

Community-Based Participatory Action Research

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Literature Review #2

The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions is conducting three student-led Community-Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) projects which involve our staff mentoring students of color in the social science research process, to develop a research inquiry into how students of color experience college and the transition to work. One CBPAR project is with African American students at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, another is with students with immigrant backgrounds at Madison College, and the third project is with HMoob American students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The studies at UW-Whitewater and Madison College are in their preliminary stages, whereas the study at UW-Madison with HMoob American students is concluding a round of data collection and starting analysis of the data. To illustrate how CBPAR works in action, in the following sections, we describe how we have used it at UW-Madison with HMoob American undergraduate students.

Introduction to CBPAR

CBPAR is a partnership approach to research that typically involves engagement between academic researchers and community actors with the aim of gaining a more grounded understanding of a given phenomenon (Appadurai, 2006; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). While social science research has traditionally derived part of its authority from an opposition between the researcher and the researched, CBPAR complicates this paradigm by partnering academic researchers and community actors through shared, collaborative decision-making that positions community members as researchers rather than objects of the research (Anderson, 2017). While CBPAR approaches have been used in a variety of social settings, including youth organizations (Ventura, 2017), K-12 schools (Green et. al, 1995), and prisons (Fine & Torre, 2006), they have not often been used in university settings (Anderson, 2017). We contend that CBPAR offers an exciting and necessary approach to studying issues in higher education because it not only includes the perspectives and experiences of higher education students—those who are often excluded from policy debates— but it also positions students in a researcher role to guide the research questions, approaches, data collection, and analysis. This approach produces theory that is conceptually innovative as well as action-oriented, which can inform activism, pedagogy, policy debates, and policy implementation.

Furthermore, to engage in CBPAR is to engage in a process of decolonization, personal transformation, and interrogation of power and privilege (Fine & Torre, 2004; Cahill, Rios Moore, & Threatts, 2008). This translates into a heightened consciousness with regard to personal positionality within an intersectional

framework and an articulation of our social locations and relationships to privilege (Anderson, 2017). Through autoethnographic data from their research journals, the HMoob American student-researchers documented how participating in this CBPAR project has been personally transformative and eye-opening for them. For example, in one of her journal entries, a student-researcher wrote about a moment in the research process where she reflected on her own positionality and blind spots:

Interviewing participants made me realize that I was also blind to HMoob student struggles. I didn't know that some participants felt a certain way. I thought everyone thought like me since we're all HMoob. We definitely share the same struggles but the differences in struggles definitely stood out to me the most, such as feeling excluded in the Business school. I can't relate to those people and I can't imagine how I would feel if I were in their shoes. It definitely put things into perspective for me and made me realize my privilege. (Autoethnographic journal 1/11/19)

Another student-researcher on that project considered what it means to be a researcher doing research within the minoritized community that one identifies with:

Within the UW-Madison HMoob American student community, I am a peer. I have relationships with these folks and feel a personal responsibility to represent them and their experiences. As a researcher, it is a personal as well as an empirical responsibility to make sure that the HMoob American student community is being reflected in the study accurately. I want to ensure that the study does not do my peers and me a disservice. (Autoethnographic journal 9/28/18)

Such journal entries illuminate the transformative power of this research approach on community-based researchers and on communities and institutions as well.

The impacts that engaging in CBPAR work can have on students is boundless. Through CBPAR, students are empowered to become critical inquirers of their lived experiences and producers of knowledge, rather than just consumers of knowledge. As its name suggests, CBPAR also involves an action component, wherein findings from the research are used to inform policies and practices. Consequently, engaging in a CBPAR project can open doors for research conference presentation opportunities as well as opportunities to collaborate with the community at large as students engage in action steps toward equitable change. As such, students will gain invaluable skills (i.e., communication, leadership, critical thinking, and writing) that prepare them for post-graduation opportunities (i.e., graduate school, post-graduation jobs, research lab positions, etc.).

A Closer Look: Our HMoob American College PajNtaub

In our most well established CBPAR project, the community we center is HMoob American college students at UW-Madison. Our ten-people research team is made up of six HMoob American college students from the HMoob American Studies Committee (HMASC), two graduate students, and two academic researchers from the CCWT. All members of the team completed UW-Madison Human Subjects Training, per Institutional Review Board requirements, and were responsible for reading relevant literature, developing sampling criteria and interview and observation protocols, recruiting participants,

and gathering, analyzing, and presenting the data as the study proceeded. The research team met weekly to discuss literature, data collection, and emerging themes. Academic research mentors were responsible for engaging student-researchers with relevant theory and empirical studies, and providing guidance throughout research design, data collection, and analysis.

The student-researchers' role in developing protocols was vital in order to discern appropriate methods and questions for the participants—other HMoob American college students at UW-Madison. Furthermore, because the student researchers are active members of HMASC, they had previous knowledge of social justice work and the literature that accompanies it. It was thanks to this familiarity with the community and the literature that the research project progressed quickly, transitioning from creating the base of the project, to interviewing the participants, to coding and writing up research briefs, opinion pieces, and scholarly articles. Additionally, from the perspective of the student activists of the HMASC, involvement in the study was viewed as an opportunity to explore how social science methods could enhance the impact of their advocacy and expand their understanding of issues important to their organization.

Because CBPAR is an approach to research (not a method per se), we developed a vertical case study involving policy document analysis, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and participant observations as our research method. As described by Bartlett and Vavrus (2014), a vertical case study incorporates three elements: a vertical element that examines the macro-, meso-, and micro- levels, a horizontal element that examines how policies unfold in particular locations, and a transversal element that examines processes over time. This method allowed us to dive deep into the individual experiences of current and former HMoob American college students at UW-Madison, connect those experiences to institutional level policies and practices, and examine those experiences over time.

Furthermore, we drew on AsianCrit to develop the protocols and methods to collect the data needed to develop such case studies (Maxwell, 2013; Rossman 2006). For example, research using AsianCrit (Chang, 1993; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Museus & Iftikar, 2014; Teranishi, 2002) and empirical studies on the college experiences of HMoob and SEAA students has documented the importance of prior educational experiences and current college experiences of exclusion (such as microaggressions and other experiences of marginalization) (Depouw, 2012; Gloria et al. 2017; Maramba & Palmer, 2014), as well as the feeling of belonging cultivated in co-ethnic spaces (Ngo, 2015). Additionally, the students on the research team engaged in auto-ethnographic journaling (Anderson, 2012) and group discussions—querying and documenting patterns in their experiences on campus—in order to further develop the conceptual framework and research protocols.

This study is currently concluding data collection and starting the process of analysis and dissemination. The other CCWT funded CBPAR projects at UW-Whitewater and Madison College will utilize a similar participatory framework and qualitative research methodology, to document how students of color experience college and college-workforce transitions.

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The mission of The Center for Research on College-Workforce Transitions (CCWT) is to conduct and support research, critical policy analysis, and public dialogue on student experiences with the transition from college to the workforce in order to inform policies, programs, and practices that promote academic and career success for all learners.

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