Collaborating With Diverse Stakeholders to Produce Meaningful and Useful Research: The Alaska Native Cultural Identity Project

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Pub. Date: 2021
Product: SAGE Research Methods Cases
Methods: Stakeholders, Indigenous research, Focus groups
Disciplines: Psychology
Access Date: January 28, 2021
Academic Level: Advanced Undergraduate
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd
City: London
Online ISBN: 9781529757149
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781529757149

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Abstract

This case study details a community-engaged research process with Alaska Native people in an urban university setting. Although Alaska Native young adults demonstrate resilience in overcoming oppressive conditions, they have higher rates of behavioral health problems, partially because of cultural loss from oppressive systems. While we know that a strong cultural identity supports behavioral health and academic outcomes, little research has explored how to support cultural identity development. Consequently, we collaborated with diverse Alaska Native stakeholders, including students, staff, faculty, and Elders, and used transformational grounded theory within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework to conduct foundational research to study this topic. In this case study, we describe the developmental research that led to the creation and planned randomized controlled trial of a cultural identity development program. In particular, we focus on creating and maintaining trusting partnerships, developing collaborative research processes, and using a series of studies to build toward larger projects over time. We describe numerous lessons we learned along the way, including the need for flexibility, transparency, and reflection.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Develop strategies for collaborating with diverse community partners
- Distinguish how community-engaged research within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework differs from other Western research methods, such as controlled lab settings
- Summarize the core components of transformational grounded theory methods
- Articulate the strengths and challenges of community-engaged research

Project Overview and Context

Something taught when you’re Native, and your grandma says, “Be Native. You’re proud. Be proud you’re Native.” Yeah, it’s just this really strong, because you know, we’re a very surviving threatened culture.—Ali

Cultural identity is someone’s connection between their sense of self and culture. A strong cultural identity and drawing on cultural strengths, knowledge, and practices to confront challenges can protect against problems (e.g., Burnette & Figley, 2016; Oré et al., 2016; Walters et al., 2002). For example, a strong Native cultural identity supports emotional and behavioral health, overall well-being, and academic success (R. A. Brown et al., 2016; Powers, 2006; Snowshoe et al., 2015). Despite these culture-based strengths, Alaska Native (AN) young adults experience high rates of behavioral health problems—such as anxiety, depression, substance use, and suicide—and have lower rates of university enrollment and retention (e.g., Allen et al., 2011; Bagalman & Heisler, 2016; Castor et al., 2006; Gone & Trimble, 2012; Guillardy, 2009; Guillardy &
At our university, one in eight of all of our students (both AN and non-AN) believe they have a substance use problem, one in five report symptoms consistent with major depression, and one in twenty have made a plan to commit suicide in the past year (Office of Student Affairs, 2014). Over half of our AN students drop out in their first semester of university, and fewer than one in 10 persists to degree completion (Boeckmann et al., 2017; Office of Student Affairs, 2016). AN people in our urban area report experiencing particularly poor mental health compared with other regions (Alaska Native Epidemiology Center, 2018).

These pronounced differences in behavioral health and academic outcomes have been attributed, in part, to cultural loss and marginalization from multigenerational colonization and trauma (e.g., Bird, 2002; Harris, 2002; Hartmann & Gone, 2013; La Belle et al., 2005; McNeil et al., 2000; Okazaki et al., 2008; Pavkov et al., 2010; Roubideaux, 2002). Eurocentric education systems continue to impact Native students, as they conflict with Native students’ values and practices (e.g., Battiste, 2002; Tyler et al., 2008). Many Native students have felt they had to choose between assimilating to Eurocentric university norms and dropping out to maintain their cultural identities (Huffman, 2008).

It is within this context that we developed this research project. We wanted to understand how we could promote AN university students’ behavioral health and academic success through cultural identity development. Foundational research in Alaska demonstrates the importance of culture when protecting against poor behavioral health outcomes (e.g., Allen et al., 2014; Wexler & Gone, 2015). Cultural interventions based in local, Indigenous theories are successful in improving behavioral health (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Goodkind et al., 2012; Mohatt et al., 2014; Noe et al., 2004; Rasmus et al., 2014, 2019). However, these interventions are usually very specific, developed by and for particular communities. To our knowledge, there are no culture-based behavioral health interventions developed for university campuses that intend to be relevant across AN cultural groups in urban settings.

