

Research Article

Arts-based methodologies to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities in the Greater Toronto Area: Sharing some implementation experiences from the fieldSheena Madzima¹, Amirtha Karunakaran¹, Luz Maria Vazquez¹ & Nazilla Khanlou¹¹York University

Abstract: Cultural identity is a complex, fluid and context bound concept. Cultural identity is informed by immigrant and second-generation youths' experiences of adaptation and integration. Cultural identity has also been linked to youth mental health and wellbeing. Research recognizes the need to develop research tools to better capture and understand youths' lived experiences with their identity and integration in multicultural settings. We present preliminary research findings from our community-based project that applied arts-based methodologies to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities in the Greater Toronto Area in Canada. Inclusion criteria were (i) youth between the ages of 16-29 and (ii) who self-identify as Asian or Asian-Canadian. We organized two workshops with youth participants. In workshop 1 we applied visual arts: Self-Portrait and a Relational Map. In workshop 2 we applied drama (Readers' Theatre). Youth feedback highlighted the effectiveness of arts-based methodologies in (i) helping youth to discuss their lived experiences without feeling like they were under evaluation, (ii) providing a universal way of communicating their experiences and, (iii) allowing youth to think of issues that participants had not previously reflected on. We also shared some implementation experiences. This pilot study informed implementation strategies for a current larger project that has the objective of evaluating the effectiveness of arts-based methodologies to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities.

Keywords: arts-based methodologies, youth, identity, visual arts, drama

Abstrait: L'identité culturelle est un concept complexe, fluide et lié au contexte. L'identité culturelle s'inspire des expériences d'adaptation et d'intégration des immigrants et des jeunes de la deuxième génération. L'identité culturelle est également liée à la santé mentale et au bien-être des jeunes. La recherche reconnaît la nécessité de développer des outils de recherche pour mieux saisir et comprendre les expériences vécues par les jeunes avec leur identité et leur intégration dans des contextes multiculturels. Nous présentons les résultats de recherche préliminaires de notre projet communautaire qui a appliqué des méthodologies basées sur les arts pour explorer les identités des jeunes Canadiens d'origine asiatique dans la région urbaine de Toronto au Canada. Les critères d'inclusion étaient (i) les jeunes âgés de 16 à 29 ans et (ii) qui s'identifiaient comme asiatiques ou asiatiques canadiens. Nous avons organisé deux ateliers avec des jeunes participants. Dans l'atelier 1, nous avons appliqué les arts visuels: autoportrait et une carte relationnelle. Dans l'atelier 2, nous avons appliqué le théâtre (Théâtre pour Lecteurs). Les commentaires des jeunes ont souligné l'efficacité des méthodologies fondées sur les arts pour (i) aider les jeunes à discuter leurs expériences vécues sans se sentir comme s'ils étaient en cours d'évaluation, (ii) fournir un moyen universel de communiquer leurs expériences et, (iii) permettre aux jeunes de penser à des questions sur lesquelles les participants n'avaient pas réfléchi auparavant. Nous avons également partagé quelques expériences de mise en œuvre. Cette étude pilote a éclairé les stratégies de mise en œuvre pur un vaste projet actuel qui a le objectif d'évaluer l'efficacité des méthodologies artistiques pour explorer les identités des jeunes Canadiens d'origine asiatique.

Resumen: Como concepto, la identidad cultural es compleja, fluida y contextual. La identidad cultural se construye con base en las experiencias de adaptación y de integración de jóvenes inmigrantes y de segunda generación. La identidad cultural ha sido asociada con la salud mental y el bienestar de los jóvenes. Investigaciones reconocen la necesidad de desarrollar herramientas de investigación que nos permitan capturar y entender mejor las experiencias de los jóvenes en relación a su identidad e integración en contextos multiculturales. En este artículo presentamos resultados de investigación de carácter preliminar de nuestro proyecto a través del cual aplicamos metodologías artísticas para explorar las identidades de jóvenes Asiático-Canadienses en el área metropolitana de Toronto. Criterios para participar en el estudio incluyeron jóvenes i) de entre 16 a 29 años de edad y ii) quienes se identificaron como de origen Asiático o Asiático-Canadiense. Organizamos dos talleres. En el taller 1 introducimos y aplicamos

