Biographical Collage as a Tool in Inuit Community-Based Participatory Research and Capacity Development

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Abstract
As a method in arts-based qualitative research, the collage technique has been previously utilized for data generation, elicitation, analysis, and presentation of results. Collage has also been used as a self-reflective, development exercise within community-based research due to its abstract and creative self-exploratory style. Although previously used in research with a variety of populations, there is limited evidence of applying the collage technique with First Nation, Inuit, or Métis peoples, even though many other arts-based methods, such as photovoice, have been used. This article describes the use of biographical collage as part of a community-based research project in a northern Canadian Inuit community. The technique was used as an exercise for building leadership capacity, as an elicitation technique in cross-cultural qualitative interviews, and as a decolonizing process in community-based participatory research. With the description of an in-depth example, this article showcases many benefits of using the collage technique when engaging in cross-cultural community-based research with Inuit.

Keywords
qualitative research, arts-based research, community-based participatory research, Inuit, Indigenous, community health, decolonizing methodology

Introduction
The word “collage” comes from the French coller (to stick) and refers to the cutting and sticking of objects onto a flat surface (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). This art genre dates back at least 1,000 years to Japanese calligraphers and later was used by Victorian era folk artists and more recently by modern-day painters and graphic artists (Butler-Kisber, 2007). The ease of use and versatility of the collage technique has made it a welcome artistic form within qualitative research. Although the combination of arts-based methods and dialogue is described as promising for relational and decolonizing research with Indigenous peoples (Caxaj, 2015; Flicker et al., 2016; Plamondon & Caxaj, 2018), to date, there has been limited usage of collage specifically as a research tool or method with, or by, these groups.

A collage research tool was used as part of a larger community-based research and capacity development program between Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, and the Hamlet of Arviat. Through a series of personal interviews, focus groups, researcher field notes, and biographical collage creations, the project seeks to examine several research questions regarding wellness in Arviat: “What is wellness in Arviat?” “How can wellness be better supported in Arviat?” “Can research or evaluation be useful in supporting wellness in Arviat?” and “What...
roles do emerging leaders have in wellness development in Arviat?” Adding to the project’s already built-in aspects of leadership development, developmental evaluation, and motivational interviewing, the collage method served several research purposes, as it was an activity for relationship-building, reflective practice for authentic leadership development, and an elicitation technique. Through this detailed example, this article showcases the use of collage within a cross-cultural research environment in a remote northern Inuit community, highlighting collage as a research method with utility in community-based participatory research (CBPR), including in research with Indigenous peoples. It also highlights collage as a tool for qualitative data collection, discussion or interview elicitation, and as a community and leadership development tool.

The Collage Art Form

Collage creation can take many forms, but in its most basic, it involves the act of cutting and sticking objects onto a surface (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010) or stringing of objects on a line or cord such as in a beaded collage (Kay, 2013). As Robertson (2000) notes, a collage can reflect the very way we see the world with objects being given meaning not from something inherent in themselves but rather through the way we perceive how they stand in relationship to other objects in the frame. Collage has been undertaken with children, adults, and across cultures (Kay, 2013; Vacchelli, 2018; Van Schalkwyk, 2010, 2013) with its widespread utilization due perhaps in part to the user-friendly nature of the art form. The basic skills needed for collage, such as arranging materials or cutting and pasting, are those that are commonly acquired early in life or can be relatively easily learned (Butler-Kisber, 2017). A collage creation exercise can be structured around a wide variety of topics or subjects. Regardless of the topic chosen, collage creation is a reflective exercise where the creator chooses the narrative, the representation of the materials, and the overall construct of the artwork. This reflection may be further amplified when the subject is that of the artist’s own life or experience (Brockelman, 2001). Like the use of other creative strategies to foster relational connections and knowledge sharing between people, the act of creating collage in a group dialogue setting can be transformative (Caxaj, 2015; Plamondon & Caxaj, 2018).