We used a community-engaged research process to create a cultural identity development program for AN university students. Our methods were based in transformational grounded theory, which prioritizes participation, redistribution of power, and action (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015) within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework (Chilisa, 2011; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012). We will unpack these terms, why we chose them, and how we used them in this chapter.

**Section Summary**

- Cultural identity promotes behavioral health, academic persistence, and achievement; however, AN people have experienced cultural loss due to past and present systems of oppression, including higher education.
- We may be able to promote behavioral health and academic outcomes of AN university students through culture-based interventions.
- We used a community-engaged research process to develop a cultural identity program for AN university students of diverse backgrounds.
Research Design

Being respected is super important and then the privacy thing is super important. So you get to choose how far your story goes... [If] the person doesn’t really have control over how they’re represented, that would be a problem.—Minnie

We used a community-engaged research process, which involves collaborating with “stakeholders,” or people who are impacted by the issue being studied, to develop relevant research that is useful to the community (Balls-Berry & Acosta-Pérez, 2017). Our stakeholders included AN university students, alumni, faculty, staff, administration, and community members. We fostered these relationships by listening to stakeholders, putting their concerns at the forefront, freely talking, being transparent with our processes, and participating in the community outside of research. We included stakeholders’ unique perspectives and insights throughout the project, including research design, implementation, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination.

Our research took place within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework (Chilisa, 2011; Kovach, 2009). As Smith (2012) noted, “Even when (the colonizers) have left formally, the institutions and legacy of colonialism remains” (p. 101). By using a decolonizing framework, we acknowledged and challenged the colonial past and present, rejected Western ideologies, and privileged Indigenous ways of knowing, namely AN ways of knowing (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015). We hoped this approach would help us reduce power differences between members of our research team and stakeholders, and promote an authentic, ethical, useful research process (Yuan et al., 2014).

Our specific research methods were based in transformational grounded theory (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015) because it is participatory, focused on power-sharing, and action-oriented. Following method guidelines, we:

• Set a shared agenda among all stakeholders;
• Were aware of differences in power between researchers and stakeholders;
• Examined how power differences affect the data;
• Incorporated the knowledge and experiences of stakeholders;
• Worked toward a socially just and mutually beneficial outcome.

We thought it was particularly important to use these research processes due to the painful history of researchers exploiting AN people (Caldwell et al., 2005; Foulks, 1989) and failure to use Indigenous knowledge effectively in intervention programs (Davis & Keemer, 2002; Walters & Simoni, 2009). Calls have been made for research to be community-driven, strengths-based, and culturally informed (L. Brown & Strega, 2005; Rasmus et al., 2016; Wexler et al., 2015). These research processes help overcome distrust between marginalized groups and researchers; enhance the quality, relevance, and usefulness of data; join partners with unique skills and expertise; and strengthen the capacities of all partners (see, for example, Allen et al., 2014; Laveaux & Christopher, 2009; Lopez et al., 2012; Yuan et al., 2014).
Section Summary

- Community-engaged research involves collaborating with people who are affected by the issue being studied.
- A decolonizing, Indigenous framework challenges colonization, rejects Western ideologies as superior, and privileges Indigenous ways of knowing.
- Transformational grounded theory is participatory, action-oriented, and focused on power-sharing.

Method in Action

I was born and raised here…. I wasn’t really taught exactly what identity was…. But, then later my friends started asking, “Well, what kind of Native [are you]?” … It started sparking my interest, because I didn’t know…. In the curriculum that I was being taught didn’t speak very highly of Native people, and if it did it was just a brief moment…. So, it didn’t really help me progress [in] identifying as being Native, until I came here and met everybody and started taking classes and learning about the history. That’s really when I started owning it.—Yeesh Ka

Developing Our Research Focus

We developed our research in response to three calls from stakeholders:

1. Utilize a strength-based, culturally informed approach to address behavioral health disparities;
2. Decolonize and Indigenize institutions on traditional lands that serve AN people;
3. Work alongside current university initiatives to address problems identified by AN students.

