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Amy L. Cook & Patricia Krueger-Henney

To cite this article: Amy L. Cook & Patricia Krueger-Henney (2017) Group Work That Examines Systems of Power With Young People: Youth Participatory Action Research, *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 42:2, 176-193, DOI: [10.1080/01933922.2017.1282570](https://doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2017.1282570)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01933922.2017.1282570>



Published online: 06 Mar 2017.



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Group Work That Examines Systems of Power With Young People: Youth Participatory Action Research

Amy L. Cook
Patricia Krueger-Henney
University of Massachusetts Boston

Youth-led group work shifts power dynamics and repositions youth as leaders in driving the learning they envision for themselves. This shift calls into question how group facilitators measure outcomes of youth empowerment groups. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) has expanded the field of knowledge production by creating shared spaces where youth participants co-create research agendas and processes that are guided by their lived experiences and expertise, and generate data-driven action to address social problems. We propose applications of YPAR as both an emancipatory epistemology and methodology to inform group work research.

Keywords: *group work research; youth activism; youth empowerment groups; YPAR*

Counselors and mental health professionals are increasingly recognizing the importance of conducting youth-led group work to critically examine dominant social structures and their impacts on the lives of socially marginalized youth (Bemak, Chung, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005; Shin et al., 2010; Smith, Beck, Bernstein, & Dashtguard, 2014). Empowerment-based groups have been found to promote youth development including increased self-efficacy to respond to personal challenges and community issues (Gullan, Power, & Leff, 2013), stronger sense of identity and engagement with youth activism (Thomas, Davidson, & McAdoo, 2008), and prevention of school failure (Bemak et al., 2005). In conducting youth empowerment groups, researchers have emphasized the importance of strengthening youth's agency where they are encouraged to dialogically guide the direction of group content and process (Pearrow & Pollack, 2009). Contrary to traditional educational and

Manuscript submitted May 29, 2016; final revision accepted December 6, 2016.

Amy L. Cook, Ph.D., and Patricia Krueger-Henney, Ph.D., are assistant professors in the College of Education and Human Development at University of Massachusetts Boston. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Amy L. Cook, College of Education and Human Development, University of Massachusetts Boston, 100 Morrissey Blvd., Boston, MA 02125-3393. E-mail: amy.cook@umb.edu

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THE JOURNAL FOR SPECIALISTS IN GROUP WORK, Vol. 42 No. 2, June 2017, 176–193

DOI: 10.1080/01933922.2017.1282570

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counseling models for “interventions” where youth are framed as passive recipients of counseling services, empowerment groups shift uneven and adult-dominated power dynamics and center youth as leaders in driving the learning and awareness they envision for themselves and their communities (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

This shift in power dynamics also calls into question how outcomes of youth empowerment group work are measured. Ensuring that the voices of youth are at the forefront throughout research investigations is critical to engaging in social justice-oriented group work with young people and providing valuable insights to adult researchers who are concerned about the well-being of youth and their communities (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013; Lyons et al., 2013). Promoting and protecting spaces for youth group work members can allow for more student-centered and more critical examinations of invisible hegemonic power structures that perpetuate social inequalities young people encounter in their everyday lives. Although these unequal structures affect youth in different ways due to marginalization and discrimination, all youth are implicated as every young person is bound by the same set of sociopolitical power dynamics. Thus, positioning youth as leaders and co-researchers in group research means creating spaces for all young people to have direct impact on all aspects of the investigation, from identifying research needs, naming research questions, selecting the research methods, collecting data, and analyzing and disseminating findings (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichy, & Aoun, 2010; Lyons et al., 2013).

Widely examined in the educational, public health, and social psychology literature is the use of participatory action research (PAR) and PAR with youth (YPAR; e.g., Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008; Catalani & Minkler, 2010; London, 2007). While YPAR seems to initially be a collaborative research process that brings young people together to engage in dialogic discussions and actionable research outcomes, YPAR also strengthens young people’s leadership capacities and honors their expert knowledge to address local problems with support from adult allies (Practicing Freedom Collective, 2013). Implementation of YPAR has the potential to strengthen youth self-efficacy and inspire active youth engagement to inform social change (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). However, there is scant application of YPAR in counseling group work despite its track record of promoting critical consciousness, assisting with the development of self-identity, and effecting socially transformative change. Only a few group work researchers have documented its application (Smith et al., 2014; Smith, Davis, & Bhowmik, 2010).

