

9-1-2008

# Unraveling Ethics: Reflections from a Community-based Participatory Research Project with Youth

Christine A. Walsh

*University of Calgary*, [cwalsh@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cwalsh@ucalgary.ca)

Jennifer Hewson

*University of Calgary*

Michael Shier

*University of Calgary*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>

 Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

---

## Recommended APA Citation

Walsh, C. A., Hewson, J., & Shier, M. (2008). Unraveling Ethics: Reflections from a Community-based Participatory Research Project with Youth. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 379-393. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol13/iss3/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---

A promotional banner for Nova Southeastern University's Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate. The banner has a dark blue background on the left with the NSU logo (a sunburst over the letters 'NSU' and 'NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY' below it) and the text 'Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate', 'Indulge in Culture', and 'Exclusively Online • 18 Credits'. A white button with the text 'LEARN MORE' is positioned below the text. On the right side of the banner, there is a photograph of six people sitting on a stone ledge in front of a building with 'NOVA SOUTHEASTERN' visible on the wall.

**Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate**  
*Indulge in Culture*  
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits

**LEARN MORE**

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

## Unraveling Ethics: Reflections from a Community-based Participatory Research Project with Youth

### Abstract

There is limited literature describing the ethical dilemmas that arise when conducting community-based participatory research. The following provides a case example of ethical dilemmas that developed during a multi-method community-based participatory action research project with youth in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Several ethical dilemmas emerged during the course of the study related to the community in which the research was being undertaken, the recruitment of participants, and the overall research process. As important are possible harms that may arise when the researcher is no longer involved. These ethical dilemmas and potential solutions are discussed in relation to social work research and community-based practice to raise awareness about the essential role of community in informing ethical research practices

### Keywords

Ethical Dilemmas, Participatory Action Research, and Youth Engagement

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the funder, the Alberta Real Estate Foundation. They would also like to thank Amanda Sears and Natasha Kuzmak who worked as research assistants on the project; Anna Brassard for her work on the study conceptualization; and Lindsey Thurston, Linda Keenan, Kim Morrison, and Alison Karim-McSwiney our community partners. Finally, they would like to thank the youth participants and their families who gave the project vision and voice.

## **Unraveling Ethics: Reflections from a Community-based Participatory Research Project with Youth**

**Christine A. Walsh, Jennifer Hewson, Michael Shier,  
and Edwin Morales**

University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

---

*There is limited literature describing the ethical dilemmas that arise when conducting community-based participatory research. The following provides a case example of ethical dilemmas that developed during a multi-method community-based participatory action research project with youth in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. Several ethical dilemmas emerged during the course of the study related to the community in which the research was being undertaken, the recruitment of participants, and the overall research process. As important are possible harms that may arise when the researcher is no longer involved. These ethical dilemmas and potential solutions are discussed in relation to social work research and community-based practice to raise awareness about the essential role of community in informing ethical research practices. Key Words: Ethical Dilemmas, Participatory Action Research, and Youth Engagement*

---

The ethical issues in community-based participatory research or community development work have not been explored or reported substantially within social work literature. One reason for this could be the absence of a clear definition of community-based participatory research in mainstream social science research methodology textbooks. Community-based research is "a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change" (Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donahue, 2003, p. 3). It could include a geographic community or a target population. Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a similar approach in that it "enlists research respondents as co-researchers who participate in defining the research questions, establishing methodology, and interpreting and applying the results" (Rodgers-Farmer & Tripido, 2001, p. 446) with the purpose of some form of social action on behalf of the target population/community. While community-based research and PAR are similar, they differ, primarily, on the role of the research participants in the research design. For the purposes here this idea of community-based participatory research follows from the definition of community-based research but includes the facilitation of a process of participant led social change.

Many social science books throughout the last three decades focus on the basic ethical questions of confidentiality and anonymity, and respecting and protecting the interests of those participating in the research (Bower & de Gasparis, 1978; Israel & Hay, 2006). Some research has explored the importance of considering the impact of research on communities and the subsequent ethical questions that arise as a result (e.g., Weijer, Goldsand, & Emanuel, 1999). Much of the focus of the prior research on ethical issues

and communities pertains directly to research conducted in Aboriginal communities. Weijer et al. articulate guidelines to apply to non-Aboriginal communities that relate specifically to the role of the community as a partner in the research beyond informed consent. This work, though, is primarily exploratory and provides little insight relating specifically to ethical dilemmas that require consideration to minimize community harm.

Further examples demonstrate that specific population groups require different ethical considerations when conducting research. For example, Martin and Meezan (2003) identify the need to take further exploratory measures to protect participants from harm and to ensure findings are relevant to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgendered population groups. Similarly, Williams (2005) has articulated the significance of incorporating the historical and present processes generating negative outcomes for racial and ethnic minority research participants in the ethical framework of a research project, and Walsh and MacMillan (2006) developed recommendations for ethical research practices with maltreated youth. Furthermore, conducting research alongside students has resulted in further considerations for ethical review boards. In particular some literature discusses the implications of power and knowledge in such collaborative projects (Olitsky & Weathers, 2005). These concerns are significant and inform work with target groups, but do not address the implications on community, when community is addressed in geographical terms.

