

Involving Street Youth in Peer Harm Reduction Education

The Challenges of Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To describe and discuss the challenges in evaluation of a participatory action research with street-involved youth.

Methods: A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized for both process and outcome evaluations. Process evaluation methods included in-depth individual interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and session debriefing forms. Summative evaluation research included focus testing of the harm reduction video and a survey of video users.

Findings: Members of the youth team reported favourably on the experience, citing friendship, skills development, fun, and pride of accomplishment among the key benefits of participation. Political tensions arose because of the focus on reducing harm from drug use rather than encouraging abstinence. The heavy demands of participatory research and development, resource constraints and the priority given to product development in these kinds of projects necessarily precludes extensive youth participation in the design, implementation and analysis of additional evaluation research. Even when resources are directed towards evaluation, there is a tendency to focus on data collection, which may limit time and resources for data analysis. Finally, there is an inclination to focus on the product development rather than dissemination and impact of the product.

Interpretation: Despite the challenges inherent in participatory action research and its evaluation, this project was regarded as an empowering experience by the street youth who participated in it. It is worthwhile to direct resources to evaluation which optimally gives proportional attention to data collection as well as data analysis, and focusses not only on product development but also on its dissemination and impact.

La traduction du résumé se trouve à la fin de l'article.

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Dedication: This paper is dedicated to Mario Gonsalves, a CYPHR team member and friend, who passed away in August 1999.

The focus of this paper is on a process evaluation of a participatory research and development project with street-involved youth* focused on peer drug-related harm reduction education. While the literature on the use of peer educators^{1,2} and participatory action research (PAR) is vast,³⁻¹² and increasingly common in application to public health¹³⁻²³ and addictions,²⁴ as well as the use of PAR methods in evaluations research,²⁵⁻²⁷ evaluations of PAR projects²⁸ are less common, as are reflections on the ethics and politics of this work.²⁹⁻³⁴ We describe how we structured an evaluation protocol that would be consistent with the project's goals, guiding philosophy, and values. In addition to a brief summary of the results of the evaluation, we reflect on what we learned about ourselves, about the limits of participation, and about the politics of evaluation in the field.

THE STREET-INVOLVED YOUTH HARM REDUCTION PROJECT

The Street-Involved Youth Harm Reduction Project (SIYHRP) was developed by the Addiction Research Foundation (now the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) in collaboration with an advisory group of providers from agencies serving street-involved youth in Metro Toronto. Research³⁵ showed that drug use was second only to homelessness as an issue of concern to street youth in Toronto. Few educational materials were available that were tailored specifically to the needs and life contexts of this population. In particular, it was evident that a harm reduction approach was required because most users reported experiencing drug-related harms, but few engaged successfully with treatment and many used to cope with street life and were not interested in stopping.

The project hired 6 street-involved youth on a part-time basis for 8 months to conduct research among their peers and to develop harm reduction materials for other street-involved youth. With training and advice from ARF researchers and support from a group facilitator (KB), they led

* We use the term "street-involved youth" to refer to homeless youth as well as those who may be housed but who spend a significant portion of their time actively engaged in street culture, recognizing that the boundaries between these categories are difficult to specify precisely.

focus groups and follow-up one-on-one interviews with a diverse cross-section of 60 street-involved youth who were recruited from a gay and lesbian community centre, a native agency, a hostel in the suburbs, a drug treatment agency, a drop-in health clinic, and a sex-trade workers' agency, as well as youth who did not use agencies.³⁶ The self-titled Concerned Youth Promoting Harm Reduction (CYPHR) team produced a 20-minute video to illustrate issues and strategies for drug-related harm reduction that was distributed to agencies in Toronto who served this population.

The primary objective of the project was to develop and implement a harm reduction program for street-involved youth using a participatory process. A secondary objective was to improve our understanding, and the understanding of others with an interest in the area, about using a participatory process with street-involved youth to prevent harm and promote health. Thus, a qualitative process evaluation research component was added to inform the development of a 'handbook' that would describe the project, and lessons learned. (See Breland et al.³⁶ for additional information around the process of developing the video.)

DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE EVALUATION

Design considerations and methodology

A number of considerations informed the development of an evaluation protocol, and together comprised an explicit ethical stance to guide the research. These are summarized in Table I, although a few points in particular merit additional commentary. (Space limitations preclude a detailed description of each of the data collection methods used in the qualitative process evaluation. These are described more fully in Poland et al.³⁷ the report is available from the corresponding author.)

Most importantly, given that we were undertaking an evaluation of a participatory action research project with street-involved youth, we wanted to avoid some of the 'power-over' dynamics associated with imposing an evaluation protocol that focussed on the performance of the CYPHR team or the effectiveness of the

TABLE I

Design Considerations in the Development of an Appropriate Evaluation Protocol

Issue	Implementation
Hear from all relevant stakeholder groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Included youth, advisory group members and core project team members in focus group discussions and individual interviews • Focus testing of video with target population, service providers, ARF management • Survey of service providers (product user group) 6 months after dissemination of video
Include formative evaluation component	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of session debriefing forms and participant observation for more immediate feedback that could (and did) inform mid-course corrections
Maximize depth and breadth of coverage, given limited resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual interviews (depth) with all youth and some advisory group and core project team members plus focus group discussions with each group (breadth)
Learn directly from participants about their experiences, in their own words	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary (though not exclusive) reliance on qualitative methods
Avoid anxiety and distrust associated with imposed evaluation of youth performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus evaluation overwhelmingly on ability of the project team to provide empowering environment for youth to accomplish goals
Significant youth control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content of participant observer notes reviewed and altered, as deemed necessary by the youth, before released to research team • Format of session debriefing forms and how reported back to group and facilitator was under youth control • Direct input on content and focus of topic checklists for focus groups and interviews • Opportunity to review interview/focus group transcript(s) and designate portions as "off the record" • Youth involvement in review of research findings and in dissemination of results as co-presenter in conference and workshop presentations
Maximize data quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to develop rapport with street-involved youth a key criterion in hiring of participant observers and research assistant engaged in data collection • Enhance rapport of participant observers and research assistant through direct involvement in work of the group and cultivation of friendships through mutual sharing
Ensure evaluation experience is as empowering as possible for youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Significant youth control over evaluation format and content (see above) • Accentuate the positive in participant observer notes, as chronicle of group's progress and achievements in overcoming adversity • Youth financially compensated for involvement in evaluation activities

materials they produced (the latter formed a small component of the overall evaluation plan, and was completed after the CYPHR team had disbanded). We emphasized that we were not evaluating the youth, but rather our ability to effectively provide the right environment for them to flourish. In other words, *we* were the object of evaluation, not them. This was a departure from traditional evaluation practice, and it signalled from the beginning our intention to operate differently.

We felt it was important to give the youth (and other participants) every feasible opportunity to direct the nature and content of the evaluation. For example, the content of participant observer notes could be vetoed or altered by any member of the CYPHR team, prior to their being made

available to the research team. We wished to signal our intention to respect their autonomy and give them control over the direction and content of the work. We were inspired by core tenets of participatory research: extensive collaboration between researcher and 'researched', reciprocal educational process, and an emphasis on taking action, a politicization of the link between knowledge and power.^{33,38-40} Indeed, the research and development work undertaken by the youth in the production of the video reflected these principles. However, the evaluation protocol was not, strictly speaking, a fully participatory one because they did not actually conduct the data collection nor analyze the data pertaining specifically to the evaluation. We took this approach partly to preserve

confidentiality of individual interviews, but mostly because the youth were not to be unduly distracted from a primary focus on the participatory research and development tasks involved in the production of peer education materials.

The measures described in Table I ensured that a) CYPHR team members were (and came to feel) treated as experts and ‘trailblazers’, rather than as ‘subjects’ or ‘guinea pigs’; b) they became vested in ensuring that the evaluation data were of high quality and representative of their experience; and c) the development of caring relationships built on trust between members of the research team and the CYPHR team had a significant impact on the quality of data collected (and on the lived experience of the research process for all parties).