YPAR has expanded the field of youth-centered knowledge production by creating spaces where youth participants are co-researchers and,

thus, co-create a research process driven by their lived experiences and expertise, and generates data-driven action to address some of the social problems that guide their investigations (Bautista et al., 2013; Fox, 2015). Whereas most traditional research paradigms position group leaders and other outside adult authorities as knowledge experts, YPAR members are both researchers and participants and co-own the knowledge production process. This includes the dissemination of their findings to various communities (i.e., universities, public schools, community-based organizations, policymakers, and local city administrations). Through this ontological shift, from a hierarchically designed group working logic to more horizontally and, thus, more widely distributed levels of participation, YPAR as an epistemology challenges the dominant research ideology by privileging youth's capacity and power to conduct research and calls into question traditional empirical inquiries (Bautista et al., 2013).

PURPOSE

Employing YPAR to conduct group work research presents a unique opportunity to privilege youth as knowing and knowledgeable contributors to building systems of expertise for both academic and non-academic communities. There is a lack of research on YPAR counseling groups conducted in schools and community-based organizations, with the exception of a few researchers who recognize its capacity for promoting youth-centered and youth-driven development (Smith et al., 2014; Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012; Smith et al., 2010). Given the positive impact that YPAR has had on informing youth advocacy and development in educational settings, exploring its connections to research in counseling group work allows group research that is anchored within young people's positionalities and perspectives. Facilitating socially underserved youth access to and participation in research can transform the purposes of research to be more in sync with young people's lives and their communities. This article, written as an inter-disciplinary collaboration between the fields of counseling and urban education, describes applications of YPAR as both an emancipatory epistemology and methodology to inform group work research that is specific to counseling and mental health as well as other professional settings that prioritize group work with young people. Hence this article points to the versatility of YPAR in group work research and practice.

WHAT ARE YOUTH EMPOWERMENT AND YPAR GROUPS?

Youth empowerment practices have been implemented through different approaches, including civic engagement (Lerner, 2004), service learning (Schensul & Berg, 2004), and YPAR (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), with the goal of fostering positive youth development (PYD; Engelman & Hazel, 2009). PYD is grounded in ecological systems theory to promote youth resilience, self-confidence, and moral development (Lee, Cheung, & Kwong, 2012). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model suggests there are multiple factors, both internal and external, that interlock to impact an individual's development. It is insufficient to target individual factors in approaches to facilitating group work. Rather, PYD experts appreciate the various external influences and contextual factors that shape development. These external factors relate to the immediate environment, family, school, peers, etc. (microsystem) and extend to the local community, media, local politics (exosystem), and beyond to broader systems and cultures (macrosystem). Through this framework, PYD programs aim to develop the five "C's" in youth: Competence (academic, vocational, and social-emotional), Confidence (positive self-efficacy and self-identity), Connection (to oneself, peers, family, school, and larger community), Character (positive integrity, moral development, values and respect for cultural norms), and Caring/Compassion (sympathy, empathy, and association with others) (Bowers et al., 2010; Lerner et al., 2005). PYD workers emphasize the importance of cultivating a supportive environment that fosters resilience and determination among young people; however, researchers have argued that PYD groups should promote a sixth "C," Contribution to promote social action (Zarrett & Lerner, 2008). Moreover, Contribution focuses on building youth's sense of agency, whereby young people believe in the ability to promote change in one's community. YPAR groups build beyond PYD group programs through their explicit focus on strengthening youth's sense of agency where they are guided toward making a difference by contributing to and leading group processes that promote social action and change.

YPAR is a knowledge producing group process that promotes youth development in that it is guided by issues of interest and importance to improve students' lives, their local communities, and the institutions that serve them (Ozer, 2016). Smith et al. (2014) suggested the use of YPAR as an important framework to employ in counseling given its "potential to facilitate wellness, feelings of agency, critical consciousness, and empowerment" (p. 9). YPAR is a collective and collaborative process between young people and their group facilitator/adult ally that encourages critical examinations of knowledge sources as well as existing social hierarchies found within the research

collective. Additionally, any inherent power differentials among co-researchers and facilitator are included in discussions about group process and collectively unpacked as they directly inform the course of action of the research collective. Altogether, these practices embrace emancipatory and visionary youth-driven social change (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015).

