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Transformative Potential of Peer-Research: Connecting Theory with Practice

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Abstract

In this article, we report on follow-up research to the “Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion” project, a cross-Canada study which utilized a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to investigate the experiences of single mothers on social assistance in a changing socio-political context. We analyzed the study’s peer-interviewing approach in detail. Findings suggest that PAR theory was applied in the *Lone Mothers* project in ways that cultivated and sustained authentic relationships, contributed to individual and social change, and minimized hierarchy. The effects of this commitment to the epistemology and values of PAR led to a non-linear and organic research process yielding high quality data. We contribute to PAR literature and the utilization of peer-interviewers through scrutinizing this methodology’s potential and challenges. We contend that PAR’s greatest transformative potential might come from building authentic and transformative relationships within research processes that facilitate robust data collection and divergent and innovative analytic perspectives.

Keywords

participatory action research; peer-interview; peer research; lone mothers; social welfare

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Transformative Potential of Peer-Research: Connecting Theory with Practice

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In this article, we report on follow-up research to the “Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion” project, a cross-Canada study which utilized a Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology to investigate the experiences of single mothers on social assistance in a changing socio-political context. We analyzed the study’s peer-interviewing approach in detail. Findings suggest that PAR theory was applied in the *Lone Mothers* project in ways that cultivated and sustained authentic relationships, contributed to individual and social change, and minimized hierarchy. The effects of this commitment to the epistemology and values of PAR led to a non-linear and organic research process yielding high quality data. We contribute to PAR literature and the utilization of peer-interviewers through scrutinizing this methodology’s potential and challenges. We contend that PAR’s greatest transformative potential might come from building authentic and transformative relationships within research processes that facilitate robust data collection and divergent and innovative analytic perspectives.

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Introduction

This article reports on a follow-up study to the “Lone Mothers: Building Social Inclusion” study, which we refer to as the *Lone Mothers* project. In the seven-year longitudinal study, single mothers accessing social assistance in three Canadian provinces – British Columbia, Newfoundland, and Ontario – were interviewed “as they experienced two important and interrelated changes in Canadian society: profound restricting of welfare systems combined with the dramatic growth of a precarious labour market associated with lack of regulation, low pay, nonstandard work, and irregular hours” (Caragata, 2011, p. 1). The *Lone Mothers* research team was comprised of academic researchers and peer-interviewers, as well as representatives from community agencies (Caragata, 2011). Apart from the preliminary work required to secure a research grant¹, peer-interviewers were involved in all stages of that research including developing interview guides, data collection, data analysis, and knowledge mobilization. For a full description of the recruitment of and ongoing support provided to peer-interviewers please refer to Pollack and Caragata (2010). The present article offers a detailed examination of the *Lone Mothers* study’s peer-interviewing approach.

¹ The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), a Canadian federal research funding agency, funded the *Lone Mothers* research project through their Community University Research Alliance granting stream.

We situate our findings and analysis within the broader academic literature about Participatory Action Research (PAR) generally and peer-interviewing specifically, as well as describing the methodology utilized in this follow-up study. From this point forward we refer to the peer-interviewers from the *Lone Mothers* project as Research Assistants (RAs). We do this because this was their official title, as well as to highlight their formal and valued position on the research team. In this section, we describe PAR and peer-research, highlighting the influences of the work of Paulo Friere and feminist theory and the characteristics that distinguish PAR and its influence on the design and processes of the *Lone Mothers* project.

PAR is an approach to social sciences research whose proponents are driven by a desire to create a more equitable and just society. As such, PAR is guided by Freirean² and feminist theories, as well as five overarching characteristics: emergent developmental form, practical issues, knowledge-in-action, participation and democracy, and human flourishing (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR is as concerned with developing knowledge as it is with the practical applicability of this knowledge. As Reason and Bradbury (2006) state, “action research is about working towards practical outcomes, and also about creating new forms of understanding, since action without reflection and understanding is blind, just as theory without action is meaningless” (p. 2). Theoretically, then, the Freirean notion of conscientization influences this theory/action nexus that is characteristic of the PAR approach. Conscientization is an iterative process of critically reflecting on the social, political, and economic reality and taking action to challenge oppressive structures (Freire, 2006, p. 35) to create a just society. This focus on “knowledge-in-action” (Khan et al., 2013; Reason & Bradbury, 2006) has previously been carried out in PAR by raising awareness about the issue at hand (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010) and influencing policy changes (Elliot et al., 2002; Goodson & Phillimore, 2010; Greene et al., 2009). Feminist theory also influenced the *Lone Mothers* project. Like PAR, feminist theory is focused on creating an equitable society. Unique to feminist theory is the idea that research must consider the influence of gender with a purpose to end women’s oppression (Maguire, 1987).