We reviewed research in this area and used our university’s Diversity and Inclusion Initiative to guide our research focus. We met with AN leadership at our university who highlighted a promising initiative developed by Native Student Services (NSS; a university resource for Native students) and eWolff (a technology resource) that had lost momentum. We conversed with initiative creators about what went well and what did not. With their blessing and stakeholder support, we developed research that would revise the initiative and create programming to support behavioral health.

Developing Our Community Advisory Board and Research Team

Through stakeholder consultation, and in line with our research approach, we identified and recruited a diverse group of AN stakeholders to serve on our Community Advisory Board (CAB). A CAB ensures that stakeholder input is prioritized and is responsible for overseeing all aspects of the research process. Our CAB has included two NSS representatives, a professor in AN Studies, three undergraduate students, and two community members. As the research team leader (S.L.B.) is an “outsider”—a European American professor—we purposefully recruited two “insiders” (AN students) to join our research team: Jacy Hutchinson (Koyukon Athabascan) and Tiera Schroeder (Yup’ik).
Securing Grant Funding

We knew we wanted to incentivize participants, fund collaborators, and disseminate research findings. So, S.L.B. applied for a grant through the National Institutes of Health American Indian and Alaska Native Clinical and Translational Research Program (NIH AI/AN CTRP) and was funded.

Conducting Our First Study

We identified collaborators’ strengths, skills, and desired areas for growth to develop the project through joint, democratic leadership. Our CAB and research team developed operating norms, identified common goals, and outlined research principles through memoranda of understanding. We (research team and CAB) discussed cultural identity at the university and developed a study protocol based on these discussions and scientific literature. Our CAB reviewed the protocol and suggested changes to help our methods align with AN ways of knowing before we submitted the study to our Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval.

Participants

We recruited students through a purposive sampling procedure (Etikan et al., 2016) in which we posted an invitation letter in the NSS office and their email listserv. Students contacted the research team or submitted their form to NSS to participate. Twenty AN undergraduate students (16 women, 4 men) participated. Ranging in age from 18 to 51, they represented a variety of AN cultural groups, undergraduate years, colleges, and majors—a diverse set of students who could provide us important insights.

Data Collection

We held seven focus groups that incorporated AN methods on campus, with two to four participants per group. To reach saturation, focus groups were conducted until no new information emerged for two focus groups (Fusch & Ness, 2015). We used a semi-structured interview guide to encourage open discussion. Our primary questions and prompts were as follows:

1. Has anyone taught you what identity is? How did you learn about identity?
2. Please reflect on who you are and where you come from. How do you describe yourself?
3. What strengths does your cultural identity provide you?
4. What aspects of university life help support your cultural identity?
5. What aspects of university life clash with or challenge your cultural identity?

We used processes congruent with AN cultures that our research team found useful in the past and that were recommended by our CAB. We:

1. Shared questions with participants 1 week ahead of the group so they had time to reflect, as reflection time is paramount for these topics;
2. Chatted and shared a light meal with participants before the focus group to help put participants at ease, as food is at the center of many AN gatherings, as in other cultures;
3. Distributed gift cards (participation incentives) before the group started so participants could leave early if needed/desired;
4. Had participants to choose pseudonyms, keeping participation confidential while allowing participants to recognize their contributions when results were shared;
5. Allowed participants to jot down private answers or things they wanted to say while people were talking, which was particularly important for students for whom speaking up to authority figures, sharing publicly, or jumping into a conversation is not culturally appropriate;
6. Used two audio recorders to capture soft-spoken participants’ voices accurately;
7. Had a notetaker who documented nonverbal gestures, as nonverbal communication is common in many AN cultures (such as eyebrow-raising to indicate agreement);
8. Were mindful of our voices, using neutral, open-ended questions and probes.

