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When Global North scholars take up community-based participatory and anti-oppressive research approaches, their research partnerships with forced migrant communities in the Global South have enhanced potential to effectively respond to community needs and to produce accountable relations of knowledge and power.

Global North scholars have long conducted research with or about forced migrants and refugees in the Global South^{i,iii, iii}. Yet the voices and interests of these populations have often been excluded from Global North-led research agendas^{iv,v}. Efforts to facilitate collaborative and culturally-responsive transnational research are gaining momentum. Yet many projects still rely on institution-driven approaches that prioritize external expertise and underrepresent those directly affected by forced migration, leaving little room to redress power imbalances in Global South-North relationships. This is problematic because it perpetuates the presumed superiority of Global North knowledge, dismisses the agency and dignity of forced migrant communities in the Global South, and risks poorly contextualized humanitarian program development^{i,v,vi}. It is thus unsurprising that some forced migrant communities feel exploited and decline participation in Global North-led studies^{vi}.

Despite rapidly growing interest in challenging this status quo, examples of how to do so in practice are limited⁵. This article addresses this gap by presenting an illustrative case study of our current community-based participatory research (CBPR) project, grounded in an anti-oppressive research (AOR) framework, between academic partners in Canada and community partners in Thailand. We highlight the role that migrant community partners play in shaping the project, barriers to their engagement, and benefits that may result from engaging in research with Global North partners when it adheres to anti-oppressive ethics.

Partnership Project

Our research partnership is mainly between Suwannimit Foundation (SNF), a migrant-serving health and social service agency on the Myanmar-Thai border, and the University of Victoria (UVic) in Canada. The research brings forward the voices of forced migrant youth living in transit and prolonged displacement using an arts-based and narrative method, the Peer-Mediated Storyboard Narrative (PMSN). The PMSN method asks youth to create a Storyboard that visually depicts their experiences of forced migration and to share their Storyboards in small peer groups. Our partnership goals were to explore the potential of the PMSN as a psychosocial intervention for forced migrant youth in a context where specialist mental health services are not readily available, and to learn about migrant youths' experiences, needs, and goals. When the study was conceived, the plan called for the UVic team to travel to Thailand to train SNF and local practitioners in the use of the PMSN and to facilitate small groups of youth in the method. As the pandemic took hold in March 2020, the partners agreed to transition our project online and this led to a journey in partnered research that transformed our project for the better.

CBPR and Anti-Oppressive Research

CBPR is frequently proposed as a solution to the problems associated with institution-driven research approaches. CBPR is a collaborative approach that responds to a community-identified

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social issue by co-generating knowledge about the issue and taking action to change it. CBPR centers the local knowledge and expertise of community stakeholders in all phases of the research. It requires continuous interaction among partners to build rapport and to design, implement, disseminate, and sustain the research. Our transnational team has engaged in this process of knowledge co-production and agreed upon local action, as the community partners involve diverse groups of youth in the PMSN (social action) to explore its potential to address the need for a non-specialist-led psychosocial intervention (social problem).

While CBPR promotes sharing research ownership and responsibilities, the academic partners found that CBPR alone did not challenge them enough to meaningfully shift the balance of power away from them and into the hands of the community partners. To this end, we grounded our CBPR in an AOR theoretical framework. AOR developed from anti-oppressive social work practice and anti-colonial and anti-racist theories. It examines systems of oppression and commits researchers to making social change^{vii}. We used AOR to critically engage with and to challenge the ways that Global North-South power dynamics play out in the process of doing research. AOR calls on researchers to:

- Ground the research process in strong personal and professional relationships;
- Critically reflect on areas of power and privilege, and work explicitly to invert power differentials;
- Include and validate multiple knowledges;
- Resist oppression and global power hierarchies in knowledge production.

Putting Theory into Practice

Putting CBPR and AOR principles into action involved four key processes: interacting with reflexivity and humility, prioritizing genuine relationships, fostering reciprocal knowledge production, and encouraging community ownership.