Behind a decision to employ PAR is also a motivation to contribute to human growth and development (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR aspires to empower or build the capacity of those involved in research (Ryan et al., 2011; Warr et al., 2011) through consciousness raising about the society in which they live (Burns & Schubotz, 2009) and the issue being researched (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). A core feature of PAR is also to support participation and democracy (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). PAR does this by sharing ownership of research with those affected by the issue being studied (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010; Pollack & Caragata, 2010; Warr et al., 2011) and by doing research with rather than on individuals (Heron & Reason, 2006; Khan et al., 2013). More than simply involving those whose lives and experiences are often the subject of research inquiry, PAR also, and ought to, ensure these individuals’ skills and experiences are respected (Burns & Schubotz, 2009; Elliot et al., 2002; Goodson & Phillimore, 2010) and are compensated fairly in order to create “a reciprocal, non-exploitative relationship between peer researchers, project leads, other agencies and stakeholders” (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010, p. 493).

Peer-research, as one of PAR’s approaches, “includes those who are directly affected by the problem being studied as active participants in the research process” (Pollack & Caragata, 2010, p. 266). The decision to engage peer-interviewers can be a pragmatic one. For example, peer research is believed to be a way to reach some of the most vulnerable individuals (Elliot et al., 2002). In addition to increasing the quantity of data by having more people conducting interviews (Burns & Schubotz, 2009; Elliot et al., 2002) some believe peer research will also improve data quality. For example, Goodson and Phillimore (2010) argue a benefit

² Used to describe the work of Paulo Friere.

“of peer research can be the willingness of some groups to express their views more openly and honestly to people they can identify with either because of common shared backgrounds or experiences” (p. 492). These more fulsome and open exchanges can result in richer data especially where the issues explored are highly personal and sensitive. Furthermore, better quality data has the potential to influence policy change so that it is more relevant for the individuals those policies will impact (Elliot et al., 2002).

There is a debate in the literature about the reliability and validity of data in peer research because of the peer-interviewer’s proximity to lived experience. Goodson and Phillimore (2010) have claimed this proximity has the potential to contribute to sampling bias when peer-interviewers recruit those they know, thus limiting the representativeness of the data collected. Additionally, proximity might also create the conditions in which those being interviewed do not share their beliefs with their peers or they may share inaccurate details “to impress or portray themselves in a certain light to their peers” (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010, p. 492). Proximity of peer-interviewers to the experience of those they are interviewing can also, then, present unique barriers. Getting to quality data is possible but could require additional training and support (Elliot et al., 2002).

The peer-interviewing approach has been used to study various social issues such as social exclusion generally and in the labour market specifically (Braithwaite et al., 2007), student participation in making policies about school bullying (Burns & Schubotz, 2009), geographical disadvantage (Warr et al., 2011), “the views and experiences of parents who use illegal drugs” (Elliot et al., 2002, p. 172), capacity building with Refugee Community Organizations (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010), needs and experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS (Greene et al., 2009), and, perceptions of the connection between paid work and motherhood (Edwards & Alexander, 2011).

Research has reported on the benefits and challenges of involving peer-interviewers in the research process (Burns & Schubotz, 2009; Elliot et al., 2002; Greene et al., 2009; Warr, et al., 2011); tensions related to being an insider and outsider (Braithwaite et al., 2007); complexities and fluidity of power dynamics (Edwards & Alexander, 2011), and methodological and ethical considerations when engaging peer-interviewers (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010; Greene et al., 2009). As we will discuss, one of the benefits of the peer interviewing process is the challenge mounted to the usual power differentials between the “researcher” and the “researched” and the change related outcomes consequently produced.

Methodology

In this follow-up study we sought to answer two questions as they related to individual and social change resulting from the *Lone Mothers* project with the intention of contributing to the broader body of literature regarding PAR and peer research and its practice: (1) What are the unique benefits and challenges of research projects involving peer-interviewers? (2) What are the specific benefits and challenges related to incorporating social action within peer research projects?

In answering these questions participants emphasized processes and behaviours evidenced throughout the *Lone Mothers* project that demonstrated a meaningful intersection of theory and practice. We understand the processes in question that were reported to be meaningful were connected to the project’s epistemological and methodological influences. These influences included feminist and Freirean theory, as well the five characteristics of PAR that Reason and Bradbury (2006) identified. We believe these five characteristics might be more briefly summarized as democratized knowledge in action, oriented to social justice. Furthermore, participants highlighted that the attention to process and the influences identified above were major determinants of the project’s beneficial impacts. While the results of the

project will be discussed in a subsequent section, it is important to acknowledge here the significance of the epistemological and methodological framing of the study as contributors to the study outcomes. Social research generally and PAR research more specifically, faces numerous challenges and these can often include pressures related to time and funding constraints that so often threaten expressed commitments to the epistemology and values of peer research.

