

**Participatory Action Research, Critical Adult Education, and
the Work of D. E. Smith for Research Praxis**
Lessons from/with Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness
**La recherche-action participative, l'éducation des adultes
critique et l'oeuvre de D. E. Smith pour la praxis éducative**
Leçons apprises des/avec les jeunes adultes sans abri

Jayne Malenfant et Naomi Nichols

Volume 36, numéro 1, juin 2024

For the People: Dorothy Smith and Adult Education
Pour le peuple : Dorothy Smith et l'éducation des adultes

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115566ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v36i01.5763>

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Éditeur(s)

Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education / L'Association
canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

ISSN

0835-4944 (imprimé)
1925-993X (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Malenfant, J. & Nichols, N. (2024). Participatory Action Research, Critical Adult Education, and the Work of D. E. Smith for Research Praxis: Lessons from/with Young Adults Experiencing Homelessness. *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education / La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*, 36(1), 97-112. <https://doi.org/10.56105/cjsae.v36i01.5763>

Résumé de l'article

De 2017 à 2021, l'équipe des jeunes en révolution pour la recherche-action (Youth Action Research Revolution - YARR) a recueilli les histoires institutionnelles de jeunes sans abri au Canada. Les entrevues abordaient les institutions de l'enseignement, des soins de santé et de la justice pénale. À l'intersection de l'éducation des adultes critique (ÉAC), de la recherche-action participative (RAP) et de l'ethnographie institutionnelle (EI), nous présentons notre mobilisation de l'EI pour ancrer nos apprentissages et nos actions. Nous décrivons nos apprentissages pour présenter l'ÉAC, la RAP et l'EI comme cadres mutuellement utiles pour la praxis et l'apprentissage militant. Nous soulignons notre mobilisation de l'EI pour illuminer et résister les processus institutionnalisants dans les contextes postsecondaires et considérons l'importance de l'aide mutuel pour réaliser le potentiel de justice sociale de la recherche participative. Nous suggérons que la cocréation de recherches d'EI avec les jeunes adultes sans abri permet de mobiliser les valeurs de l'ÉAC et d'appuyer les recherches communautaires visant à exercer une influence positive sur les vies de gens touchés par les problèmes à l'étude.

Volume 36 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editors-in-Chief: J. Adam Perry and Robin Neustaeter
French Language Editor: Jean-Pierre Mercier
Special Edition Editor: Sara Carpenter
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

36,1 June/juin 2024, 97–112
ISSN1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH, CRITICAL ADULT EDUCATION, AND THE WORK OF D. E. SMITH FOR RESEARCH PRAXIS: LESSONS FROM/WITH YOUNG ADULTS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

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Abstract

From 2017 to 2021, the Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR) team documented the institutional histories of young people experiencing homelessness in Canada. Interviews with youth focused on educational, child welfare, health care, and criminal justice institutions. Situated at the intersections of critical adult education (CAE), participatory action research (PAR), and institutional ethnography (IE), we outline our mobilization of IE to ground learning and action in our team. We document the different phases of learning that we undertook to illustrate how CAE, PAR, and IE can be mutually supportive frameworks for praxis and activist learning. We highlight our use of IE to illuminate and resist the institutionalizing processes at work in post-secondary contexts and reflect on the importance of mutual aid as essential to realizing the social justice potential of participatory research. We suggest that co-creating IE research with young adults with lived experiences of homelessness constitutes a unique opportunity to mobilize CAE values and tangibly support community research that seeks to positively influence the lives of those implicated by the problems we study together.

Résumé

De 2017 à 2021, l'équipe des jeunes en révolution pour la recherche-action (Youth Action Research Revolution - YARR) a recueilli les histoires institutionnelles de jeunes sans abri au Canada. Les entrevues abordaient les institutions de l'enseignement, des soins de santé et de la justice pénale. À l'intersection de l'éducation des adultes critique (ÉAC), de la recherche-action participative (RAP) et de l'ethnographie institutionnelle (EI), nous présentons notre mobilisation de l'EI pour ancrer nos apprentissages et nos actions. Nous décrivons nos apprentissages pour présenter l'ÉAC, la RAP et

*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
36,1 June/juin 2024, 97–112
ISSN1925-993X (online)*

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l'EI comme cadres mutuellement utiles pour la praxis et l'apprentissage militant. Nous soulignons notre mobilisation de l'EI pour illuminer et résister les processus institutionnalisants dans les contextes postsecondaires et considérons l'importance de l'aide mutuel pour réaliser le potentiel de justice sociale de la recherche participative. Nous suggérons que la cocréation de recherches d'EI avec les jeunes adultes sans abri permet de mobiliser les valeurs de l'ÉAC et d'appuyer les recherches communautaires visant à exercer une influence positive sur les vies de gens touchés par les problèmes à l'étude.