Reflexivity and Humility

Reflexivity calls on those in positions of power to continually examine how their social locations (i.e., beliefs, values, identity, privilege) influence their approach to doing research. The academic partners practiced reflexivity by naming and problematizing their power and privileges, particularly as white, Western-educated outsiders who have financial resources and citizenship in a politically stable country with greater access to protections, including against Covid-19. This prompted further scrutiny about the academic partners' roles within wider contexts of power asymmetries. The partners asked: How have historically rooted power asymmetries been reproduced in research partnerships between Global North institutions and Global South forced migrant communities? How might the academic partners' actions, however unintentionally, reinforce asymmetries and contribute to erasure of forced migrant voices? What implications does this have for how the academic partners position their priorities in relation to the community partners?

Wrestling with these reflexive questions instilled humility into our research process. Humility enabled the academic partners to interrogate assumptions about mainstream research practices

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(e.g., sticking to pre-set procedures and timelines), to confront the limits of their knowledge, and importantly, to position themselves as co-learners. Concretely, this was shown by expressing openness to correction and guidance from the community partners, releasing control over research project steps (e.g., directing participant eligibility criteria, pilot testing), and allowing plans to change based on community partners' needs and preferences.

Genuine Relationships

We took three interconnected approaches to foster genuine relationships, which may be informative to other online participatory collaborations. First, the partners prioritized getting to know one another personally. Although perhaps obvious, we had to be especially intentional about this step to bridge our geographical distance while collaborating online. We asked each other questions about our respective contexts, day-to-day lives, interests, goals, and how the pandemic differently impacted each of us. For the academic partners, this offered a glimpse into the community partners' worlds; a chance to try to understand their realities of serving forced migrant communities at the Myanmar-Thai border while coping with Covid-19. The community partners also explored their curiosities about life in Canada, noting differences in our cultures and education systems.

Second, we took time to build rapport and trust. The pandemic made this possible because it slowed our project timelines. We extended team meetings over an extra year, and scheduled meetings flexibly to accommodate the community partners' service priorities. This was crucial for trust-building, as the community partners felt their time was respected. We also strengthened trust by having open-ended check-ins about the research process and soliciting the community partners' feedback. The academic partners were conscious that inherent power imbalances in our relationship could make the community partners feel unsafe voicing disagreements. Thus, the academic partners explicitly named these power dynamics, including their privileges and gratitude for the community partners' patience with their lack of understanding of the local context and languages. The academic partners also ensured research funds were paid to the community partners. Over time, the community partners offered direct and constructive feedback about the PMSN.

Third, we openly showed emotion and empathy. The team listened intently to one another, celebrated one another's successes, and gave the community partners time when they were dealing with crises (e.g., delaying meetings and project tasks). When a team member shared a difficult migration experience, stresses of responding to the border crisis, or words of gratitude, we allowed ourselves to be genuinely affected and this deepened our bonds of mutual understanding.

Reciprocal Relations of Knowledge Production

This process involved creating a respectful space for co-learning and co-generating knowledge from the cultural knowledge systems and languages in the project. One way that the partners facilitated this process was by doing the PMSN method together, including creating and sharing our individual Storyboards and practicing peer mediation. The PMSN method, developed by Dr. Jessica Ball, initially suggested that participants organize their Storyboards around how migration affected their identity, sense of belonging, and future aspirations. Our team practice sessions

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generated rich discussions about the meanings of these organizing concepts. For example, the community partners explained that identity concretely refers to an “ID card” and that psychological self-exploration is not encouraged in Thai and Myanmar cultures. As our discussions deepened, a striking knowledge exchange transpired: while the academic partners encouraged incorporating more local concepts to guide Storyboard creation, the community partners became increasingly invested in using the concepts of identity and belonging. We dialogued about how to reconceptualize these concepts to be culturally meaningful, such as by asking about youth about their roles within their communities and how their friends or family members would describe them.

