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The Japanese-American Photo Project : Exploring Hidden Local Histories in Learning Social Work Macro Practice through Participatory Action Research

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Sage Research Methods: Diversifying and Decolonizing Research

The Japanese-American Photo Project: Exploring Hidden Local Histories in Learning Social Work Macro Practice through Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

This case study describes the Japanese-American Photo Project, an undergraduate social work macro practice class assignment at California State University, Fresno. It was simultaneously enacted and researched through the method of participatory action research (PAR). The project was initiated by the serendipitous discovery of a box of unidentified photographs owned by a community group. In the context of a democratic education classroom exercise, the goal of the research was to document an experiential activity in which students put into practice and assessed their grasp of macro social work practice skills. The conclusions of the research were recorded as videos, which were used in teaching other sections of macro social work practice.

The case of the Japanese-American Photo Project demonstrates how students can collectively activate their learning by overcoming challenges such as lack of funding and creating a project from scratch. The aim of the project was to empower students to develop a research process to understand what the significance of the photos was and how to use macro practice skills to engage with the communities in the pictures. This activity required learning about the ethics of the historical context of the pictures and being sensitive to the trauma survivors experienced. The research process called for reflection on one's own socio-cultural position and how to perform macro practice in relation to community. In the end, the research showed that students found the Japanese-American Photo Project to be a meaningful learning exercise, though not without many challenges that impacted the final result.



Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, readers should be able to

- understand macro social work practice in relation to democratic education and historical trauma.
- understand what participatory action research is.
- identify potential ethical challenges in a collective participatory action research project based on historical trauma.

Project Overview and Context

This case study describes a class project that took place in an undergraduate-level macro social work class at California State University, Fresno in 2016. Macro social work practice is a broad field that includes understanding organizations, administration, policy advocacy, as well as making systemic change, and working with communities. It is not an indirect practice; rather, macro practice involves direct practice skills that target working with communities and neighborhoods and advocating for social justice across a diversity of socio-cultural and racial groups in a multitude of practical ways. Social work defines itself as a social justice profession that promotes the wellbeing of communities, families and individuals. Indeed, social work as a profession seeks to understand the connection between “public issues” and “private troubles” ([Ioakimidis & Wyllie, 2023](#), p. 3). In recent decades, there has been growing inequality in many industrialized countries, creating a greater need for structural interventions to support vulnerable people, at the same time that there has been a clear decline in the teaching of macro social work practice in U.S. programs, with few schools of social work offering a specialization in this field ([Reisch, 2017](#), p. 6). While the educational emphasis on macro social work has ebbed and flowed in reaction to broader social trends during eras characterized by welfare state expansion or restructuring, the current moment raises a more existential question of how social work can fulfill its mission of promoting social justice without affirming the significance of structural tools to intervene in systems of oppression.

This case study involves a participatory action research (PAR) project that took place in Central California, one of the most ethnically diverse, impoverished, and underserved regions of the United States ([Fairbanks, 2021](#)). PAR is a method that is engaged with ways of constructing knowledge collectively through action. Using the critical pedagogical approach of democratic education is key to opening up the complex histories of this under-researched region and understanding how local power dynamics, structures, and systems have emerged and continue to endure. Democratic education challenges the hidden curriculum of some macro social work practice assignments where students are socialized into uncritically accepting professional administrative roles complicit with structural state policies that do not always align with the interests of diverse local communities. Exploring the complexity of historical trauma and local silence offers students the opportunity to examine how the field of social work has been complicit or resisted oppressive state policies ([Ioakimidis & Wyllie, 2023](#)).

The aim of the Japanese-American Photo Project was to provide experiential learning through a democratic

education approach so that students could better understand how to conduct outreach work, manage a common project, organize an event, and reflect on the significance of the historical trauma of the Japanese-American community in Fresno today through the method of PAR. The project occurred at a time when President Trump's policy of separating children migrating across the southern border of the United States was taking shape. As many students were from the same communities targeted by Trump's separation policy, some saw parallels with the forced incarceration of Japanese-Americans during World War II and pondered the implications of these unlawful yet state-supported activities to social work.

Context

The idea of the project emerged when I visited a small shop in Fresno's Chinatown. A former student pointed to a box of old studio photographs of Japanese-Americans taken at the Frank Kamiyama Studio between the 1920s and 1950s that had been sitting for many years in the closet of a neighborhood association. Curious about the people in the photographs, I asked to borrow the box and spent many evenings examining the old pictures and wondering why so many remained unidentified. I decided to task macro practice students to research the local Japanese-American community and put on a show where locals were invited to identify the photographs. My goal was to have students learn macro practice skills such as planning, developing, implementing, analyzing, and evaluating a learning activity through the process of a PAR project. Further, I sought to embrace bell hooks' ([2003](#)) pedagogical notion of democratic education, which views learning as also occurring outside of the corporate gates of the institutionalized classroom and deeply engaged with critical thinking. I also wanted to have students use critical reflective skills to wrestle with the meaning of this local historical injustice from the perspective of macro social work practice.