Collage as Research Tool

Collage has been used by researchers in acts of reflection, memoing, and presentation (Gerstenblatt, 2013; Vaughan, 2005) as a generator of qualitative data and as an elicitation technique with research participants (Kay, 2013; Vacchelli, 2018; Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Collage has also been used for community and relationship development since it can help facilitate collaborative partnerships, foster co-learning and capacity building among partners, and it allows a balance between knowledge generation and intervention (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Hacker, 2013). In a CBPR context, collage is an arts-based method that can facilitate research in partnership with communities and can elevate participant voices to that of coresearchers and cogenerators of knowledge (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). In this way, and like other arts-based research approaches, collage may be a research method that would allow space for decolonization.

Collage has been used as an elicitation technique and qualitative data collection tool in several studies across diverse populations. As a researcher and art therapist inspired by her own experience making beaded collages, Kay (2013) incorporated bead collages as an arts-based method in her research with two art teachers in the United States. Seeking a more collaborative approach, she incorporated the making of a beaded collage within the interview itself (Kay, 2013). She found that the collage-making exercise facilitated interactive interviews and that it encouraged the participants to self-reflect, organize their thoughts, and communicate verbally. It also was a research and interview design that promoted reciprocity through participant empowerment, allowing them to be the drivers of the knowledge and insight developments (Kay, 2013). The beaded collages became both a method of data collection and part of the analysis, resulting in a final research product that was considered more holistic and persuasive through the triangulation of data (Kay, 2013).

In Vacchelli’s (2018) work with migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking women, collage making was shown to be well-suited for research with vulnerable populations, particularly when working cross-culturally and dealing with sensitive issues. From a practical standpoint, setting up and facilitating the collage-making workshop was shown to potentially aid the researcher in negotiating her position within the focus group, particularly when the researcher was previously unknown to the participants (Vacchelli, 2018). Like Kay’s (2013) work, Vacchelli’s collage-making exercise empowered the participants, allowing them to have control over the experiences they wanted to present and gave them time to select and consider what they wanted to uncover in the exercise.

Van Schalkwyk (2010, 2013) developed a five-step collage life story elicitation technique (CLET) that has proposed utility for not only ethnographic research but as a strategy for child psychological counselors to assist in diagnosis, intake interviewing, and treatment planning. CLET overcomes some limitations of strictly verbal interaction, eliciting richer information and understanding of the past and the future (Van Schalkwyk, 2013). The process provides a reflective framework in which participants, as coresearchers, consider their experiences and assess their meaning, producing rich and vivid stories, through collage, that highlight their own construction or perception of their self-identity (Van Schalkwyk, 2010).

Collage in Indigenous Research

Previous use of collage in research has highlighted its utility and versatility across diverse groups. From a practical
standpoint, the collage technique can help to overcome some communication barriers. Collage creation does not require verbal language and thus can be supportive and feasible for individuals struggling with adequate oral- or text-based expression. Collage has also been shown to be a valuable elicitation technique. Collage creation provides an opportunity for the coresearchers (participating “artists”) to engage in their own reflective practice prior to any follow-up focus groups or interviews. It externalizes ideas and reflections giving the artist a chance to curate and consider their messages prior to sharing and discussing them (Van Schalkwyk, 2010).

Although there are few examples of collage being used in research with Indigenous peoples, currently, many arts-based methods are considered appropriate as part of decolonizing methodologies (Flicker et al., 2016; Gabel, Pace, & Ryan, 2016; Veroff, 2012; Yuen, 2016). Arts-based methods can provide an opportunity to address the historical mistrust and power differences between researchers and Indigenous communities, whereby Indigenous knowledge has been previously exploited or discounted (Hammond et al., 2018). Coholic, Cote-Meek, and Recollet (2012) discovered in their research involving Indigenous Northern Ontarian women that arts-based methods enabled support and acknowledgment of a diversity of beliefs and experiences. For them, arts-based methods encouraged a holistic approach to the generation of data that existed in the participant’s personal knowledge. This also facilitated personal development among community participants.

In 2007, Lavalee piloted a study that included an Anishinaabe symbol-based reflection exercise. Within this project, participants were asked to create or purchase a symbol that captured the meaning of their martial arts experience and subsequently share that with the researcher (Lavalee, 2007). The use of symbols, both within and outside of artistic creation, is a cornerstone of cultural and spiritual expression and meaning for many Indigenous peoples (Lavalee, 2007). Lavalee’s (2007) usage of an Anishinaabe symbol-based reflection exercise highlighted the potential of symbol- and arts-based methods within Indigenous research methodologies.

