SPECIAL ISSUE • Relationality in family and intimate practices

open space

Decolonising research with black communities: developing equitable and ethical relationships between academic and community stakeholders

Sadie Goddard-Durant, sgoddarddurant@brocku.ca
Brock University, Canada

Jane Ann Sieunarine, tanelamahabir@gmail.com
Black community member, Canada

Andrea Doucet, adoucet@brocku.ca
Brock University, Canada

In this International Decade for People of African Descent,[1] the spotlight in Canada and in other Western countries has turned to understanding and documenting the lived experiences of black communities. This interest by scholars is perhaps even greater over the last few months with the heightened attention around the world as the Black Lives Matter movements have highlighted anti-black racism in North America. However, reflective of the wider social injustices against black persons, there have been harmful relationships between researchers and black communities historically that has led to black communities mistrusting researchers (Davis et al, 2010; Scharff et al, 2010). These histories have parallels with critiques of the sustained damages of white settler scholarship on, but not with, Indigenous communities where, as Linda Tuhaiwi Smith famously noted that '"research" is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary' (Smith, 2012: 1). Moreover, more and more attention has been given to ethical research practices that go beyond simply getting ethical approval from research ethics boards (Tuck and Guishard, 2013; Doucet, 2018a). In particular, Indigenous communities and scholars who conduct research with them, and to a lesser extent black communities and scholars, have been calling for more attention to be paid to the nature and quality of the relationships that researchers are building with communities who have historically been oppressed in research and in society generally (Gibbs, 2001; Semali et al, 2007; Napoli, 2019). Specifically,

members of these communities are calling for research relationships to be transparent, trustworthy, respectful and reciprocal (Scharff et al, 2010; Tobias et al, 2013). While there is a growing body of research on how to build collaborative relationships with Indigenous communities globally, less is documented about developing these relationships with black communities and black families in particular. Such insight is necessary at this point in history if we are to decolonise the research process with black families and communities – that is, if we are to highlight their experiences using research processes which do not stereotype, revictimise and marginalise them.

In this article we reflect on our recent experiences of university scholars working with a black community organisation in one of Canada's largest cities to conduct research on the experiences and needs of young black mothers. It is within this context that we share our experience of fostering a collaborative, equitable and ethical relationship between a variety of stakeholders – a young black mother of two (Jane Ann), two black staff members from an Afrocentric community-based organisation who worked with youth/black mothers (Kim and Princilia), a black Caribbean PhD student new to Canada (Sadie) and a white Canadian professor (Andrea). We outline five strategies key to initiating and growing the relationship between team members in the early phase.

Respecting the implications of exploitative histories for building new relationships

Sadie had extensive experience of working with black communities in Barbados and wanted to continue this work in Canada. She had used her professional network to initiate contact with the Afrocentric community-based organisation which had deep roots within the black community in the city. In her introductory email, Sadie outlined her experience and her values in doing work with black communities by means of facilitating nuanced representation in research, and providing evidence which communities could draw on to advocate for and design interventions and policies to address systemic barriers and structural injustices. She invited discussion about the community-based organization's interest in understanding young black mothers. In line with the findings of other researchers (see Frerichs et al, 2017; Wang et al, 2017), it had been her experience that authenticity and transparency were necessary for communities that had long histories of abusive interactions with researchers. This approach was on target. The director of the community organisation agreed to an exploratory meeting in which they stressed their need for transparency, reciprocity and emphasis on relationship building. This requirement for entering into a collaboration was in keeping with their Afrocentric approach to service delivery. This requirement of the research relationship was also a consequence of their own exploitative experiences in the past with researchers; this requirement has been also raised by other scholars as key to building successful partnerships with racially marginalised communities (see Tobias et al, 2013).

It was in the context of this history, and the desire to maximise an Afrocentric approach, that Sadie and Andrea made the decision that Andrea should take a more behind-the-scenes role in the fieldwork stages of this project. This was a difficult decision for Andrea because, although she was the 'senior' member of the research team, her approach to research was one of resisting divisions of labour between team members and to participate in all aspects of the research processes, including

fieldwork. Thus, Andrea's role was to meet with Sadie after her meetings in the community, to participate in the backstage work of developing the interview guide and visual methodology with the team, adapting a version of the 'listening guide' narrative approach to data analysis (Doucet, 2018b) for this context, and guiding the team through team data analysis sessions. This experience was instructive for her in that it highlighted how, in some cases, a desire to enact non-hierarchical and ethical research relationships can actually mean moving out of the way so that ethical research relationships can be cultivated.