Data Analysis

We followed transformational grounded theory methods (Redman-MacLaren & Mills, 2015) to analyze our data. The audio data was transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. We removed identifying information and added field notes. We uploaded transcripts into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative software program, where we analyzed the data while we collected. A research assistant open-coded the first five transcripts, assigning a word or phrase to each idea that captured its essence (Moghaddam, 2006), and S.L.B. reviewed the codes. We developed a codebook from these open codes and used it to independently code each transcript. New codes were created as needed to fully capture the data, and we reviewed previously coded transcripts with these new codes for consistency. We discussed differences in our coding and came to consensus on which codes best captured the data. We memoed our thoughts throughout this process to capture reactions and emergent findings. Finally, we developed themes by examining connections in our coding.

Presenting Results

We presented findings to our CAB to seek feedback and corroborate perspectives. Results from our first study told us that:

- Multiple aspects of students’ cultural identities provided them strengths, including personal, familial, community, tribal, regional, and historical identities.
- Students largely developed their identities through parents and Elders via storytelling, experiential learning, connection, personal exploration, and sharing with and teaching others.
- The university system affected students’ cultural identities in both supportive and conflicting ways. For example, opportunities for connection and cultural engagement in Indigenous spaces supported students, whereas prejudice, lack of representation, and difficulties engaging in cultural practices were challenging.

We wrote results summaries in many formats to share with our stakeholders, including a written report for university administration and an oral presentation for NSS. We also presented at scientific conferences and submitted manuscripts to peer-reviewed scientific journals.
Using Results to Secure Grant Funding

Through CAB consultation, we knew we wanted to develop a program that was responsive to our results. S.L.B. applied for another grant through the NIH AI/AN CTRP and was funded.

Developing Our Elder Advisory Committee

It was clear we needed AN Elders to help create our cultural identity program. Sometimes referred to as “capital E” Elders, these Elders are above and beyond what European Americans might consider an “elder.” Being advanced in age does not automatically make one an Elder, nor is advanced age a requirement. Rather, Elders are mentors, guides, and confidants; they are looked to for direction and mentorship, possess a lifetime of experiences and knowledge, and act as keepers of cultural wisdom for current and future generations. They provide a sense of stability and well-being in times of hardship. Just as Elders have the best interest of their communities in mind, community members care for their Elders by providing game, flora, and other subsistence and support. AN people treat Elders with the utmost respect by listening to their stories and recommendations, giving them prime positions (e.g., close parking spots, leadership roles, front-row seats) and protecting them from mistreatment. Elders can be trusted to ensure that research is reflective of community priorities. Upon CAB approval, we invited AN Elders to collaborate, privileging a diversity of genders, cultures, tribal affiliations, professions, and upbringings, along with wisdom in AN identity development, teaching/experience with university students, and community leadership. The Elders provided relevant cultural knowledge and formatting advice for program development that would best suit AN students’ needs and serve as mentors in the cultural identity program.

Developing Our Identity Program

We constructed our identity development program by drawing on scientific literature, Elders’ wisdom, our CAB’s knowledge, and AN university students’ lived experiences to enhance our program’s quality, relevance, and usefulness. Over many months, the research team engaged in numerous meetings with the Elders and our CAB to share ideas and facilitate communication, efficiency, and transparency throughout program development. After meetings, a meeting summary and program edits were emailed to attendees to encourage contributions and feedback. Reminder emails were sent before meetings to encourage attendance. Research team members, namely S.L.B. and TS, also had weekly meetings to reflect on progress and assess the “to-do list.” We held individual meetings with stakeholders as needed.

The Elders and research team constructed the bulk of the program. We shared progress with our CAB, sought feedback, and adjusted accordingly along the way. We used information from our focus groups and existing literature to construct the program outline. Then, we determined program structure to ensure we had a solid foundation. Next, we established key values vital to cultural identity development and sequenced them in a natural flow. A theme was identified for each session, which drove activities and discussion.