Many students at Fresno State are first generation immigrants or come from farmworking backgrounds. It is common for students to come from mixed status families, in which some members have citizenship while others are undocumented. In a mixed status family, some members have access to resources while others are subject to detention by the authorities, which can cause tensions, and feelings of insecurity and injustice. Fresno State is one of the most culturally and racially diverse campuses in California, which reflects the long agricultural history of the region. Located on the unceded lands of the Yokuts and Mono peoples, the emerging agricultural industry of Fresno in the 20th century drew immigrants from all over the world. Today, farms in Central California are large and corporatized, relying on a huge migrant farm labor force that draws people from across the southern border. Recent government policies that accelerate the deportation of undocument-

ed people, along with the lack of labor and social rights, have created a profoundly precarious position for migrant farm laborers, which is a significant regional macro social work issue.

The Fresno Japanese-American community dates to the 1890s when ranchers in Central California recruited Japanese farm workers to pick grapes. Japanese-Americans worked hard to save money, buy land, and provide social mobility to their children. Before the Second World War, Japanese-American farms produced over 70% of greenhouse flowers and 40% of commercial vegetables in California ([Jiobu, 1988](#)). Second generation Japanese-Americans known as the *Nisei* were deeply integrated with American school and social life. Shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Executive Order 9066 authorized the forced removal of all people of Japanese descent on the West Coast to concentration camps in desolate parts of the United States. 70,000 Japanese-American citizens were given only days to sell their property and assemble at evacuation centers. This action severed Japanese-Americans ties to local communities overnight with property loss estimated as upwards of \$6.2 billion ([Pippert, 1983](#)). Though the U.S. government finally acknowledged the injustice of its actions in 1988, many of the survivors of the camps had already passed on and the compensation offered was largely symbolic. Fresno had two evacuation centers that concentrated local Japanese-American residents for dispersal to incarceration camps ([Park, 2019](#)), but few students knew of this history or the role that social workers played in managing the evacuation.

The rationale for focusing on the history of the Japanese-American community was based on three main objectives. First, it sought to open up the history of a community that was often erased in discussions of local history and little known by students born two generations after the war. The history of this group had contemporary relevance to the emerging practices of how the state was dealing with migrant people crossing the border, especially at the intersection of immigration enforcement and child welfare ([Wessler, 2011](#)). Second, the project sought to support students' experiential learning in managing a macro practice event through planning, implementing, analyzing, and evaluating a project with this community. Finally, the project was a reflective exercise on how social workers have historically responded to social injustice at the intersection of immigration and racial prejudice. Through participatory action research, students documented the meaning of this learning exercise.

Democratic Education, Historical Trauma, and Social Work

Macro Practice

University education has changed in recent decades due to fundamental structural changes as public funding has declined. Neoliberalism, a philosophy characterized by a market-orientation in political decision-making that favors deregulation, free markets, and privatization over public funding, has been the dominant socio-economic model in late 20th and early 21st century industrialized societies. In social work education, the influence of neoliberal policies can be seen in the increasing focus on reductive management skills and competencies that can overlook the relational and structural dimensions of social issues ([Carey, 2021](#)). Further, increasing reliance on technology has given rise to a speedy knowledge society that churns out a massive amount of information. These major transformations have impacted our ways of understanding society, ourselves, and our communities. New demands on universities to be increasingly entrepreneurial and productive have brought challenges regarding how to navigate information overload and the pressure to produce while supporting crucial critical thinking skills.

Neoliberal ideologies have shaped societal value systems and prioritized self-interest, which has brought a resurgence of social Darwinist perspectives and policies that have an impact on social work education ([Esposito & Perez, 2022](#), p. 24). Democratic education, on the other hand, is grounded in deep reflection and radical empathy, as well as interactive learning with community. It uses ideas of “slow education” that push back on the pressure to increase productivity and competencies by enhancing deep knowledge creation through reflective thought and dialogue using cultural humility and appreciative listening ([Wear et al., 2015](#)). Moreover, it centers radical empathy, which is “a complex cognitive-affective skill that allows us to ‘know’ (resonate, feel, sense, cognitively grasp) another person’s experience” ([Jordan, 2010](#), p. 103). Slow learning and radical empathy were central elements in developing deliberative democratic education where learners could use PAR as method to engage and learn with community.

The pedagogical aims of the Japanese-American Photo Project were based on bell hooks’ ([2003](#)) notion of democratic education. hooks ([2003](#), p. 41) describes democratic education as a method that “breaks through the false construction of the corporate university as set apart from real life and seeks to re-envision schooling as always a part of our real-world experience, and our real life.” From this perspective, education becomes an emancipatory act of critical thinking that engages with the world. Students in the project had to plan and execute a show, and through this experience learn to theorize the meaning of exploring the history of this group as macro social work practice. Finally, developing the project through classroom dialogue and working

together meant engaging with the topic from different structural standpoints as well as diverse personal experiences and identities.