Methods

Qualitative interviews and a focus group were utilized as data collection tools, a decision informed by a belief that these qualitative methods would enable deep inquiry, permitting us to capture experiences with the peer-interviewing approach as completely as possible. One-on-one interviews enabled exploration of each individual's peer-interviewer experience. A focus group unearthed new information that emerged when this group of women remembered their experiences together. The interview questions prompted research participants to reflect on how and why they got involved in the *Lone Mothers* project, what they liked and did not like about being a peer-interviewer, as well as if and how they were, or were not, meaningfully involved in the research process and social action activities related to the project.

Research participants included six of the seven RAs from the Ontario site of the *Lone Mothers* project, as well as two others – the Project Coordinator (PC) hired part time to support the research and the Principal Investigator (PI). We reference this group as the research team, although this grouping is only a subset of the full research team from *Lone Mothers project*. In instances when we mention the academic partners, we are referring to the PC and PI who represent for the purposes of this research, the academic perspectives of and influences on the project. We contacted RAs using information from the existing *Lone Mothers* database. Only one person – an RA – did not return a call asking if she would like to participate in the follow-up study. Recruitment and data gathering were done according to an approved ethics protocol. Data collection was the same for all research participants and included individual interviews and one focus group. This follow-up study's PI, who is this article's second author, conducted the interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 1-1.5 hours and were held in participants' homes, except for the interview with the *Lone Mothers* project's PI, which was held at her office. It is important to note that although the PI from *Lone Mothers* study was a co-investigator on this follow-up study and is a co-author of this paper, the data collection and analysis were done without her involvement.

The interviews were open ended and minimally structured in order to fully elicit the experiences of the RAs. The interviews began with a brief preamble about the goal of the research and the expressed desire to understand how the RAs felt about their experiences, what they found good and problematic about their role as RAs and peer interviewers, and how their roles influenced the overall research goals. They were then asked to "tell me about your experience." Periodic prompts asked for more information, clarification and at times for more specifics on positive and negative experiences. All the RAs were single mothers, all had prior experience receiving social assistance and were between 28 and 60 years of age. They included women who are Indigenous, racialized, and white and both those who are Canadian born and immigrants.

Seven of the eight interviews were audio recorded. Audio files were not transcribed and there is support for analyzing qualitative data directly from audio files. The literature that supports the processes we utilized for analyzing non-transcribed files suggest there are several benefits to this approach. These benefits include the potential to enhance accuracy (i.e., transcribing only what is needed for reporting reduces the likelihood of an external transcriber

misinterpreting the file), improve accountability and transparency (i.e., archiving materials from all steps of the analytic process increases the ease with which it is possible to evaluate the researcher(s) logic in reaching a particular conclusion; Markle et al., 2011), and more authentically capture participants' voices (Chrichton & Childs, 2005). Furthermore, other research suggests that research designs can evolve along with technology in ways that do not require that transcription be standard practice in qualitative research (Markle et al., 2011). Finally, the small sample size facilitated direct audio analysis.

Our data analyses process first involved reviewing our written field notes to generate an initial set of descriptive codes. After analyzing the audio files directly in NVivo (a qualitative data analysis software) the initial descriptive codes were modified creating broader categories, which Saldaña (2016) describes as collections or groupings of codes. This process of coding and categorization enabled the identification of themes and concepts by which we can understand the data and its implications, and it is these that we report on here. As a final step, audio files were again reviewed once more and selected quotations were transcribed that best reflected the key findings. The framing of this article has been enhanced as a result of feedback from the follow-up study's participants, collaborating with the PI from the *Lone Mothers* project, and with the support of peers and faculty colleagues and reviewers.

Following the data analysis, research participants provided feedback on our interpretation of the data and vetted quotations at a focus group session held in an accessible location. Four people attended the feedback session – three RAs and the PI from the *Lone Mothers* project. Three others planned to attend, but at the last minute were unable to. Three people who did not attend the feedback session requested a summary of the findings and their quotations by email. All three have been invited to discuss these findings by phone, over e-mail, or in-person individually and one has done so. This step of requesting feedback from research participants reflects an ongoing commitment to meaningfully involve individuals with lived experience through all stages of the research process and to ensure their voices are accurately represented in knowledge mobilization.