Limitations of the evaluation protocol

Some observers might argue that giving the youth as much control over form and content of the evaluation as we did seriously compromises the ‘objectivity’ of the research, introducing a strong potential for self-interested ‘bias’. We respond on two levels. First, we dispute the assumption that any research can be entirely disinterested, objective, and free of bias. Instead, we seek to both minimize and make explicit those biases that cannot be avoided. Second, we remind the skeptics that our stated purpose in conducting the evaluation was to assess the ability of the various teams of professionals involved in this project to create the optimal conditions for youth empowerment and successful completion of the set tasks. Thus it makes perfect sense to accord primacy to the views of the youth participants, for they alone can truly say how successful we were in this endeavour. Since we deliberately avoided using the evaluation as a means of passing judgement on the youth, the need for a countervailing politics of ‘self interest’ was correspondingly diminished.

KEY FINDINGS

Given the scope and depth of the evaluation, and the focus of this paper on the design of an evaluation protocol (and reflections on its implementation), only very abbreviated discussion of the highlights of some of the findings of the process

evaluation can be accommodated in the limited space available. Here we focus primarily on reporting the experiences of the youth CYPHR team members (the views of core project team and advisory group members are reported elsewhere).^{36,37}

Relatively early in the process, the youth developed “more than working relationships” with each other, describing each other as “friends” and “family”. They also spoke very highly of the team facilitator. Youth team members reported that their twice-weekly half-day meetings gave them a chance to ‘escape’ from their personal realities and to temporarily forget about their problems. Energy was redirected towards having fun, using their skills, and making a difference. Although many were drawn initially to the prospects of making some money, over time they became heavily vested in the project, contributing outside of paid time, and seeing the product as reflecting their own skills and abilities. They felt it was important to complete the project to prove to themselves and others that “street youth” can succeed. Given this accomplishment, they felt empowered to accomplish other things, such as going back to school. They also benefitted from the development of new skills in research, video production, and consensus decision-making. Being taken seriously by a large organization and being counted on to do their best and follow through with a quality product were in themselves seen as important to these youth.

CYPHR team members felt that project timelines were unrealistic (they had been determined in light of a shoestring budget and prior to the youths’ decision to embark on the creation of a video). This led them to question whether ARF was really committed to developing a product or whether studying and disseminating the “process” was seen as more important. These feelings diminished as timelines were extended*, and members of the project team showed support for the video and stood behind it in the face of controversy.

In order to maintain the autonomy of the youth, and to protect their time for

* Things came to a head when it appeared as though money would run out once the youth had designed the project, and that ARF would pursue its development and implementation in their absence. However, extension funding was found and youth were able to complete the video and be present at its official launch.

completion of the video, contact between the advisory group and the CYPHR team was minimized. This presented problems later in the project when the youth came to an advisory group meeting to present an update on their progress. Confronted by (well-intentioned) concerns on the part of some advisory group members, some youth reported perceiving a lack of support for their work, and tension arose between the two groups that required extensive ‘debriefing’ on all sides.

LESSONS LEARNED

Since we were all relatively new to this kind of work, assumptions were made about the nature of participation which, we would argue, are not actively discouraged in the PAR literature. For example, we assumed that the youth would be eager to take a more active role in the design and implementation of the evaluation protocol. While they respected and appreciated the stance from which the offer was made (which symbolically and actually ceded control to them), it was soon evident that in practice they had more than enough to do just to meet the rigorous demands of producing a credible educational product on a limited budget, with a steep learning curve, and limited financial resources. They understandably did not want to be too heavily distracted from this primary task. Designing and implementing a state-of-the-art evaluation protocol could have become an all-consuming endeavour in and of itself.

As is often the case, the nature of the evaluation was profoundly influenced by the timing of data collection. For obvious reasons, we sought to involve youth in group and individual discussions about their experience prior to the disbanding of the group. Having already been extended once, the budget did not allow for ongoing youth involvement beyond production of a second ‘draft’ of the video (following one round of focus testing with youth and providers). This meant that some final editing, packaging, marketing and dissemination was undertaken by the project team (with input from the Advisory Group), without the sustained involvement of the youth. It also meant that while youth had direct input on the content of the participant observation notes, opportunities for

commenting on other aspects of data analysis were more limited as it became increasingly difficult to track the whereabouts of CYPHR team members once they no longer met on a regular basis.