Yuen (2016) utilized the collage practice as a method of analysis and representation when working with Indigenous women on a project designed to examine Indigenous women’s healing and the impact of cultural supports upon that healing. As a form of analysis, she created collages out of the body maps the participants had created themselves rather than following a more traditional mode of analysis such as thematic coding (Yuen, 2016). Through arts-based methods of inquiry and representation, Indigenous ways of knowing were prioritized, and alternative opportunities for participants to share their experiences and knowledge were provided (Yuen, 2016). And, as Yuen (2016) discovered, the collage method of representation promoted reflexivity in the analytical process, an important exercise for Indigenous methodologies as greater insight is often gained from looking within.

In-Depth Example: CBPR and Capacity Development Wellness Research Project in Arviat, Nunavut

Introduction to the Project

The program developed between Queen’s University and the Hamlet of Arviat, Nunavut, is a community-based research project seeking to explore “wellness” and “wellness research” in the community of Arviat. As part of the overall aim, the program seeks to support and build leadership capacity in young adult Inuit “initiators” (translated into Inuktitut as pigiaqtisiajijit) who work primarily within community development, wellness, youth, and recreation departments in Arviat. The collage method was selected not only to be an elicitation technique for subsequent in-depth interviews but for the method’s ability to facilitate CBPR through utilization as a relationship building activity and a reflective practice exercise for authentic leadership development with participant/coresearchers within the wellness research components of the project.

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence in community development conversations around “authentic leadership” (Roche, 2010). Authentic leadership exists in leadership situations where the individual identifies strongly with the leadership role and acts upon the basis of their own values and convictions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Developing authentic leadership capacity, it is believed, will provide opportunity in complex and changing times (Roche, 2010). The notion of “authentic leadership” aligns well with Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit, often translated into English as Inuit traditional knowledge, and encompassing Inuit beliefs, laws, traditions, and values (Nunavut Department of Education, 2007). Service (pijitsirniq), consensus decision-making (aajiiqatigiinniq), and collaborative relationships and shared leadership (piliriqatigiinniq) are at the center of the Inuit leadership style (Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre, 2011). These characteristics require the leader to have knowledge of his or her own strengths and weaknesses. In this context, a leader would understand his or her place in the group and would develop collaborative relationships. Leaders lead through action and by example rather than by delegation (Pauktuitit Inuit Women of Canada, 2006; Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre, 2011). Authentic leaders develop necessary skills, in part, through the construction and revision of their own life stories (Shamir & Eilam, 2005). Authentic leadership development focuses on developing and possessing self-knowledge for purposeful action, which can be gained in part through structured acts of self-reflection (Branson, 2007). Our pigiaqtisiajijit community-based research project in Arviat involved working with young people to explore their own wellness experiences and to consider their own authentic leadership as a way of building capacity and supports for community wellness in Arviat. Of note, throughout this article, the term “participant/coresearcher” will be used as the project was designed to foster co-learning and values participant community and life story expertise. We aimed to create an
equitable partnership among community participants and researchers as per the central tenants of CBPR.

**Our Collage Research Process**

**Stage 1: Preparation.** Biographical life story collage creation was chosen to enhance reflection and communication among the pigiaqtisitijit (the “initiators”) who are the participant/coresearchers in the project. This research project was embedded in the human resource development work of the municipal Hamlet of Arviat. There was a mixture of local and nonlocal members on the research team bringing various expertise. Leadership from local team members at each stage of the research project helped to ensure that culturally and locally appropriate decisions and actions took place.

In preparation, a workshop plan was drafted by the project team, and the biographical collage technique was piloted with three participants (two female and one male). Piloting the activity helped ensure clarity in how it was explained, allowed the development of a nuanced approach for these specific participants, and gave some indication of the time and materials needed. Pilot participants gave qualitative feedback about their experiences. Small changes were made in how the exercise was explained and in the diversity of artistic materials provided. Collage-making participant/coresearchers were pigiaqtisitijit who had been identified and specifically invited by the Hamlet of Arviat office. Participants’ requests for separate workshops for the men and women were honored.