Fostering this reciprocal learning environment expanded our research focus to encompass a *process* of knowledge exchange (rather than an outcome-driven process) – one that promoted self- and mutual discovery and equality between the partners. The community partners described several benefits. Beyond obtaining skills in facilitating peer psychosocial support, they appreciated newfound opportunities to explore their strengths and sense of self and to position themselves in the role of giving instructions to foreigners instead of being on the receiving end of this dynamic. Our process of knowledge exchange blurred the boundaries of, and softened common power differentials between, “researchers” and “participants.”

Notwithstanding these benefits, our efforts to equitably co-produce knowledge were hampered by our reliance on English to communicate because the academic partners could not speak any of the community partners’ primary languages (i.e., Thai, Myanmar, and Karen). By working in English, we risked translation inequivalences and reinforcing the primacy of Global North concepts. It is likely that the language barrier has limited a full exchange of ideas for the project and PMSN.

Community Ownership

In keeping with AOR, the partners committed to resisting the hold that Global North researchers often have on global knowledge production in favour of supporting community ownership and rights to this knowledge. The academic partners encouraged the community partners’ autonomy to shape the research and decide on how to use the PMSN. Having more time to complete the project helped to reduce the workload burden on the community partners, thereby lowering barriers to their engagement. Over 18-months, the community partners were able to gradually take more control over the research as they strengthened their capacity to use the PMSN. They used this time to try out adaptations to the initial PMSN approach that better suited their context and the degree of emotional depth they were prepared to handle. For example, in some contexts, they condensed the PMSN into a one-time workshop (rather than multiple sessions) to accommodate competing schedules, and they sometimes embedded more structure (e.g., asking youth to create timelines of their lives). The community partners have explicitly affirmed the necessity of asserting control over many parts of the project (e.g., recruitment, data collection, PMSN format) because of their linguistic and cultural knowledge and on-the-ground experiences serving different sub-populations of forced migrant youth. Their active engagement led to innovations in the PMSN method. They demonstrated to the academic partners that the PMSN could be delivered in multiple ways, depending on the facilitator’s experience and training (e.g., teacher, counsellor) and youths’ settings or circumstances (e.g., security, place of residence).

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At the same time, our research was also embedded within structures and settings that constrained some possibilities for community ownership. The academic partners remain bound to satisfying institutional requirements, for example, following procedural ethics protocols to obtain informed consent, collecting detailed participant demographics, and producing academic outputs, which are arguably less relevant to the community partners. Additionally, the predominance of English-language publications, combined with minimal time on the part of community partners to dedicate to writing, hinders the community partners' autonomy to publish about the research themselves. Dealing with the crisis context at the border and impacts of Covid-19 have also constrained their capacity to invest more broadly in exploring the use of the PMSN.

Looking Behind and Ahead

Grounding our CBPR project in AOR, relying on the four illustrated processes, transformed the partners' roles, the overall process, and project outputs. The academic partners repositioned themselves as co-learners and companions, working alongside the community partners in support of their identified needs and goals. The community partners were also co-learners, benefitting from self-discovery and developing research and psychosocial support skills, while also being instrumental facilitators who used their expert judgment of on-the-ground needs to change project directions. Following their leadership has transformed project outputs, including a scaffolding of the PMSN based on context and the forthcoming manual. Finally, AOR has made our work about the processes of forging accountable relationships and collaborating across geographies, knowledge worlds, and power differentials – processes that go beyond tangible project outputs.

How can AOR address power imbalances in forced migration scholarship between Global South and North partners? AOR holds those in power, often based in Global North institutions, accountable to valuing the knowledge and expertise of migrant community partners, to ensuring they benefit from participating, and to keeping power imbalances in check. In our case, doing the project virtually and slowly allowed us to closely follow AOR tenants, which transformed our project for the better. Even in partnerships where power dynamics cannot be leveled entirely, CBPR and AOR can be combined to ethically engage in partnered research that addresses the self-identified needs and goals of forced migrant communities and that restores power to them as both beneficiaries and instrumental actors in initiatives for and about them.

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