ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Bringing Community Based Participatory Research to Domestic Violence Scholarship: an Online Toolkit

Lisa A. Goodman[1] · Kristie A. Thomas[2] · Nkiru Nnawulezi[3] · Carrie Lippy[4] · Josephine V. Serrata[5] · Susan Ghanbarpour[6] · Cris Sullivan[7] · Megan H. Bair-Merritt[8]

Abstract
In the absence of ongoing involvement in the communities that are the subjects of research, even well-intentioned researchers can develop questions that are not relevant to community needs, employ methods that hurt community members, or disseminate findings in ways that are inaccessible to those most affected. Recognizing these harms, a growing number of domestic violence (DV) researchers have embraced community-based participatory research (CBPR), an approach in which researchers and community members share power at every level of the research process, co-creating knowledge that can be applied to enhance community well-being. Despite growing interest in this approach, however, there are insufficient opportunities for interested researchers to learn how to actually engage in it, especially in the DV context. To remedy this gap, the authors of this paper collaborated to develop an online toolkit for emerging researchers interested in CPBR. This brief report frames the need for CBPR in DV research using short vignettes that come from our own research experience; introduces *Power Through Partnerships: A CBPR Toolkit for Domestic Violence Researchers*; and presents recommendations for developing, promoting, and disseminating future CBPR research. We chose to announce the development and availability of this toolkit in an academic journal in order to highlight its scholarly and practical relevance for researcher audiences who might be less familiar with the CBPR approach.

Keywords Community based participatory research · Intimate partner violence · Domestic violence

Lisa Goodman's story: In my fourth year of graduate school, I wanted to shift attention beyond sexual assault on campus to illuminate the way these same acts shaped the lives of women living on the street and in shelters, those facing multiple forms of oppression and daily hardships. As a new researcher trained in traditional research methods, I planned to use a quantitative design and to measure sexual assault with the most rigorous scale available, the Sexual Experiences Survey (SES) (Koss and Oros 1982; Koss et al. 1987). I developed the research question and selected this measure without asking women who were homeless or precariously housed what kind of knowledge would improve their lives or how they understood the experience I wanted to explore. Perhaps it should not have been a surprise, then, when the participants' eyes glazed over as they completed the SES, which asked about a series of "unwanted" sexual experiences, or when they seemed to check boxes without even really looking at the items. At first, I couldn't understand this response; but as I started talking with my participants informally, things became clear: What, they asked, could "unwanted" possibly mean in a context where sex could buy a participant a safe place to sleep,

✉ Lisa A. Goodman
goodmalc@bc.edu

[1] School of Education, Boston College, Campion 310, 140 Commonwealth Ave., Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA

[2] Simmons College School of Social Work, Boston, MA, USA

[3] University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD, USA

[4] National LGBTQ Institute on Intimate Partner Violence, Seattle, WA, USA

[5] National Latin@ Network for Healthy Families and Communities, a project of Casa de Esperanza, St. Paul, MN, USA

[6] Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence, Oakland, CA, USA

[7] Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

[8] Boston Medical Center, Boston, MA, USA

some food, or a guard for the night? Was this wanted, as in something that was enjoyable and freely chosen? Absolutely not. But nor was it forced upon them as an assault. Instead, it was the "best" path, chosen from among bad and worst paths. One woman described it as a "necessary evil." Another said "This is just what it is to be a woman without options." Despite being so eager to understand, I had failed to really see my participants' complex experiences. I did not know enough about their everyday lives to know how to ask the right questions. Had I not finally taken the time to talk with the community of which my participants were a part – something I had never been taught to do in graduate school - my data would have been worthless and, more importantly, I would have caused damage simply by asking questions that further marginalized the very people I wanted to support.