Keywords

Institutional ethnography, critical adult education, participatory action research, youth, homelessness, praxis

Mots-clés

ethnographie institutionnelle, éducation des adultes critique, recherche-action participative, jeunes, sans-abrisme, praxis

The ethical, methodological, and pedagogical commitments associated with participatory action research (PAR) overlap in a number of ways with those used in critical adult education (CAE). Both approaches are grounded in a commitment to combat epistemic hierarchies and disrupt normative ways of teaching and learning, ensuring that participants are active in their engagement with and shaping of projects (whether pedagogical or research-based). Overlaps and connections between PAR and CAE are well-documented, with some arguing the two are necessarily intertwined (Glassman & Erdem, 2014). PAR and CAE challenge the top-down organization of teaching and learning situations that are typical of educational institutions and/or research contexts. While each approach begins with a dedication to social justice (Caraballo et al., 2017), it is important to critically reflect on one's praxis and consider how mobilizing PAR/CAE frameworks in conversation with other social change strategies might bolster their impacts. In our experience, one useful paradigm that can advance the social change aims of PAR and CAE is Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography (IE). The project presented here attempts to capture how using a participatory IE approach outside traditional academic spaces holds significant potential for realizing the social justice aims of PAR and IE while mobilizing CAE values and methods.

IE's social ontology (McCoy, 2021) affords a view of people's work as interconnected and mutually constitutive social practices. With the materialist view of social life that IE puts forward, we come to see our teaching, learning, research, and activist trajectories as "socially organized practices of coordination" (p. 35) that are shaped by and shaping the spaces, curricula, research designs, discourses, and ideas we encounter and navigate in our work together. Further, IE offers epistemic tools we can use to collectively investigate the social organization of institutional spaces of teaching and learning, such that we make clear the "social relations and organization in which our everyday doings participate but which are not fully visible to us" (D. E. Smith, 2005, p. 1). In this article we argue that Smith's sociology for people offers several important analytic strategies for those involved in CAE and/or PAR projects. First, IE directs attention to the material conditions of learners' (researchers' and teachers') lives that undermine and enable collective work for transformative justice.

Second, it affords a particular type of consciousness-raising that aligns with CAE and PAR approaches. An IE approach to analysis shifts the burden of responsibility for social problems from the shoulders of those experiencing them most profoundly to the ruling relations that are the objects of inquiry. As people are invited to engage in an IE analysis, they begin to see how their experiences are connected with the experiences of others; in this context, the challenges they face appear as predictable outcomes of unjust social and institutional processes, rather than as personal failures. In turn, PAR approaches provide opportunities to actualize the activist potential (G. W. Smith, 1990) of IE work. We believe these approaches, together, provide a strong grounding for types of CAE that highlight activist learning (Lovett et al., 1983) as directly shaping new ways of advancing social change (Choudry, 2015).

Drawing on our experiences co-leading a participatory IE with young people in Tio'tia:ke/Montreal, Quebec, Canada, in this article we articulate how IE's distinctive ontological, epistemic, and axiological (or ethical) orientation allowed us to see the interrelations of our experiences in new ways, affording us essential insights regarding the shared grounds of our diverse experiences (Bannerji et al., 1991). At the same time, we note that PAR and CAE can ensure that the practical aims of IE research (i.e., learning and social change) are not overlooked. While we hold hope for the potential of critical research and pedagogy to effect change, we are hesitant to view all critical and participatory approaches as inherently transformational. We remain keenly attuned to D. E. Smith's (1987) warning about the academy's predilection for "institutionalization" (p. 217) of critical research frameworks. While the co-creation of knowledge is an epistemic goal in PAR work (Mirra et al., 2016; Nichols et al., 2018), in practice, participatory research and CAE can easily also risk "institutionalization" (Anderson, 2017; Boezeman et al., 2014; Larrea, 2019), with researchers and educators slipping back into unidirectional teaching and learning practices and institutionally defined practices for dissemination and action. Institutionalization is furthered by an unquestioning acceptance of the power roles, theory, and knowledge hierarchies in research teams, as well as by researcher deferral to institutional demands and the imposition of performance metrics (Chatterton et al., 2010). D. E. Smith (1987) hoped that IE would work in opposition to this "professionalization" of knowledge in academic research, where institutionalization subsumes activism into "hierarchical strata [and] detaches them from the movements they originate in" (p. 217). We propose that with intentional efforts to subvert this institutionalization, the use of IE in a PAR/CAE project holds potential to be deeply transformational in its pedagogical impacts for all members of research teams, regardless of how fraught their engagement with formalized education has been throughout their lives.