Furthermore, within this literature limitations exist relating specifically to participatory research projects (Khanlou & Peter, 2005). Elkeland (2006) describes ethical dilemmas that arise in participatory research projects as “othering-effects,” suggesting that the primary ethical dilemma that arises is a result of defining participants as “research subjects”. This is a significant finding but not entirely encompassing all of the various types of ethical dilemmas that may arise when conducting participatory research. As a corrective, the following paper identifies the ethical dilemmas that developed, essentially requiring consideration during the data collection and social action project implementation phases, in the undertaking of a community-based participatory research project in the Greater Forest Lawn community in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

The Greater Forest Lawn community has been characterized as a highly vulnerable community fraught with infrastructure problems, deflated property values, and a host of social issues pertaining to seniors, youth, unemployment, poverty and crime. Furthermore, over the past 50 years a remarkable diversification of the Greater Forest Lawn’s population in terms of ethnoracial plurality has occurred. This concentration of diversity has contributed to an extremely vibrant mercantile and cultural community along the area’s “main street”. In spite of these “two faces,” or perhaps as a result of them, renewed interest and optimism has been directed to this complex community. Comprehensive plans for revitalization have been developed through award-winning, University-facilitated, participatory planning and design exercises, with attention being paid to urban typologies and models that challenge the conventional suburban approach currently favored by existing bylaws. In particular, recognition has been given to the value of addressing the social determinants of the built environment and applying a socio-spatial approach to redevelopment (Bentley, Alcock, McGlynn, Murrain, & Smith, 1985; Lynch, 1981; Trancik, 1986), to more effectively enhance the international character of Greater Forest Lawn for residents and visitors alike.

Following this multi-disciplinary theoretical framework, and informed by various technical reports and key-informant interview data describing the social context within this particular community, the research team developed a mixed-method participatory research project in collaboration with research participants and one social service organization delivering services in this particular community. The purpose of the *Images for Action: Youth Engagement in Greater Forest Lawn* study was to promote community development through improved leadership capacity of youth residing within the community. Involving youth in community revitalization projects is a method that is being used successfully across Canada and the United States to develop a range of capacities (e.g., leadership, interpersonal, project management skills) and provide youth with a voice and a process to make changes in their communities (Calver, Zeldin, & Weisenbach, 2002; Pittman, Diversi, & Ferber, 2002; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2003; Zeldin, 2004a, 2004b). The research was conducted in 2006-2007 as a collaborative partnership between The Boys and Girls Club of Calgary community-based social service organization whose mission is to provide a “safe, supportive place where children and youth can experience new opportunities, overcome barriers, build positive relationships and develop confidence and skills for life” (¶ 1) and a research team from the Faculties of Social Work and Environmental Design whose objective was to find effective solutions for the social dimensions of the built environment.

The multi-stage and multiple focus of the research design provides a unique case to examine the ethical dilemmas that may arise in conducting community-based participatory research. As will be highlighted, the research methodologies consisted of traditional social science methodologies of quantitative and qualitative data collection combined with a participatory action research component. The following provides an overview of the methodologies utilized to carry out this research project. The focus of this paper is to present an overview of the ethical procedures implemented prior to beginning the research, those ethical dilemmas that developed during the execution of this research project, and the potential for harm after the research has been completed. In conclusion, we describe the implications of identifying these ethical dilemmas for social work research and, in particular, the significance of these discussions in relation to community development work. Possible solutions are also offered which signify the importance of further linking research with practice.

## Methods

Participants were recruited through a convenience sampling of those participating in an evening program offered by one social service organization within the Greater Forest Lawn community. A total of 11 youths, ranging in age from 13 to 17 years, participated in the project. Two of the participants were female; six of the participants lived within the Greater Forest Lawn area and the remainder lived in adjacent communities that were part of the catchment area for the social service organization. All participants were Caucasian except for one who described himself as Caucasian/Cree.

Given the focus on community development/revitalization, the research team designed a curriculum incorporating social and environmental design issues which the project facilitators used to guide the research program. One Environmental Design student and one Social Work student collaborated with the youth and program facilitators

to develop an implementation plan which involved determining a timeline, allocating resources, obtaining supplies, determining additional human resources required and assigning tasks. Following the recommendations of Calvert, Zeldin, and Weisenbach (2002), youth were involved in as many of the stages of the process as time would permit. Three phases where the youth had the greatest involvement were: (a) identification of enhancement project, (b) implementation of project, and (c) presentation of the project outcomes to community members and stakeholders.