**Stage 2: Collage-making workshops.** The workshops were undertaken in a comfortable training center easily accessed by members of the community. Refreshments were provided when people arrived. Following a discussion around leadership, wellness, and the usefulness of personal reflection, the research project was explained, and informed consent for the collage creation and for being contacted in the future about a potential interview was obtained. Six people attended the women’s biographical collage workshop. Among this group, four completed collages, one woman stayed and observed, and one woman did not create a biographical collage but submitted a written substitute at the end of the workshop. One woman who was unable to attend the workshop at the original time completed a biographical collage and interview at a later time. Seven people attended the men’s workshop and all completed biographical collages. Eight follow-up, in-depth interviews were conducted. Thus, in total, 14 participants took part, 12 collages were created, and 8 in-depth interviews were conducted.

At the beginning of each workshop, participants were shown the piloted collages as examples. Each participant/coresearcher was given a white poster board, a few pieces of paper, and markers. They were also shown the art supplies (glue, tape, beads, stickers, feathers, markers, construction paper, pipe cleaners, scraps of material, small pieces of metal and wood, markers, etc.). There was great diversity in the art materials to support diverse types of collages. Collage creation was loosely structured and focused on the participants’ biographical account. First, participants were instructed to list, draw, or make some note of significant moments (experiences, events, milestones) that led them to where and who they were on the day of the workshop. This was done on a piece of scrap paper. The participants were also asked to write at least one future event or milestone that they might imagine or be working toward in their life journey. When the participants had documented their ideas in some way, they were asked to look at the many art supplies that were provided and begin to map or plan their collage using these items on a piece of white paper first. They were asked to include at least five milestones (past and/or future) from their list and could use the art materials in any way they wished. Participants could also choose to write words/names or draw on their collages if they desired. Once participants had their ideas planned, they were given as much time as they needed to create their actual collage on the poster boards.

The creation process took most participant/coresearchers about 30 min (ranging between 20 and 45 min). Guidance and opening instructions were delivered in the same manner for all women whether they were able to attend the group workshop or not (one woman was not).

During the workshops, facilitators took observation and field notes with recordings of group dynamics, interactions, and discussion themes. The facilitators also kept reflective journals throughout the research project, promoting researcher self-reflexivity and serving as documentation of each decision made throughout the research project.

Participants were aware that they were not required to explain or describe their choices or final artistic piece. If the artist gave permission, the collages were photographed to keep a digital visual record for future reflective exercises or potential in-depth, follow-up interviews. The collages were the property of the participant/coresearchers, and they were free to take them at the end of the activity. Once the collages were complete, participant/coresearchers were free to go. Many stayed however and wanted to share their collage with the group. In both English and Inuktut, some pigiaqtisitijit talked about their choices of milestones, their artistic decisions, and their own journeys. Highlights from these discussions were recorded in facilitator field notes. Figure 1 is a photo of Inuk coauthor Michelle Malla who created and explained a collage as part of the pilot of the exercise.

**Stage 3: In-depth interviews.** All participants from the collage creation workshop consented to being contacted for potential interview follow up. The interviews were conducted in an iterative process with four initial interviews being conducted, transcribed, and reflected upon, before the guide was adapted and the rest of the interviews proceeded. At the time of this publication, eight participant/coresearchers (five women, three men) from the collage workshop participated in these in-depth interviews. Prior to the interviews starting, the research project was explained, and interview-specific consent was obtained. The interviews were conducted one-on-one with a research assistant from outside the community who was trained specifically for
the task. The interviews were conducted in English (all participants declining the need for an Inuktitut interpreter) and followed a semistructured format. Interviews ranged from 20 min to 1 hr in length. Seven participants agreed to be audio recorded, with one participant requesting that only handwritten notes be taken during the interview. Following some demographic questions, the participant/coresearchers were asked to share their collage. The participant/coresearchers were given freedom to choose which pieces on their collage they shared, in what order, and to what degree.