We ground this proposal in the practical insights we have gained from working together on a participatory IE project with young adults who had lived and living experiences of homelessness. Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR) was designed to help us understand the roles that institutions (e.g., schools, health-care institutions, child protection, the criminal-legal system) could play in preventing young people from becoming homeless. Over the course of this project, our conceptualization of our own pedagogical, research, and activist strategies shifted. We began to recognize the myriad small ways our team benefited from and was transformed by collaborative and "co-facilitated" (Hanson, 2014) approaches to learning and research, by which our IE work became a pathway to engaging in CAE practices. We began to appreciate that the most transformative changes were happening

in our team and the ways we were learning together—not necessarily in the institutional spaces we investigated together. In this article we outline, in part, how mobilizing not only PAR, but also activist learnings, such as the application of mutual aid strategies (Malenfant et al., 2023), can bolster the impacts that research has in affected communities. Although we remain steadfast in our commitments to challenging institutional power, we are equally committed to enabling relational and educational processes at the heart of our work that foster shifts in understanding in the team, and immediately benefitting those involved through transformational learning and action.

We begin this article by describing YARR and its research activities, highlighting the issues we aimed to understand and address: i.e., institutional discrimination and barriers for young adults navigating housing precarity, and possibilities for research to shape homelessness-prevention efforts. Following a description of YARR, we provide an overview of key theoretical groundings for this work: IE and PAR. We examine how Dorothy Smith's work continues to influence our research, grounding it in the knowledges of the people with whom we work (as well as our own), and inspiring us to question how our research is useful to people outside universities and other academic and governing institutions. We outline the common ground between IE and PAR, and reflect on the potentials and challenges of using these approaches in conversation with each other. We highlight specific CAE concepts, particularly relating to informal and activist education strategies, that are in line with PAR and which we think can effectively shape how we mobilize research, particularly research informed by Smith's work, to create the changes we hope to see in the world (D. E. Smith & Griffith, 2022). We highlight how Smith's work guides us to shift our focus from individual experiences of harm in social systems toward collective responsibility for social transformation. Based on our reflections, we outline key learnings from YARR that continue to inform our ongoing work to conduct and mobilize research that addresses unjust social structures inside and outside academia. We highlight what we see as the possibilities that are afforded by engaging with the ethical, methodological, and pedagogical commitments of PAR, CAE, and IE when seeking to foster multidirectional, critical, and transformational learning and research.

YARR: Youth Action Research Revolution

Formed in 2018 and based in Tio'tia:ke/Montreal, the Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR) team documented the trajectories of young people experiencing homelessness in Canada,¹ particularly exploring their historical and present-day interactions with educational, child welfare, (mental) health-care, and criminal justice institutions. YARR began by undertaking over six months of formal (paid) training and relationship building, and continued to foster opportunities to do so over four years of work together. From the outset, YARR was deeply informed by both PAR and the work of Dorothy Smith, as well as by Malenfant's previous work on activist learning and mutual aid. We began the project with a commitment to anchor our work in the living/lived knowledges of youth who had experienced homelessness and harm in social systems, beginning in their standpoints (D. E.

1 While we recognize youth may be defined differently depending on context, in this project we defined youth (broadly) as anyone between the ages of 16 and 29. These young people were often engaged in adult and alternative education, and they make up an age demographic that may be understood in many ways as institutionally precarious (Carpenter & Mojab, 2017).

Smith, 1987). Throughout the project, we aimed to create a deeply participatory space that could foster multidirectional learning, hiring youth who had lived and living experiences of housing precarity through our partnership with a youth-serving organization. During the project, Malenfant was a doctoral student and Nichols was their supervisor. Malenfant, along with the four youth co-researchers who were hired in 2018, had lived experience of homelessness. Our diverse knowledges across not only the housing system but also social services, education, and criminal-legal systems formed the starting point for YARR's exploration of possible points of youth homelessness prevention in Quebec. Following an IE approach, each of our experiences provided important knowledge about how educational and social services are organized. This reminder to ground the development of our project in our diverse experiences was an integral contribution that Smith afforded our collective work. By starting from our own everyday experiences, we were able to identify key inter-institutional junctures we wanted to understand more deeply (e.g., the intersections of child welfare and homelessness or mental health and homelessness) and begin to improve our shared understanding of the organization of social systems, such that we could begin to identify specific ways that institutional responses could better support stability, learning, and well-being for youth and adults.

