

Research Methodologies

Being challenged and transformed by Community-Based Participatory Research

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Purpose: To share my experience as a dietitian and PhD graduate who was transformed by Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) with women facing difficult life circumstances (e.g., low income, recent immigration to Canada, social and geographical isolation).

Summary of content: I started my PhD research under the ENRICH Research Program and its overall goal of promoting healthy weights through healthy eating in pregnancy and postpartum. However, by building meaningful relationships with women, as well as healthcare and service providers in community settings, I realized that weight was not going to be the focus of my research because women facing difficult life circumstances clearly prioritized other aspects of their lives and health. As such, I explored women's perceptions and experiences of health during pregnancy and postpartum.

Systematic approach used: By following the principles of CBPR, I became aware of women's knowledge and perceptions about health, including nutrition, and how they did not always translate into healthy behaviours due to women's complex life circumstances. Indeed, women's realities shaped their experiences during pregnancy and postpartum. Early in my research, I felt unsure about advocating for maternal nutrition when housing, income, and adequate access to prenatal care were much bigger issues for my participants. However, I also learned how powerful community food programs could be in facilitating social and health supports.

Conclusions: CBPR can deeply transform researchers who embrace multiple ways of knowing and reflexivity. CBPR enabled me to view and frame food as a gateway for social change and women's advocacy.

Recommendations: CBPR aligns with many tenants of critical dietetics, and is a viable and desirable approach for enhancing advocacy among dietitians and communities.

Significance: By developing trusting and respectful relationships in CBPR, where various ways of knowing are valued, dietetic researchers and professionals can identify community strengths and knowledge to be built upon and highlighted.

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