Following Paulo Freire's (1970) vision for education, YPAR interrupts the "banking concept of education," whereby young people are no longer the passive recipients of knowledge or group work interventions. Rather, they are key actors in creating the research agenda and driving the changes they hold for themselves and their community. As an emancipatory framework, YPAR holds promise for adolescents who are navigating developmental transitions to see themselves as leaders with visions of direction (Ozer, 2016). Furthermore, through a focus on promoting critical consciousness and more diversified ontological stances, YPAR conducted with socially marginalized youth increases awareness of oppression and racism that contribute to community-wide problems instead of narrowing the focus to individual behavioral issues and centering blame on students (Irizarry, 2009). Through this process, youth shift dominant narratives about young people away from pathologizing explanations and are informed to take actions against anti-youth and socially unjust material conditions (Cahill et al., 2008).

DESCRIPTION OF YPAR GROUP IMPLEMENTATION

In the field of counseling, YPAR groups have been conducted in community-based settings and middle/high schools with youth, typically with one to two group facilitators (Smith et al., 2012, 2010). Because the purpose of YPAR is to privilege young people as experts of their lives and to teach young people to develop skills to inform interventions and programs (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003), YPAR group facilitators actively encourage youth to co-lead group processes from the outset, including recruitment and determining the focus of group work and investigations, to closure and assessment of YPAR outcomes (Krueger-Henney, 2015). Whereas typical group work practices and analyses of group work outcomes follow a hierarchical structure with adult facilitators taking the lead, YPAR repositions youth as equal co-creators, co-leaders, co-visionaries, co-authors, and co-owners of personal and group-identified goals.

The processes that unfold during YPAR are characteristic of task facilitation groups, where young people come together to accomplish group-identified objectives, collaboratively supporting one another in

working toward shared goals. Similar to task facilitation groups where the work that transpires incorporates both a focus on content and process (Corey, 2014), YPAR participants are encouraged to engage in open dialogue to share their reactions, experiences, and insights as they navigate data analyses and research investigations. Simultaneously, group counselors who specialize in task group facilitation foster personal growth and social action by applying the principles of “group based educational, developmental, and systemic strategies” as YPAR processes unfold (Association for Specialists in Group Work [ASGW], 2000, p. 3). In this way, YPAR group work follows a critical cycle of investigative inquiry (see Figure 1). Through a shared process of open dialogue about critical issues pertinent and relevant to young people’s lived experiences that include individual race, class, and gender-specific journeys through the physical and materialized landscapes of everyday life (i.e., school, work, home, and neighborhoods), and based on a needs assessment across school-community constituencies (i.e., other youth/students, parents/guardians, and teachers/administrators/staff), youth

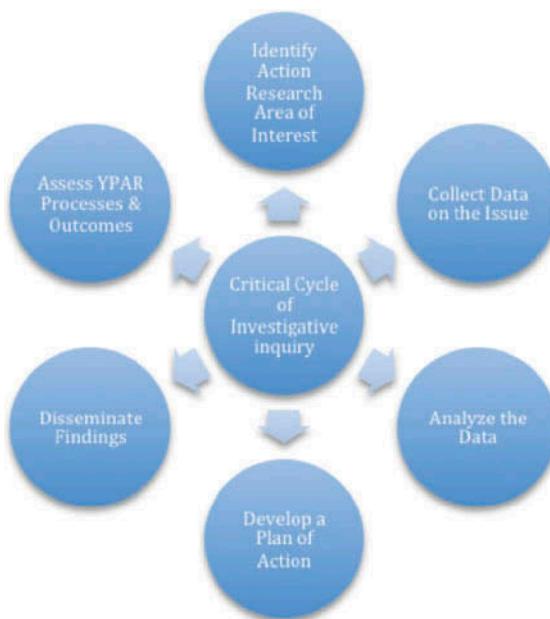


Figure 1 Youth engage in group processes to research an issue of importance to the community. Through open dialogue among youth and group facilitators, participants engage in a critical cycle of inquiry that builds understanding, skills, and knowledge of issues, with the goal of promoting change and improvement.

co-researchers identify and then select an issue of importance to add focus to their YPAR group work (Fox & Fine, 2015; Smith et al., 2010). Creating spaces for open dialogue where youth have opportunities to engage in challenging conversations on topics of personal and group immediacy are important characteristics of social justice group work (Singh & Salazar, 2010).

