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You can't clap with one hand: Learnings to promote culturally grounded participatory action research with migrant and former refugee communities[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how researchers can undertake culturally grounded participatory action research (PAR) with migrant and former refugee communities whose relational network, customs and social hierarchy are perceived to be under threat. It draws on learnings from a PAR-inspired ethnographic study with young Assyrian women, who experienced tension with the bottom-up, participant-centred and social change-oriented ideals of PAR. Participants preferred to discuss their experiences with the researcher and have their views publicized anonymously through a research report than to work with her on an action project to address the issues that they raised. The young women wanted adults in their community to understand their desire to adapt some Assyrian cultural norms so that they could 'fit in' better in New Zealand society, but feared they would be criticised if they conveyed this in a public way. This experience showed that it is important to ground tools and processes in participants' own goals and sociocultural contexts, which may not always be immediately apparent. Projects that acknowledge and work with participants' relational networks are more likely to be effective in communities whose social fabric and customs are perceived to be under threat than those that attempt to 'mobilise' a sub-group within it to achieve social change.

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This paper considers how researchers can undertake participatory action research (PAR) with former migrant and refugee communities to achieve culturally grounded outcomes that benefit the community and contribute to academic knowledge and theory. PAR is a collaborative form of applied research that is undertaken to understand and resolve an issue affecting a group of people (Kindon, Pain, & Kesby, 2007; Pain, 2004; Williams, 2004). This approach emphasises the value of conducting research *with* (rather than *on*) people to share knowledge and stimulate action to challenge social inequalities and facilitate the positive development of the target group, moving away from the top-down, theory testing models of earlier models of action research (Gustavsen, 2001; Pain, 2005). It recognises that people have knowledge about how their life situations could be improved and can contribute to the achievement of more sustainable, relevant and effective outcomes for research and development projects that concern them. Thus, PAR practitioners strive to maximise participant control and ownership over

[☆] An Iraqi proverb.

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the design and implementation of the research, with a particular focus on hearing the views of people whose opinions are often dominated by others (Kindon, 2005; Pain, 2004; The Next, 2003). The extent that a research process promotes a better understanding of the situation and strengthens the capacity of participants to face their future is given utmost importance in PAR, with the recognition that 'action' can be obstructed for many circumstantial reasons (Swantz, 2003).

PAR practitioners are advised to facilitate research processes in a way that is responsive to participants' characteristics and sociocultural context (Chambers, 2002; Chawla, 2001; Kesby, 2000; Keys, McMahon, Sanchez, London, & Abdul-Adil, 2004; Kindon et al., 2007; Mohatt et al., 2004). However, cultural differences are often overlooked in project plans (Carnegie et al., 1998; Keys et al., 2004) and the value that PAR itself places on participant-centred, bottom-up processes may conflict with cultural frameworks that are common in many migrant and refugee communities in Western societies.

This paper presents the learnings from a PAR-inspired ethnographic study with young Assyrian women in New Zealand. Assyrians are an ethnic group of Christian faith who originate from Iraq and the surrounding countries. Almost 60% of New Zealand's total Assyrian population of 1680 reside in Wellington, where the research took place (Statistics New Zealand, 2007). Many New Zealanders of European or Māori descent are unfamiliar with the Assyrian ethnic group, and assume that they are Muslims (Armstrong et al., 2005).

The study with young Assyrian women was instigated to gain better knowledge of their settlement experiences in New Zealand and to identify ways to support them to positively adjust to life in this country. The need for this research was highlighted after a needs assessment for Assyrian youth (Armstrong et al., 2005) revealed concerns about how the young women were doing at school and were adjusting to gender roles in this country, but was only able to obtain the input from Assyrian boys and adults. The needs assessment indicated that Assyrian young people in New Zealand – like their counterparts in Australia, Sweden and the United States (Badal, 2001; Cetrez, 2005; Gow et al., 2005) – are adopting the culture and language of their new country at a faster rate than their parents (i.e. they are experiencing an 'acculturation gap' – Kegler, Young, Marshall, Bui, & Rodine, 2005; Lin, 1986; Schapiro, 1988; Zhou, 1997). This gap has been described as a particular source of tension in Assyrian refugee and migrant communities, as the long-standing persecution that has threatened their ethnocultural group has made retaining their culture extremely important to them (Badal, 2001; Cetrez, 2005). Yet, little research has been conducted with Assyrians to understand how they are managing concerns about cultural maintenance and adaptation in their societies of settlement.

Both academic and community research goals were formed for the proposed research so that – in line with the principals of PAR – the research could make a positive contribution to the local community while informing academic knowledge construction. The community research goal was *"To facilitate a research process that is a positive experience for the participants, in which their views are heard and respected, and there is an opportunity to initiate and | or participate in a project to address issues concerning them."* The academic goals were refined over the course of the research to focus on how the young women managed expectations and assumptions about how they should 'adapt' or 'maintain' their culture (in light of the 'acculturation gap' mentioned above); and exploring what influences the educational and career pathways that young Assyrian women take in New Zealand.

This paper considers the methodological learnings that took place as the research team engaged in an iterative process to develop and progress these academic and community goals. It explores tension between the bottom-up, participant-centred and social change-oriented ideals of PAR and the necessity of facilitating a process that is appropriate in the given sociocultural context.

1. Methodology

1.1. Participants

The first author spoke with 60 young women (between 16 and 25 years) and 72 Assyrian adults (53 women and 19 men) across over 400 h of ethnographic research, focus groups and interviews. Participants had lived in New Zealand for between 18 months and 20 years, with most having resided in this country for between 3 and 11 years.

All of the young women and a number of adults participating in the research were relatively fluent in spoken English. An interpreter provided translation support for several of the conversations with Assyrian adults.

1.2. The process

The first author spent the first year of the research engaging in ethnographic conversations with Assyrians at community events (e.g. weddings and picnics) and spaces (e.g. their church and in family homes) to gain understanding about their culture and experiences, and to scope collaborative research opportunities. She found that her Assyrian contacts offered advice for the development of the research methods and questions, but did not want to take on the role of 'research partners'.

With the consent of community leaders a series of five focus groups and six semi-structured interviews were held with young Assyrian women at the end of this scoping phase to learn about their settlement and school experiences in New Zealand and to explore opportunities to address issues raised in a PAR project. The focus groups took place at the participants' high school, with between 4 and 13 students participating in each session, whilst interviews were held at the participants' homes or at a café, according to their wishes. A core of eight young women attended all – or almost all – focus groups, and three attended both focus groups and interviews. Interviews were also held with four Assyrian parents (two mothers, two

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