Ultimately, we developed an 8-week program with weekly 2.5-hr sessions. The program covers students’ cultural identities, strengths, and life paths to promote rootedness in who they are across settings. The
program follows the following sequence, in order of depth and intimacy:

- **Week 1. The Real Human Being**: Personal identity; introduction to program;
- **Week 2. Our Relatives**: Family identity; recognizing healthy Elders and mentors;
- **Week 3. Our Land**: Community and tribal identity; examining interconnectedness;
- **Week 4. Becoming Aware**: Cultural region history; understanding historical trauma and healing justice;
- **Week 5. What You Are Known For**: Cultural gifts; identifying strengths and traditional values;
- **Week 6. Becoming**: Life paths; identifying aspirations and life purposes;
- **Week 7. Vision**: Contributions; giving back through gifts and strengths; aspiring to Eldership;
- **Week 8. Story**: Ceremony, celebration; sharing identity.

While specific curriculum per session varies, each includes (a) didactic instruction via storytelling, (b) discussion via talking circles, (c) group experiential activities to facilitate connection, and (d) individual reflection and documentation via ePortfolio.

**Didactic Instruction: Storytelling**

Storytelling is an important AN tradition, used to teach important lessons across generations, and has been used to promote health (e.g., Hodge et al., 2002). Elders are knowledge bearers responsible for passing knowledge to the next generation, and thus didactic instruction in identity development via storytelling from Elders makes sense, aligning with both traditional AN practices and literature on identity development and behavioral health.

**Discussion: Talking Circles**

A talking circle usually involves participants sitting in a circle, with one sacred item that designates who is speaking. The item is passed around the circle clockwise, and each member is usually given the opportunity to speak twice (two full rotations). Talking circles will allow students to participate in a traditional AN practice while sharing and learning with one another; such traditional practices have been successfully incorporated into health/well-being promotion programs for youth and young adults (e.g., Kenyon & Hanson, 2012). When topics are heavier, we plan to use smaller groups of 4–6 people. These smaller, Elder-led groups will be kept throughout the program to encourage intimacy and deeper reflection.

**Connection: Experiential Activities**

Students will learn traditional AN practices, such as beading and sewing as they create their own medicine bags to hold the strengths they have identified from developing their identities. In addition, students will eat traditional foods from cultural regions across the state such as caribou, berries, fish, moose, and greens. As Native identity is often developed through cultural practices (Kulis et al., 2013), we hope these experiences will provide students with a stronger sense of cultural connection.
Reflection and Documentation: ePortfolio

An online portfolio will allow students to document their identity exploration. An ePortfolio is a digital space where the creator can curate a collection of pictures, words, art, music, videos, and other multimedia pieces. Our program's ePortfolio template contains prompts to facilitate reflection and short reflection videos from AN students, staff, faculty, and Elders. For example, for Week 1, the corresponding ePortfolio page features an AN staff member self-reflecting and prompts students to upload and caption a picture (photo or artwork) that represents who they are. They are asked to consider questions like “What is your Native name? Who named you? Where does your name come from? How would you describe yourself? What should people know about you? What makes you proud about yourself? How does that pride impact your life?” Because an ePortfolio is driven by its creator, helps connect distinct pieces into a whole, and is able to be continuously revisited and updated (e.g., Chen, 2009), it is responsive to the process of identity development.

Ceremony: Story and Celebration

Finally, students will reflect on their cultural identity journey in the form of a six-word story. The intention is to help students reflect deeply and carefully on what composes the core of their identities. For example, CAB member, Eva Gregg, shared one six-word story: “I am my ancestors and descendants.” She concisely and powerfully captured her belief in nonlinear time, and how it fosters a strong connection to family as a central part of her AN identity. The completion of the six-word story signifies the completion of the program through a ceremony, consistent with AN cultures, though not the end of identity development. ePortfolios can be continuously updated as students develop their cultural identity beyond the program. Students may also share their ePortfolios with others by adjusting their privacy settings, as sharing identity is important to the process of identity development.