Kristie Thomas' story: Many years ago, I was invited to be a part of an innovative research project with a local community domestic violence (DV) program. I jumped at the chance to join the team: the topic fit squarely within my area of research and my role would be one of a collaborator rather than a detached consultant. A chief part of the project was to interview program staff and I was excited to learn from them. Soon into the project, however, I began to feel that the dynamics were "off" and my meetings with staff felt bumbling and unproductive. I couldn't understand why some of the staff members seemed so unwilling to share their opinions and no one wanted to make any concrete decisions. Admittedly, I was frustrated, but never expressed it out loud. I considered backing out of the project but couldn't quite bring myself to do so. Eventually, I learned that the agency was collapsing under the weight of serious organizational problems including a toxic climate, an exorbitant workload, and a culture that discouraged self-care. The research project I was part of had been imposed on already-overburdened staff. Even worse, it was another in a long line of impossible situations for them: they could not say no to being involved for fear of retaliation. I hadn't recognized any of this at the start of my participation. I had jumped too quickly into a project without first getting to know the organization and the people with whom I would be working. I let myself become, at least initially, another authority figure over the very people whose input mattered most.

Nkiru Nnawulezi's story: I came into the DV field as a graduate student with hopes to produce data that would highlight and eradicate the racism that Black women experienced in formal systems. My advisor enthusiastically connected me to numerous community stakeholders to help implement a study. After individual conversations with three different executive directors of DV shelters, I recruited and interviewed 14 women staying in those shelters for my study. Women shared stories of both pain and triumph related to racism. I analyzed these stories, and then gave each organization a report of the findings. Each ED thanked me for the report and…silence. One ED invited me to present at a staff in-service a few months later, but the impact of that training still remains unclear. The report and subsequent research manuscript, state-level practitioner talks, and academic conference presentations did not directly help to shift the local shelters in which survivors were most deeply impacted. I felt incredibly dissatisfied with the traditional and applied dissemination methods I used. I did not feel like I upheld my promise to survivors in the study that the results would benefit future survivors in their local shelters. I wish I had taken more time to understand each organizational context, identify its knowledge of and personal relationship to institutional and individual racism, and known what type of data was needed to support a shift in structural and cultural practices.

As these stories highlight, in the absence of authentic community partnerships, even well-intentioned researchers can develop questions that are not sufficiently relevant to community needs, employ methods that can be harmful or burdensome to community members, or disseminate findings in ways that do not really make a difference to communities. Recognizing these harms, a growing number of domestic violence (DV) researchers have embraced community-based participatory research (CBPR), an approach in which researchers and community members share power at every level of the research process, co-creating knowledge that can be applied to enhance community well-being (Israel et al. 1998; Minkler and Wallerstein 2010; Yuan et al. 2016).

Despite growing enthusiasm for this approach to research, however, there are insufficient opportunities for interested researchers to learn how to actually engage in it, especially in the DV context. If CBPR is not taught as part of a graduate program's core curriculum or by one's mentors, interested researchers often resort to learning CBPR on their own and as they go. Such work can be as a solo venture, as many researchers work within disciplinary silos, disconnected from each other and unable to share ideas, intellectual frameworks, participatory processes, and practical tips. Although authors within the broader CBPR field have produced numerous guides and resources for emerging researchers, few exist to support those interested in doing DV research specifically (for one exception, Sullivan et al. 2017, focused on collaborations with the criminal justice system).

To remedy this gap, the authors of this paper and other experienced, diverse CBPR researchers and practitioners collaborated to develop an online toolkit for emerging researchers who want to produce knowledge *with* and *for* communities but are not sure how to begin. Building the final product was an iterative process that instigated rich thought, debate, insight and discussion. Collectively, we drew upon our own varied experiences, the academic literature, oral histories, and activist writings. The resulting toolkit captures a critical set of values and strategies that early researchers in academic, policy, community, or practice-based settings can apply in their own communities. This brief report introduces *Power Through Partnerships: A CBPR Toolkit for Domestic Violence Researchers*, available at cbprtoolkit.org (Goodman et al. 2017). The next sections describe how the toolkit was developed and the gaps in scholarship made evident through the process. The final section presents recommendations for developing, promoting, and disseminating future CBPR research.

