Transformative Research Methods to Increase Social Impact for Vulnerable Groups and Cultural Minorities

Donna M. Mertens, PhD[1] ⬤

Abstract

A transformative lens applied to research increases impact in the form of providing support for actions that increase social, economic, and environmental justice. Researchers who accept the role of supporting transformative change can enhance their abilities to do so through the use of a transformative lens that informs the design, implementation, and use of their research. The transformative ethical assumption informs methodological choices in that the research design consciously focuses on addressing inequities and providing a platform for transformative change. Engagement with members of marginalized and vulnerable communities is critical and needs to be approached in ways that value the knowledge they bring and addresses power inequities. Methodologies that are commensurate with a transformative approach include the use of mixed methods, viewing the role of the researcher as a social change agent, learning from social activism, and employing specific strategies for culturally responsive inclusion, addressing power differences, and planning for sustainability. Examples of research that increased social impact illustrate how these methodologies have been applied: social activism strategies to address structural racism for youth and for Black men in prison; culturally responsive strategies in research affecting members of sexual minorities in countries in which same-sex behaviors are prohibited by law and for incarcerated women; power inequities in research for people living in high poverty, including children in Nicaragua and Indigenous South Africans; and planning for sustainability with Indigenous youth in Canada and farmers in South Africa. The transformative approach to research asks researchers to critically examine their role in sustaining an oppressive status quo and to address the challenges of supporting increased justice.

The inclusion of proactive strategies for increasing the impact of social science research is an evolving practice, driven by ethical and political concerns. The increased visibility of social inequities brought about by the impacts of the global pandemic and a climate crisis heightens awareness of the importance of expanding our understandings of how to increase impact of research for transformative purposes. From an ethical perspective, researchers who do not consciously act to address inequities may be complicit in sustaining an oppressive status quo (Mertens & Wilson, 2019). From a political perspective, lack of documented impact may lead to decreased funding for social science research (Sordé Martí et al., 2020) or, worse, destabilizing the world's democracies (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2020).

An example of political pressure that drives researchers to demonstrate impact arose when the European Commission (EU) (2013) questioned the usefulness of social science and humanities research because the impact of the research for improved social conditions was not systematically documented. In response to this challenge, the EU funded the IMPACT-EV initiative that was led by a team of researchers from eight EU countries to develop criteria for impact, develop a mechanism for determining impact, and establish a

[1]Gallaudet University, Washington DC, USA

Corresponding Author:
Donna M. Mertens, Gallaudet University, Washington DC, USA.
Email: Donna.mertens@gallaudet.edu

repository for research studies that demonstrate impact (http://impact-ev.eu/). The team from Spain made major contributions to this effort and concluded that quantitative measures, such as citation-based metrics, while useful, were insufficient to demonstrate the wider impact of research (Sordé Martí et al., 2020). They recommended the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods "to deeply respond to the social impact issue and the improvement of society and its social meaning" (p. 949).

Their recommendations align with the assumptions of a transformative research lens that is based on the ethical assumption that researchers need to design their studies so that they contribute to transformative change to increase social, economic, and environmental justice (Mertens, 2020; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). A transformative lens incorporates the understanding that ethical practice is inclusive in a culturally responsive manner with members of marginalized and vulnerable populations in ways that challenge the existing power structure. The argument that I put forth here is that impact can be increased by thoughtful design and inclusion of stakeholders and formation of coalitions that can sustain the needed changes. Researchers and the communities they serve can increase the potential for transformative change by incorporating lessons learned from social activism and social change agents. This might be considered to be a controversial position given that other research frameworks call for a separation between research and advocacy. However, continuing to do research in a business-as-usual manner puts the researcher in the unethical position of being complicit in sustaining oppression. By adopting the role of change agent, researchers have the opportunity to disrupt that historical legacy and contribute to a transformed world (Hall, 2020).

This article begins with a brief introduction to the assumptions that make up a transformative approach to research. Next, the implications of these assumptions for research practice are illustrated through the use of examples that demonstrate key aspects of a transformative approach that serve to challenge oppression and create change at the personal and societal levels. This includes a discussion of methodologies that are commensurate with a transformative approach, the role of the researcher as a social change agent, learnings from social activism, and specific strategies for culturally responsive inclusion, addressing power differences, and planning for sustainability.