Aligned with both PAR and CAE literature, we built YARR on a belief that creating transformative spaces for learning and inquiry takes time, material resources, trust, and the active subversion of normative knowledge hierarchies (Fine et al., 2003). Following activist approaches to learning (Shantz, 2017), we aimed to create educational spaces that were fluid and responded to the immediate individual and community needs we were navigating. We began the project with several months dedicated to relationship building, learning from one another, and shaping our research together. This required an openness to sharing what our previous experiences of learning looked like, and an active effort to invite one another to share from "wherever they may be" so that we could continue to learn together (Mtonga, 2016, p. 12). Throughout the course of the early stages of our work together, two legal interns worked with our team. Based on the questions and experiences of members of the team who had lived and living experiences of homelessness, we identified specific aspects of the law that we asked the legal interns to teach us about (e.g., municipal bylaws that target people sleeping or resting outside; the provincial Youth Protection Act; and the Quebec Charter of Rights and Freedoms). These were laws that people identified as posing problems for their lives or as potentially offering avenues through which we might pursue justice. As the legal interns explained how various legal concepts and laws have been designed to work, and others on the team explained how these laws are operationalized in practice, together we deepened our understanding of the socio-legal organization of our own and others' experiences. IE's focus on bringing into view specific text-act sequences as they actually unfold in people's lives was essential to this transformational learning opportunity. By toggling between young people's stories and an analysis of legal texts, we began to see an institutional basis for the experiences of discrimination and harm young people described. At the same time, this process of shared learning and inquiry challenged assumptions held by the legal interns about a natural alignment between the spirit and operationalization of policy and law in people's practices. Finally, the invitation for legal students to teach the team upended traditional hierarchies on research projects, where academic researchers take on an expert educator role. These types of multidirectional learning opportunities

highlight the importance of mobilizing diverse knowledges to guide collective efforts to investigate and address systemic injustices.

As part of our experience of learning together, we developed the following research questions, which we used to anchor our research design and activities:

1. What institutional barriers are young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability currently encountering?
2. What provincial and federal policies and institutional practices shape these experiences?
3. What types of interventions will address homeless youth’s unique needs and experiences in the context of Canada’s shifting political-economic conditions?

Throughout our research, we included ongoing learning opportunities for co-researchers to undertake data collection, analysis, and mobilization. While the quantity of learning opportunities between all team members is important—and underlines the potential for critical educational approaches to bolster participatory and activist research practices such as PAR and IE—we wish to highlight here the fruitfulness of fostering ongoing, multidirectional, non-hierarchical, and mutual learning opportunities (Haworth, 2017) to support PAR and IE work, ensuring that projects continued to be grounded in the knowledges of people’s everyday and ongoing experiences navigating institutions.

We also learned from the youth who participated in our data collection: 38 young people between the ages of 18 and 29, each with lived experience of housing precarity and intersecting systemic barriers. We invited interviewees to tell us about their experiences with public sector institutions from their first memories (often as very young children) until today. Because of the inter-institutional and historical focus of our research, we undertook up to three interviews with each young adult. This approach was also designed to honour the emotional labour that goes into sharing one’s experiences and to ensure that people had the time and opportunities they might desire to offer adjustments to or elaborations on something shared in a previous interview. This work took place in partnership with a youth homelessness organization, which provided support that we, as researchers, would not have been able to contribute to the team. Our interviews with young people became illuminated through additional standpoints from which to understand and trace out the systems that young people were navigating while homeless in Tio’tia:ke/Montreal and elsewhere. A key institution that emerged in all but one interview was schools, and the education system more broadly. Dismayed by the experiences of educational harm that young people described during interviews, we attempted, in our collective work, to ground our ongoing learning together in approaches that did not mirror the barriers and exclusions youth described facing in their experiences of schools.

Mobilizing critical and participatory opportunities for multidirectional learning is always important in the context of research on youth homelessness, as the standpoint of those with direct experience navigating housing precarity reveals important information about the intersecting institutional processes through which access to housing is socially organized (D. E. Smith, 1987, p. 4). This approach was particularly powerful in our project, as five of the six team members who made up YARR had faced disengagement, including expulsion, from mainstream schooling, and we thus needed to ensure we did not replicate pedagogical harms they had experienced elsewhere. Given that 62%–90% of young people experiencing homelessness have faced similar types of educational exclusion (Liljedahl et al., 2013), any attempt to engage young adults with lived experience of homelessness would benefit from

pedagogical practices that build on the wealth of knowledge they bring. Furthermore, we benefited from IE's invitation to trace out from our own experiences to learn more about how institutions, policies, and laws work such that the experiences we have had are possible. To this end, we intentionally undertook research to understand how institutions like schools operate so that homeless youth are often excluded and pushed out. In our practice, we aligned with mutual aid approaches when possible (Ross-Gordon et al., 2016, Chapter 6), eschewing a narrow reliance on the very institutions we were studying to respond to the harm they were perpetuating, while simultaneously working to hold them accountable.