Findings

Based on their involvement in the *Lone Mothers* project, the participants in this follow-up study described some of the benefits and challenges associated with their experiences as peer-researchers. In this section we present what participants said about the interactions between the academic partners, peer-interviewers, and the panel and the decision-making processes utilized throughout the project. We group these into three overarching themes that demonstrate a commitment to key features of the PAR methodology: (a) cultivating authentic relationships; (b) transformation and change; (c) minimizing hierarchy. We utilize these broad themes because of their close conceptual relation to the theory that supports PAR research, namely the reduction of power in the research relationship and the importance of enabling meaningful social action and advocacy efforts *with* persons with lived experience of the subject under study. Thus, the analytic process that yields this discussion is supported by Saldaña's (2016) model of codes that link to themes and concepts that in turn support the development and testing of theory.

Theme One: Cultivating Authentic Relationships

The participants placed a high value on cultivating authentic relationships as evidenced by participants' descriptions about how the *Lone Mothers* research team behaved towards one another and with the women they interviewed. We define authentic relationships as meaningful connections between individuals who behave towards one another with honesty, compassion,

and respect and in ways that both acknowledge and “own” power differentials, while also attempting to minimize the ways such power plays out.

Processes and behaviours that built authentic relationships amongst the *Lone Mothers* research team were categorized as follows: (1) Having mutual respect and expressing genuine interest in one another and (2) Fostering an inclusive and protective environment. We will now describe these processes and behaviours within these thematic categories, recognizing the categorizations are not perfectly distinct and there is necessarily an overlap in how these experiences were reported.

(1) Mutual Respect and Genuine Interest

In general, members of the *Lone Mothers* research team were comfortable taking additional time to build trusting relationships. For instance, the PI described a point of tension when she insisted on taking more time to revise the interview guide based on feedback from the Ontario RAs, despite pressure from another site to move ahead with the guide as it had been developed. At least one academic partner left the project frustrated at how long it was going to take to obtain data that was publishable. However, trusting relationships were seen as both basic respect for RAs and as prerequisite for getting richer data and the research team held firm on not sacrificing the underlying tenets of PAR. As the PI’s description of tape recorders being turned off by RAs at critical moments revealed, there were tensions between strong robust research outcomes and the values of PAR. However, after trust had been built, RAs no longer withheld data, became highly skilled yet sensitive at asking probing questions and yielded a quality of data that attested to the value of these respectful relationship-building processes. Sara (RA) commented: “if these [research participants] ...don't trust us...they're going to hold back...so before we get these people to trust us, we have to show them, we have to make them feel that they can trust us.”

Research team members demonstrated mutual respect in acknowledging their different yet complementary skills and experiences. Jill, explains: “It was like a link, so [the academic research team] taught us their skills and then we meshed them with our own and then we went into the situation where, quite frankly we were used to every day...”

Jane (PC) highlighted RAs’ essential roles in supporting academic partners to more effectively do their job when she stated, “they helped build our capacity... [Yet] I think without them we wouldn't know how to get out there and how to interview women [with the same nuanced language that they helped shape].”

(2) Fostering an Inclusive and Protective Environment

By being flexible to one another’s circumstances that, at times, were complex and complicated, by making it as easy as possible to participate, and by meaningfully involving RAs in various aspects of the research process, the academic leads for the *Lone Mothers* project in Toronto fostered an inclusive environment. The PC, Jane, spoke about the importance of flexibility when she said, “working with women whose lives are really complicated...on the one hand...you have some expectations, on the other hand you're a lot more forgiving than if [the PI] and [the community services partner] didn't show up.” Madison (RA) said she felt like “[academic partners] were pretty good at organizing it; they did realize we were moms” and recognized how difficult it was to coordinate everyone’s schedules.

Finally, being protective was also demonstrated in long conversations amongst the academics across the three research sites about which identifying data to strip from the transcripts. Jill (RA) mentioned the academic partners’ tendencies to be protective of RAs when she explained “actually, [the academic partners were] coming off as very protective of

us...small considerations that other people had no small considerations for. That's how you could sense...see the difference; it was tangible...it was consistent...that's what builds trust."