The Transformative Lens for Research

The transformative approach to research is defined in terms of axiological, ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (Mertens, 2020a; Mertens & Wilson, 2019). The axiological assumptions that encompass the values and ethics held by researchers occupy a dominant position because they guide and give direction to the other assumptions. The characteristics of the transformative axiological assumption have been described briefly in the preceding section as providing impetus for consideration of research impact to address inequities. The use of a transformative lens through which to understand the nature of ethics and values takes researchers beyond the traditional approval from ethical review boards and the dictum to "do no harm." A transformative ethical research study needs to be based on the principle of cultural respect that serves as a basis for developing appropriate relationships with the full range of people affected by the study (the stakeholders). The study needs to be designed to explicitly address inequities in order to optimize its contribution to social, economic, and environmental justice. The design also needs to incorporate the strengths in the community and provide for reciprocity, that is, give back to the community something of value in the form of transformation (Mertens, 2020b, p. 18).

Hence, the implication of this assumption is that research should be action-oriented, consciously addressing inequities, and provide support for transformative change in the form of increased social, economic, and environmental justice.

The axiological assumption informs the nature of the ontological assumption, that is, the nature of reality, associated with a transformative stance. Reality is not seen as something that exists that is waiting to be measured, nor is it sufficient to describe the nature of reality as being socially constructed. Rather, a transformative lens illuminates the various beliefs about what is real and asks researchers to critically interrogate those beliefs. Some versions of reality emanate from oppressive positions of power and serve to sustain oppression. Other versions of reality emanate from the experiences of marginalized and vulnerable populations and serve to challenge the oppressive status quo and lead to increased justice. For example, racists operate from a version of reality that White people are superior to Black people, thus justifying policies that limit Black people's access to housing, safe neighborhoods, healthy environments, health care, employment, and education (Rothstein, 2017). "The researcher has a responsibility to make visible the different versions of reality about a phenomenon, their origins, and the consequence of accepting one version of reality over another" (Mertens, 2020b, p. 19).

The transformative ontological assumption also leads to directives for action in terms of inclusion of contextual analysis to understand history and culture and for relationship building with stakeholders in the design of the research study. This attention to building relationships is informed by the transformative epistemological assumption. Researchers need to include time and resources in the study design to build culturally respectful relationships with the full range of stakeholders and understand what it means to build trust in different cultural contexts. Researchers also have to understand the power structure and develop strategies that provide an inclusive and safe environment for all stakeholders, especially those who are marginalized and vulnerable, to participate. They need to develop strategies for working together that value the lived experience of community members as

essential knowledge in order to have accurate understandings of problems and potential solutions. In the United States, funders are increasingly requiring researchers to include the development of coalitions as part of their studies, particularly when addressing social and health problems (Wolfe et al., 2020). The rationale for this requirement is that community-based coalitions understand the context and culture better than outsiders and that they are positioned to sustain the needed changes when the researchers leave the field. The forming of relationships in culturally respectful ways and strategies of social activists in the formation of coalitions provide bases for research impact; these issues are explored further in subsequent sections of this article.

The foregoing assumptions inform the character of the transformative methodological assumptions. Many different methodologies can be used in transformative studies; however, the use of a transformative lens is the most important aspect of methodological choices. Transformative designs typically are cyclical with information from the first phases informing decisions in subsequent stages. They include phases for relationship building and contextual analysis and consciously include plans for transformative use of the research process and findings. A transformative lens is characterized by

- An ethical stance that promotes social inclusion and challenges oppressive structures that sustain inequality and discrimination
- A participatory and reflective entry process into a community, designed to build trust, address power differences, and make goals and strategies more transparent
- The dissemination of findings in ways that encourage the use of results to enhance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice
- A commitment to addressing the intersectionality of relevant dimensions of diversity—such as gender, disability, indigeneity, poverty status, and language—by incorporating culturally responsive, equity-focused, feminist, and indigenous approaches that are relevant in the evaluation context (Mertens, 2020a, 2020b; Mertens & Wilson, 2019) (cited in (Bolinson & Mertens, 2021))

Likely candidates for methodological choices include participatory action research (Liebenberg et al., 2017), community-based participatory research (Lucero et al., 2018), the communicative methodology (Garcia-Carrion, 2016; Sordé Martí et al., 2020), culturally responsive designs (Rodriquez et al., 2011), Indigenous culturally responsive approaches (Chouinard & Cram, 2020), and co-design methodologies (Hyett et al., 2020). However, researchers can adopt these methodologies in ways that either incorporate a transformative lens or not. In subsequent sections, I explore the transformative aspects of these methodologies and how they serve to increase impact.