The “Photovoice” concept was first developed by Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris as a “methodology to reach, inform, and organize community members, enabling them to prioritize their concerns and discuss problems and solutions” (Wang, 2005, ¶). Photovoice is a process in which community members are given photographic cameras to identify, highlight and encourage possible change within their communities (Wang & Burris, 1997). It is a visual way to give voice to the concerns of the community. It has been used successfully in different settings with youth in a community needs assessment project (e.g., Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004), adults and youth to document community assets and concerns (e.g., Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004), and specific ethnic populations such as Latino youth (e.g., Strengh, Rhodes, Ayala, Eng, Arceo, & Phipps, 2004).

According to Wang and Redwood-Jones (2001) Photovoice has three main goals, “(1) to enable people to record and reflect their community’s strengths and concerns; (2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through large and small group discussions of photographs; and (3) to reach policy-makers” (p. 560). The social action component of Photovoice with youth is beginning to emerge (Wilson, et al., 2007). As Mitchell, Molestane, Smart, Buthelezi, and De Lange, (2005) suggest, “[w]hile there are many projects that use photography as a way to give voice to participants, we think that giving children this tool has opened up an important space for us to see the possibilities for taking action” (p. 7). Molloy (2007) further argues that social justice workers are obligated to use tools such as Photovoice as a tool that “affords diverse populations of oppressed individuals the opportunity to take social action by raising awareness in the community and with policy-makers” (p. 39).

Photovoice was chosen as a way to identify and share community development issues that were meaningful to research participants and as an innovative way to engage in social action through sharing the project to the community. At the outset, the research team acknowledged that while the researchers considered the entire process to be capacity building/enhancing for the youth participants and the community, there may be some risk involved in taking pictures of community development/enhancement areas in a particular community. For example, a primary concern related to the potential risk of harm if a participant witnessed or photographed illegal activity. To address these concerns, a training session led by the research team and an experienced facilitator of Photovoice was held to reduce the likelihood that participants would be subjected to harm and to identify ethical considerations when photographing people and the community (e.g., obtaining consent, when necessary, privacy, dignity, respect).

Youth were provided with disposable cameras to take pictures of the positive (community strengths) and negative (areas for change) attributes of the social-built environments in their community. The youth shared their photos with the rest of the group and each participant selected a photo that showed an area for change and one that

depicted community strength. Youth were asked to reflect on their selected photos, and then were interviewed to create a reflective piece to accompany their selected images. The research students transcribed the narratives of the participants and then presented them back to the youth for verification and modifications if required. Once the participants were satisfied with what was written, they signed their name below the paragraph to show they approved it.

The action component of the project consisted of two primary activities. First, the youth worked as a group to identify a community development project that would address concerns they had about their social-spatial environment. The youth collectively identified graffiti and littering as the primary issue and suggested painting garbage cans with graffiti art to promote awareness about littering in Greater Forest Lawn. Six out of the 11 youth attended this event and each of them decorated a garbage can with assistance from a community development artist and art students at the University of Calgary. The second action activity facilitated the presentation of their artwork, photographs and reflections, and engagement process at an images exhibit in the community. For this final stage of the research design the ethical considerations consisted of informed consent (as with other stages of data collection identified above) and, in particular, informing participants that their participation would be considered public, as confidentiality and anonymity could not be provided given the nature of the task of presenting and the level of community involvement. Illustrations of the Images for Action project are found in the photobook <http://share.shutterfly.com/action/project/0QbsXDhq5bMWFC/landing>. Throughout the entire process participants were fully aware of their right to withdraw from the research.

Researchers were interested in determining the nature of change experienced by youth involved in the community development project. Data collection included pre and post test instruments, comprised of demographic questions and questionnaires assessing participants' sense of community, *Sense of Community Index (SCI)* (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986, as cited in Chipeur & Pretty, 1999) and neighbourhood disadvantage, *Neighborhood Environment Scale* (Elliott, Huizinga, & Menard, 1989, as cited in Crum, Lillie-Blanton, & Anthony, 1996). Standard ethical consideration for the administration of the two measures were made prior to conducting the research and consisted of obtaining consent from parents and assent from the youth to participate in the project, maintaining anonymity of research participants in regards to the responses given, and the duration of time in which the data would be stored after the completion of the research project.