artes visuales: autorretrato (Self-Portrait) y mapa de relaciones (Relational Map), en el taller 2 aplicamos una técnica de drama - teatro de lectores (Readers' Theatre). Recibimos retroalimentación de los jóvenes participantes en esta investigación, quienes subrayaron la eficacia de este tipo de metodologías artísticas en lo que se refiere a (i) ayudarles a sentirse libres para discutir sus experiencias sin sentirse como si estuvieran siendo evaluados, (ii) proveerles un medio universal para comunicar sus experiencias, y (iii) como medios a través de los cuales pudieron pensar sobre problemas en los cuales no habían reparado en pensar antes. En este manuscrito también compartimos nuestra experiencias sobre la implementación de este proyecto. Este fue un estudio piloto que nos ayudó y del cual aprendimos estrategias para implementar nuestro proyecto actual que es más extenso, que tiene el objetivo de evaluar la eficacia de las metodologías artísticas en el estudio y exploración de las identidades de jóvenes Asiático-Canadienses.

Introduction

This paper draws on our implementation experiences from the community-based project titled "An Arts-based Participatory Youth Engagement KMB Project on Asian-Canadian Youth Identities" led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou, from York University (Khanlou, 2018). The purpose of the project was to apply arts-based methodologies to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), in Canada. A key objective was to receive feedback from youth participants on the effectiveness and relevance of these arts-based methodologies in exploring their Asian-Canadian identities (Khanlou, 2018).

Cultural identity is a complex and fluid concept (Khanlou & Vazquez, 2018), and it has been defined as one's "sense of self" (Phinney, Berry, Vedder, & Liebkind, 2006), context-bound, and that "manifests in the presence of culturally different other(s)" (Khanlou, Bender, Mill, Vazquez & Rojas, 2018, p. 59). Furthermore, cultural identity has been linked to youth's mental health and wellbeing since it develops and is informed by immigrant and second-generation youth's experiences of adaptation and integration in the context of multicultural societies. Challenges of integration and adaptation related to racism, discrimination, invisibility, as well as youth's resilience and strengths, constitute the backdrop and building blocks of youth's cultural identities and mental health. It is in light of this complexity of experiences and of the impacts that they may have on youth's mental health, that it is imperative for researchers to develop effective research approaches, strategies, and tools to better capture

and understand youth's lived experiences with their identity and integration in multicultural settings.

Researchers have highlighted the need to develop innovative qualitative methodologies, tools and approaches to exploring and understanding youth's identities (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). Khanlou's project (2018) was a first exploratory step towards contributing to the discussion of the effectiveness of arts-based methodologies in exploring these issues from the perspective of Asian-Canadian youth living in the GTA. In this manuscript we present our experiences in implementing this exploratory project; we present some preliminary research findings and lessons learned from the field.

The project

The project consisted of the following key activities (Khanlou, 2018). At the onset of the project an Advisory Committee (AC) of youth, community partners, and project researchers was established. The AC provided input into project design and activities. Following this activity, the team started the phase of recruiting study participants. We organized the following two Workshops that were facilitated by two youth researchers (first and second authors).

In Workshop 1 (November 2019) a total of two Asian-Canadian youth participated in the workshop's activities. Following welcome and a general introduction, youth participants were introduced to Self Portraits (Bagnoli, 2009) and Relations Maps (Bagnoli, 2009; Crilly, Blackwell, & Clarkson, 2006) which are considered effective methods for individual level of identity exploration. They are arts-based

visual research techniques that allow researchers to gather information on individuals' experiences in a non-linguistic dimension of research (Khanlou, 2018). After the introduction to these two techniques, the two Workshop facilitators asked general open-ended questions about Asian-Canadian youth cultural identity and experiences of migration and integration. As part of the workshop discussion guide, facilitators asked the youth to draw a self-portrait and a relational map to explain their ideas. After taking some time to draw, youth were asked (through close and open-ended questions) about their feedback and input on the two techniques.