Developing Our Second Study

Our next step is piloting the cultural identity development program we created for AN students at our university via a randomized clinical trial. We will recruit 40–50 AN university students to participate. The students will be randomized, with half the students receiving the intervention in the Fall and half in the Spring. This rigorous design will help us be confident that any effects we find are from the intervention itself, and not related to other variables, while also allowing all participants to participate in the program. We hypothesize that this intervention will develop AN students' cultural identities, strengths, and sense of community; improve their behavioral health; and support their academic persistence and achievement. We will test these outcomes via mixed design analyses of covariance of self-report measures and records. We will also examine program feasibility through a process evaluation that includes program observations and analyses of post-program focus groups.

Sustainability

Thinking about sustainability from the start is critical when conducting community-engaged research. Research funds dry up, people move into new positions, but any beneficial program/research should
continue. We plan to publish an accessible report and hold meetings to discuss findings. Because the program is campus-driven, has been implemented in a previous form, has received buy-in from stakeholders across campus, and is being pilot tested at the university, we feel confident that we can sustain the program through collaboration with AN leadership. Eventually, we will be able to share the program with other institutions that seek it, as it is a program with few barriers to implementation. The program content will be freely available, and the developers of the ePortfolio technology have pledged to provide no-cost licensing options to interested institutions.

Section Summary

- We developed our research in response to calls from stakeholders and conducted our research in collaboration with a CAB and AN Elders. These community-based relational processes are vital for developing useful, meaningful research.
- We used information from our first study to create an AN cultural identity development program for university students that we now plan to pilot test through a randomized clinical trial.
- By considering sustainability at each step of our research process, we have developed a collaborative project that is likely to continue long after funding ends or individual priorities change.

Practical Lessons Learned

There were many lessons that we learned along the way in our unique roles as the lead researcher (S.L.B.), graduate research assistant (T.M.S.), and community partner/CAB member (A.C.F.).

1. **Building community partnerships takes time and requires flexibility.** While this is a common experience when conducting community-engaged research, it was especially evident in our study. The AN community is tight-knit and wary of “outsiders” after experiencing exploitation at the hands of settler-colonizers and “helicopter” researchers (ones that fly in, collect data, and promptly leave). It was important for us to work with and alongside our community rather than imposing our own inflexible expectations. We acknowledge and respect the time, energy, and humility necessary to bridge a gap of mistrust that spans generations of people. We hope that researchers who are aspiring to do similar work would do the same.

2. **Including all stakeholders helps to provide distinct perspectives that can create useful research.** There were many “ahah!” moments throughout the research process that left us feeling inspired at the breadth of experience we had brought together by forming relationships with community members and prioritizing them in the research process. Working alongside these stakeholders and incorporating their input gives us a better chance of creating an intervention that is more relevant, valuable, and sustainable.

3. **Community-research partnerships capitalize on and build the capacities of all partners.** Our approach joined partners with unique skills and strengthened the capacities of all partners. For example, while lending “insider” perspectives relevant to the research, the research assistants
received mentorship in designing, conducting, and disseminating research. While providing expertise in designing research, the lead researcher received mentorship in AN cultural practices and communication styles.

4. **Researchers and community members often function at different speeds.** Research tends to be detail-oriented and methodical while community interest tends to wax and wane, often building momentum that asks for quicker movement than what is feasible for researchers. For example, we spent several months waiting for grant funding to be processed, during which time our Elders graciously offered their time without yet being compensated. In another instance, a change in IRB jurisdiction halted our research progress for many months. We had to find ways to adjust, adapt, and meet in the middle to develop and follow a schedule that worked for all involved.

5. **Transparency is key to conducting community-engaged research.** It was important for us to treat our relationships with stakeholders like any healthy relationship—with open communication, honesty, and consistency. Like any relationship, it is also easy to create rifts if anyone feels they cannot trust the other. Practicing transparency ensured that there were no stones left unturned, and thus no reason to feel as if we, as researchers, were being anything but forthcoming. In addition, it helped us develop as a team who shared power equally, rather than a hierarchical group driven by those with institutional connections. When everyone has the same access to information, we have the same opportunities to act on it, give necessary input, and influence decision making.