The *Lone Mothers* research team from Ontario was also supportive of one another in ways that helped them navigate inequities they experienced. It was, indeed, a project of "women helping women" (Sara, RA). This support was seen in how the academic partners coordinated the project's logistics. Research participants offered specific examples, such as distributing honoraria in a way that did not compromise RAs' monthly income, making reminder calls, providing childcare, food, and bus tokens to ensure it was as easy as possible to participate, and embedding training throughout the project to build RAs' skills and confidence conducting research. Other help that was offered included providing employment references and the subsequent establishment of a partnership with a university to waive tuition to facilitate RA's access to post-secondary education, denied under Ontario's social assistance system. Support also came in the form of caring for and encouraging one another. As Sara (RA) stated, "[academic partners] cared about us, like we cared about these women [on the panel], so it made it better for us to be able to work with these women." Marsha (RA) said, "it was always encouragement; there was never a time where you felt like you were being put down; you always had some form of importance." Jennifer (RA) provided support to a woman she interviewed by encouraging this woman to advocate for herself. Jennifer said:

One woman was struggling so hard with cockroaches in her apartment, I said call your MP, I'll call you when I get home, I'll look it up for you. Call your MP! Take the pictures to send him... that's what they do as part of their community work to get you another apartment.

Support was also demonstrated in other arguably less conventional ways. For example, research team members taught one another and respected what one RA referred to as the etiquette – social norms – that one acquires based on unique lived experiences. Jill (RA) stated:

The academics we worked with were going out of their way to make sure, to check their inventory, to check their motives...things like that weren't checked [at other research sites], that just stood out with neon lights... You know, if you check your motives and you check your inventory...I think that that's our etiquette and [other sites] weren't doing that.

The research team also cultivated authentic relationships through expressing genuine interest in others and their differing perspectives. Some RAs said they enjoyed hearing about each other's stories and experiences, as well as those of the women they interviewed. The PC described the importance of including RAs' voices when analyzing and framing the data because "it helped us understand or draw conclusions in a different way."

Theme Two: Transformation and Change

A major goal of the *Lone Mothers* project was to contribute to individual and social change, both enhancing individual lives and improving social systems. As the PI stated, "part of participatory action research theory is that the people involved in it are changed by it." Beyond an aspiration for transforming individual lives, the research was driven by the need for larger-scale social change. Research participants talked of transformation and change in across a wide variety of systems and circumstances. These have been grouped into two primary categories within this broader conceptual theme. These are: (1) Change in Systems and Structures and (2) Individual Transformation.

(1) *Change in Systems and Structures*

Jennifer (RA) said she “wanted it to make a difference...I will speak to anybody and everybody who will listen about how difficult it is for single parents on social assistance...maybe the changes won't affect my kids, but they'll affect future generations.”

Jill (RA) explained she “felt like there was a possibility I could contribute to being part of the change I wanted to see.” Madison (RA) wanted “the politicians or social assistance [deliverers] to understand where we're coming from...the hardships...just speaking out, I think was important.” The PI emphasized, “we wanted change...we really hoped that we might be able to at least put on the provincial government agenda the idea that single moms and their families were being impoverished” by the current welfare system. Such impoverishment, it was argued, had broader social consequences including negative education and health outcomes for these families. Furthermore, one RA (Jennifer) recounted how she attempted to contribute to large-scale change among the women she interviewed, even if that change might not directly impact them:

We will take this research and present it to people who make the decisions, and we WILL make changes and I kept saying that to them...so just trying to encourage the women that you're going to make a difference – all this time, all this effort, all this money will make a difference.

The *Lone Mothers* academic partners who participated in the follow-up study, influenced by Freire's ideas of conscientization, enacted their commitment to creating social change by facilitating activities for reflection and action, encouraging consciousness raising efforts, and offering RAs and women on the panel a variety of engagement and social action opportunities. For example, the PI and PC explained the research team debriefed as a large group and in smaller clusters – teams of three with two RAs and one academic partner – which informed interview guide revisions, as well as how data were framed. Additionally, to build upon the study's momentum, a grant was secured for a subsequent project culminating in the publication of a book of stories highlighting the lived experiences of single mothers accessing social assistance (Caragata & Alcade, 2014). One RA indicated their hope that this book will be used in universities to raise awareness about policies that neglect and marginalize single mothers and to disrupt the dominant narrative stigmatizing single mothers.

Some RAs described how the *Lone Mothers* project raised their awareness about social democratic institutions, as well as the political process and how to get involved in it. Moreover, the project's knowledge mobilization activities that were directed at challenging the dominant narrative about single mothers on social assistance provided RAs and the women on the panel with opportunities to engage in social action, something they were encouraged to do by the academic partners. Indeed, one goal of the project was “to involve women with lived experiences of poverty and social assistance in advocacy and social change efforts, such as public speaking and meeting with politicians” (Pollack & Caragata, 2011, p. 266). Research participants described the following list of social action activities that took place and shared which activities they participated in themselves: letter writing, presentations to Committees of the Senate and House of Commons of Canada and to social service delivery bodies in approximately ten different municipalities across Ontario, conference presentations; being interviewed by, and featured in, various media outlets, a symposium that brought together all three research sites; reshaping the training provided to social assistance caseworkers, and training in media relations provided in an intimate and status-affirming way by Olivia Chow and the late Jack Layton, prominent Canadian politicians.

