

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

The Community-Based PhD: Complexities and Triumphs of Conducting CBPR

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47j4h0s9>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 47(3)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Smiles, Deondre

**Publication Date**

2024-12-01

**DOI**

10.17953/A3.34827

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

### **The Community-Based PhD: Complexities and Triumphs of Conducting CBPR.**

Edited by Sonya Atalay and Alexandra C. McCleary. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022. 440 pages. \$35.00 paper; \$35.00 e-book.

For many scholars who work with Indigenous communities, particularly junior and emerging scholars, community-based participatory Research (CPBR) is vitally important, if not indispensable, in constructing and implementing research with communities. We generally understand such work in the academy to fall under the umbrella of community-based participatory research, but defining it can be a challenge. Another challenge is implementing such frameworks in Indigenous communities and marginalized communities more broadly in a way that upholds and supports the communities and their needs. Finally, how might students, who find themselves on extremely compressed schedules that are becoming even tighter with funding and writing considerations, find the time for such efforts? This is to say nothing about all of the complex relationship-building, communication, and shifting priorities that these scholars will find themselves within while conducting their academic work. This is certainly a challenge that I faced during my doctoral degree, and it's something that I often think about when working with my graduate students, all of whom do some form of work with Indigenous communities. We want to "do the right thing," but what exactly does that look like in practice? While there are texts out there that focus on community-based work, Sonia Atalay and Alexandra McCleary's *The Community-Based PhD: Complexities and Triumphs of Conducting CBPR* provides a very welcome contribution to study and preparation in this area through its inclusion of a variety of voices surrounding conducting CBPR, alongside a glimpse into the struggles and challenges that many face when doing this work.

The diversity of thought in this book becomes apparent in its different sections and chapters. The first section specifically focuses on the ways in which researchers will need to navigate institutional factors and structures while doing CBPR. One chapter, in vivid colors and illustrations, focuses on how one researcher "queered" CBPR, while another chapter speaks on the long, involved work in building relationships with communities, and yet another critically interrogates the idea of "giving back" in academic research with communities. The second part focuses on how communities comprise different voices, attitudes, and opinions versus monolithic identities, particularly when some members of communities speak up in opposition or critique of work being done. Part three of the volume focuses on the various ways relationships are built and maintained via community-based work, particularly in archaeological and ethnographic work.

Part four centers the need to allow communities to take the lead in the work, even in the face of "messy" situations that might arise (as Kelly Wiltshire writes, focusing

on her work with the Ngarrindjeri Nation). One particular favorite chapter of mine is in this section, as Victoria Bochniak describes the importance of embarking on relationship-building in fieldwork quite early in her chapter. Part five speaks on the ways in which the roles of everyone involved in participatory research, researcher and researched alike, can shift when doing community-engaged work, such as the experiences of Bonnie Newsome, who writes on the unique positions she was placed in on account of her PhD work in archaeology, considering her previous role as a tribal historic preservation officer. Finally, in part six, Atalay herself recaps the experiences of the contributors, contemplating what they all mean going forward as we engage in CBPR.

This book excels at centering the graduate student experience. Too often, when books and works are written about community-engaged work, it is written from the perspective of established researchers who are sometimes years removed from their formative experiences in fieldwork and in communities. While established academics are not infallible at doing community-engaged work (as has been proven many, many times), there is the benefit of experience—and the privileges that more substantial institutional backing (such as funding) can provide—that are not immediately available or accessible to more junior scholars, such as students. It can become too easy to think that community work is as simple as reading a few articles, completing an ethics process, and entering a community. The experiences shared in this book speak to the fact that it is not that simple.

Another strength of this book is the space it makes for vulnerability. We do not talk about failure in academia very often. We are taught to showcase our successes, and this is reflected in the ways that we speak about research methods. However, failure is an excellent teacher, and the chances are very good that we have *all* had missteps or setbacks when working in a community. I know that *I* have, and it's a lesson I try to pass on to my students. Reading this book left me feeling validated, and thinking, "See, I'm not the only one!"

Finally, the diversity of formats in the book brings another dimension to that vulnerability: each author or set of authors is allowed to bring their full selves to the work and to the book, making it less of a sterile treatise of how to do CBPR and more of a personal narrative of the sometimes long, sometimes bumpy road that the authors took in their own research journeys.

Speaking as an Indigenous academic, the increasing embrace of community-based work and methods validates what our communities have always known—that communities should and must be able to take the lead in work that is being done with them. Speaking as well as a member of a discipline (geography) that, while researching, has had a fraught history with Indigenous communities, it becomes increasingly important while training students who wish to do community-based work to do so in an ethical manner. It is also important to remind them that community-based work does not always mean smooth sailing—there will be challenges and plenty of considerations that we must keep in mind while doing this work. This volume does an outstanding job at attending to all of these issues while still pointing the way toward carrying out good, ethical work within communities. It makes this book well suited for use

in a variety of courses and settings, including graduate seminars and course work on community-based research, or research methods more broadly, as well as for any scholar who wishes to delve further into the landscapes of community-based participatory research.

*Niyokamigaabaw Deondre Smiles*  
University of Victoria