

Arts-based methodologies: Exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities and experiences

N Khanlou, F Nunes, D Davidson,
L Seto Nielsen, N Alamdar, and LM Vazquez



Introduction

Youth from Asian backgrounds in Canada represent a heterogenous group of young people. May is recognized as the Asian Heritage Month (Government of Canada, 2021).

According to Statistics Canada (2016) between 2006 and 2011, of all newcomers to Canada, 13.1% were born in the Philippines, 10.5% were Chinese-born, and 10.4% were Indian-born. Today, Canada is one of the world's most ethno-culturally diverse countries with ethnic minorities representing 19.1% of the total population. The South Asian population is the largest ethnic group in the country, accounting for 25% of the visible minority population and 4.8% of the total population.

Asian-Canadian youth have resiliencies and at the same time encounter barriers to their inclusion in Canadian society (Khanlou et al, 2018). The challenges they face may include language barriers; balancing different and gendered family, cultural and religious expectations; and experiences of discrimination and racism.

Innovative methods are needed to better understand youth's lived experiences, such as in relation to their identities and integration to Canadian society.

Arts-based research encompasses approaches that use artistic forms and expressions to understand personal experiences. Arts-based approaches are considered relevant to explore and communicate youth's experiences with, for example, racism and marginalization (Clover, 2011; Halverson, 2010).

Our study

Our community-based project titled “Arts-based participatory research approach: Potential for exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities through an intersectionality lens,” applied arts-based methodologies to explore Asian-Canadian youth identities in the Greater Toronto Area.

We applied visual arts (Self-Portrait and a Relational Map), and drama (Readers' Theatre) to explore the experiences of Asian-Canadian youth. The objectives of the project were to:

- Assess the feasibility of arts-based methods to examine Asian-Canadian youth identities,
- To receive feedback from youth participants on the effectiveness and relevance of these arts-based methodologies in exploring their Asian-Canadian identities.

In this Information Sheet, we report on some preliminary findings from our study.

What did we do?

We conducted a total of 25 individual qualitative interviews and one focus group with 8 youth participants. Individual interviews were conducted in person. During the interviews youth were asked questions about the strengths they have as Asian-Canadian youth, and about the challenges they face. Youth were asked to draw a Self-Portrait and a Relational Map. At the end of the interview, youth provided feedback on how the visual arts worked for them as tools to express their ideas, feelings, and perceptions.

During the focus group, youth were introduced to Readers Theatre (RT). Youth were organized in small groups (2-3 youth) and were asked to write a script. The topic of the script was related to their identities as Asian-Canadian youth. Each group read their scripts to the large group. At the end, youth provided their feedback on the RT method. Below we provide a description of the methods we applied in the study.

Self-Portraits

The self-portrait is an arts-based visual technique which relies on the expressive possibilities of participants (Bagnoli, 2009a). Visual and creative methods allow participants to express in drawing what they cannot put into words (Gauntlett, 2007). The method of drawing has been employed:

- ✓ with children to refine interviewing techniques (Scott, 2000),
- ✓ to work as “ice breakers” during interviews (Morrow, 1998), and
- ✓ to conduct autobiographical investigation of young people and their identities in the context of migration in England and Italy (Bagnoli, 2009b).

Relational Maps

The relational map allows researchers to gather information on individuals' experiences in a non-linguistic dimension of research (Bagnoli, 2009a). The diagrams may be produced by the researcher or participants, which allow further interviewing and dialogue between the researcher and participants.

Relational maps have been employed as graphic tools during interviews with participants while investigating human relationships (Josselson, 1996), and in study of psychology of human intimacy (Roseneil, 2006).

Arts-based research is an approach to investigate through the systematic use of artistic forms and expressions to understand personal experiences (McNiff, 2011; Rose, 2016).

