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# Centering Reciprocity and Accountability in Community-Based Research: How Meaningful Relationships with a Community Advisory Group Impacted Survey Development

Rebecca Godderis, Jennifer Root

**ABSTRACT** Community advisory boards (CAB) or groups (CAG) are frequently included in qualitative community-based research (CBR), particularly in the early phases of assessing need, impact, and design of a research project. Projects with emancipatory, liberatory, or decolonial emphases include CAGs in the spirit of inclusivity, representation, transformation, truth-telling, and participation, but the methodological value and impact of such groups often remains under-explored in reports about the research. It is also relatively uncommon to use CAGs in quantitative research. In our survey research about post-secondary instructors' experiences of receiving student disclosures of gender-based violence, we used a time-limited, task-specific CAG to assist with survey development. In this report from the field, we discuss our approach to the inclusion of a CAG in our research, which emphasized reciprocity and accountability to community, and we explore how the use of a CAG directly impacted and strengthened the quantitative study.

**KEYWORDS** community advisory group, community advisory board, reciprocity, accountability, survey development, community-based research, gender-based violence

For scholars engaging in community-based research (CBR) it is relatively common to incorporate some form of a community advisory board (CAB) and/or group (CAG) (D'Alonzo, 2010; Koné et al., 2000; Newman et al., 2011; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This practice is particularly the case for projects with emancipatory, liberatory, or decolonial goals to ensure inclusivity, representation, transformation, truth-telling, and participation (for an overview see Cargo & Mercer, 2008). However, the methodological value and impact of CAGs remains under-explored in the actual reporting of these studies. In most empirical manuscripts and research reports, the work of a CAG is frequently described in just a sentence or two. We present a more fulsome description of how a time-limited, task-specific CAG positively impacted the creation of a survey tool, thereby meaningfully improving and impacting the overall study design. Furthermore, as part of this discussion, we thread throughout it our reflections on how this group contributed to building reciprocity and accountability between us, as university researchers, and the communities we engage with through our scholarship and activism.

## **The Project**

The goal of our empirical study was to explore how post-secondary instructors responded to student disclosures of gender-based violence (GBV) and the impact (if any) these disclosures had on teaching and learning. Over the past 10 years, there has been a heightened awareness of GBV on campuses, giving rise to our questions about how instructors were engaging with survivors of violence inside the classroom. We had a sense, based on our own experiences of receiving disclosures (Root & Godderis, 2016), that instructors might be struggling with supportive responses to disclosures. We and others have also previously written about the collective responsibility of everyone on campus to address GBV, including viewing the classroom as a space where violence may occur and disclosures of violence may be shared (Godderis & Root, 2017; Sharoni & Klocke, 2019). The aim of this specific survey project was to better understand how receiving disclosures of GBV impacted university instructors' approaches to teaching. To do so, we designed a survey instrument to be administered to all instructors at our home institution. Our principal goal in undertaking this work was to better support survivors by improving the quality of teaching and learning within post-secondary classrooms. The guiding research questions for the project asked about when and how disclosures were received by instructors, how instructors responded, and whether these experiences changed instructors' approaches to teaching. We incorporated a CAG to assist with the development of the survey. Vaughn and Jacquez (2020) propose that methods and tools often not considered inherently participatory (i.e., surveys) can be thought about and (re)designed in participatory ways, especially if the researchers tend to be collaborative by nature. This perfectly describes our intention when formulating a time-limited, task-specific CAG to inform survey design.

## **Creating a Community Advisory Group**

There is a robust literature establishing the value of CAGs in relation to CBR. For example, a recent World Health Organization ([WHO], 2020) report outlines how best to bring together a CAG that authentically represents the community and highlights the importance of including those who have the least amount of power in that community. In relation to the study of GBV, a review of research using CBR suggests frequent use of CAGs, often composed of anti-violence advocates, activists, service providers, and/or survivors (e.g., Khan et al., 2018; Wolferman et al., 2019). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully determine the utility of CAGs in GBV studies, we did observe a seeming absence of in-depth descriptions about why and how CAGs are used in CBR projects examining violence. Moreover, in general there appeared to be a limited number of studies utilizing CAGs in quantitative research. Two articles in the health field provide in-depth descriptions of using CAGs in creating a survey. Flicker and colleagues (2010) engaged youth to develop a sexual health survey while Abelsohn and colleagues (2015) built on this work in the context of women living with HIV/AIDS. Beyond these two studies, the literature is quite sparse in terms of detailed descriptions of how CAGs work and how they can be used to strengthen quantitative research, especially in the field of GBV research.