(2) Individual Transformation and Change

All the research participants expressed disappointment the *Lone Mothers* project ended and this, we suspect, was both because they wanted to continue to contribute and to push for change and because they became like a family, something many participants stated.

Jennifer commented on how many of the women have stayed in touch, not only with the other RAs but also with some of the women they interviewed. She reported having a deep connection with many women over their shared learning, their common backgrounds and their working together on a common goal.

Another RA spoke passionately about social connections and the significance of knowing people outside of her usual network. Madison said, “it was good to see who they were [the academic researchers] to see that they were just women, just like us [laughing]... but better off.”

Laura recounted a story of one RA who utilized these social connections and expanded networks to have stronger references when she applied for jobs reporting, “I know people who have friends who are power players and those connections help, I never had those before.”

In the focus group that was part of this study, it was significant to note the deep feeling and sense of connection between the RAs even though the study they had worked on together had ended some years prior. Among the RAs interviewed, only two remained on social assistance and several women reported other meaningful personal changes that they attributed to their involvement in this project. One RA expressed change that she described as transforming her life: “I learned to speak up, that I had a voice.”

Theme Three: Minimizing Hierarchy

We understand minimizing hierarchy to mean disrupting the dominant social order that benefits some individuals more than others. Findings related to the broad theme of minimizing hierarchy have been categorized as follows: (1) Creating a non-hierarchical environment; (2) Removing Barriers to RAs Full Involvement and, (3) Peer-interviewers as power mediators between the interviewer and interviewee. We elaborate on these categories below and provide evidence to support these claims.

(1) Creating a Non-Hierarchical Environment

The academic research team minimized hierarchy by fostering an environment in which RAs were seen to be equal and valued counterparts. For example, Jennifer (RA) reported, “[the PI] treated us all the same. We were all equal. She went out for drinks with us in Newfoundland and just made us feel like we were just as good as she was.” Marsha (RA) echoed this sentiment: “they never once looked down on us.” Similarly, Jill (RA) emphasized how the academic partners fostered a collegial environment when she stated “I was under the assumption back then you had to have a number of university years under your belt to do this...I liked the fact that wasn't the case and that had to do with the people that trained us.” Jill (RA) also said, “isn't that what a lot of white, wealthy, academics do; they take up a lot of space, and I didn't feel that way with the academics that I worked with.”

Academic partners also unsettled dominant hierarchical relationships by acknowledging their privilege. The PC, Jane, described the importance of “hav[ing] a really good understanding of your privilege and...your sense of location” and RAs noticed that academic partners checked their privilege. Jill (RA) explained “the academics we worked with were going out of their way to make sure to check their inventory, to check their motives.” Another RA, Jennifer, shared, “even something as simple as [offering to buy] a coffee...those

kinds of things made it really warm and welcoming. Just them realizing that I don't have two bucks in my pocket for a coffee.”

Jill (RA) described how the academic partners meaningfully involved RAs when she stated “we were consulted a lot... decisions weren't just made without us. Jennifer (RA) echoed this sentiment: “they would constantly ask for my opinion...who does that, who asks you what kind of questions you'd like to be asked about your life.” Madison (RA) also thought it was good that the academic partners incorporated RAs' voices in the development of each interview guide.

(2) Removing Barriers to RAs Full Involvement

The *Lone Mothers* project also tackled hierarchy by offering RAs practical support to help them more fully participate in the project and to build new skills. In relation to the former, RAs were compensated as fairly as possible through honoraria, funds for transportation, as well as with food and childcare at research team meetings. In relation to the latter, most RAs described participating in the project was a learning opportunity in which they were taught how to conduct qualitative social science research, navigate social democratic systems, as well as present at conferences and other speaking engagements. One RA sensed the academic partners were intentional about the learning opportunities offered to RAs. When speaking about working with two Canadian politicians through her work as a peer-interviewer, Madison (RA) stated, “they wanted to educate us in some way.”

(3) Peer-Interviewers as Power Mediators Between the Interviewer and Interviewee

Peer research may have helped address power dynamics between those doing the interviewing and those being interviewed. For example, peer research as a strategy for helping those being interviewed feel more comfortable sharing their stories with their peers rather than an academic researcher was confirmed in this study. Indeed, there was a belief by most of the Ontario research team that because of shared experiences there was a “very level playing field” (Jennifer, RA) between RAs and the women they interviewed. Furthermore, the strength of the relationships built between the RAs and the women they interviewed led to exceptionally low rates of attrition in a longitudinal study. Research participants would go out of their way to alert the team to possible moves or changes in status so that they might remain part of the study.