In the spirit of building ethical research relations, Sadie and the community organisation director also had discussions about what the research team and the organisation and community could and/or should realistically gain from participating in the project and partnership. Access to a community to research, money, prestige, career advancement, skills, knowledge, and source data for programme and policy development were all valuable and likely outcomes. As one way to ensure reciprocity, it was agreed that Sadie and Andrea would offer capacity building by way of training in research methods to the organisation. This would yield two outcomes for the organisation: (1) they would be on their way to reducing their reliance on external research expertise in the long term; and (2) they would move closer to fulfilling their mandate to be a centre of research excellence for health in the black community. Staff would be able to develop their research competence. Two staff members, Kim and Princilia, came on board as part of this capacity-building component of the research partnership. We had the beginnings of a working group! We began with weekly meetings, which we tacitly agreed would be dedicated to getting to know each other. We shared about our professional and personal backgrounds – work and educational histories, experiences with research, our personal and professional interests, and goals, hobbies and family lives. These exchanges paved the way for us beginning to trust each other.

Ultimately, this research partnership was started because there was an acknowledgement from the researcher and those being researched (as represented at this stage by the community-based organisation) about the reality of abusive relationships typically fostered by researchers with black communities and with this black community in particular. There was also a commitment to do better on the part of the researchers, and a willingness on the part of the community-based organisation to be open to brokering relationships with researchers in spite of past experiences. While seemingly elementary, these positions were critical to forging a relationship between these scholars and this black community.

Getting to know the community: constructing and dissecting narratives of anti-black racism

As a part of our early working group 'getting-to-know-you' meetings, Kim and Princilia shared stories with Sadie about the young women/mothers with whom they worked. These discussions occurred through the lens of anti-black racism because this characterised the daily living conditions of the community. How did anti-black racism play out in the lives of these black women? What systemic injustices and structural inequalities did they encounter in their daily lives? What resources did they have at their disposal to navigate these? What role did this community-based organisation play in helping black women navigate these barriers? What role did Kim and Princilia

play in this work? What would this mean for how the community received their interest in brokering a new type of relationship?

Respecting that our positionality to anti-black racism would also influence our relationships with each other and the community, we also reflected on our own experiences of anti-black racism as black women who occupied spaces which have historically been predominantly occupied by white persons in Canada. We reflected on how our privilege as educated professionals left us with vastly different experiences of anti-black racism from our community and access to resources to navigate them. This reflection on our shared insider–outsider position served to deepen our relationship as we were often 'the only' in our professional journeys up to this point.

Community engagement: building community trust and interest

Community engagement was a cornerstone of how initiatives were developed at the community-based organisation. As such it was agreed that Sadie would participate in community events towards gaining first-hand insight into the community's daily living conditions; providing the community with an opportunity to get to know her; and ultimately building a foundation from which to engage community members about their ideas for the direction the research project should take. In the end, Kim was able to vouch for Sadie's commitment and genuineness to a young mother from the community whom she knew and bring her onboard the team. Jane Ann's personality was key to her membership. Jane Ann was accustomed to self-advocacy and was passionate about confronting anti-black racism in her life and that of other young mothers in the community. She readily shared her life experiences and broached discussions about what this would mean for conducting research with young black mothers. She willingly engaged in the discussions the working group had been having from the outset about who they were and their positionality to the community and research project. Efforts to engage a second mother were unsuccessful. However, this failure to secure a second partnership with a community member was insightful in and of itself. Around this time, in this community, young black mothers were facing heightened community violence against their male relatives and partners on top of their own struggles. They simply did not have the emotional availability or time to engage in an exercise that did not immediately relieve their stress and grief, and which was occurring within a context that experience had taught them was unfair to them.

Being open and vulnerable was essential to forging our relationship. While not explicitly voiced, in essence, Sadie, as an educated middle-class woman from the academy, needed to 'prove' herself as someone safe to be given access to this community. This makes sense in light of the long history of researcher exploitation of black communities. This was required even though Sadie was a member of the wider black community herself. She was required to navigate that insider–outsider role and luckily, Kim and Princila had navigated the same challenge and were willing to offer their insights.