Last but not least, the resources required for time-intensive qualitative research were significantly underestimated. Having designed a relatively elaborate process evaluation protocol that included participant observation, in-depth individual interviews, focus group discussions, and session debriefing forms, the bulk of the time and energy of the research team went into data collection, and data analysis was correspondingly compromised. In our experience this is all too common in qualitative research in the health sciences.

The politics of field research on controversial public health interventions

The video was seen as controversial by senior management and was loudly criticized by some community groups (who claimed that it promoted drug use) at a time when the Addiction Research Foundation was under scrutiny from the new Conservative government. From a strategic perspective, the organization could ill afford new adventures in harm reduction and participatory action in a political environment that was largely indifferent (if not hostile) to the welfare of street youth. Nevertheless, senior managers within the sponsoring organization stood behind the project. Where these pressures were expressed in tangible terms could be seen in attempts to limit the distribution and marketing of the video, requests to remove the word 'fun' from the subtitle of the video ("Safer with CYPHR: A Guide to Fun and Safe Drug Use"), and the selective editing of some of the more controversial elements of the video out of the shortened version used for its official launch, as well as a last-minute decision to limit publicity concerning the launch. The fact that the evaluation was timed in a way that inadvertently preceded these developments clearly has implications for how they can be discussed and reflected upon by participants and included in the project evaluation. Our feeling is that in the future such evaluations would ideally collect interview data at several points in time, including later dissemination. In hindsight we would also have

included interviews with key people outside the project, including senior managers, in order to better understand the institutional and political pressures.

CONCLUSION

In order to address a significant gap in the methodological literature on the application of participatory action research methods in public health, we have focussed this paper on the evaluation of an innovative participatory peer education/harm reduction project undertaken with street-involved youth. Rather than limiting discussion to the description of the evaluation protocol and key research findings, we have instead sought to a) describe the ethical and methodological considerations that influenced the design of an evaluation, b) reflect with candour on what we have learned about the limitations and strengths of alternative evaluation methodologies and about PAR itself, and c) discuss our experiences of the politics surrounding field evaluations of controversial public health interventions. The ethics and politics of evaluation, in particular, are insufficiently addressed in the published literature, but, we would argue, ethics and politics have a profound impact on the uptake and implementation of PAR and harm reduction with marginalized groups in public health. Our hope is that this paper makes a modest contribution to raising these issues as worthy of explicit consideration so as to (to quote Sylvia Tesh) "get the politics out of hiding".

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RÉSUMÉ

Objectifs : Décrire et expliquer les défis de l'évaluation d'un projet de recherche active auprès de jeunes de la rue.

Méthode : Nous avons combiné des méthodes quantitatives et qualitatives pour évaluer tant le processus que les résultats du projet. Pour l'évaluation du processus, nous avons utilisé des entrevues individuelles approfondies, des groupes de discussion, l'observation des participants et des questionnaires récapitulatifs après les séances. Pour l'évaluation sommative, nous avons fait visionner à des groupes cibles une vidéocassette traitant de réduction des méfaits en sollicitant leurs commentaires.

Constatations : Les jeunes ont dit avoir apprécié l'expérience, qui leur a permis entre autres de se faire des amis, d'acquérir des compétences tout en s'amusant et de retirer une certaine fierté de leurs accomplissements. Des tensions politiques se sont manifestées lorsque les jeunes de la rue se sont concentrés sur la réduction des méfaits de la consommation de drogues plutôt que sur l'abstention. En recherche active, il est souvent difficile de doser le temps et les ressources consacrés au projet proprement dit et à son évaluation. Même lorsqu'on dispose de ressources d'évaluation, on a tendance à mettre l'accent sur la collecte des données en négligeant leur analyse. On tend aussi à s'attacher à l'élaboration du produit plutôt qu'à sa diffusion et à l'analyse de ses effets.

Interprétation : Malgré les défis inhérents à la recherche active et à son évaluation, les jeunes qui ont participé au projet considèrent qu'il leur a permis de renforcer leur autonomie. Il vaut la peine de consacrer des ressources à l'évaluation, car cela incite à se pencher autant sur la collecte des données que sur leur analyse et à ne pas en rester à l'élaboration d'un produit, mais à travailler à sa diffusion et à l'analyse de ses effets.