The interviews were framed in a reflective questioning style that embodied elements of motivational interviewing with interviews being structured and conducted in a manner whereby the participant was acknowledged as a partner, accepted and valued for their perspective and understanding, and able to bring forth their own ideas for and knowledge of themselves and the community (Homeless Hub, 2019; Miller & Rolnick, 2013). The reflective style further extended to the self-awareness exercise of the collage for participants. It also allowed researchers to gain insight into participants’ feelings about and understandings of how or why events occurred and what ideas they had for the future. The interview took the shape of a discussion following the participant’s lead in explaining their collage. Open questions were asked to further broaden a topic or gain insight (Lee & Barnett, 1994). Therefore, collage was used to elicit ideas for discussion within the interview and formed the basis for a reflective exercise around the participant/coresearchers understanding of leadership within the community, their place in the community, their wellness, and future directions.

Stage 4: Reporting and next steps. All measures were taken to ensure anonymity of recorded data and confidentiality particularly for the interviews. All notes and transcripts were de-identified and kept in password-protected files. All audio and graphical files were secured on a password-protected computer, and care was taken in their reporting to ensure maintenance of anonymity and confidentiality. Participant/coresearchers have access to their own data, and they can share it as they like. De-identified facilitator field and observation notes, as well as reflective journals, were used. In future, these data as well as aspects of the visual collages and the follow-up interview transcripts may be analyzed to understand the pigiaqtittisjiiit journey in the program and aspects of their wellness, but these findings are not presented here. At this stage, we are reflecting on our experience using collage as a tool in this CBPR program in Arviat.

Discussion

The self-reflective collage creation exercise was designed for the participant/coresearchers to engage in the creative process and internally reflect on their life, wellness, and leadership journey and the meaning they attribute to events in their life story. In our case, the research was more facilitated through the collage process rather than the biographical collages generating specific research data themselves. In a safe space, participant/coresearchers were invited to share their creations and engage in collective reflection and hope-building which is an essential part of positive CBPR. Below, we reflect on its strengths and limitations and the potential of art, and collage creation specifically, within a decolonizing research paradigm.

Strengths of the Collage Elicitation Method

Our experience with collage creation was that it was a relatively easy artistic activity to learn and where both novice and experienced artists could create largely self-directed, meaning-filled collages. This was a distinct strength. During the workshop, the role of the facilitator was intentionally quite minimal, and participants supported each other and took the lead. The relatively straightforward nature of collage art creation opened space for participants to engage comfortably within their own language, learning and sharing from others rather than being directed or interrupted by a facilitator needing to teach them specific techniques. As Huss and Cwikel (2005) noted, creativity (and interpretation) remained with the research participant, and through this process, participant and researcher relationships were strengthened and made more equal, and cultural expression was supported. This was key particularly for one of the facilitators who was new to the community and noted:

There was a sharing of stories (mostly in Inuktitut)—one of our coresearchers was sharing about the building next door, how it used to be a school. People were singing along to the background music (in Inuktitut). In the beginning of the collage activity there was a lot of laughter and discussion in Inuktitut as the women looked through the boxes of the craft pieces, it felt like it was very familiar for them. (Field Notes, Arviat, May 2018)
For many Indigenous communities, preservation of traditional language and culture is an important concern, and the inclusion of traditional cultural practices and Indigenous ways of knowing is a central principle in Indigenous contextualized CBPR practice (Laveaux and Christopher, 2009). Deciding to situate any nonlocal facilitators in the background created supportive roles for them and provided more space for free expression of local experiences and cultural identity. The personal and creative freedom of collage enabled the participants to engage and connect, and they did this in their own first language. We noted that without prompting or direction, participant/coresearchers communicated almost exclusively in Inuktitut during the creation section of the workshop. Afterward, participants who chose to share conveyed their reflective life story in various manners: in more formal presentations to the group, in informal discussions, in Inuktitut or in English, or simply by passing the collage around without any verbal explanation. Participants in the collage-making activity indicated they were empowered as coresearchers and maintained control over the production and sharing of knowledge. Here, one participant explains an aspect of their collage that conveyed strength and pride:

I drew my hand and then a ball or let’s say it is a world, inside this ball I have said “grabbing opportunities”— to be able to see so many people in this community grab opportunities whether for work or for school or going out on that land, that is what I take pride in. (Participant/coresearcher, Arviat, May 2018)