On reflection, there were two key strategies we employed to recognise, acknowledge and navigate the challenges inherent in growing our research collaboration between two academics and a black community, each with our own agendas, constraints, privilege and relationship to power. These challenges proved to be opportunities to grow the relationship closer to what we aspired it to be. We discuss these next.

Deprioritising the research process and prioritising the relationship to build capacity

It is easy to pay lip service to the idea of engaging in capacity building within a research partnership. What might the relationship look like when academics genuinely engage in building the research capacity of the peer researchers? Training Jane Ann and Kim and Princilia as peer researchers automatically meant that the research process would go at a much slower pace. While research was Sadie's training and job, this was not the case for the others. Kim and Princilia had some graduate training in research while Jane Ann had none. Hence teaching had to occur, in a way which met all their learning needs, pitched at a level that everyone could understand but not feel frustrated with or alienated by. This slowed pace of research has been documented as a factor in researchers abandoning the values of community-based participatory research (Stanton, 2014).

In addition, while we agreed to carve out time to meet weekly, Kim and Princilia worked in an underresourced, dynamic environment where they were often doing crisis intervention. Jane Ann's engagement with different systems relating to her children and her own development meant that oftentimes her schedule was not her own to dictate; in addition, encounters with anti-black racism in her daily life could easily derail her day and sap her emotional energy. Honouring the relationships we were building, which were characterised by respect and authenticity, meant that Sadie had to resist the temptation to forego training the others to do tasks and to take them on herself to move the project along. In an environment of rigid timelines set by funders, this can be a real and strong temptation. It also meant that Kim and Princilia had to advocate for space within their work days to engage with training material. We found ourselves building a check-in time into the start of our meetings so that everyone could debrief and receive support, the aim being to place the 'outside world' to one side and engage in research work for the allocated time. Engaging in capacity building, therefore, provided an opportunity for us to practise empathy, a willingness to compromise and negotiate, and flexibility with each other.

Lack of resources – in particular time, money, research expertise and emotional energy – are realities of working with black community organisations and communities. It was important for the working group members to acknowledge this and accept the implications for the work which needed to be done. This required us to intentionally prioritise and nurture our relationship with each other to avoid frustration about the slowed progress of the project or a sense of the work being too demanding and overwhelming. Were we consistently successful? No. However, naming this challenge and unpacking its implications and finding an agreed-on way of working through it as an ongoing reality proved quite helpful to it not derailing the collaboration.

Sharing voice and power within the working group

Another key strategy to growing the relationship between academics and the community was ensuring that each stakeholder's voice was heard and honoured. All stakeholders on the working group agreed that it was important that we collectively recognise and value the different expertise everyone brought to the project – including knowledge of how to do research, knowledge of the lived experiences of young black mothers, and knowledge of supporting black community members in navigating

systemic barriers and injustices. But what would this look like in practice? One aspect of this was painstakingly making space during meetings for everyone to set the agenda and share their ideas and concerns. As we got deeper into the work and assigned tasks to do outside meetings, sharing voice also involved recognising our differing relationships to power in the various contexts in which we operated, and using that differential access to power for the benefit of the group's goals and/or a given member's developmental needs. Connected to this was the academics learning what it meant to be an ally as opposed to a saviour – that is, mutually unpacking problems and brainstorming solutions instead of taking over to fix the problem. Valuing each voice equally also meant we each had to be open to recognising and acknowledging our mistakes in the work and in our interactions with each other, and taking the responsibility to correct these errors.