Social Activism and Change Agents in Research

The transformative axiological assumption includes the idea that researchers need to recognize the strengths of community members and integrate their knowledge, skills, and experiences into the planning and implementation of the research. Too often, members of marginalized and vulnerable communities are seen as being "at risk," a problem, weak, powerless, or deviant (Mertens, 2020a). Research that critically examines the historical and structural inequalities that subjugate members of marginalized communities increases the probability that the impact of that research will leave communities better off. Dhaliwal et al. (2020) describe a Radical Inquiry approach used in a youth center in California that is consciously designed to address the structural and historical structures that subjugate and discriminate against communities of color in the United States. The goal of the program is to "create safe spaces grounded in social justice and build youth power for young people to love, learn, educate, heal, and transform lives and communities" (p. 49).

Dhaliwal et al. (2020) began with the following questions:

> What is the goal of this work, if not a liberatory process? And if an endeavor does not see itself as an agent of change along a continuum that leads us toward equity, what harm are we doing in measuring its effectiveness? What might be 'proven effective' and replicated, and who will benefit most? (p. 50)

The research began before the center was actually opened for members in order to provide time to form relationships with the program founders, partners, and staff. The center conducted a youth-led needs assessment that was developed and administered by young people to identify what they needed, that is, a safe place they could call their own. The results of this survey were used to frame the theory of change, the research plan, and the data collection tools. The program adopted a model of continuous learning in the form of conducting an annual survey that was administered by the staff and then used as part of their regular retreats to inform their plans for the following years. The program staff also undertook a Listening Campaign and high school Community Health Interns conducted a Youth-Led Participatory Action Research Project to increase their understanding of the adverse conditions the youth faced and the coping mechanisms that the youth viewed as valuable.

The research results were used to inform the establishment of a chat lounge that was facilitated by the high school Community Health Interns. The lounge provided a safe space for youth to discuss the problems of violence in their community and coping mechanisms. The program also focused on issues in the schools, such as the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately affects youth of color. The impact of the program is evidenced in the evolution of a loving, empathic community that provides a safe space free of violence for

young people to gather and plan their futures. The program also worked with school administrators and teachers, parents, and students to revise practices and policies to support healing, connection, and meaningful success. Thus, the conscious use of a liberatory lens informed the full research process and resulted in research that was viewed as valuable and usable by members of this community.

McBride et al. (2020) provide another example of research work that is focused on consciously addressing structural racism in order to increase social equity. Historical and contextual analysis reveals that slavery was just the beginning of an oppressive racism in the United States. Policies regarding segregated housing have resulted in persistent barriers for people of color, resulting in lack of access to safe spaces, a healthy environment in terms of air and water, and access to quality healthcare, employment, transportation, and education (Rothstein, 2017). The effects of structural racism are evident in the number of police-killings of people of color and in their disproportionate incarceration for nonviolent crimes, as compared to European Americans who commit the same offenses.

McBride et al. (2020) recommend three strategies to address structural racism borrowed from social activists in order to increase research impact: advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing. Advocacy entails incorporating deliberate strategies into the research design to motivate existing decision-makers to take action toward the common good. McBride's nonprofit, Center for Community Engagement and Social Change (BECOME), demonstrated advocacy in their work with a social services group that served a high-poverty area in Chicago. Following severe cuts in federal spending that impacted the social services group's ability to provide services, BECOME worked with them to develop an advocacy agenda to build capacity in other community organizations to further their progress toward social equity. The strategy of mobilizing expands the focus from existing leaders to inclusion of people, programs, and community organizations that have a stake in creating a more racially equitable society. BECOME used this strategy when working with a project in seven communities that received grants to use arts as a lens to reform the criminal justice system. They worked collectively with the seven communities to build capacity to create change at the organizational, community, and systems levels. This enabled these grassroots organizations to work with communities to effect social change in this way. Community organizing is a strategy that focuses on working directly with communities of color to position themselves to make changes to increase justice. BECOME organized parents in a high-poverty area by providing training in organizing and use of a survey to document their community's needs. These parents used the findings to advocate for a community center for their children to safely access resources and to build affordable housing in their neighborhood.