Participants showed confidence and creativity in the artistic process, creating meaning out of abstract art supplies (beads and scraps of paper or cloth). They were not limited to the use of symbols or imagery from any specific cultural reference. The abstract nature of the collage also meant that Inuk participant/coresearchers could construct their biographical collages in a nonlinear fashion. Respecting nonlinear conceptualizations of time was important given that historically, Inuit did not ascribe to a linear temporal conceptualization (Goehring & Stager, 1991; van den Scott, 2017). Historically, Inuit had two measures of time: ecological and social/structural notions, with both being considered qualitative and based upon events (either of natural rhythm or significant occurrences of individual, family, or community; Gombay, 2012). The nonlinear conceptualization of time is reflected in many of the collages and discussions within the Arviat *pigiaqtisijit* research project. Many participants chose to create biographical collages that did not display a “time line” in a linear fashion, with very few utilizing dates as markers of moments (except for in the distinct case of marking high school graduation or a trip “south”).

Collage was a helpful communication elicitation technique when engaging cross-culturally. The process of collage making gave participant/coresearchers a chance to reflect on their lives and consider their significant milestones before having to communicate them verbally and in a secondary language (if required). This lessened the chances of the research being hindered by language barriers, contributing to further colonization or misunderstanding of information. Participants were the obvious experts in their own artistic work, and their interpretation was required to decipher the story or meaning that lay underneath. One participant/coresearcher decided to represent some difficult milestones, explaining the artistic process as such:

There was a lot of discussion in Inuktitut—[one participant] mentioned some sad moments, they said they were using a lot of black items and they also used items to represent the idea of “walking in my shoes.” (Field Notes, Arviat, May 2018)

Another participant/coresearcher explains how he or she used the art pieces to show difficult experiences or milestones related to losing innocence and depression:

That soccer ball is my innocence, when I was in school, elementary mostly. And, then that squiggly line, the red line, that’s like when I changed. My innocence got taken away. And that plane represents me going back and forth. That black dot is like depression. (Participant/coresearcher, Arviat, June 2018)

Participant/coresearchers therefore ultimately controlled which and how much detail was revealed, and the way this information was communicated and depicted. We found this particularly helpful when information was of a sensitive nature or where nuance and time was required around its communication (or lack thereof). It was also helpful to ensure that power remained in the hands of participants during the research process.

As the follow-up interviews for the Arviat project took place after the collage-making workshop, participant/coresearchers had a chance to personally reflect on the collage-creating activity before following up with a verbal interview in a secondary language with the interviewer. Used in this manner, the collage technique helped to improve the ease of communication and lessen any misunderstandings or tensions between the interviewer and interviewee, echoing Kay’s (2013) noted finding that the collage technique can be used as a nonverbal method of building community and fostering connections.

Deciding to facilitate the collage making in a group setting, rather than one-on-one, fulfilled a request by the participant/coresearchers, but it also ensured efficiency in conduct and maximized collaborative benefits. Although there is always the potential for individuals within a group to be influenced by those around them, as Van Schalkwyk (2010) states, with any artistic creation, there is always outside consideration or influence of the “audience” whether that be friends or family members, the researcher, others in the community, or even their own acknowledged selves. The group setting fostered a dialogical space that allowed for focus on the interconnectedness of people, contexts, and ideas (Plamondon & Caxaj, 2018) and provided natural opportunities for the group to form ideas about their shared past, present, and future (Freire, 1997). The activity showcased strength and potential within the group and helped members appreciate this:
I am proud and excited, I see so much hope and potential in this group. (Participant/coresearcher, Arviat, June 2018)

In our experience in Arviat, the group setting also encouraged everyone to create. During the men’s workshop, for example, the facilitators observed that participants were slowing down in their activity, but after one participant shared details about his collage, there was a reinvigoration of creativity from all the other participants in the group. This experience similarly echoed that of Coholic et al. (2012) who reflected on how an arts-based group was shown to create a supportive environment for participants to explore their own self-understanding and the issues they deemed to be important.

Participant/coresearchers went through the reflective process of creating the collage, strengthening their sense of self-identity as they developed their authentic leadership capacity, but they were also able to take home a final product of the process and a concrete record of the event and the knowledge shared (in the collage itself). In the collage creation workshop and subsequent interviews, many participant/coresearchers expressed pride in their final creation, stating that they would be displayed in their own work or personal environments, with some considering adding on to the collage in the future.