YPAR topics of group work are youth-driven and can span a variety of youth-identified issues (Smith et al., 2010), such as suicide prevention, mental health awareness, substance abuse prevention, trauma prevention and wellness, punitive schooling practices and policies, gender and sexuality, postsecondary transitions, college access, poverty, school-family relationships, police brutality, and immigration policies. In YPAR-based processes for group work, the chosen topic is critically examined with respect to various contextual factors, following ecological systems theory. Emphasis is placed on uncovering the invisible power structures and inequities that may impede wellness, mental health, and positive educational outcomes, allowing youth, in partnership with adult allies, to take action to improve local conditions and eliminate oppressive systems.

YPAR Facilitator Roles

YPAR group facilitators are frequently current and former teachers, afterschool practitioners, doctoral students, and university-based educators and researchers, whose professional work and academic inquiries focus on documenting young people's lived experiences and complex social realities. YPAR group facilitators receive training in YPAR logics and methods while completing a graduate degree, working with community-based organizations, and participating in professional development seminars and workshops. University-based YPAR scholars also complete the Institutional Review Board's (IRB) mandatory training in research ethics (Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative; CITI). With additional preparation, counselors and other group work specialists are also well positioned to facilitate YPAR groups and can provide further mental health supports and/or referrals as they may arise (Smith et al., 2010). The specific training that counselors require to facilitate YPAR groups includes both research and group leadership training to allow for greater understanding of decolonizing, participatory research methods, and application of processing here-and-now interactions.

Participatory research processes that are centered on involving young people necessarily require a change in the role of the adult researcher and repositions the adult as YPAR facilitator and collaborator (Hart, 1997). As facilitators, adults train youth researchers in

YPAR methods to lead the collaborative research process. As collaborators, or co-researchers, they research alongside youth researchers and provide technical assistance. Adults in YPAR are conscientious of power structures within the group work process, including socioeconomic inequalities between them and youth co-researchers, as well as between youth co-researchers themselves. On the one hand, while the non-counseling and non-psychology YPAR group facilitator (i.e., classroom teacher, doctoral student) may not necessarily have mental health credentials, they are ethically obligated to speak to the family (i.e., the adult who signed the consent form) and/or a counselor about a group member's struggles with mental health concerns. On the other hand, counselors and psychologists who have engaged in formal group training would be able to provide additional supports and assistance with personal issues related to mental health and wellness should they manifest during YPAR group facilitation.

Screening and Selection

Young people choose to participate in YPAR. YPAR groups are open to all youth and are not restricted by individual characteristics or group memberships. YPAR group work is task-oriented and aims to make an impact on whole communities, rather than exclusively focusing on personal or individual problems. Thus, the composition of YPAR members can include youth from various backgrounds, genders, and ages (e.g., 9th to 12th grade youth; see Smith et al., 2010 for an example of YPAR in school counseling). With permission from participating community-based organizations, schools, and parents/guardians, YPAR facilitators invite youth into the collaborative research process through contacting specific schools and youth groups by distributing information about a given YPAR and a potential topic of investigation.

The process of informed consent and assent with parents and youth, respectively, is clearly communicated both verbally and in writing (Smith et al., 2010). When group facilitators recruit young people to participate, they clearly describe what YPAR is as well as the potential benefits and limitations. For example, YPAR group work is an experience where youth select an issue of interest to research with the goal of improving their community. Simultaneously, it is important to inform participants of the potential for local and structural constraints within the organization or school that could restrict change. It is throughout the initial group meetings that the research collective solidifies the focus of the YPAR and collectively establishes a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to document a shared agreement

about the degree to which co-researchers engage in the terms of the group research process. The MOU would incorporate issues of importance to YPAR members, such as confidentiality and limitations to confidentiality, agreed upon rules to guide intergroup communication, and consent to distribute or withhold artifacts and findings from YPAR investigations.