Growing our relationship as a working group called for a certain level of reflexivity, vulnerability, flexibility and empathy. It was important that we created an environment of shared and equal power, perhaps because we were all coming from different experiences of personal and professional power. It meant that Sadie, and to a lesser extent Kim and Princilia, had to relinquish some of their power in their interaction with Jane Ann, and Jane Ann had to learn to take up her power. It also meant we had to acknowledge and set aside our preconceived notions about each other's privilege and power and learn how to support each other more authentically. As black women in a world that seeks in multiple ways to render us powerless, this was significant that we could support each other in being empowered.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, we reflected on our journey of building a relationship to facilitate a research project on the experiences and needs of young black mothers in one of Canada's urban cities, and we shared some key strategies which researchers seeking to work with black families might consider in developing equitable and ethical research relationships with them. Given the exploitative relationships of the past, it was crucial that we named and grappled with what was needed by the scholars and this black community, and by extension the young black mothers and their families whom we wished to access to build intimacy, trust and cooperation with each other. It was important that we explicitly considered the differing experiences of anti-black racism in our lives; continuously committed to proving our willingness to create a new power dynamic with each other; and that we intentionally tended to our relationships, especially in times when it was easier to deprioritise these relationships while prioritising research progress and outputs. Ultimately, we were able to grow a relationship that successfully confronted and overcame many of the shortcomings of and documented barriers in implementing the values of community-based participatory research with racially marginalised communities.

Notes

[1] The United Nations General Assembly declared 2015–2025 as the 'International Decade for People of African Descent' in recognition that people of African descent are a 'distinct group whose human rights must be promoted and protected'. The theme for the decade is 'People of African descent: recognition, justice and development'.

Funding

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References

Davis, S.K., Williams, A.D. and Akinyela, M. (2010) An Afrocentric approach to building cultural relevance in social work research, *Journal of Black Studies*, 41(2): 338–50. doi: 10.1177/0021934709343950

Doucet, A. (2018a) Feminist epistemologies and ethics: situated knowledges, epistemic responsibilities, and ecological thinking, in R. Iphofen and M. Tolich (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics*, London: Sage, pp 73–88.

Doucet, A. (2018b) Revisiting and remaking the listening guide: an ecological and ontological narrativity approach to analyzing fathering narratives, in A. Humble and E. Radina (eds) *How Qualitative Data Analysis Happens, Moving Beyond 'Themes Emerged'*, London: Taylor and Francis, pp 80–96.

Frerichs, L., Kim, M., Dave, G., Cheney, A., Hassmiller Lich, K., Jones, J., Young, T.L., Cene, C.W., Varma, D.S., Schaal, J. and Black, A. (2017) Stakeholder perspectives on creating and maintaining trust in community–academic research partnerships, *Health Education & Behavior*, 44(1): 182–91.

Gibbs, M. (2001) Toward a strategy for undertaking cross-cultural collaborative research, *Society & Natural Resources*, 14(8): 673–87.

Napoli, M. (2019) Indigenous methodology: an ethical systems approach to arts based work with Native communities in the US, *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 64: 77–83. doi: 10.1016/j.aip.2019.05.006

Scharff, D.P., Mathews, K.J., Jackson, P., Hoffsuemmer, J., Martin, E. and Edwards, D. (2010) More than tuskegee: understanding mistrust about research participation, *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 21(3): 879–97. doi: 10.1353/hpu.0.0323

Semali, L.M., Ackerman, R.M., Bradley, S.G., Buzinde, C.N., Jaksch, M.L., Kalavar, J.M., Montecinos, V. and Chinoy, M.R. (2007) Developing excellence in indigenously-informed research: collaboration between African communities and the academy, *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 3(2): 8–23. doi: 10.1177/117718010700300202

Smith, L.T. (2012) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, London: Zed Books.

Stanton, C. (2014) Crossing methodological borders: decolonizing community based participatory research, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20(5): 573–83. doi: 10.1177/1077800413505541

Tobias, J.K., Richmond, C.A. and Luginaah, I. (2013) Community-based participatory research (CBPR) with indigenous communities: producing respectful and reciprocal research, *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 8(2): 129–40. doi: 10.1525/jer.2013.8.2.129

Tuck, E. and Guishard, M. (2013) 'Uncollapsing ethics: racialized sciencism, settler coloniality, and an ethical framework of decolonial participatory action research, in T.M. Kress, C. Malott and B. Portfolio (eds) *Challenging Status Quo Retrenchment: New Directions in Critical Qualitative Research*, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, pp 3–28.

Wang, K.H., Ray, N.J., Berg, D.N., Greene, A.T., Lucas, G., Harris, K., Carroll-Scott, A., Tinney, B. and Rosenthal, M.S. (2017) Using community-based participatory research and organizational diagnosis to characterize relationships between community leaders and academic researchers, *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 7: 180–86. doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2017.06.007