Versatility of the method also means that the final created collage product did not necessarily need to be analyzed data. In our case, the collage was used to facilitate research rather than to generate data in itself. Although the participants allowed us to photograph and see the final collages, all of the research (focus group discussions/interactions, field notes, interviews) and community benefits (relationships built/strengthened, community capacity built, etc.) could have been generated without the researchers being aware of the final collage product. In our case, from a CBPR perspective, it was the act of creating not the final collage product that proved valuable. Having said this, the collage works could potentially still be analyzed with participant/coresearchers to identify group-level themes or patterns (e.g., positive or negative depictions, use of specific colors or imagery) that might be evident in the final creations.

Limitations of the Collage Elicitation Method

Although the collage technique had many strengths in our CBPR project, we also found a few limitations. While collage allowed for abstract pieces (such as cloth and beads) to be used, one limitation was the amount of art supplies that needed to be collected and prepared prior to the workshop. Variety and volume of art pieces (paper, cloth, beads, natural items, poster boards, etc.) were useful to fuel participants’ creativity and their desire to create unique collages. This may be logistically difficult when engaging in research in/with other communities depending on costs and availability of local materials.

Given the group nature of these workshops, maintaining confidentiality was something we could talk about and encourage with participant/coresearchers but could not explicitly ensure. To mitigate any potential concerns, at the end of the workshops, we included reflections on how we could honor the experience and confidence of each other. Participant/coresearchers engaged in a significant amount of discussion while creating their collages, often sharing details and ideas with each other. As with focus groups, individual information was known by others. While we attempted to de-identify any field notes or transcripts, some close friends and family members may be able to potentially identify participants through even the de-identified quotations or general details that were shared. The abstract nature of the creation itself did allow for some degree of confidentiality after the workshop since the meaning and significance of the collage story cannot be easily ascertained without the creator’s explanation. In the Arviat project, participants were not asked or required to share their collages, but some did:

One participant volunteered to share with the group, they decided to share with the group first in Inuktitut and then shared in English. When they finished sharing the whole group clapped. (Field Notes, Arviat, May 2018)

The decision to share, however, was one that some people weighed:

One participant considered sharing. At first, they asked if they had to share, we all said no it wasn’t required. Then they stated they did not want to share. But then after a smoke break with the group, they stated that they felt there should be sharing. In the end, they said they would just pass their collage around and that they didn’t want to have to talk about it. (Field Notes, Arviat, May 2018)

Worry over confidentiality or anonymity may have been one reason why a few participants decided not to share details about their collage, decided not to join the collage creation at all (one person stayed but did not create), or decided to write a response instead of produce a piece of art.

The specific collage approach is something facilitators and participant/coresearchers need to be sensitive about and discuss together. Previous work has utilized collage construction at the same time as the interview process and others have done the collage first and used it as an elicitation tool for subsequent group interviewing (Kay, 2013; Vaccelli, 2018; Van Schalkwyk, 2010). Both approaches have their own set of strengths and limitations. Given the large workshop groups and wanting to be respectful of everyone’s time, the research team in Arviat decided to conduct the individual interviews after the workshop, with a second follow-up contact needed with the participant/coresearchers. Although the decision to interview after the fact may have allowed the interviewee to reflect and prepare, it also created space for participants to become hesitant and nervous about the looming interview (perhaps even leading to some nonparticipation). However, as Vaccelli (2018) inferred by the hushed tones of her participants in her work, some participants in a group setting may often prefer private discussion, and so it is important to offer a balance and allow flexible choice. Some Arviat participant/coresearchers needed a quiet
and more private environment to feel comfortable discussing sensitive and personal issues if they wished to share them. Others did not prefer this setting. There was a conscious decision by the research team to ask the participant/coresearchers who were interviewed privately if they had any significant moments (milestones) that they would have liked to add but didn’t—opening the conversation to include other milestones that perhaps some were hesitant to include during the group process. A few participants did use this opportunity to share further ideas.