Group Process and Sequence

YPAR groups incorporate processes that include data-driven action and dialogic discussion (see [Table 1](#)). The “A” (action) in PAR is a fundamental component; youth co-researchers learn about and practice research methods by engaging their data in community-wide actions to share their findings and the significance of their work with the larger public. In addition, youth-led action supported by youth-centered empirical data remains under-represented in shaping and influencing policymaking that ostensibly promote youth-driven institutional programs and practices. As a result, YPAR can inform transformative social change (Mirra et al., [2015](#)).

In addition, dialogic discussions among members of the group research collective provide opportunities for developing communication skills with other youth and adults, engaging in perspective taking, challenging social norms and oppressive traditions, and achieving personal and group-identified goals (Ozer, Newlan, Douglas, & Hubbard, [2013](#)). The working (action-taking) stage of YPAR groups typically follows a sequence of implementation depicted in [Figure 1](#), with youth engaging in collecting data, analyzing data, developing a

Table 1 YPAR Group Work

<i>Core YPAR group processes</i>
Training and practice of research skills
Develop strategic thinking skills to influence change and reach desired goals
Intentional power sharing with students in action research process
Develop communication skills with youth and adults
Dialogic discussion to promote perspective taking and achieve personal and group goals
<i>YPAR group sequence</i>
Screening encourages open membership
Selected topic is youth-driven
Youth lead data collection and analyses
Plan of action is negotiated in shared collaboration between youth and adults
Widely disseminate findings and assess outcomes

plan of action, disseminating findings, implementing data-informed actions, and assessing outcomes. During this process, group facilitators, as allies and members of the collective, directly support youth in developing leadership skills to reach collectively identified goals (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

Applying the following example of bullying and violence to a YPAR setting helps to illustrate the dual attention to process and content of task facilitation groups as YPAR members engage in decision making and problem solving. Through a focus on action, YPAR groups promote mutual sharing, support, and dialogue, but mental health and wellness issues are not intentionally explored therapeutically. Participants may begin with sharing and identifying different existing narratives about their lived experiences of witnessing bullying incited violence, as well as the extent to which statistical data reflect youth narratives (Linville, 2014). Through this process, youth engage in knowledge sharing, thereby deepening one another's understandings of the issue as group members experience it (Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). Group members gather data to inform their understandings of the issue, such as quantity, type, and frequency of occurrences as well as what social structures perpetuate bullying and how school stakeholders respond (or not) to bullying and violence. Data collection can consist of a variety of formats, including school-level data of documented instances of bullying and violence, interviews with school-community members, photovoice documentation of students' observations and experiences of bullying and violence, and related information from literature and internet searches. Throughout the data collection, facilitators encourage YPAR participants to engage with and articulate their own insecurities toward what they may not know or understand via open dialogue with co-researchers to process and analyze data. They are encouraged to explore what the data mean, how they potentially impact youth and the community, and to identify steps to be taken to stop bullying and violence. YPAR group facilitators encourage ongoing conversations to enhance awareness of contextual factors and potential structural inequities and how they intersect with local experiences of bullying and violence. YPAR group members can co-develop a plan of action that may include a variety of outcomes, such as conducting further research, developing a survey for distribution among key stakeholders (e.g., student body, teaching faculty, administrators, and parents), and/or planning an event to raise awareness.

Dissemination and Evaluation of YPAR Findings

With youth assent and parent consent, findings from YPAR group work are disseminated broadly with the purpose of making

recommendations for what program and practice changes adults and institutions must implement when working with youth to safeguard young people's well-being (social, emotional, and physical), or in this case, eliminating bullying and violence in the school community. Evaluating outcomes of YPAR group work is an ongoing process that occurs throughout the research process and after implementation of actions. The assessment of YPAR group work processes also prioritizes young people's voices as co-investigators, where they share equal grounding with group facilitators in researching and documenting outcomes of YPAR group work. Group facilitators prioritize young people's voices through collaborating with youth in the writing of final reports and scholarly publications (Tuck et al., 2008).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GROUP WORK RESEARCH