Another example from social activists occurred outside of the world of research, but it offers insights into strategies used by change agents that could be integrated into research studies that are focused on the reduction of poverty and improvement of working conditions (Greenwood, 2019). In the United States, fast-food workers are paid very little ($7.25/hour) and rarely get pay increases, leaving them unable to support their families without taking on two or three jobs. The Service Employee International Union partnered with a grassroots group called New York Communities for Change to build a coalition to mobilize the fast-food workers in New York City. The coalition was called Fight for $15 and was organized to increase minimum wages for this group of workers to $15/hour. The leaders hired organizers to knock on doors in the neighborhoods where the fast food workers tended to live and to visit fast-food restaurants in the area. They held several meetings and the attendance increased at each meeting. One group of workers decided that they would conduct a 1-day strike; these workers were at the McDonald's in New York City on Madison Avenue and at a Wendy's near Madison Square Gardens. These two locations had heavy foot traffic (pre-pandemic), and the action attracted wide news media coverage in the form of the television and print news, Twitter, and other social media outlets. Workers also protested at shareholder meetings for these corporations and got additional news coverage. This caused political leaders and church leaders to take notice, and they began to lobby for increased wages. Workers in other cities joined the cause and went out on strike and engaged with the media. The coalition reached out to the African American and Latino communities, the Poor People's Campaign, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). As a result, twenty states passed legislation to transition to a $15 minimum wage. This Fight for $15 is an ongoing coalition that demonstrates the power of including a coalition with broad representation and purposely using media outlets to bring pressure to bear on those who control access to resources.

Culturally Responsive Inclusion

Many groups of people experience high levels of discrimination and threats of violence. It is very important for researchers who work with these populations to have a positive impact in order to contribute to a more just world. In order to have a positive impact, researchers need to enter communities in culturally responsive ways that keep the participants safe and allow them to express their ideas about conditions, problems, and solutions without fear. One example of an oppressed community is found in many African and Caribbean countries where members of the LGBTQI communities face stigma, discrimination, and violence, with laws that punish same-sex sexual relations with prison time and even death (Miller, 2020). Miller reported on a project called the Advocacy and other Community Tactics Project (ACT) in Cameroon that was designed to improve health access for gay and bisexual men and trans women. A transformative lens was used to inform the design of the study with particular efforts

focused on being culturally responsive with the stakeholders. The project was structured as a collaboration with multiple members: a lead activist agency, a watchdogging expert, and nine identity groups who worked as a collective. The researcher shared data collection responsibilities with the collaborative. Other transformative aspects of this work included taking an advocacy stance on behalf of an oppressed group, ensuring grassroots representation, providing a safe and supportive environment, focusing on issues of justice, and consciously addressing power issues as a basis for sustained transformative action.

In keeping with the transformative approach to research with the ACT project, the researcher and collaborative spent considerable time establishing respectful relationships and developing ways to work together (Miller, 2020). The study used a transformative mixed methods design. The collaborative conducted a contextual analysis using document analysis to identify legislative barriers. The researcher used extant data and interviews with activists to reveal such culturally oppressive practices as family rejection, eviction by landlords, and living on the street. As a part of reciprocity, the project trained local data collectors on how to be mystery shoppers at health care clinics. These participants visited the local clinics and collected data using a standardized tool that had been developed by the collaborative in order to reflect indicators of importance to them.

The attention paid to the mystery shoppers (local data collectors) illustrates aspects of culturally responsive inclusion. The project monitored the experiences of the local data collectors by collecting qualitative data as the study progressed. These data revealed that the local data collectors experienced hostility and high levels of stress. The project used these data to design additional training to provide better safety protections and ways to respond to discrimination in a nonprovocative manner. The project also started providing support meetings so the data collectors could deal with the stress they experienced in their field work. Four of the nine collaboration members contributed to the sustainability of the project by training additional people to collect data.