Institutional Ethnography (IE) and Its Role in YARR

YARR was drawn to Smith's institutional ethnographic (IE) approach because it positions the "object of our inquiry, as practices, methods, procedures—as activity, rather than an entity" (D. E. Smith, 1990, p. 90). This is important as we continue to reflect on the history of research on homelessness—or homeless people—as an objectifying and obfuscating practice (Yarbrough, 2020) and opt instead to understand, through experiences, texts, practices, and procedures, the social activity and relations that young peoples are experiencing as homelessness. IE's Marxist-feminist grounding, which actively links research to the material conditions of peoples' lives, has informed our approach to planning, ethics, data collection, and analysis, and continues to inform how we understand the things we have learned through this project. Dorothy Smith's (2005) interpretation of Marx forms the basis of her "sociology for people." We share her commitment to a research approach that goes "beyond experience itself and into the social conditions that determine experience and the forms of consciousness we use to interpret [them]" (Carpenter, 2012, p. 31). This is why YARR began with, and returned frequently to, the material realities of our own and others' experiences. It also reminded us, as members of YARR, that institutional policies, which appeared abstracted as they emerged in our data collection and discussions as a team, are actually produced through the interconnected and embodied activities of people. Indeed, even the institutions we were working in (including university and social services contexts) fostered ways of working and seeing in which social relations are obscured and become alienated from the actual material contexts of their production (D. E. Smith, 1990). Following an IE approach, we collected data (through qualitative interviews; reviews of policies, program guides, legislation; and discussions among our team members and with professionals in the homelessness sector in Montreal) to better understand the practices, discourses, and procedures that currently organize experiences of youth homelessness to illuminate the "ruling relations" (p. 6), or "the complex of discourses, scientific, technical, and cultural that intersect, interpenetrate, and coordinate the multiple sites of ruling" (p. 6).

This epistemic grounding was important as we worked with young adults navigating homelessness, where obfuscation, as well as erasure and devaluation of young people's understandings or knowledges, is a regular occurrence as they attempt to navigate systems. The makeup of our team (that is, of people who were positioned differently by and within the institutions we were studying) impacted how we were able to illuminate and understand how specific institutional mechanisms produced the varied experiences we had had. Together, we were able to trace out different institutional relations and processes that would

otherwise remain obfuscated if we were working in a less diverse group.² For example, our work with the legal students demonstrated how multiple standpoints offer essential insights about how legislation is activated in the practices of actual people (e.g., police officers or child welfare workers) and how these institutional practices are experienced by others (e.g., homeless youth or mothers). These discussions facilitated opportunities for knowing social life in ways that would not be knowable if we focused only on understanding laws or describing lived experiences of young people without housing. IE shaped how we developed our research questions and interview scripts; how we engaged with institutional texts, policies, and laws throughout the project; and how we created our team’s shared code-book (i.e., a shared set of definitions and practices through which we indexed our data to enable analysis), conducted analysis, and collectively elucidated key points of institutional failure and possibility (Sauvé, 2018) as illuminated by our research.

As we will articulate more fully later in this article, to address the immediate harms faced by members of our team, we also needed more direct forms of action and mutual aid, the immediate and direct support of one another in the presence of institutional barriers. In bringing forward this focus on action, we also began to consider ways to ensure that the research was itself a form of direct action and mutual aid. We were inspired by George Smith’s (1990) observation that Dorothy Smith’s scholarship is particularly useful to any researcher who “stands outside political-administrative regimes intent on managing society” (p. 631), as well as to scholars mobilizing Smith’s work to resist institutional professionalization of research aimed at supporting social movements (Kinsman, 2020). As a group, we were composed mainly of those who had been the targets of political-administrative regimes established to rationalize and bureaucratize inequality, albeit sometimes in different ways. YARR tried to mobilize the “ground-up” potential of IE for activism, particularly in those “regimes” that are historically untransparent and difficult to access—for example, policing (D. E. Smith, 1990). While we traced out the policies, laws, and experiences that backgrounded young people’s lives and shaped their experiences of homelessness, we were regularly reminded that there are limitations to simply understanding how things unfold and are experienced. For example, although people we interviewed were unaware of specific policies or practices, they already knew how these institutions worked (in that they didn’t work for them). Learning more about the specific policies that were implicated in a denial of service didn’t necessarily help them navigate these institutional contexts any more effectively. Knowing one’s rights does not necessarily translate into an experience of said rights. This realization drove YARR to continuously reflect on and find ways to ensure the activist potential of IE was realized more immediately—that is, in our own lives, through direct efforts and a dedication to mutual aid and mutual learning (Spade, 2020)—even as we engaged in the long game of trying to do something with our knowledge of the specific institutional processes that pose problems for youth.