During the early stages of conceptualizing the project we began to discuss the possibility of creating a task-specific CAG to support the development of the survey. The central reason for

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this approach was to uphold accountability and reciprocity in our personal and professional relationships with individuals we work alongside in the areas of GBV prevention. For us, accountability and reciprocity are overlapping concepts that, when taken together, highlight our responsibilities as researchers to ensure *all* aspects of a research endeavour are beneficial not only for us as researchers, but also for the communities we work alongside. This mutually beneficial relationship also necessitates a focus on identifying and mitigating/eliminating harms that can be caused by research itself (e.g., extractive and exploitative relations). Our hope was that even though this CAG would be time-limited, it could provide an additional opportunity to build and nurture meaningful relationships within the context of our ongoing engagement as scholar-activists in GBV.

In terms of thinking about who made up “community” for this project we purposefully identified individuals from both inside and outside of the university who we felt could offer a variety of expertise, experiences, and perspectives in the areas of GBV, teaching and learning, and survey methodology. Moreover, in line with the WHO (2020) report, we worked to include representation from communities often ignored and/or intentionally exploited within the university community. For our specific context this involved inviting individuals from each campus (our home institution is a multi-campus university with one campus often classified as the “main” or “primary” campus) and ensuring there was representation from faculty who held limited-term (one to three years) and contract/part-time (course by course) appointments in addition to full-time permanently employed faculty.

Once we determined the general areas of knowledge and demographics we aimed to have represented, we worked to identify individuals with whom we had existing relationships including faculty colleagues throughout our home institution who held various teaching positions, individuals from the university-based Diversity & Equity Office, Gendered Violence Task Force, Centre for Teaching Innovation & Excellence, and Accessible Learning, as well as partners external to the university including the local community-based Sexual Assault Centres. Connecting into existing relationships was important to us to confront and challenge one-sided relationships that can occur within research contexts (Maiter et al., 2008), especially given that the CAG for this project was going to be a time-limited arrangement. Researchers engaging in CBR continue to grapple with how to balance relationship-building and reciprocity with the power differentials arising between university and community partners, and many have noted the value of long-term relationships to challenge power hierarchies and increase the success of meaningful CBR for both researchers and community members (e.g., Hanson & Ogunade, 2016; Yang et al., 2019).

Our goal was to connect with individuals who we knew, and with whom we had worked in various capacities, so that their involvement with this CAG would not be a one-time interaction that felt extractive and tokenistic but rather was part of on-going, reciprocal engagement with us as scholars, activists, and colleagues. Over the past decade of being employed at the university, we have been dedicated professionally and personally to eliminating GBV on and off campus. This activity has involved attending Take Back the Night marches organized by the local sexual assault centre, responding to multiple requests from GBV community organizations for

assistance with grant applications, research projects, and strategic consultations, and taking on formal and informal roles within the university to establish GBV policies, support survivors, and more. As passionate teachers, we have also worked to build strong relationships with fellow instructors who work at the university on a part-time or full-time basis, including answering requests about how to incorporate GBV materials into classes and respond to disclosures. We relied on these relationships to build the CAG.