The use of these culturally responsive strategies for inclusion and support yielded important impacts of the research. The data provided a basis for training health care workers and district directors in the provision of positive health care, free of intimidation and discrimination (Miller, 2020). The facilities developed corrective action plans and committed to reducing or eliminating discriminatory practices. They also formed a network of district directors through a WhatsApp group so they could stay informed on the issues. A new health care site was also established within one of the collaborating identity organizations. The local data collectors reported on a survey and in interviews that they were more likely to seek healthcare and to help others navigate the system. And the project spread beyond the initial health care clinics: prison health care workers asked for training for their staff. The project was not directed at changing the oppressive laws in Cameroon, but it did result in a health care system that was more supportive for bisexual and gay men and trans women.

McCracken (2020) provides another example of strategies used to be inclusive in a culturally responsive way in her work with incarcerated women. Before she submitted a proposal for her research, she volunteered with a group that worked with women inside and outside the county jail. Researchers sometimes think in terms of qualitative or quantitative methods. However, the act of volunteering was an essential part of her research, but it eludes labeling of methods as quantitative and qualitative. In the process of establishing respectful relationships, she discussed the study with the women as she developed her proposal but not in a formal research sense because she did not yet have ethical approval. Her first proposal for a community-based participatory research design (CBPR) was deliberately flexible and described the process she planned to use to create a research study with the incarcerated women. After that was approved, she worked with the women to develop research questions and data collection methods that the women viewed as feasible and valuable. McCracken then submitted a second proposal to the ethical review board that reflected the results of the collaborative process. These stages of research that are needed to enact culturally responsive inclusion are difficult to categorize as qualitative or quantitative, yet, they are essential to research that is to have transformative impact.

McCracken (2020) identified the primary goals of the CBPR approach as follows: "create partnerships, investigate the role of power in existing relationships, build capacity, and create new knowledge that positively impacts the community at the center of the study" (p. 3). She described how engaging with the women as co-researchers addressed power issues that would have been present in studies with a more hierarchical structure between researchers and participants. McCracken wanted to further reduce power inequities by having women who were incarcerated lead the focus groups and to compensate them for this work. Unfortunately, jail administrators denied both of these requests. The researcher then decided to hire women who had been released from prison to be the co-researchers to lead the groups. Initially, her university blocked this plan because they balked at "hiring" someone with a criminal record. The researcher had to engage in a lengthy educative process with the university; she explained that having a criminal record was a requirement for the research assistants in this study. The women who were eventually hired had to be interviewed by the university lawyers and recount in detail their traumatic past experiences with law enforcement and incarceration. These challenges and the strategies McCracken used to overcome them, illustrate the need for perseverance in enacting culturally responsive inclusion.

Addressing Power Differences

Using a transformative lens, Shier (2015) provides a third example of culturally responsive inclusion in his study with

children who live in high-poverty areas in Nicaragua. The study also illustrates strategies for addressing power differences that are typically present in research studies that have adult leadership and children as co-researchers. To counter the usual positions of power, the research project was mainly initiated and directed by the children themselves, with adults playing a role in training and supporting the young people. The work was supported by an NGO known as CESESMA[1] that supports children and adolescents in the pursuit of human rights. In one child-led study, the children chose to investigate the topic of alcohol and its relation to violence (CESESMA, 2012). They described their process of identifying a topic at a meeting in which they listed the social problems in their community and had a democratic vote to choose the one problem they felt was most important. They collected qualitative data by creating drawings of their experiences about the topic and by interviews with children and young people under 18, young people aged 18–25, and parents and community leaders. They also interviewed the local chief of police. Their interview guide included both quantitative and qualitative questions. They then held a meeting where they analyzed the results and then wrote up the final report. This team of researchers presented their findings to the government's Family Commission which subsequently decided to make the alcohol problem and associated violence its top priority. Specific impacts of the government's taking action based on the research report (and possibly other factors) included confiscating illegal liquor and closing at least two unlicensed cantinas by local police. The young people were interviewed on national television, and it was broadcast on the evening news. The local authorities have also ensured that no new liquor licenses are granted in the area where their village is located.