YPAR positions youth as active participants in group processes, authors of assessment tools, and investigators of group work outcomes. Young people's double role as both researchers and participants increases the ecological validity of their findings (Balazs & Morello-Frosch, 2013). YPAR also enhances young people's interpersonal power and leadership capacity by centering the physical presence of youth in research designs and outputs, and informing community-based socially transformative advocacy work (Engelman & Hazel, 2009). Positioning youth as experts of their experiences redistributes levels of participation, thereby shifting the group working logic from a hierarchically imposed framework to a more horizontally shared praxis of inquiry. In this way, YPAR as an epistemological approach, applied to the study of group work research, challenges the dominant research ideology of top-down investigative analyses and traditional empiricism by privileging youth's ability and power to conduct research (Bautista et al., 2013).

YPAR DATA ANALYSIS AND ASSESSMENT CONSIDERATIONS

While building meaning of research findings and experiential learning, youth as co-researchers are directly involved in the analysis of their data in ways that are developmentally relevant and meaningful. For example, YPAR group facilitators frequently guide youth researchers in learning how to identify themes from documented artifacts and transcriptions of participants' lived experiences. Thematic

analysis is often introduced through youth-centered, experiential learning activities involving games that encourage identification and sorting of important messages in transcribed material or documented products. For example, Foster-Fishman et al. (2010) described a game through which facilitators actively engage participants in qualitative data analyses as “newspaper editors.” The task of data reduction is the focus of participants’ editorial work, whereby they identify key messages and assign titles to passages of text to capture meaning of qualitative data. Subsequently, participants actively participate in finding thematic matches through a sorting game that involves the clustering of themes or grouping of key messages, using wall space in the room and adhesive paper. Participants are encouraged to share thoughts, defend positions, and debate disconfirming viewpoints about why they have grouped certain messages and/or created new clustering of themes.

TROUBLING THE WATERS OF GROUP WORK RESEARCH

Framing traditions of research, including the study of research processes that include group work, typically prioritizes methodological strategies *about* people, rather than privileging collective and more horizontalized group research logics *with* and *by* people. Based on a framework of critical research, traditional methods that typically exclude non-academics from measuring outcomes of group work are challenged through positioning youth co-researchers to lead investigative inquiries (Mirra et al., 2015). Group work research that employs critical analysis is collaborative, conducted in proximity with group members, and is carried out with the purpose of creating and disseminating knowledge for, or at least toward, social change (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Employing YPAR in group work endorses this critical stance toward traditional group practices and the study of group work.

Key stances in collaborative group research logics also include an ongoing ethical preoccupation with what constitutes “group membership” and “participation” as fundamental aspects of evaluating group work impacts and outcomes on group-identified goals. During YPAR group work process and assessment of outcomes, tensions often exist between individual “insider” and “outsider” positionalities toward the collective research process and purpose (Ozer et al., 2013). YPAR assumes full collaboration and equal power distribution among group members and group facilitators as part of the group process. This does not equate with young people having full input in group processes in YPAR; rather, facilitators intentionally provide for

research activities as dialogic processes that welcome different perspectives and build understandings of strengths and limitations of various viewpoints (Ozer, 2016). Likewise, investigating outcomes of YPAR group work also assumes a collective process. In this way, YPAR group facilitators challenge “artificial boundaries” between insider and outsider positionalities when, in truth, all co-researchers are implicated by the same socioeconomic structures and the unequal social conditions these produce in their everyday lives (Pollack & Eldridge, 2016).

Despite explicit recommendations for power sharing in YPAR group work, effective cooperative partnerships among group members and facilitators are often bounded by organizational and political constraints within school, community, and organizational environments (Ozer, 2016). More specifically, tensions may exist that restrict youth in the selection of YPAR topics of focus for group work, identification of action steps, and dissemination of findings. Possible sources of restricted empowerment may relate to group facilitator values regarding social justice and perceived limitations of youth power to carry out intended plans for action (Ozer et al., 2013).