We also thought carefully about how much time was fair to ask of the CAG. While there is literature suggesting a successful CAG requires extensive time commitment from members (Arnold et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2009), we intentionally designed a time-limited CAG. In the case of our study, we asked CAG members for approximately 6 hours over a two-month period, which involved attending two 2-hour meetings with other CAG members plus reviewing a draft survey instrument. We were explicit about the amount of time in the initial email so invitees could make informed decisions about whether participation would fit into their schedules. We understand this transparency as part of the practice of accountability and reciprocity towards communities because it provides individuals with the information necessary to make the best decision for themselves (rather than demanding their participation). This aspect of the process felt particularly important to us when it came to requesting participation from representatives who were engaged in frontline support work because time spent with us generally came at the expense of providing support for survivors. In the end, the CAG had a total of 12 people. This size of group worked well to balance a diversity of experiences while also ensuring the group was small enough that everyone had an opportunity to participate in the meetings.

### **Benefits of Including a Community Advisory Group**

Below we provide more detailed explanations of the benefits of engaging a task-specific CAG to assist in the development of a survey and speak specifically to the ways the group contributed to reciprocity and accountability.

#### ***Refining and Developing the Survey***

The CAG made numerous important contributions to survey development. The following select examples illustrate the evolution of survey items and concepts based on the input of the CAG. Specifically, CAG members clarified how to more fully account for instructor diversity and positionality, and how to make the concepts of GBV and disclosure accessible to those with little to no professional experience in the area of GBV.

#### **Accounting for diverse instructor positionalities**

The CAG identified the need to account for a wider range of instructor positionalities than we originally conceived, for example: personal characteristics, discipline/department *and* main area of teaching, and likelihood of engaging with GBV content in course instruction. Their assistance in widening our understanding of instructor identities and demographics resulted

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in richer data collection and, therefore, more meaningful understandings of GBV disclosure. This strengthened our ability to draw conclusions about how student disclosures are received by instructors and identify issues unique to different contexts (e.g., different campuses, specific departments or disciplines, etc.). These seemingly small shifts provided us greater specificity in contextualizing responses to disclosure, particularly our ability to examine potential connections between both discipline and/or subject of teaching and receiving disclosures.

Another major contribution of the CAG was their suggestion to include a question about instructor attitudes related to GBV, a survey item that we had not previously considered. The CAG identified a global ‘umbrella’ question that dramatically changed the analytic power of our study: “Q: How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statement: GBV is a significant problem on university campuses?” Responses to this question were scored on a Likert scale and allowed us to engage in a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between potential non-believing/blaming/misinformed attitudes about GBV on campus and the experience and outcome of receiving a disclosure.

Finally, the CAG helped us better understand the unique experiences of part-time instructors. Part-time faculty often teach at multiple institutions simultaneously during the academic year and, in some cases, are teaching different subject matter in different disciplines/departments. Identifying this nuance is not simply about accurately capturing demographic details, rather making these distinctions allowed us to broaden our thinking about teaching contexts, institutional expectations, and the culture of GBV on various post-secondary campuses. In the end, this new understanding led us to shift from the question, “What department do you teach in?” to the final survey question, “Check the item that most closely aligns with your primary teaching area (this may not necessarily be the same as your department or program).” Determining the scope and variety of teaching responsibilities allowed us to better reflect the positionality of all instructors who may take the survey, as well as considering how instructors may receive disclosures at multiple institutions and thus need to navigate different procedural and cultural expectations regarding how to respond.

### **Making gender-based violence and disclosure accessible and concrete**

A central contribution of the CAG was the various ways they expanded our conceptualization of disclosure, capturing a wider range of types of disclosure, thereby helping us to create more accessibility for survey participants who may not be experts in this area. For example, they pushed our thinking beyond the assumed verbal disclosure scenario to include written disclosures, in-class disclosures, non-disclosures (anonymous, third-party disclosures), electronic disclosures, and hallway disclosures. We also added a category of “unsure/maybe” when asking participants about receiving disclosures; that is, the CAG helped us to account for indirect disclosures (perhaps not even verbalized) that left the recipient wondering if a disclosure was shared. Thus, the CAG afforded us the ability to formulate questions capturing the complexity of disclosure and opened the scope of our survey. In the end this allowed for deeper analyses and theorizing on the concept of disclosure.