The use of reflective journaling by youth was encouraged throughout the project and qualitative interviews were conducted upon completion of the participatory research project. The field guide sought to capture the nature of the experience for the youth. Questions included, "how do you think being involved with the project has affected you; how did being involved in the project make you feel about your community; and do you think this project has had an effect on your community?" We were aware that "providing an experience alone does not create "experiential learning". "The learning comes from the thoughts and ideas created as a result of the experience" (Boyd, 2001, p. 2). Thus we were interested in determining the nature of the experience and the transformation that occurred for youth as part of the process. Also, we felt that examining the impact of this project on youth would be crucial to dissemination and developing a sustainability plan

for future projects. Ethical considerations in relation to the qualitative measures were associated with the difficulty of engaging participants and their parents. Research assistants who had not been involved previously with the youth recruited the participants and were trained to interview them in an attempt to ensure authenticity of response. The low rates of participation however, resulted in challenges in presenting the findings in ways that protected the anonymity of the respondents. These ethical considerations are often typical within qualitative research with youth and have been the subject of some consideration in the literature (e.g., Ensign, 2003; Kirk, 2007; Nelson, & Quintana, 2005). The following section describes some of the unique ethical dilemmas in connection with community-building research and social action projects.

## **Discussion**

Ethical issues unique to participatory action methodologies must be anticipated and identified and solutions must be developed prior to engaging in research in the community. This however, is not always the case. The following section describes some of the ethical dilemmas that emerged during the data collection and action stages of the research program related to the community, participant selection, and the research process.

### **Community Level Considerations**

Throughout the process of data collection several ethical issues developed. Initially concern was raised related to the selection of community. For instance, the community targeted to carry out this project was selected for several reasons, all primarily based on a subjective understanding of the community by the funder, a provincial real estate foundation. Prior research has shown that places become stigmatized as a result of people's perceptions of their locations and, subsequently, the people to which they offer residence (Takahashi, 1998). Lefebvre (2000) has similarly characterized space in such a manner that places emphasis on the subjective impressions held by people, because these impressions control what any given space represents. Rather than a particular space being perceived as a place for poor people, the space needs to be redefined to erase the stigmatization that is attached. When attention is not being given to the perceptions of individuals, limitations are placed on improving ways in which people engage with their environments (Landry, 2001; Worpole, 2000).

This has been exemplified in the development of social housing projects within the urban landscape. Very little attention is directed towards the perceptions of people in regards to the design and location factors for these buildings (Gurney, 1999). Research literature has highlighted how the many problems that develop in regards to social housing projects are directly linked to how these areas of residence are perceived by the people in the community and elsewhere (Dean & Hastings, 2000; Hastings, 2000). Participating in this project has done little to address the negative perceptions of this particular community. The ethical consideration then becomes whether the research team has increased the level of stigmatization attached to this particular community by targeting the community for the research project, or if the risk of identifying this community as "in need" was outweighed by the possible positive outcomes experienced



by the participants and the wider community. One of the youth participants questioned the intention of conducting this research in their community by drawing attention to the fact that violence and crime (two of the considerations for selecting this community, among other social indicators) are present in all communities.

The initial focus of the research project was also a source of ethical consideration as the program of research was unfolding. The intention at the beginning of the project was to focus primarily on a problem or area for change in the youth's community and facilitate a youth engagement project that addressed this concern. When this idea was presented to the youth, one of the youth questioned the agenda of his neighbourhood needing to be fixed and identified that while commonly held perceptions of the community were negative, other communities had similar problems and their community shouldn't be singled out. The youth expressed the importance of showing both areas for change and strengths of the community to counter the stereotype. This concern about further stigmatization shifted the focus of the project resulting in the youth taking pictures of what they considered to be the positive and negative aspects of their neighbourhood and reflecting on both dimensions. While the project the youth engaged in focused on an area for change, the images exhibit they presented to the community represented a balanced view of their neighbourhood. Recent literature similarly suggests the importance of identifying community risk when conducting research that is geographically isolated in a specific community (Kaufman & Ramaroa, 2005). This particular lesson learned by conducting this research demonstrates the significant implications for the community when perceptions of stigmatization are a leading construct determining the focus of the research program. Researchers must also attend to the ethical implications arising from conducting community-based research driven by funder expectations rather than guided by the expressed needs and consent of the community.

Related to this idea of facilitating a continued process of stigmatization and community consent is that this particular research project received a substantial amount of media attention. The media department at the University of Calgary was instrumental in promoting the project beyond Greater Forest Lawn. A press release entitled, *Glamorous Garbage: Teens in Greater Forest Lawn take initiative to paint garbage cans and beautify their community*, resulted in extensive media exposure. The youth were interviewed by a local television station, a radio station, two major local newspapers, and were featured on a morning television news program. These experiences, as reported by the youth participants, allowed their voices to be heard and also made them feel valued for the work they had completed. This activity was viewed by many of the research participants as a positive component of the activities that they were engaged in throughout the research program. Beyond these positive implications, though, the attention given by the media was spun in a manner that described "at-risk" youth from an "impoverished" community participating in something positive, essentially further stigmatizing, or utilizing community stereotypes to sell papers or get ratings. With the overall intention of the project premised on promoting/facilitating/creating change, the role of media in this process is questionable. On one hand the media attention facilitated participants in expressing their concerns however; the media was involved for a mere moment of the research project and offered no long-term consistent mechanism for change.

