
The main goal of *Women’s Voices in Health Promotion* is to describe research that was carried out by one of six federally funded centres on health promotion in Canada. The McMaster Research Center was the only centre that focused exclusively on women’s health. The Center chose to examine paid and unpaid work and their impact on health. The research projects were an attempt to develop and communicate strategies to create healthier working environments for women.

For the purpose of the research, the term *health promotion* was broadly interpreted and ranged from the micro (a support network for a lesbian woman with breast cancer) to the macro (women and family law). The book is divided along four central themes: women workers in health and social service agencies; women with disabilities and health promotion; immigrant, refugee, and visible minority women and health promotion; and women across the life span. The collection consists of 20 chapters and all projects adopted the feminist participatory action research model.

To review an edited collection is a challenge due to the multiple authors and the diversity of topics covered. I will focus on two issues: the feminist participatory action research (PAR) methodology and four selected chapters.

The intent of research that utilizes a PAR methodology is to treat research participants as partners. Moreover, research outcomes should “effect structural change through policy-making, community development and empowerment of the women themselves” (p. 17). A PAR methodology is ambitious and increases the expectations of the utility and directions for the research. For community members, a PAR methodology makes participating in research projects more attractive because they may feel confident that the project will further their cause. This is understandable because resources are often scarce for community groups. The nature of community groups participating in the PAR projects as described in the book varies greatly. In some projects the community partners were professional women, in others they were grass-roots women. This distinction between the background of community team members can be important. For example, a team’s functioning may be affected differently when a community member can attend meetings as part of a job or if the member can only attend outside work. It is not uncommon for research teams to encounter a great deal of tension based on rather simple issues such as when, where, and how often they should meet. Unfortunately, this kind of interaction among team members was little discussed in most chapters.

Nevertheless, the various chapters are excellent illustrations of the possibilities and pitfalls of PAR projects. One of the major challenges to a PAR project is to avoid setting the research parameters before community members get involved in the project (Hagey, 1997). Often community members come on board after the research topic and research questions have been outlined. When that happens, one cannot describe the research as a PAR project. This was the case for many projects described in the book. I felt that the PAR methodology was overstated in many projects. This does not mean that the researchers’ intentions were flawed; it merely demonstrates the enormous divide between the intentions, or the ideology, versus the practical day-to-day reality of research. Nevertheless, the authors passed up an important opportunity to discuss these issues.

For example, the study by Nora Gold, “Promoting the Physical and Mental Health of Female Social Workers,” looks at the impact of stress in the workplace. Social workers across the country have seen their workloads increase because of major cuts to social services and health care. The author used a PAR methodology because “it is committed to helping solve problems it studies, not just to describing them” (p. 62). However, the
research parameters were set by the researcher. She states: “two children’s aid societies were approached to take part and both agreed” (p. 62). After a number of focus-group discussions, the participants were informed about their collective responses, but no further action was taken. Although this piece of research is valuable, and in fact may improve social workers’ working conditions, I think to declare this a successful PAR project, instead of describing the methodology as qualitative, is mistaken.

On the other hand, a study by Maroussia Hadjukowski-Ahmed, Myrna Pond, Isik Ural Zeytinoglu, & Lori Chambers is a wonderful illustration of a well implemented PAR methodology. The community participants were involved from the initial research question to the final action component. The intent of this project was to improve working conditions for exploited immigrant women workers. The chapter outlines problems and tensions as well as the positive aspects of a team working with a PAR methodology. Although the final outcome of the project was not what was hoped for, the research was truly collaborative. This chapter also illustrated some of the dangers of PAR. The employer labeled the employees/researchers as trouble-makers and threatened them.

All chapters in the book engagingly describe how the authors struggled with and succeeded in communicating health promotion measures to improve work environments. Based on my own research background and interests, I will highlight four chapters. Jennifer Hoyle's chapter, “Health, Leisure and Women with Mobility Disabilities,” is interesting because it demonstrates the dramatic impact of social services’ reduction on vulnerable and often invisible women. When transportation cuts for the mobility disabled were implemented, the negative impact on their leisure activities was instant and affected their physical and mental health. Hoyle argues that we have to get rid of the segregation of leisure activities among the abled and “dis-abled.” One example that illustrates Hoyle's argument on a national and international level is the segregation of the Olympic and the Para-Olympic games. Why can these two events not be held simultaneously? Why are Olympians met with much media hype while the para-Olympians, who in all likelihood had to overcome more hurdles in order to compete, are met with a deafening media silence? The challenge Hoyle and her research participants face is to communicate their vision of integrated leisure activities to the larger public, policymakers, and politicians.

Nazilla Khanlou & Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed's chapter, “Adolescent Self-Concept and Mental Health Promotion in a Cross-Cultural Context,” is a piece of work that underscores the positive aspects of children rooted in one culture and growing up in another. The adolescent girls who participated in this project did have their share of difficulties living in two cultures; nevertheless, they were able to draw on the strengths of the “old” and the new cultures. The final activity of the project, the organization of a cultural event in a high school, was an affirming success for the participating young women.

A study by Kathleen Wilson, Theresa Garvin, & Colin McMullan makes important considerations concerning tanning in “The Bronzed Aesthetic.” Communicating to the general public that suntanning is dangerous and increases the risk of skin cancer is useless unless the underlying reasons for why people aspire to certain looks are addressed. The individual “fear of skin cancer” approach does not work according to Wilson, Garvin, & McMullan. Community and societal influences that equate a tanned look with a healthy look have to be addressed. Thus, no matter how important the message one tries to impart, communication in isolation of societal norms and values is meaningless.

Ronald Bayne’s chapter, “A Stop the Violence Community-Based Prevention Project,” describes a study that used an innovative approach to address violence in public settings such as schools, sports, and the media. The focus of the project was to organize a large conference on violence and to invite as many stakeholders as possible, such as teachers, police officers, community groups, health and social organization, and so forth. The most innovative aspect of this project was the focus on adolescents and young adults themselves. Young
males are not only the major perpetrators of crime, they are also the largest group of victims. It is also a group that is very difficult to reach and therefore often left out of the discussion. One of the outcomes of the project was to focus on the type of violence that is frequently seen as legitimate and is often sanctioned by parents: amateur-sports violence.

In conclusion, *Women’s Voices in Health Promotion* is very readable and suggests many health-promotion and communication strategies. This book not only provides the reader with concrete ideas about health promotion but can also be used to teach the various aspects of PAR methodologies to students, academics, and community members.

The most negative critique for this book is reserved for Canadian Scholar’s Press. The quality of the production of the book is poor. The book comes with two errata: one for the back cover and one for an incorrect authors list for chapter 1. In addition, the pages, in particular the first page of each chapter, look like cheap photocopies. The poor production quality of the book makes it less appealing to the casual buyer.

**Reference**


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