Developing the Toolkit

When the idea for the toolkit emerged among several of the authors, it was intended to be a small project. As is often the case with many academic undertakings, it blossomed rather quickly in scope and membership. Driving this evolution were two realizations: first, that the DV field could really use a CBPR toolkit that was large in scale and dynamic in format, and second, that such a toolkit absolutely had to include the voices of diverse experts. Thus, the project began with a subgroup of us, who created an initial outline focused on the major toolkit topics. That subgroup then worked with the National Resource Center on Domestic Violence to convene a larger group of DV-focused CBPR researchers –selected based on their track records for building strong community partnerships in diverse contexts and settings. The purpose of the meeting was to build relationships, share ideas, refine the outline, and begin to shape the toolkit. Each of the authors of this manuscript was present. The bulk of our work centered on identifying which of the wide range of CBPR practices are particularly useful for DV research. We also wrestled with the question of what practices are central versus optional for a research process to be considered CBPR, and what is unique about CBPR in the DV context. Afterwards, we each contributed specific pieces to the toolkit and continued to revise and integrate together until we had a consensus draft.

One of the many strengths of this toolkit is the diverse perspectives it contains. Although each of us believes in CBPR as an essential tool to advance the field of DV and improve the lives of survivors, we occupy diverse social locations and professional roles that bring us into CBPR partnerships in different ways. Our social identities vary by race, ethnicity, class, ability, sexual orientation, age, faith, and lived experiences. Some of us are academics with and without tenure working in universities, others work at national resource centers that conduct research and provide technical assistance to DV programs. We have varied experiences designing studies directly with individual survivors and advocates or with entire organizations and coalitions. Some of us partner primarily with culturally- and population-specific programs and survivors, and others collaborate with mainstream programs.

This diversity in experiences and perspectives brought with it an array of different values and voices among the authors, which made for lively and at times challenging discussions. Many of these discussions among the authors mirrored those we outline in the toolkit that researchers and community members often undergo when conducting CBPR projects. To take a few examples, we describe and propose strategies for handling challenges that emerge when researchers and community partners do not share certain social identities or when they do; when salary and institutional resources significantly differ across collaborative partners; when traumatic social events impinge on the research process differentially for CBPR collaborators depending on their social location; or when time demands and availability differ substantially across CBPR collaborators. The process of working on this toolkit highlighted for many of us the value and utility of CBPR skills across a variety of settings.

The toolkit is comprised of four parts, each of which speaks directly to the issues raised in the introductory anecdotes. The first part introduces the toolkit and its authors. The second part presents an overview of CBPR, its intellectual roots, and its history in the DV arena. This part also illuminates contextual factors that are particularly relevant to CBPR in the domestic violence context. The third part offers a set of tools for self-examination for researchers considering doing CBPR, including questions and exercises that toolkit users can engage with as they clarify their thinking. The fourth part delineates a set of values that shape CBPR and explores how these values translate into practices specific to doing CBPR with DV survivors, their families, and the programs that aim to help them. Table 1 lists these core values and provides the reader with a sense of what they can expect to learn about these values in the toolkit.

In an effort to be as engaging and useful as possible, the toolkit provides lively examples of model partnerships from the field; reflection exercises to assess "readiness" to engage in CBPR; emerging researchers' perspectives on why they chose CBPR; practice tips; and links to supplemental materials, including additional readings and sample research materials. In addition, embedded within the website are nearly two dozen video clips from interviews we conducted with a variety of researchers and practitioners in which they

Table 1 Core values of community-based participatory research in the domestic violence context and related toolkit content

Value	Corresponding toolkit content
1. CBPR requires a commitment to building relationships founded on transparency and trust	• Steps for establishing solid relationships with DV community partners • Strategies for establishing trust and transparency with DV community partners
2. CBPR entails building on each party's strengths, resources and interests	• Examples of the unique and shared strengths that DV community members and researchers bring to a CBPR project
3. CBPR attends to individual and structural power and works toward redistributing power more equitably	• The role of structural oppression in CBPR projects • Strategies for fostering equitable distribution of resources and access for marginalized communities and why that is particularly critical in the DV context
4. CBPR requires equitable decision-making and mutual accountability	• Strategies for developing research questions, designing methods, interpreting results, and disseminating findings in a collaborative way with DV community partners
5. CBPR is a flexible and creative process that responds to the ongoing and evolving needs and priorities of all stakeholders	• Examples of common twists and turns when engaging in CBPR in the DV context and how to deal with them • How to build realistic and flexible timelines
6. The products of the CBPR process belong to all partners	• Developing dissemination plans that are creative and useful • Handling findings that are potentially harmful • Determining authorship and dissemination roles • Examples of dissemination products that are meaningful for DV community partners and researchers