One final point warrants emphasis, which segues into the next section. Related to the attention given by the media, the community has been defined as disadvantaged and the youth have been labeled “at-risk” to place emphasis on the need to invest in research funding in this area. All the while the youth, their families, and the community may reject the classification and actually be harmed rather than empowered by it.

### **Participant Level Considerations**

Beyond the ethical dilemmas that emerged at the community level several ethical considerations emerged with the participant group. For instance, the initial intention of the research program was to engage and involve youth that could be considered to be at risk. The use of the term “at risk” has three primary ethical dilemmas. The first is consideration of the extent of the negative implications of labeling these participants as at-risk. The second relates the problem with identifying specific populations of at-risk youth in general. Increasingly youth are engaged in high risk behaviours during adolescence which means that in some ways, essentially, everyone in their adolescent years can be considered to be at risk (Gross & Capuzzi, 2006). The third consideration is the extent to which the participants were actually at-risk. There were no measures to identify whether a participant could be considered to be at-risk (whether this is based on socio-economic status or other variables that may impede the development of opportunities for youth). For example, if youth from economically disadvantaged families had employment obligations after school or had to take care of younger siblings because families could not afford childcare, they would have been excluded from participating in this research since it was offered in the evenings. This suggested overall, that the research may not have targeted youth who may have benefited the most from participating. It may also be that youth participants were defined as at risk because of the social-economic disadvantage of their community, while they themselves may not have been. Indeed even the project facilitator developed an awareness that he may have been labeled as an at risk youth as he shared many of the risk factors with other community youth while he was growing up in Greater Forest Lawn.

Related to this notion of at-risk youth, the issue of diversity created ethical considerations. While youth in Greater Forest Lawn are very ethnically diverse (Downie, 2004) and we had hoped to work with youth from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, participants who were recruited were not representative of this ethnic diversity. We made an effort to engage as many ethnically diverse participants from local schools and broader sections of the community but those efforts were largely unsuccessful. In particular, we had no way to identify if we were reaching those who do not typically attend these programs because they might face “racism, discrimination, fear of other participants, travel safety, language barriers and [other] cultural reasons” (Downie, p. 25).

A further challenge we faced was trying to avoid running a program “that ‘cream[ed]’ or select[ed] the youth most likely to perform” (Starr, 2003, p. 930). This was sometimes difficult to avoid since we were unable to recruit youth representing greater diversity and of the youth participants often the same youth volunteered for certain tasks. It became an ethical dilemma during the media related activities in two respects. The first is that some participants were uncomfortable speaking to the media, so their voices were essentially not given equal opportunity. For the collaborative purposes

of the research it would have been useful to hold meetings amongst the group to create a collectively determined message that would be passed on to the media, rather than a presentation to the wider community that consisted primarily of the insight of two participants. The second was the constraints to the “voice” of one participant who was allowed to participate in all aspects of the project but was not allowed to be photographed or engage with the media for fear that he would be stigmatized.

A final ethical consideration relating to the participant group is addressing the expectations of research participants in relation to their perceived outcome measures. This ethical question emerged and became apparent at the end of the project during the culminating event when one participant became overwhelmed with the overflow of garbage from the designed can. This youth remarked that even though they had put in so much effort, the larger community did not seem to care about the issue of littering. At that point it became important for the research team to point out that community change can be a long process but that all efforts can act as incremental steps towards change in the long term.

Researchers and some, but not all, community members might be aware that community change can be a slow process and happens over time. Participants, though, may be engaging in this type of project for the first time and hence may expect more immediate results than can realistically be achieved. Therefore even though this issue of creating realistic expectations may not be directly addressed on an ethics application it must be highlighted that it cannot be assumed that participants’ expectations will be consistent with what is likely achievable by community projects.

### **Research Process Considerations**

Amidst these community level and individual level ethical considerations several dilemmas arose relating to the overall process of the research program and the intended and actual outcomes. For example, it is recognized that “[y]oung people’s participation in addressing community problems is not only possible and useful, but fruitful” (Pittman et al., 2003, p. 7) since “every young person, like every adult, has unique abilities and experience that can expand the capacities and outcomes of [community change] efforts” (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001, p. 11). After analyzing the post-test scores, though, it was found that three respondents (of four correctly completed post-tests) had a higher perceived level of neighbourhood disadvantage than they had at pre-test. This raises the question of whether this research made the participants more aware of disadvantages or problems in their community. If this was the case, did the project provide enough of an ‘action’ component to counter the awareness of negative issues within the community? Furthermore, since only six of the 11 participants participated in the community action event of painting the garbage cans, this brings into question the impact the research had on the other five participants who were not exposed to this action process or the creation of solutions to the potentially newly revealed problems. If the research provided a heightened sense of neighbourhood disadvantage then it likely resulted in more risk to the individual by undertaking this process than that which was originally apparent prior to commencing the project.