Through being protective of the marginalized women they were interviewing, RAs exercised power in how they managed their interviews and challenged the traditional hierarchy in the research relationship. As an illustration, RAs would sometimes turn the tape recorder off, change the topic, or not ask probing questions when the women they interviewed shared sensitive information. In the following quotation, Laura (PI) described this trend, as well as how she respected the reasons why RAs were censoring information that would reach the academics:

[RAs] wanted to control what we were to hear, and it would particularly come up with really important kinds of things...those critical things...and we weren't hearing them...but they were protecting [the women on the panel] ...and especially because social services was part of the project they had good reason to doubt whether or not we were going to rat on them.

This was a crucial point at which building trusting relationships and equalizing power came up against the need for generating high quality data. The research team addressed the RA's approach as a training opportunity about the need for balance in PAR research, between

creating trusting relationships and acknowledging the agency of the peer interviewers. While a goal of the research was the collection of high-quality data, this was balanced by respecting the power of the peer interviewers. RAs subsequently stopped turning off their recorders when sensitive information was shared.

Discussion: Transformative Potential of Peer Research and Its Challenges

We contribute to literature on PAR (Participatory Action Research) and peer-interviewers through scrutinizing this methodology's potential and challenges. We contend PAR's greatest transformative potential might come from the building of authentic and transformative relationships within research processes that facilitate robust data collection and divergent and innovative analytic perspectives. More specifically, this article's primary contribution comes from our analysis of how the epistemological perspective that undergirded the research, influenced by PAR theory, translated into transformative practices that shaped important macro and micro level change throughout the *Lone Mothers* project. Important to note is the very limited discussion in the existing literature that analyses individual and social change effected through PAR when it is undergirded by an associated epistemic world view. This world view influenced research processes and behaviours that cultivated authentic relationships³, contributed to individual and social change, and minimized traditional research hierarchy while yielding strong and robust data. We argue that a commitment to such a non-linear and organic process – even when pressure to do otherwise mounted – made the *Lone Mothers* study an inclusive project that positively impacted individuals connected with it, and effected modest changes to the benefits available through, and service delivered by, the social assistance system. Though participants in this study overwhelmingly described the merits of the *Lone Mothers* project, we also highlight some of the challenges they shared.

PAR aspires to create change by generating new knowledge about complex social issues, translating this knowledge into action, and transforming the research process itself. The Freirean notion of conscientization, feminist methodology, and five overarching characteristics of PAR – emergent developmental form, practical issues, knowledge-in-action, participation and democracy, and human flourishing (Reason & Bradbury, 2006) – influenced the research processes and team behaviours throughout the *Lone Mothers* project in ways that demonstrate this study's participants' commitment to (1) building authentic relationships (2) influencing individual and social change, and (3) minimizing hierarchy in research processes. Overall, this study unearthed some of the tensions of a peer research project, as well as the merits of research that is inclusive of those with lived experience of the issue being studied.

This study's primary limitation is that participants were from one site of a multi-site study. Therefore, we make no claims these findings represent the opinions of all individuals involved in the *Lone Mothers* project. The small number of participants in this study also limits the generalizability of these findings; however, we believe this study generated some important insights for research and practice about PAR. These insights are related to (1) the additional time PAR projects require, (2) a continued need to examine power imbalances in research, and (3) the transformative potential of authentic relationships.

The findings from this follow-up study highlight tensions that can arise between the peer-interviewing approach and a traditional understanding of rigorous investigative methods. The PI acknowledged the tensions that emerged between academic pressures such as finalizing

³ We define authentic relationships as meaningful connections between individuals who behave towards one another with honesty, compassion, and respect and in ways that both acknowledge and "own" power differentials, while at the same time attempting to minimize the ways such power plays out.

the interview guide, generating findings more quickly, or publishing peer-reviewed articles, and a commitment to embracing the non-linear, organic, and participatory features of peer research which tend to require more time than conventional qualitative research methods. The PC also referenced time constraints when she said she wished there was more time to have involved panel members and more fully involve RAs in data analysis and knowledge mobilization.

Another challenge that has been cited in earlier literature is the concern that peer research produces a lower quality of data. This view is contested and there was certainty among participants that the data in the *Lone Mothers* project was seen to be richer because of peer-interviewers' proximity to the research issue being studied. This made those interviewed more comfortable and importantly, committed to the project.