Participatory Action Research (PAR) and its Role in YARR

Participatory action research (PAR) was a key methodological approach informing YARR and continues to shape our ongoing work. PAR serves as a “radical epistemological challenge

2 While we focus on our methodological and theoretical groundings in this article, we present a more in-depth exploration of findings from this project elsewhere (see Malenfant et al., 2023; Nichols & Malenfant, 2022, 2023).

to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides” (Fine, 2008, p. 215). PAR is useful in that it undertakes co-creation of research oriented at tangible actions, as an “epistemology that assumes knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action” (Fine et al., 2003 p. 173). Throughout the project, our work with the YARR team aimed to be deeply participatory; we sought to ensure community researchers could participate in the varying ways they needed and wanted (Fine, 2008).

For example, when a team member was receiving inpatient care for mental health and substance use challenges, the individual proposed to the group that he produce research notes, drawings, and reflections about his experiences in the institutional settings that were the focus of our work, thus enabling him to continue to contribute to our collective aims. Originally conceived as a means of being flexible and accommodating, this team member’s idea for how to continue to stay involved in the project while receiving treatment served as a model for how we could all engage in participant observation as we went about our everyday lives. This adaptation of our study design, pursued as a means of providing flexible work, allowed the team to benefit from one another’s observations and insights as we continued to engage with public institutions in our ongoing efforts to stabilize our lives (e.g., in seeking treatment and support for substance dependence; in seeking mental health care; in navigating criminalizing encounters with the police; in navigating post-secondary learning and training situations). It also set the stage for other team members to propose how they wished to contribute to the project in ongoing ways, often through artistic (i.e., visual and poetic) depictions of their own experiences and the experiences of the young people we were interviewing together. These artistic renderings were an important way young people consolidated and communicated what they were learning. They also aligned with our commitment to destabilize epistemic hierarchies perpetuated in and by research.

Following community-grounded PAR approaches (Nichols & Ruglis, 2021), we aimed to challenge rigid ideas of what research (and learning to do research) looks like, along with ideas of who holds knowledge about the social issues we research. As with IE (D. E. Smith, 1987, 2005), a PAR project can use multiple methods to achieve the overall epistemological and material aims of enabling justice, collective knowledge, and action—particularly a “recognition that knowledge is produced in collaboration and action” (Fine et al., 2003, p. 173). In YARR, we developed a dedication to using PAR in such a way that “actions” we undertook were historically, socially, and materially situated, and not constrained by normative academic ideas about how social change is made (e.g., through policy advocacy). By failing to account for the situated social contexts of people’s lives and their engagements in collective work, PAR can risk succumbing to performative participation (Jordan & Kapoor, 2016) and remain constrained by a lack of imagination and a narrowness of actions (Malenfant et al., 2023). PAR holds important potential to inform research in its challenge to historical and current hierarchies of knowledges in institutions of learning. It also offers a recognized framework for prioritizing experiential knowledge and challenging practices where researchers speak on behalf of communities that they work with. We believe it is important to actively resist working-for, in favour of “the work-together” (Fine et al., 2003), which extends beyond participation and aims to attend to the symbolic, material, epistemological, and cultural grounds for co-creation.

We also were dedicated throughout the project to a broad definition of participation, grounded in a critical engagement with narratives of participant empowerment, which

“need to be continuously questioned” (Flicker, 2008, p. 83), and which often obfuscate the labour that community members undertake toward mutual and multidirectional education. We continuously reflected on our work together to ensure that we weren’t limiting what we might see as action, and we maintained a specific focus on actions that do not rely on State or bureaucratic appeals for “change” (Choudry & Kuyek, 2012). Rather, our conceptualizations of possible actions to pursue were grounded in activism; aimed to be useful to the actual realities of those experiencing the social issue we were interrogating (D. E. Smith, 1990); and meaningful contributions to work already happening in resistance to unjust systems and for organizing political struggle (Choudry, 2015). This required ongoing reflection on our work, aims, and contributions, and at times we needed to adjust to urgent social issues that required timely mobilization of our research findings and team members’ knowledges.