The social action related events were primarily organized by the coordinators of the research (e.g., the university team and the social service organization partner). This

point and the fact that involvement in this project resulted in an increased awareness of the negative factors that have been associated with the participants' neighbourhood requires a deeper reflection on the role of the researcher in facilitating the social action process and the level of involvement that should be given to those members of the community. We are essentially asking the question of possible harm after the research has reached the point in which the researcher is no longer involved. This is a difficult ethical question to answer because while researchers can move on to work on other projects, participants are left to face the same issues. This is of particular concern if skill development and capacity building of the community were not identified as a fundamental goal from the outset. The issue then is whether it is ethical to leave participants with a perception that community projects are interesting but short lived or to provide communities with the types of knowledge to continue to engage in their own processes that are relevant and meaningful. Does the researcher have an ethical obligation to maintain contact with the process after the research has ended? And, if so, in what ways? This project has not answered these questions although the knowledge obtained in this project is being utilized in a couple of projects that are community driven with the investigators as collaborators.

Two final ethical considerations require identification. The first is the use of disposable cameras for youth to document positive and negative images they find in their community surroundings. Giving disposable cameras suggests a short-lived impact, and essentially demonstrates that they are not being provided with real tools or opportunities to achieve long term, sustainable goals by participating in this project. This then leads into ethical discussions of what the participants are to do after the research program ends, the researchers leave, and they do not have the equipment to further develop the skills that they had been developing over the prior three months. This point, though, is related to the final ethical dilemma. The original budget to conduct this research included money to provide honorariums for research participants. This, of course, was related to the fact that the targeted youth were those who could be considered of a lower socio-economic status. The social service organization collaborating with the university research team requested that honorariums not be offered throughout the project as it sends a message that individuals should be paid to participate in other capacity building activities and the organization could not sustain this once the project was completed. As a result, even providing real cameras could be considered an incentive to participate beyond the intended personal development impacts on participants. This also results in a dilemma for researchers who advance that the skills, knowledge and expertise of youth or other members of the community should be recognized in tangible ways.

### **Conclusion**

The discussion of this community-based participatory research project has demonstrated how several additional ethical issues developed beyond those anticipated prior to the onset and thus not specifically included in the protocol submitted to the University's ethics review board. This is a crucial point as it brings attention to the complexity of conducting community-based participatory research projects in ethical ways and raises awareness to those concerns that may arise. As social work practitioners working in the field of community development we are involved in programs and

projects with the overall intention of generating positive outcomes for those involved. Often we work in communities that are marginalized and social excluded and thus potential negative consequences arising from ethical dilemmas are potentially associated with even greater harm. In many instances where these projects are being conducted by community-based organizations these projects do not have that initial formal ethical review and do not require formal ethical revisions during the research process. The discussion presented here was intended as an initial exploratory informing process. It enlightens research practice with marginalized groups or stigmatized communities and also informs community-based social work practice. It is evident that when working at the community level ethical issues develop. McAuliffe and Coleman (1999) suggest that ethical dilemmas in fieldwork develop rather quickly and require an immediate response to address or rectify a particular situation. To what extent, though, are these issues informing social work practice at the community level? Or, alternatively, are there methods of addressing these ethical issues in the community development process that can inform community-based research? From the experience of conducting this research, it would seem that the ethical lens would need to transcend beyond the relationship between the researcher and the participant and provide assessments of community level risks and greater clarification of the intended impacts and outcome measures of community work on participants.

Many of the dilemmas that have been raised here were addressed throughout the research process on an ongoing basis between the researcher and the youth participants involved. The issue of parental consent is one such example. One parent stipulated that her son's participation in the project needed be met under the condition that his image would not be featured in anyway as she feared potential stigmatization related to his participation in this project. In order to satisfy this request the research team ensured that the youth's image was edited from all group photographs as well the media was advised that this specific individual was not to be featured as part of the project. This condition proved difficult at times due to the level of public and media attention the project received and the risk of making the youth feel excluded from certain group activities such as being interviewed by the media or featured in the photobook.

In the edited collection of essays by Leadbeater et al. (2006) on the subject of ethical issues when working with youth, it is suggested that ongoing collaboration with less rigidity needs to occur between the research team and the ethics review boards of academic institutions throughout the research process. This would offer a piecemeal solution as it would not necessarily address all the ethical issues that could develop throughout engagement in such a collaborative community-based process of research and action. Furthermore, it would seem that it offers only a solution to research that is affiliated with an academic institution. For this particular project, greater collaboration at the community level would have helped to address the potential community level stigmatization issues that we identified as creating ethical concerns, essentially requiring the researcher to move further away from the agenda of the university and the funding organization. Ultimately, it would seem the most appropriate solution would include a mix of approaches between university affiliated research boards and those that could be considered community stakeholders. Evolutionary processes at the university research ethics board level are necessary, but we must acknowledge the significant connection between community-based participatory research and communities, and the informing

capacity of community development work in issues related to ethics of individuals in communities, and communities in their entirety, essentially making that highly regarded, but minimally maintained, connection between research and practice.