Despite initial concern that individuals may be hesitant or unwilling to participate in the collage workshop given the artistic nature or the potentially sensitive experiences that the narratives could elicit, the participants felt it was a welcome and motivating experience:

This collage I made has, it motivates me, and I’m not afraid to tell it to anybody in hopes that I will be able to help somebody by me telling them the story. (Participant/coresearcher, Arviat July 2018)

**Concluding Thoughts**

Overall, the biographical collage technique worked well within a CBPR and capacity development program with men and women in a remote Inuit community. Our experience highlighted that the collage method can enhance cross-cultural learning and communication in research projects, support personal reflection and leadership development, and foster relational connections in a community-based research team, and serve as an elicitation tool in follow-up interviews. During the workshop process, the collage technique was shown to effectively foster a sense of community as participants created together and shared with each other in their own language without having to be constantly directed/guided by a facilitator. Furthermore, the collage creation was reported to be an enjoyable experience for adult Inuit men and women, with sharing, singing, and laughing throughout the process. Many participants expressed pride in the creation of a final product.

Choosing a biographical topic for the collage activity provided an opportunity to build personal reflection and leadership capacity development in the community. Using reflective questioning gave participants the opportunity to consider their community and themselves as leaders and articulate their ideas for the future. These reflections were situated within the context of the life stories that they chose to tell and explore. The contextual element of biographical storytelling also provided researchers with a rich understanding of participant and community thoughts and ideas.

The utilization of a biographical collage elicitation technique in an Inuit community has highlighted many benefits of using an arts-based method in community-based research. The adaptable and easily accessible technique fostered a sense of community among participants and empowered participants to become research partners as cogenerators of knowledge. Collage helped create a reciprocal environment whereby knowledge was generated, and community capacity was built alongside authentic leadership development and the appropriate sharing and balancing of power.

Even with the growing usage of arts-based methods within Indigenous communities, there seems to be a current gap in the literature around the use of collage with Inuit or even with Indigenous communities more broadly. Based on our experiences in this CBPR project, the collage technique, when used in a group setting, has the potential to foster relationships among participants and between community members and other members of the research team—local and nonlocal. Moving forward, community-based researchers should consider using the collage activity to elicit rich discussion and interviews when working on participatory projects. Collage helped foster research relationships, built upon community strengths and expertise, promoted co-learning, and was an exercise that served to respect and highlight traditional culture and language. This is in line with CBPR principles in an Indigenous context such as those outlined by Laveaux and Christopher (2009). Kovach (2010) looked at the use of a conversational method in Indigenous research, as it is a “method of gathering knowledge based on oral storytelling tradition congruent with Indigenous paradigms.” As Kovach was already known to her research participants, she acknowledges that this method hinges upon trust and “relational accountability.” Evidenced in our project, the biographical collage has the potential to foster community–researcher relationships and enrich dialogues between researcher and participant by providing a starting point and safe platform for the life storytelling. Future research that explores the use of biographical collage as a tool in conversational method research may prove valuable, especially when the researcher is an “outsider” in relation to the study community.

Perhaps the greatest testament to the use of collage within Inuit, Métis, and First Nation populations is how the participants themselves can see future use of the collage and its benefits within their own community:

I would do it as an arts activity with the kids. Maybe their achievements with school or their first caribou or their first goose. Or maybe one of the first words that they said . . . And if they notice their achievements they’ll want more achievements. (Participant/coresearcher, Arviat, July 2018)

The importance of . . . doing a collage, is getting who you are in there and looking at it right in front of you. It’s very encouraging because there’s milestones that you can see and at the end where you are now is right here . . . and that’s very encouraging. (Participant/coresearcher, Arviat, July 2018)

Although, in our case, the collage technique was explored when working with an Indigenous community, the benefits of collage may also be applicable to non-Indigenous communities, such as seen in Vacchelli’s (2018) work with refugee and asylum-seeking women. Further exploration in a non-Indigenous context of the benefits highlighted by the Arviat research project could be valuable, particularly when the
researcher is a community outsider or when working with communities that have also experienced power differences with, or may be mistrustful of, researchers. Through a detailed example of the collage technique being used within an Inuit project, this article attempts to showcase the versatility and suitability of the technique in cross-cultural community-based research and promote its potential further usage with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

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