As is the case with other PAR projects, we recognize that while we attempted to foster co-creation and non-hierarchical decision making whenever possible, “our practice did not always live up to the design” (Fine et al., 2003, p. 174). An important learning we continue to bring to our work is the need to actively disrupt paternalistic hierarchies in research teams, where the academics (whether or not they have lived experiences of the social issues they are studying) hold the answers and work on behalf of/to educate community members. Indeed, here we want to stress that involvement in this project was transformational and deeply educational for the “educators” or academic researchers co-leading the project. Recognizing the ways that each of us enter learning, already shaped by our respective experiences, identities, and material circumstances, provides a promising place to begin disrupting top-down notions of learning in research and educational institutions.

Mobilizing IE with PAR: Possibilities and Challenges for Research

Both PAR and IE allowed us to anchor our work so it was relevant in the lives of each YARR member in different ways. Dorothy Smith’s (1990) work provided a starting point to outline the ways in which capitalism obfuscates and creates an environment in which we become alienated from the structures and relations that organize our experiences. This grounding has been important for the project, where the obfuscation of each of our institutional experiences, including educational trajectories, was organized in different ways. Our dedication to mobilizing PAR/CAE to support the participation and learning of all team members stemmed from our recognition of the disproportionate harm that some learners face in educational and research environments, as well as the additional labour required from them to educate those without lived experiences of those harms about how things could be different. We drew on learnings from other PAR projects that outlined the importance of recognizing differences in access, identity, and responsibility in social justice-oriented participatory research, and that highlighted the significance of ongoing communication and reflection:

We have learned that “equal” participation and responsibility does not mean the “same.” Instead, it means endless ongoing conversations, among us, with every decision always revisited, about who can take risks, who dares to speak, who must remain quiet, and what topics never see the light of day. (Fine et al., 2003, p.178)

Like Fine et al. (2003), we actively sought to create different ways for people to participate in the project that reflected their passions, desires, and everyday life circumstances; we also became increasingly aware that our unequal participation in institutional life was a central resource of the team. One way that differences in access, identity, and responsibility come into view is by paying attention to the ways our experiences of an institutional process differ. Not only was it analytically useful to pay attention to these differences, but our divergent experiences also served as opportunities for redistributing institutional resources.

For instance, as this project unfolded and members of the team struggled to mitigate mental health distress, we began to note and keep track of different patterns in accessing resources—including the degree to which a doctor even recognizes the symptoms of mental health distress in a person's talk. Without an official diagnosis, and thus no access to publicly funded resources, some members of our team used alcohol and non-prescription drugs to mitigate the anxiety provoked by school, for example. Others were told they could not access the treatment they needed to address their diagnosed concern because they continued to use substances. Everyone talked about waitlists and the insufficiency of public treatment options. Only one of us had access to paid sick leave and workplace insurance that covered a limited number of privately funded psychotherapy appointments. When this discrepancy came starkly into view as Nichols was being supported to take a medical leave from work, we collectively decided to use resources for the project to take paid mental health leave as a team—viewing this as a direct and reasonable cost of doing research on social justice issues.

It similarly became evident that institutionalized spaces of learning were not serving any of us well. However, it was also clear that the harms were more significantly pronounced for those who had to struggle harder to create alignment between their material realities and the abstract, objectified demands of a public education system. Members of our team who regularly faced discrimination, racism, homophobia, ableism, and other forms of discrimination in schools had particularly important insights to offer about the institutional blocks or “walls” they experienced as learners, which limited their educational engagement in ways that had long-lasting material and social implications for their lives, even after they were housed. Addressing barriers to learning, particularly those grounded in forms of systemic and individual discrimination, requires “extra emotional, social, and intellectual supports that are needed but generally not available in institutionalized education” (Lange et al., 2015, p 92). While we recognized that as academic researchers we were unable to address all of our team members' support needs, we aimed to recognize each of our “work” (D. E. Smith, 1990) to learn in spite of institutional failures and to meet as many conditions that support learning as possible. This work must be active. While, theoretically, PAR/CAE may understand that all members of research and learning teams are differently positioned, “there is [often] a gap between what they know about their practice and what they actually do in practice” (Misawa, 2010, p. 188). The aim of CAE, Kong (2010) argued, should be to “build institutions and social movements” (p. 235) where identities and harmful experiences in systems are not barriers but foundations to create just alternatives.