Earlier research has referred to the extra time needed for PAR projects. These projects require additional time for training (Burns & Schubotz, 2009; Greene et al., 2009) and support (Greene et al., 2009). Yet, "provid[ing] lone mothers with training and experience in interviewing and other research skills" (Pollack & Caragata, 2011, p. 266) was a goal of the *Lone Mothers* study. Time as a limited resource emerged as a tension in the *Lone Mothers* project when pressure to produce results (i.e., finalize the interview guide, produce findings more quickly, or publish peer-reviewed articles) clashed with the participatory features of the project. This idea of time as a challenge also emerged when participants talked about the stealth-like pace of social policy change. RAs and academic partners alike wanted change to happen faster and to be more significant. Jane (PC) explained, "I guess it's the sense of... 'what more could we have done?'...I'm not sure we could have done more, it's more my own sense of wish[ing] the system would change quicker."

This study's finding that the *Lone Mothers* project aimed to minimize hierarchy aligns with earlier literature describing PAR's aspirations to address power imbalances by doing research with rather than on individuals (Heron & Reason, 2006), sharing ownership of research with those with lived experience of the researched issue (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010; Pollack & Caragata, 2010; Warr et al., 2011), or compensating participants as fairly as possible (Goodson & Phillimore, 2010). However, like time, power is highly complex and fluid (Edwards & Alexander, 2011) and continues to be a tension in PAR projects (Elliot et al., 2002; Goodson & Phillimore, 2010; Greene et al., 2009; Warr et al., 2011). While participants in this study described various processes and behaviours that demonstrated a commitment to minimizing hierarchy, one participant reflected that hierarchy between academic partners and RAs persisted following the project's completion. Therefore, we suggest future research examine in a highly nuanced manner the challenge points related to power and privilege in PAR, helping to elucidate the trajectory of a fully involved peer research process that disrupts hierarchy more completely.

Finally, while there is great potential in addressing tensions related to time and power in PAR, the methodology's greatest transformative potential may be related to cultivating authentic relationships within the research process. The participants in this study spoke extensively about the behaviours exhibited throughout the *Lone Mothers* project that reflected a shared value for building authentic relationships. Apart from references in the PAR literature in which research team members respected one another for their different skills and experiences (Burns & Schubotz, 2009; Elliot et al., 2002; Goodson & Phillimore, 2010), there is little attention in the literature to building authentic relationships and what the impacts of these might be for both the involved academics and the peer researchers. As an outsider to the *Lone Mothers* study, this article's first author was often struck by how fondly participants spoke about their relationships with one another and the women they interviewed. Future research might explore in more depth the role and impact of relationship building within PAR and peer research. This may be significant in considering the effects of social networks that support bridging capital.

Although a small study, our findings corroborate and build on other PAR related scholarship. The theory and guiding features of PAR informed the *Lone Mothers* project in ways that consistently respected the inclusion of peer-interviewers and supported a research process that was non-linear and organic. The very nature of this process was at times perceived, especially by some academic partners, as threatening to the quality of the research and most certainly to it being conducted in a professionally expedient manner. The academic partners interviewed for this study emphasized that far from data quality being compromised by PAR, it was significantly enriched through better participant retention, high quality interviews, and important insights from the RAs in shaping the interview guides and in analyzing the data.

With respect to the “Action” component of PAR, our findings are especially important. Although no extraordinary social change occurred as a result of the research, several impacts are notable. Some incremental but important changes did occur in social service delivery including in the training provided to welfare workers and some jurisdictions committed to utilizing less draconian means to ensure compliance. Two other changes are perhaps even more significant. The RAs had opportunities to speak out in a variety of academic and professional venues and to be trained and learn how to do so effectively. If and when these more marginalized voices become stronger – as they can through PAR engagement – we create a broader more inclusive and activist citizenry. And, as if that possibility is not sufficient, another benefit is the building of individual agency.

As has been noted in social work scholarship over almost 30 years, (Fabricant et al., 1992; Gubrium & Järvinen, 2013) compliance or perhaps “resigned” compliance becomes a common response to the demands made of social service users. As Dorothy Smith (1990) suggests, problems are textually mediated, not just to categorize, but also to write and read problems into troubled lives, and the recipients of such re-writing bear not only the weight of the troubles (which likely endure) but also of being re-written as client. The experience of being a researcher, an activist peer researcher, challenges this re-writing and perhaps re-inscribes agency.

As a final note, we suggest that PAR can be understood not as a risk to research rigour but as a vehicle to transform research processes, research data and research relationships. While participants in this study overwhelming described the positive aspects of the *Lone Mothers* project, we highlight the importance of continuing to investigate PAR as a methodology, so it continues to support inclusion, equity, and transformation within research and beyond.

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