### References

- Bentley, I., Alcock, A., McGlynn, S., Murrain, P., & Smith, G. (1985). *Responsive environments: A manual for designers*. London: The Architectural Press.
- Bower, R. T., & de Gasparis, P. (1978). *Ethics in social research: Protecting the interests of human subjects*. New York: Praeger Publishing.
- Boyd, B. L. (2001). Bringing leadership experiences to inner-city youth. *Journal of Extension, 39*(4), 1-6
- Calgary Boys and Girls Club of Calgary. (2006). Retrieved from [http://www.calgaryboysandgirlsclub.ca/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=16](http://www.calgaryboysandgirlsclub.ca/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=3&Itemid=16)
- Calvert, M., Zeldin, S., & Weisenbach, A. (2002). *Youth involvement for community, organizational and youth development: Directions for research, evaluation, and practice*. University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Community and Youth Development /Tides Center, Madison, Wisconsin.
- Chipeur, H. M., & Pretty, G. H. M. (1999). A review of the sense of community index: Current uses, factor structure, reliability, and further development. *Journal of Community Psychology, 27*(6), 643-658.
- Crum, R. M., Lillie-Blanton, M., & Anthony, J. C. (1996). Neighborhood environment and opportunity to use cocaine and other drugs in late childhood and early adolescence. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 43*, 155-161.
- Dean, J., & Hastings, A. (2000). *Challenging images: Housing estates, stigma, and regeneration*. New York: Policy Press.
- Downie, R. (2004). *East Calgary youth assessment an assessment of the needs and preferences of youth in East Calgary*. Report prepared for the City of Calgary Community and Neighbourhood Services, East Area Office., 1-56.
- Elkeland, O. (2006). Condescending ethics and action research. *Action Research, 4*(1), 37-47.
- Ensign, J. (2003). Ethical issues in qualitative health research with homeless youths. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 43*(1), 43-50.
- Gross, D. R., & Capuzzi, D. (2006). Defining youth at risk. In D. Cappuzzi & D. R. Gross (Eds.), *Youth at risk: A prevention resource for counselors, teachers, and parents* (4th ed., pp. 3-19). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Gurney, C. (1999). Lowering the drawbridge: A case study of analogy and metaphor in the social construction of home ownership. *Urban Studies, 36*(1), 1705-1722.
- Hastings, A. (2000). Discourse analysis: What does it offer housing studies? *Housing Theory and Society, 17*(3), 131-139.
- Israel, M., & Hay, L. (2006). *Research ethics for social scientists*. London: Sage
- Kaufman, C., & Ramarao, S. (2005). Community confidentiality, consent, and the individual research process: Implications for demographic research. *Population Research and Policy Review, 24*(2), 149-173.

- Khanlou, N., & Peter, E. (2005). Participatory action research: Considerations for ethical review. *Social Science and Medicine*, 60(10), 2333-2340.
- Kirk, S. (2007). Methodological and ethical issues in conducting qualitative research with children and young people: A literature review. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 44(7), 1250-1260.
- Landry, C. (2001). The creative city: Harnessing people's imagination. *Streetwise*, 42(2), 2-7.
- Leadbeater, B., Banister, E., Benoit, C., Jansson, M., Marshall, A., & Riecken, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Ethical issues in community-based research with children and youth*. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (2000). *The production of space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Lynch, K. (1981). *A theory of good city form*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Martin, J. I., & Meezan, W. (2003). Applying ethical standards to research and evaluations involving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 15(1/2), 181-201.
- Mcauliffe, D., & Coleman, A. (1999). "Damned if we do and damned if we don't:" Exposing ethical tensions in field research. *Australian Social Work*, 52(4), 25-31.
- Mitchell, C., Molestane, R., Smart, J., Buthelezi, T., & De Lange, N. (2005). *Taking pictures/taking action! Visual methodologies in working with young people*. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from [http://www.ivmproject.ca/images/photo\\_voice/CHILDRENFIRSTARTICLE.pdf](http://www.ivmproject.ca/images/photo_voice/CHILDRENFIRSTARTICLE.pdf)
- Mohamed, I. A., & Wheeler, W. (2001). *Broadening the bounds of youth development: Youth as engaged citizens*. New York: The Ford Foundation and Chevy Chase, MD: The Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development.
- Molloy, J. K. (2007). Photovoice as a tool for social justice workers. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 18(2), 39-55.
- Nelson, M. L., & Quintana, S. M. (2005). Qualitative clinical research with children and adolescents. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 34(2), 344-356.
- Olitsky, S., & Weathers, J. (2005). Working with students as researchers: Ethical issues of a participatory process. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(1), 1-20.
- Pittman, K., Diversi, M., & Ferber, T. (2002). Social policy supports for adolescence in the 21st century: Framing question. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 12(1), 149-158.
- Pittman, K., Irby, M., Tolman, J., Yohalem, N., & Ferber, T. (2003). *Preventing problems, promoting development, encouraging engagement: Competing priorities or inseparable goals*. The Forum for Youth Investment. Washington, DC: The Forum for Youth Investment, Impact Strategies, Inc. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from <http://forumforyouthinvestment.net/files/Preventing%20Problems,%20Promoting%20Development,%20Encouraging%20Engagement.pdf>
- Rodgers-Farmer, A. Y., & Potocky-Tripodi, M. (2001). Gender, ethnicity, and race matters. In B. Thyer (Ed.), *The handbook of social work research methods* (pp. 445-454). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Starr, A. (2003). "It's got to be us:" Urban youthworkers. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 25(11), 911-933.