Potentials for Critical Adult Education (CAE)

When discussing ways to work that attend to the educational justice potential of IE and PAR, we wish to highlight the positive impacts of building strong supports and community. One approach that we brought into our work together from the outset of YARR, and that

we have aimed to highlight in this article, was mutual aid. Mutual aid, the voluntary and solidarity-based approach to directly addressing the needs of given communities in the face of oppressive institutional structures (Spade, 2020), has historically been a part of CAE (Ross-Gordon et al., 2016, Chapter 6) and is an effective strategy for building strong social supports that take into account (and build solidarity across) multiple knowledges, skills, and positions. Mutual aid-based CAE has been particularly fruitful in providing CAE learning for social justice, including in Black and immigrant communities in the United States (Ross-Gordon et al., 2016, Chapter 6). Mutual aid—e.g., ensuring directly, whenever possible, that our team had the things they needed to participate in our shared work—provided a strategy through which we could actively support one another to learn, even as we were individually navigating barriers to that learning in our team and in our lives. Mutual aid also gives educators and learners a framework through which to understand co-constituted learning and solidarity-based actions, which position our learning and survival as intertwined (Yarborough, 2020).

Bonds developed through mutual aid provided a space through which we worked together to “investigate the social relations and organization of consciousness” (D. E. Smith, 1987, p. 4) that connect us to one another and to the institutions and institutional processes we were investigating. Often this meant collectively reframing narratives of self-blame and the individualization of educational struggles that are characteristic of those who have faced institutional barriers and blocks in education systems. In our research broadly, and our team dynamics specifically, we mobilized IE and PAR/CAE to explore this tendency to self-blame, where learners (in particular, those who had experienced homelessness and educational disengagement) internalized discourses that they were individually failing to learn, taking on labels given to them throughout their institutionalized learning experiences. Dorothy Smith (1990) described this process as an ideological circle, in which the label (or objectified form of consciousness) is operationalized in, and goes on to shape, ongoing social relations and material conditions of people’s lives. In a similar way, Hacking (1995) described the looping effects produced as people interact with, take up, and adapt systems of classification (e.g., diagnoses of learning disability) in the ongoing unfolding of their lives. These types of ideological practices are common in educational settings and come to shape how learners know themselves in relation to others.

Alternatively, systems of mass compulsory education are designed for, and perpetuate the academic success of, an abstract learner who looks and talks like the teachers, is literate in the language of instruction, is consistently fed, comes from a two-parent family, and has access to all the additional resources (e.g., money for supplies, extra shoes, school trips, additional psycho-educational assessments) required to make the public system work effectively, including stable housing. Young people who do not fit this normative ideal are streamed out of mainstream programming and labelled in ways that suggest *they* and *their* families are the problem (Nichols, 2019; Griffith & Smith, 2005). Throughout our work together, team members highlighted the ways that our learning together—from peers, and often in spite of failure of formalized education—created systems of care and support. These approaches could be drawn on to anchor critical methodologies in the work that participants were already doing despite educational harm and barriers in formal systems (Fine, 2008). Our experience suggests that opportunities to share knowledge outside of—and even about—institutional models of schooling are one way educators and researchers can commit to radically different and socially just practices of inquiry and learning.

Conclusion

This article highlights the potential for IE to add to the social and conceptual impacts of PAR/CAE practices, recognizing the benefits that Smith's alternative sociology brings to existing approaches that facilitate research learning through co-creation and solidarity. We think the synergies across these approaches have potential to not only provide learning opportunities for those historically excluded from and harmed by academic institutions, but to also be transformational for all members of a research project. We believe that in order for these approaches to be truly transformational in the ways they could be, all those involved must walk away transformed—not only adult learners who are deemed “barriered, disadvantaged, underprivileged, or vulnerable” (Lange et al., 2015, p. 87). Smith's IE offers us theoretical grounding from which to pursue these multidirectional transformations, and to make visible in our everyday research work the institutional experiences that have shaped how we enter learning relationships with one another.

We must also expand our understandings of the potential for actions emerging from PAR projects, beyond traditional scholarly or non-profit notions of impact (Choudry, 2015), and see these spaces as holding radical possibility for co-creation of knowledge and learning—potentially impactful experiences in their own rights. Building educational relationships that are grounded in multiple and diverse understandings and experiences creates a fuller understanding of how systems work or, more often, don't work, equipping us to shift the way these systems are organized. Despite each member of YARR encountering barriers and harm done in educational institutions throughout their trajectories, there was a collective dedication to learning how to work differently together. Research projects hold a unique potential to help us think differently about how critical engagement with social issues can provide those most impacted by them with opportunities to gain tangible skills, as well as spaces to critically investigate the conditions of their own lives. Smith's work provides us with a template for doing just this. In tandem with the type of mutual aid community building we used in this project, education can be emancipatory, not only by addressing the lack in formal schooling, but also by rejecting normative notions of how, where, and why education takes place. Through learning together differently in projects like YARR, we equip one another with the skills and knowledge to work differently throughout our professions and communities.

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