Shier (2015) notes several factors that support culturally responsive inclusion of young people in ways that insure the children operate from positions of power. First, children need to be recognized as having the knowledge and experience about the problems they want to solve. They need technical support and resources to plan, organize, carry out, and disseminate their research studies. Adults can provide training in communication, research methods, data analysis, teamwork, and report preparation. The supporting organizations need to commit to sustained support of the young people in carrying out the recommendations they make in their action plans. This support is necessary so that the child researchers can fulfill their roles as advocates, activists, and agents of social change.

Ebersohn and Rooyen (2018) conducted a longitudinal study of pathways to resilience for Indigenous South Africans who lived in high-poverty areas with low literacy levels. Their questions about methods reflect a concern for explicitly addressing power differences:

> Which methods can accommodate high levels of illiteracy? Which methods reflect sensitivity to heightened vulnerability due to poverty and isolation in a society that is already highly unequal?

> Which methods acknowledge sociocultural diversities related to age, gender, and governance hierarchies? (p. 2)

They opted for participatory methods in the form of elicitation methods in order to create a space for participants to operate from a position of power. Data collection occurred during two sessions totaling 8 days over 2 years. These conversations were conducted in the local language by a trained local translator. The data included verbatim transcripts translated into English, observations documented in field notes by multiple researchers, researcher journals, visual figures, and artifacts. The conversational data collection setting was used in recognition of the communal nature of the communities in South Africa. The production of visual materials was used to overcome concerns about low levels of literacy. Local partners suggested prompts that stimulated the production of visual materials by community members that depicted their community and factors they viewed as engendering risk or protection. Symbols that were familiar to community members (e.g., a drum and a snake) were used to elicit their knowledge of how Indigenous knowledge is used to solve problems. To address power issues directly, the researchers met the participants at locations close to their homes, minimized the time demand, built rapport through sharing meals and tea, and leveraging existing partnerships they had developed over a decade. The groups were separated by age and gender to address power differences inherent in the social and cultural structure. The researchers recognized the limitation of their work because they were all "outsiders." They acknowledge that the power differences might have been more effectively addressed if the researchers were Indigenous. In addition, the impact of the work of documenting Indigenous knowledge might be more accurately described by Indigenous researchers.

Sustainability

Farmers in South Africa were part of a research collaborative that was deliberately structured to address power issues between themselves, academic practitioners, social impact investors, and community researchers and to develop a collaborative to support sustainability of transformative change (Arko-Achemfuor et al., 2019). A South African alumnus of an educational institution for children (Serolong) initiated the study because she wanted to have support for literacy development for farmers in a rural area. She had completed higher levels of education and had established Bokamoso Impact Investments (BII) to support agricultural development and entrepreneurship. Serolong wanted to support farmers in developing sustainable farming practices, but her engagement with the community revealed that the farmers needed to develop literacy skills before they could benefit from further training. Arko-Achemfuor, an academic practitioner, worked with Serolong to provide training for farmers in functional literacy and numeracy. Data from the training

program revealed that all the participants obtained certificates of successful completion. Subsequently, BII then provided training on basic horticulture and production of vegetables on a commercial scale. BII then facilitated movement of the produce to markets.

Arko-Achemfuor recruited Romm and McIntyre-Mills, both community researchers, to participate in meetings with the farmers where they discussed the farmers' needs. Their data collection through conversations at these regularly held meetings illustrates the use of methods that are indigenous to the community as the chief regularly called such meetings, even before this project began. The conversations at the meetings revealed that the farmers wanted to learn to produce healthy and fresh food and how to run a cooperative. Some of the farmers also wanted to learn how to keep bees and market honey. The key to the success of this project was to engage the community to identify problems and find solutions that are sustainable. The philosophy that was enacted in this project is described thusly: "Practitioners become 'academics' insofar as they co-research with others (including those situated in higher education institutions and also communities in the field) options for inputting constructively into the social and ecological fabric of life, where knowing is linked to action as part of the definition of 'knowledge'" (p. 8). The implementation of the solutions was fraught with challenges because of a lack of financial resources to enable farmers to obtain the inputs (seed, fertilizer) and the farm equipment they needed and a historically low water table. BII had to persevere in their search for funding and to support drilling additional boreholes to find water.