Another example of how the CAG helped us to articulate complex ideas in clear and concrete ways was the transformation of a single survey question (nominal variable) to a table (nominal and ordinal variables). In addition to responding to the question, “In your capacity as a post-secondary instructor, has a student ever disclosed an experience of GBV to you? [yes/no/maybe]”, we added a table with nine concrete examples of GBV, and the opportunity to indicate the frequency of each type of GBV disclosure. This valuable addition to the survey allowed us to name specific types of GBV, from rape to denial of essential services, and unwanted attention to online harassment. By providing concrete examples of GBV and using plain language (in addition to providing terminology and definitions within the survey) participants who were less familiar with the complexities of GBV were able to participate in the survey more meaningfully.

### ***Growing Reciprocal Relationships and Remaining Accountable***

The use of a task-specific CAG provided us with another opportunity to deepen our connection to members in our communities. CAG members commented that they appreciated having an opportunity to share their knowledge, learned from other members of the CAG, and enjoyed having the opportunity to talk about the topics they were passionate about (and we did too!). The meetings gave us, as researchers, the opportunity to demonstrate how much we value and take seriously the expertise and experiences of community members. We came to the group with some basic ideas, but we wanted these ideas to be questioned, changed, and challenged. Thus, like Flicker et al. (2010) and Abelsohn et al. (2015), the CAG members were involved at the earliest stages of survey conceptualization, contributing much more than just usability testing after the survey was already designed. The CAG had an opportunity to frame and develop the survey rather than to simply respond to the parameters already set by the researchers. For us, this approach fundamentally challenges the idea that we, as university-based researchers, are the experts—an assumption commonly upheld by the Western research paradigm (read: colonial, patriarchal, classist, racist, ableist, etc.).

In addition to this reciprocity, creating a CAG was about accountability, which includes mitigating potential harms related to undertaking research. For example, if those we were in relationship with—and particularly those who work directly with survivors—had expressed to us that we should not complete this study because it could cause more harm than good, then we would have listened and discontinued the research. In other words, the CAG gave us the opportunity to meaningfully check in with community members about the potential impact of our research. Accountability also meant identifying what information would be especially significant to community members by having members share what they felt would be most useful from the research. Thus, the inclusion of a CAG ensured our research processes produced an outcome that was meaningful to CAG members and their communities, which overlaps with the idea of reciprocity as articulated in Swartz’s (2011) concept of “intentional ethics of reciprocation” which emphasizes “an ethics of reciprocation is to give back both ownership of knowledge and material benefit to those participating in the research” (p. 49).

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Our goal in outlining our approach to the use of a CAG to assist with the development of a survey instrument was to emphasize the utility of this community engagement technique while also highlighting how it can contribute to deepening relationships of trust with community members. While a one-off use of a time-limited, task-specific CAG could be extractive and exploitative, our experience was that when a CAG was part of on-going engagement with community it contributed to building reciprocal relationships, deepening accountability processes with community partners, and significantly improving the research. In terms of limitations and future GBV research, we consider ourselves, ultimately, accountable to survivors of GBV. One of the limitations of our study was our intentional decision to not ask student survivors to join the CAG because the survey was focused on instructors. This is an element of the research we may change in future projects. Further, in our study we did not provide compensation to the CAG and we continue to wonder if the unpaid labour provided by CAG members unfairly added to their workload, especially for already burdened community workers. Additional research could examine the experiences of CAG members to better understand what meaningful compensation and mutual benefit means to them. Overall, given our positive experience with the CAG, we encourage other researchers to consider the reciprocal and accountable use of CAGs in their own research and to include fulsome descriptions of CAGs in their reporting of research results.

### **About the Authors**

**Rebecca Godderis** (she/her), (*corresponding author*) is an Associate Professor in the Department of Health Studies and the Social Justice and Community Engagement Masters program at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her research and teaching are intertwined with activism with a focus on gender and sexuality from an intersectional, anti-racist feminist perspective. Email: [rgodderis@wlu.ca](mailto:rgodderis@wlu.ca)

**Jennifer Root** (she/her), is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University. Her approach to scholarship is rooted in advocacy, community-driven methods, anti-oppressive, and intersectional feminist theories. Her broader interests include women's experiences of intimate partner violence, gender-based violence, and sexual violence.

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