- Strack, R. W., Magill, C., & McDonagh, K. (2004). Engaging youth through Photovoice. *Health Promotion Practice, 5*(1), 49-58.
- Strand, K., Marullo, S., Cutforth, N., Stoecker, R., & Donahue, P. (2003). *Community-Based research and higher education: Principles and practices*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Streng, J. M., Rhodes, S. D., Ayala, G. X., Eng, E., Arceo, R., & Phipps, S. (2004). Realidad Latina: Latino adolescents, their school, and a university use photovoice to examine and address the influence of immigration. *Journal of Interprofessional Care, 18*(4), 403-414.
- Takahashi, L. (1998). *Homelessness, aids, and stigmatization: The NIMBY syndrome in the United States at the end of the twentieth century*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Trancik, R. (1986). *Finding lost space: Theories of urban design*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Walsh, C. A., & MacMillan, H. L. (2006). The ethics of conducting research in the field of child maltreatment: Problems and prospects. In B. Leadbeater, E. Banister, C. Benoit, M. Jansson, A. Marshall, & T. Riecken (Eds.), *Ethical issues in community-based research with children and youth*, (pp. 190-206). Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Wang, C. (2005). *Photovoice background*. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from <http://www.photovoice.com/background/index.htm>
- Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health Education & Behavior, 24*(3), 369-387.
- Wang, C. C., Morrel-Samuels, S., Hutchinson, P. M., Bell, L., & Prestronk, R. M. (2004). Flint Photovoice: Community building among youths, adults, and policymakers. *American Journal of Public Health, 94*(6), 911-913.
- Wang, C., & Redwood-Jones, Y. (2001). Photovoice ethics: Perspectives from Flint Photovoice. *Health Education and Behavior, 28*, 560-572.
- Weijer, C., Goldsand, G., & Emanuel, E. J. (1999). Protecting communities in research: Current guidelines and limits of extrapolation. *Nature Genetics, 23*(5), 275-280.
- Williams, C. C. (2005). Ethical considerations in mental health research with racial and ethnic minority communities. *Community Mental Health Journal, 41*(5), 509-520.
- Wilson, N., Dasho, S., Martin, A. C., Wallerstein, N., Wang, C. C., & Minkler, M. (2007). Engaging young adolescents in social action through Photovoice: The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) project. *Journal of Early Adolescence, 27*(2), 241-261.
- Worpole, K. (2000). *Here comes the sun: Architecture and public space in twentieth century European culture*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Zeldin, S. (2004a). Youth as agents of adult community development: Mapping the processes and outcomes of youth engaged in organizational governance. *Applied Developmental Science, 8*(20), 75-90.
- Zeldin, S. (2004b). Preventing youth violence through the promotion of community engagement and membership. *Journal of Community Psychology, 32*(5), 623-641.



### **Author Note**

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the funder, the Alberta Real Estate Foundation. They would also like to thank Amanda Sears and Natasha Kuzmak who worked as research assistants on the project; Anna Brassard for her work on the study conceptualization; and Lindsey Thurston, Linda Keenan, Kim Morrison, and Alison Karim-McSwiney our community partners. Finally, they would like to thank the youth participants and their families who gave the project vision and voice.

Correspondences regarding this article should be addressed to Dr. Christine A. Walsh, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive, N.W., Calgary, Alberta, Canada, T2N 1N4; Telephone: (403) 220-2274; Fax: (403) 282-7269; E-mail: [cwalsh@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cwalsh@ucalgary.ca)

Copyright 2008: Christine A. Walsh, Jennifer Hewson, Michael Shier, Edwin Morales, and Nova Southeastern University

### **Article Citation**

Walsh, C. A., Hewson, J., Shier, M., and Morales, E. (2008). Unraveling Ethics: Reflections from a Community-based Participatory Research Project with Youth. *The Qualitative Report*, 13(3), 379-393. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-3/walsh.pdf>

---