6. **People’s needs, strengths, and desires change over time.** We needed to be responsive to what stakeholders are asking, in addition to respecting the amount of energy they are willing to put forth in the process. Our research process has now spanned a couple of years—and is still ongoing! We have experienced changes in our collaboration group, adding some who became interested as the project progressed, saying goodbye to others as competing priorities arose for them, and changing the roles of some involved to better incorporate their strengths and desires. We have learned to embrace change while keeping focused on our overarching research goals.

**Section Summary**

- Building research-community partnerships takes time and requires flexibility, compassion, transparency, and patience from all collaborators.
- Including stakeholders provides distinct perspectives and unique capacities to produce useful research and build skills.
- Partners’ needs, strengths, and desires change over time—and that is okay; we must adjust accordingly.

**Conclusion**

I love the fact that there will be Native people learning who they are… . That is needed, because you can’t live a life not knowing who you are. You’ll be lost. You know? You gotta know who you are, and then take flight if you need to.—Faye
Acknowledging, respecting, and incorporating the unique lived experiences and expertise of diverse stakeholders is key to designing and conducting meaningful community-engaged research. We took a decolonizing, Indigenous approach, using a transformational grounded theory method, to conduct our research. In our work, we kept our recognition of the damaging history of colonization and related current oppressive systems and their impacts on all of us—directly and indirectly—at the forefront. We wanted our diverse partners to have power and influence on our research process, so we approached all aspects of our research collaboratively. Our approach helped us establish trust among everyone involved; enhance the quality, relevance, and usefulness of our findings; effectively utilize our unique skills and expertise; and strengthen all of our capacities in the process. Our research journey is far from over; we have had many twists and turns along the way and have stumbled and needed to get back on track again. Through it all, we have answered important research questions, and our findings have often led us to ask new questions, leading to new studies. We have grown as researchers, collaborators, and as people. That is the true nature of community-engaged research. We hope our case both inspires you and cautions you, so that you enter into your own community-engaged research with your eyes wide-open, ready to embrace beautiful, often messy, processes that are needed to produce meaningful and useful research.

Section Summary

- Mutually respectful relationships are key in community-engaged research.
- Transformational grounded theory within a decolonizing framework calls on researchers to continuously reflect and engage in anti-oppression.
- Community-engaged research helps to generate meaningful research questions and useful research findings.
- Community-engaged research, like much research, often requires multiple studies as research findings lead to new questions and interventions.

Authors’ Note

All quotes in this case are from focus group participants. All names are pseudonyms that were chosen by the participants.

We would like to thank the members of our Community Advisory Board (CAB) who oversaw all aspects of this research—including design, data collection, and data analysis—and provided feedback on this manuscript. Those CAB members, besides co-author Amber Christensen Fullmer, are Brian Walker, Cheryl Turner, Edna Standifer, Eva Gregg, Scott Larionoff, and Sheila Randazzo.

This research was supported by the National Institutes of Health under Award Number U54GM115371.

Classroom Discussion Questions
Classroom Discussion Questions

1. What were some of the actions the researchers took to build trusting relationships with stakeholders? What steps could you take to build trusting research relationships?
2. How does the transformational grounded theory method fit within a decolonizing, Indigenous framework?
3. Why was it important for the researchers to engage other advisors (Elders) above and beyond their initial CAB? In what other instances might you want to do this?
4. What are some unique challenges you may face as a researcher who is considered an “outsider”? How might you address them?
5. What steps did the researchers take to ensure that the community would benefit from the research? What steps would you take in your own research?
6. Why is it important to think about sustainability early in a research project?

Further Reading


**Chilisa, B.** (2011). *Indigenous research methodologies*. SAGE.


Web Resources

- American Indian/Alaska Native Clinical Translational Research Program: [https://www.montana.edu/aiian/](https://www.montana.edu/aiian/)
- Center for Alaska Native Health Research: [http://canhr.uaf.edu/](http://canhr.uaf.edu/)
- Community Psychology: Social Justice through Collaborative Research and Action:
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