In Workshop 2 (December 2019) a total of five Asian-Canadian youth participated in the workshop's activities. The two youth facilitators followed the same format used in Workshop 1. Following welcome and a general introduction, the youth were introduced to Readers' Theatre (Pardue, 2004). Readers' Theatre (RT) Theatre is a form of drama, it is a simple theatrical arts approach in which participants write, read off and discuss a script they wrote based on a particular issue. After the introduction to RT, the facilitators asked general open-ended questions about Asian-Canadian youth cultural identity and experiences of migration and integration (these were different questions from Workshop 1). As part of the workshop discussion guide, the facilitators asked the youth participants to write a script based on any experiences the youth wanted to share in relation to the topics explored before. Youth were grouped in small groups (One group of two members and one group of three members) to work and write their group script. After taking some time to discuss and write down their scripts, the youth were asked to read aloud their scripts, and after that a discussion of the scripts content was followed. Finally, and through close and open-ended questions, the facilitators asked about youth's feedback and input on RT.

Preliminary insights and experiences from the field

The project utilized critical arts-based methodologies in exploration of Asian-Canadian youth identities. A key component of this exploratory project was to

obtain youth's feedback on how effective these tools were in exploring their Asian-Canadian identities. Youth's feedback highlighted the effectiveness of arts-based methodologies in (i) helping youth to feel free to discuss lived experiences without feeling like they are under evaluation, (ii) providing a universal way of communicating youth's experiences and, (iii) allowing youth to think of issues that participants had not previously reflected on.

The youth participants emphasized that the interview questions in the beginning of each workshop were effective icebreakers. They appreciated the relaxed atmosphere and open dialogue in which the facilitators and participants actively participated. The arts-based methods helped youth feel free to discuss personal experiences without feeling like they were under evaluation. This helped participants openly discuss intimate issues surrounding their identity as Asian-Canadian youth.

The youth participants felt these tools were effective in facilitating deeper self-reflection on one's identity compared to other methodologies such as one-on-one interviews or question-based group interviews. In addition, the participants felt that the diagrams in the self-portrait and relational map provided a universal way of communicating their issues as they could understand the underlying issues illustrated by other participants. The drawings from the self-portrait and the relational maps illustrated the issues and ideas that youth had on paper, which provided a guideline to navigate through complex concerns, at the same time allowing youth to communicate these concerns to themselves and others in a coherent style.

There are important implementation lessons learned from the project. The implementation of arts-based methodologies in the two Workshops took more time than a traditional focus group activity with close or open-ended discussion questions. The workshops included time for learning activities (introducing the arts methodologies) as well as time to completing the drawings and writing the script. Time management then is important to consider when applying these arts methodologies in a group format. Therefore, with more participants, facilitators will need to improve

their techniques in order to attain adequate information or would need another facilitator to manage another group of participants.

In the first workshop, the facilitators encountered participants who were exhibiting social desirability bias i.e. participants who felt compelled- and voiced their desire- to give the “right” answer during the focus group. However, there is no right answer as every participant's response is unique and pertains to their personal experience. Therefore, as facilitators, how can we mitigate the effects of social desirability in focus group participation? It may seem like an opportune time to interject and help participants work through their responses. However, our role was to remain neutral and not influence their responses by placing our own perspective on the participants. This entailed refraining from consoling and validating the participants when they expressed anxiety about their disconnection with their Asian identity.

Furthermore, we found that these methodologies were effective in a small group as a large group may cause certain individuals to refrain from speaking their beliefs and opinions. As evidenced in the second workshop of five participants, some participants may dominate the conversation. However, a small group discussion allows participants to know they are not alone in their experiences. This would help people bounce ideas off to each other but there was the worry of participants influencing other participants' responses and perspectives. As such, we found that it would be better to not have an order of when participants should respond but more so allow participants to respond whenever they want while observing the rules of the focus group such as not talking over each other. Achieving this in a focus group is important, in addition to engaging participants that are more reserved.

Conclusion

Preliminary findings show that the visual and drama arts-based methodologies applied in this project have potential in capturing the complexities of Asian-Canadian youth identities. We are appreciative of the

youth participants for sharing their experiences in creative ways and providing useful feedback on these techniques. This was an exploratory project with a small sample size, therefore generalizations of preliminary findings shared in this manuscript are not possible. Principal Investigator Dr. Nazilla Khanlou is currently leading the implementation of a large scale project (SSHRC 2019-2021) to apply the same visual and drama arts methodologies we applied in the project, to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities in the GTA (Khanlou et al., 2019). Our team look forward to sharing findings from this large project with the community.

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