In consideration of shared power dynamics and horizontalized group research logics, engaging young people in YPAR or other forms of participatory research does not necessarily preclude the different research methods that can be used in YPAR. In fact, many community-based participatory research partnerships have employed randomized control trials to address local problems (Trickett, 2011). However, YPAR can enhance the rigor, relevance, and impact of group work research through appreciating insider knowledge and expertise in both the identification of salient issues of analysis and interpretation of data (Balazs & Morello-Frosch, 2013).

MULTI-METHOD EVALUATION IN THE STUDY OF YPAR GROUP WORK

A variety of measures and forms of data collection can be employed to assess outcomes of YPAR group processes. Ozer and Douglas (2015) developed an observational rating scale, the YPAR Process Template (YPT) to measure the quality of YPAR implementation and other youth empowerment projects. The YPT includes dimensional and frequency scales to quantitatively assess group processes including training and practice of research skills, strategic thinking, intergroup relations, and communication skills to evaluate how power is shared. Reliability coefficients of the YPT scales are good to excellent, with

intraclass correlation coefficients ranging from .66 to .97. The YPT also incorporates qualitative data collection requiring raters to document illustrative quotes as supplemental material to augment understandings.

Because of the versatility of YPAR in its implementation and diversity of group work topics, assessment tools of group processes are likewise varied. Depending on the focus of group work implementation, interviews, observations, and focus groups may be conducted and analyzed (Ozer & Wright, 2012). Photovoice, a method of photographic display that promotes empowerment, can also be used to capture and narrate experiences (Luttrell, 2012; Smith et al., 2012); and concept mapping (Windsor, 2013) can be developed and analyzed. Furthermore, survey instruments can be employed to measure variables of interest. For example, Ozer and Douglas (2015) used a class climate survey to measure various experiential attributes of the classroom, including peer-to-peer relations and teacher-student interactions to assess outcomes of YPAR group processes. In the previous bullying and violence example applied to a YPAR setting, measures that assess attitude toward wellness, empowerment, and perceptions of bullying and violence in the community would be important to include. Regardless of the type of measures employed, procedural recommendations for assessment of YPAR and youth empowerment groups encourage explicit and intentional co-participation of youth. Active youth engagement in measuring group processes enhances the validity of findings and, as such, is a critical component of research rigor.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR GROUP WORK RESEARCH

The continued advancement of group work research is warranted to further investigate the application of YPAR to the study of group work. Documenting outcomes of YPAR group work in counseling practice can help inform the future direction of the field for a number of reasons. The application of YPAR to the study of group work demonstrates the potential to promote social justice, a critical mandate for group work specialists (Singh, Merchant, Skudrzyk, & Ingene, 2012). Rather than following a top-down approach to investigate group work processes, YPAR makes salient the importance of developing bottom-up and collective articulations of the different meanings co-researchers attach to the data. The application of YPAR as a de-hierarchized, flexible, and

participatory research logic of inquiry broadens capacities for group work research through advancing its relevance, accuracy, and scope (Balazs & Morello-Frosch, 2013). Repositioned as knowledge experts, youth can lead group processes and research analyses in ways that traditional group work research and practice may not afford. Implications of YPAR for group work research redefine roles of group researchers to be inclusive of young people's perspectives, thereby adding important contributions to the study of group work.

Furthermore, YPAR group processes of learning the skills of action research and dialogic praxis can be an enriching and empowering experience that develops young people's expertise in research and social activism by way of offering data-driven educational events across communities (Cahill, 2006; Smith et al., 2010), participating in media conferences, drafting petitions to remove abusive school personnel (Krueger, 2010), and teaching other young people about social justice-centered research methods (Fox et al., 2010). YPAR as a method of research and youth engagement presents the opportunity to learn about invisible power structures that define the course and directions of their pathways toward success.

Counselors have a unique set of group work skills and expertise that focuses on promoting youth well-being and empowerment that transfers well to conducting YPAR groups (Smith et al., 2014). YPAR expands group work research and practice in ways that can address structural and systemic barriers. Shifting the focus of group work to intentionally address the unjust environmental conditions that contribute to youths' negative academic and social outcomes is a social justice mandate for counselors (Bemak et al., 2005; Ratts, Anthony, & Santos, 2010; Shin et al., 2010). Integrating participatory research methods offers group work specialists an important opportunity to facilitate personal development, youth activism, and social justice, while advancing both group work research and praxis.

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