Readers Theatre

Readers Theatre is a form of drama in which presenters read off a script (Pardue, 2004). It entails a simple theatrical approach based on a scripted narrative that is read aloud to the audience, and that does not utilize any performance, scenery, or costumes (MacRae & Pardue, 2007).

Readers Theatre has been described as a good strategy to effectively introduce and discuss complex social, cultural and ethical issues (Savitt, 2010) and to promote dialogue about race and immigration among youth (Huisman, 2009).

What did we find?

Impact of COVID-19 on Asians: Asian Youth Perspectives at Start of the Pandemic

Youth expressed *frustration, anger, exclusion, and blame*.

Youth told us that the COVID-19 pandemic heightened an already pre-existing *racism and discrimination* against people of Chinese origin:

Chinese people are being discriminated about this 100%. If a white person would have this virus, it would be about the virus, but because we're associating this virus from China, originally from a country full of minorities, we focus on the minority part... People are saying that the reason this virus is prevalent is because Asian people love to eat cats and dogs...What Asian people want to do is looked down upon simply because they're Asian (P25).

Some youth appeared to have internalized the *blame*. Youth referred to anti-Asian discrimination in public spaces.

Like in the subway, an Asian person walks in with a mask and everyone else leaves and distant themselves and that is so disrespectful (P14).

An old Chinese man in Chinatown passed out and needed help but no one would go near him and it is very heart breaking (P18).

Even among those who personally were not directly targeted, they report that their friends, parents, and other family members experienced the racism:

And it makes me sad when I see people are making jokes about the public health crisis that is happening in China and you do not see any hashtags # to say "Wuhan go strong" or "China go strong" (P16).

Youth highlighted the role of social media. They described it as being rampant with bias against Asians. One participant noted:

I have not experienced it personally, but it is everywhere now, and the media is talking about it and people follow the news and not go with a proper information (P21).

Youth commented on how the saturation of negative and distorted images socializes non-Asians to believe in the inferiority of Asians, as well as blames Asians for supposedly transmitting the virus.

Youth's feedback on Arts-based methodologies

Self Portrait:

- ✓ Challenges: some youth explained that they were more "a word person" than visual, but they also recognized that they do not know how to express the thoughts that they have in their heads.
- ✓ Useful self-learning tool: some youth highlighted that it was a good tool to express thoughts that are hard to express verbally. They found it useful to express their feelings and experiences.

Relational Map:

- ✓ Youth noted that it was a useful way to identify meaningful relationships with others. It helped them to see who they “appreciate” most in their lives.

Readers Theatre:

- ✓ Youth highlighted the benefits of collective co-writing of the script. They said that putting themselves, as characters, in the shoes of “others” illuminated things about their own experiences.
- ✓ Youth explained that the script writing process helped them to think about their experiences through a cultural lens.

Selected References:

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ABOUT THE INFORMATION SHEET

This information sheet is part of a series of information sheets produced at the Office of the Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health and in relation to the Intersectional Approach to Youth Identity program. It provides some of the key findings from our arts-based qualitative study titled *Arts-based participatory research approach: Potential for exploring Asian-Canadian youth identities through an intersectionality lens*.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS AND COLLABORATORS

Dr. Nazilla Khanlou, Associate Professor, Faculty of Health, York University, is the Principal Investigator of this study and Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health. Dr. Fernando Nunes is Department Chair/Associate Professor in the Department of Child and Youth Study, Mount Saint Vincent University. Dr. Deborah Davidson is Associate Professor at the LA&PS Department of Sociology, York University. Dr. Lisa Seto Nielsen is Associate Professor, Faculty of Health, York University. Dr. Negar Alamdar is contract faculty at the LA&PS Department of Human Rights and Equity Studies, York University. Dr. Luz Maria Vazquez is a research associate/coordinator at the office of the Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health, Faculty of Health, York University. We acknowledge and are grateful to the Office's research assistant, Dr. Attia Khan, and to the Office's volunteers Amirtha Karunakaran, and Sheena Madzima, for their research support.

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