describe the ins and outs of doing CBPR, common mistakes, and lessons learned. These clips serve to bring the written content to life and put a face to some of the names behind CBPR.

Future Research Directions

The process of developing the toolkit represented a unique opportunity to engage in lively discussions about the nature of CBPR in the DV context. It also enabled us to recognize clear gaps in scholarship that hinder our work. First, few studies have attempted to explore systematically the *process* of doing CBPR research in the DV context. More research is needed on how researchers and community stakeholders – programs and survivors – set up their partnerships. What are the tensions, obstacles, and power dynamics that tend to arise as people with such distinct roles, pressures, and outlooks collaborate? How have researchers and their community partners resolved these issues, and what skill and resources have they utilized to do so? Are there consistent patterns in how partnerships handle decision-making at each step of the research process? More information about what practices promote successful and even sustainable partnerships would also be enormously helpful to researchers and community members as they navigate the collaborative process.

There is a paucity of scholarship not only in illuminating CBPR *process* in the DV context but also in documenting systematically its *outcomes*. More research is needed regarding the extent to which CBPR is used in the evaluation of DV interventions and in the development of measures and tools for DV survivors and their families. Specifically, what kinds of interventions, measures, and tools tend to be developed using CBPR, and are certain outcomes more commonly assessed in the evaluations of these products? What populations are most often involved as CBPR collaborators, and why are others not at the table? What strategies are most useful in ensuring that program evaluation and measure development – which tend to be technical in nature – are conducted in a way that is truly collaborative and methodologically rigorous? Research that addresses these questions can illuminate patterns in the use and impact of CBPR. It might be that there are simple oversights that can be tackled within ongoing CBPR projects; other gaps might need intensive brainstorming as to identify how barriers to inclusion and process can be eliminated.

As one step towards filling these gaps, the *Journal of Family Violence* anticipates publishing a special double issue in the fall of 2018 on CBPR and youth participatory action research methods (YPAR) within the DV and teen dating violence fields. The goal of these special issues is to bring together gender-based violence studies from across the globe to describe research processes that integrate CBPR values, and to highlight their contribution to individual and community change. Accordingly, the research highlighted in these issues represents a critical step forward. Additional journal special issues or edited books would be valuable strategies for continuing the dialogue. Journals that focus on family and interpersonal violence might consider adding a permanent section that features CBPR projects. Doing so would be particularly helpful in promoting visibility of

CBPR, especially if those articles were given flexible page limits to allow authors to elaborate on the CBPR process and the outcomes. We also recommend that conferences focused on DV or interpersonal violence more broadly devote a piece of their programming explicitly to CBPR in an effort to support the sharing of ideas and strategies among CBPR researchers and to build the relationships necessary for sustainable and creative work.

Conclusion

As illustrated in the anecdotes that introduced this article, conducting traditional research that does not explicitly and intentionally engage the communities most affected by the issue at hand can lead to mistakes, such as cutting corners on relationship building, alienating the very people whose input matters most, or miss out on the opportunity to make meaningful change in a DV setting. Adopting a CBPR approach, on the other hand, can be deeply rewarding; but it is not without its own immense challenges, especially in the DV context. *Power Through Partnerships: A CBPR Toolkit for Domestic Violence Researchers* was created to help researchers identify both the joys and the challenges of doing CBPR work, and provide supports about how to avoid or address them. It is essential to start this work by looking within; that is, for interested researchers to think through why they want to conduct CBPR and how their social locations will affect the relationships they hope to make and the work they aim to do. The toolkit we have prepared, although by no means comprehensive, provides a framework for doing just this.

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