The impact of the program went beyond the development of literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge in horticulture and entrepreneurship (McIntyre-Mills et al., 2019). The farmers who participated in the training became less dependent on social grants. Some farmers grew more produce on their household farms than they had previously. The profits from the cooperative were shared amongst the farmers who chose to work in the cooperative. The farmers place high value on the support network that they have developed to work together. Challenges continue to face the farmers, but they have the collaborative of local farmers, researchers, and BII to meet these challenges. They have a mechanism in place to experiment with crops that can be raised with less water and warmer temperatures.

Liebenberg et al. (2017) wanted to engage with Indigenous youth in a study of mental health services in ways that increased the relevance of the findings to this group, that is, accurately reflected their lived experience and needs. They assumed that increasing relevance would increase the probability that the research findings would be used to influence policy making and service provision, thus increasing the impact of the research. To this end, they employed a participatory action research approach that was based on the development of a collaboration with the researchers, youth, and community knowledge users, both service providers and senior government department staff. Rather than assuming that they knew the best way to engage youth, the collaborative engaged in a workshop with youth, community partners, and researchers to develop strategies to engage with Indigenous youth, collect data, and share findings. Indigenous community partners recommended the use of visual images linked with interviews because that was in keeping with the cultural traditions of storytelling. Subsequently, the youth provided the data by means of taking photographs and producing day-in-a-life videos that were used to frame interviews that the researchers conducted. All members of the collaborative participated in the analysis of the data.

As a way to increase dissemination and impact, the youth led the dissemination of the findings (Liebenberg et al., 2017). They created posters that paired quotations from the interviews with elicitation photos; the posters were displayed in the community centers and in prominent places around the villages. One of the creative methods for dissemination involved painting a mural that depicted the eight core findings on the walls of the crisis center. The director of the crisis center used the findings to develop a strategic plan that integrated the identified needs into a larger community development plan. Service providers reported changing their practice to integrate the findings to make their work more culturally supportive. Because senior government officials were part of the collaborative from the beginning, the findings were also used at the policy level by the First Nations Health branch of the Federal Government of Canada to change policies on mental health resources for Indigenous youth. The collaborative process provides a mechanism for further sustainability in that the youth developed leadership skills and all the partners developed research and dissemination skills. The development of respectful relationships and consciously creating a collaborative with government, health service staff, and youth was key to the sustainability of this movement to increase support for Indigenous youth through culturally responsive mental health services.

Conclusion

Concern for demonstrating impact of research arises from ethical principles as well as political pressures. Researchers need to critically examine the impact of their work in order to avoid complicity in continuing an oppressive status quo and to make contributions toward increased justice. A transformative lens applied to thinking about, planning, implementing, disseminating, and using research provides guidance in strategies that can increase the impact of research to this end. The transformative assumptions lead to conscious inclusion of members of vulnerable and marginalized communities in ways that are culturally responsive and address power inequities. If researchers take their role seriously in this regard, they can benefit from integrating learnings from social activists who dedicate their work to increasing justice. Some might consider a shift in the role of researcher to encompass

social activism as controversial. However, others argue that researchers should adopt a role as change agents and employ strategies that have been successfully applied by social activists (Hall, 2020; McBride et al., 2020).

The discussions of methods in terms of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods misses the larger contextual and cultural issues that need to be addressed to increase the impact of research in addressing inequities and increasing justice. As exemplified in the studies discussed in this article, integrating strategies of social activists, shifting the role of researcher to social change agent, culturally responsive inclusion of members of marginalized and vulnerable populations, formation of collaboratives or coalitions, explicitly addressing power differences, and planning for sustainability are not unproblematic. However, communities have the strength to guide researchers in ways to overcome these challenges. Researchers can support transformative change by asking themselves, what is the impact of my work? Is it contributing to increased justice or supporting oppression? If researchers make a commitment to increasing justice, then their final question asks: What do I need to do in the design of my research to support transformative change and sustainable impact?

ORCID ID

Donna M. Mertens https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0251-8618

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