has other priorities.
Winter	Analyze findings			No responsive communication from the community partners.
2/13/23	WIP #2 with Team Justice for Native Children			Discuss the grant, objectives, and goals.
3/3/23	Initiate engagement with new Bhutanese Community Partner			
3/6/23	Meet more members of the new partner organization.			
3/8/23	Begin planning an event for Youth Mental Health			
4/8/23	Host a workshop "Intro to Mental Health and Psychotherapy"			Great interest and engagement from new partners. Interested in moving on this issue.
5/3/23	Planning meeting with IRL team re next steps for data collection and engagement			
6/4/23	Host a discussion and activates on Mental Health at Winton Woods Park.			Youth shared lots of insights about their experiences and things they would like to see/feel supported on.
Summer 2023	Create actions and disseminate findings			
8/22/23	Meeting with IRL leadership team to discuss progress to-date/next steps/spending down the funds			
10/10/23	Interact Funds Discussion			
10/25/23	Mental Health Well-Being Fund Established			

Figure 1. Timeline of Activities

2024 Refugee led Mental Health and Well-Being Restricted Fund	
About the Fund: The purpose of the fund is to support refugee-led organizations working to address mental health and well-being through community- led programming. This funding is intended to support ideas generated from the refugee communities that amplify community power and enhance a sense of connection and belonging. Projects will be considered that enhance a sense of connection and belonging, amplify refugee voices to improve mental health services, expand access to services, and/or build community awareness and understanding of available resources and services.	About the Project: • Cohort Participation: • Organization to join a cohort of refugee and/or immigrant-led community-based organizations. • Serving refugee and immigrant communities in the Cincinnati Metro Area. • Funding Details: • Receives \$20,000 for programming and capacity support. • Project Duration: • 18-month project timeline. • Project Focus: • Programming directed towards improving mental health and well-being of community members. • Capacity-building support to enhance program activities and organizational capacity development.
Support and Collaboration: • Selected organization(s) receive funds along with coaching/advising from Cincinnati Compass and partners. • Connections to other partners facilitated to build organizational capacity. • Collaboration with research partners at UC and UMN for data collection/analysis on community health needs, assets, and program quality. Advocacy and Education: • Data used for advocacy and educational efforts. • Enhance understanding among stakeholders (philanthropic organizations, policy makers, and service providers) about refugee mental health and well-being and refugee-led programs.	Expectations • Project Collaboration: • 18-month collaboration within a cohort for peer-to-peer learning. • Data and Information Sharing: • Establish a platform for organizations to share data and program information. • Community Awareness: • Organizations disseminate program learnings to the broader community. • Raise awareness and garner more support for refugee and immigrant-led programming.

Figure 2. Overview of the Refugee-led Mental Health and Well-being Fund

flexibility is built into project funding to allow unexpected events; funded teams will be part of a learning cohort designed to share best practices with each other; technical support from the IRL team is ongoing through the life of the project and beyond; and funded teams are well positioned to use the outcomes of this project to seed funding opportunities elsewhere. Our proposition was accepted, and we are currently entering into a partnership to support community-centered approaches to address mental health.

Conclusion

By using CBPR, the IRL team was able to deeply engage with the Bhutanese community to identify culturally responsive ways to work towards addressing youth mental health. Our iterative process encouraged us to examine how factors at each ecological level impacted everyone involved and allowed us to refine the project in response. As the clock ran out on the project funding, we sought a next step that would enable us to continue our commitment to the community and utilize the lessons we learned thus far. By transferring funds to a local philanthropic organization that initiated a restricted fund for refugee-led projects, we can further prioritize the goals and desires of refugee communities in uniting research and action for mental health. The organizations we partner with are able to implement a variety of programming and efforts will be supported with data collection and analysis. The goal is for these projects to seed other funding opportunities, as well as shed light on the necessity of funders to provide resources to organizations led by people closest to the problem.

We encourage future researchers to explore methodologies and collaborations that similarly respond to emerging challenges and allow for creative solutions that prioritize community needs and desires. Learning from our experience, we specifically suggest the following:

- Utilize an ecological framework when assessing the potential challenges that impact CBPR, or when encountering a setback in community partnered research. Don't assume that one level of analysis can explain why challenges exist and/or can lead to productive solutions.
- Reach out to funders about transforming projects, even in radical ways, to move your project in a direction that best supports the community, rather than prioritizing traditional expectations of funded academic research.
- Be open and transparent about the difficulties you experience in collaborative research and how you attempt to address them, whether successful or not.
- Externalities will always complicate the research process, especially when you are collaborating with diverse stakeholders. Settle into the reality that flexibility is critical to CBPR.
- Be authentic and mindful in the ways you engage with the community to ensure that the research process is not extractive and reproduces harm.

We believe that utilization of these suggestions can enhance the ability of research to support social justice aims.

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