The notion of historical trauma, which evolved from studies of the ongoing impact of the Holocaust and Indigenous genocide across generations, examines how major violent and oppressive historical events continue to harm individuals and communities ([Menzies, 2019](#)). Increasingly, there has been greater attention to the consequences of historical trauma on the micro level of epigenetics ([Conching & Thayer, 2019](#)) and attachment ([Talley, 2018](#)), but there is a need to further explore the structural impact of historical trauma via macro practice with communities ([Rosenwald et al., 2023](#)). By analyzing a local case of historical trauma through the lens of structural social work, students could reflect on the role and responsibility of their profession in relation to vulnerable communities historically, and the lessons that needed to be learned.

Centering the significance of historical trauma has important macro practice implications, especially as the legacies of colonization, transatlantic slavery, genocide, and war continue to roil down through the generations. Social workers have an obligation to understand how these often-silenced collective histories persist in the present, in terms of intergenerational trauma, forced assimilation, and unjust social structures. In this project, students reflected on the parallels between the contemporary detention of migrant children, “Muslim bans” at the border, and the wartime experience of Japanese-Americans. They also considered how generic images of the “model minority” and racism cloaked the reality of the many-layered historical trauma of Asian-Americans ([Cai & Lee, 2022](#)). The pedagogical approach of democratic education sparked radical empathy and engagement with the story of the local Japanese-American community and provoked conversations on contemporary issues surrounding migration.

Participatory Action Research

Academic research is often criticized for being cloistered in the ivory tower far away from the experiences of everyday people. PAR aims to better understand the world by engaging collaboratively with community members through an inquiry-based, participatory and transformative process ([Littman et al., 2023](#)). An essential principle and purpose of PAR is social justice through its focus on co-creating research with community members and a commitment to taking action to enact change ([Lenette, 2022](#), p. 3). PAR is fundamentally *participatory*, which means that people involved in the research process gain insight into the taken-for-granted practices they perform, explore distinct perspectives on the topic, parse emerging questions and findings, develop the analysis, and thus consider how to make changes in social practices. This also means that participants

must explore how generational, racial, immigration status, gender, and other power dynamics have an impact on research. Reciprocity is central in PAR as equality in research requires mutual respect and exchange, going beyond the notion of research as extraction ([Lenette, 2022](#)). PAR focuses on developing consciousness of social issues and promoting socially just change through collective knowledge-building. While positivist approaches to research seek to objectively study phenomena through a detached observation, the orientation of PAR is intrinsically embedded in the social practices that it interrogates via the interactive presence of the participant-researchers. PAR can therefore be messy and complicated, and the path forward can take detours, but it is suitable for macro practice learning precisely because it emphasizes process.

Planning and Implementing the Japanese-American Photo Project

Students were given the photographic material for the project in late August 2016. The photos documented a rich community life of babies, community events, students, and families in both traditional Japanese clothing as well as modern western suits and dresses. The photos abruptly end in 1942, with only a handful of photos of men in uniform and several of a military funeral during wartime. A small group of photos date from the 1950s and feature a few dozen wedding photos with women in puffy white dresses and men in tuxedos. Students were intrigued by the shift in the clothing over the years: what did these changing fashions reveal? Why did Japanese clothing disappear so abruptly? Why were there so few photos during wartime? Why were the photos of the 1950s so different from the previous decades? These were the initial observations that students considered when exploring the topic and constructing the event.

Initially, students had to plan a timeline of the event and how it would be implemented. Fresno State runs on a semester system. During the time I taught there, social work macro practice courses for undergraduates took place during the fall semester and research courses in the spring. Students did not necessarily remain in the same groups for each course. I introduced the idea of the project in September and the project concluded at the end of the semester in December, 2016. In the first month, September, students planned and divided the responsibility for the events. During October, students collected all of the copies of the photos, finalized the plans for the show, secured the venue, and performed outreach with the Japanese-American community.

Toward the end of October, students started to become fatigued and there were minor irritations about who was participating and contributing enough to the project. It is important to note that the project was one part of the macro practice course and there continued to be other lectures to attend and assignments to complete for the course. There were numerous discussions to troubleshoot issues and find solutions as students had different ideas about how large the project should be. An artist came to class to help support students in envisioning how to display the photos, which provided key support immediately before the show. Students kept learning diaries throughout the project where they documented the emotional ups and down, joyous moments of connection, learning process, and hard work that was involved.

The centrality of the historical trauma of the forced incarceration of Japanese-Americans in 1942 loomed large in the project. Despite being one of most egregious violations of civil rights in U.S. history, silence surrounding the incarceration prevails, which means that survivors have often been expected to cope with burden of trauma themselves ([Nagata et al., 2015](#)). Students therefore recognized the sensitivity of revisiting this historical period for many community members attending the show. To prepare, students read about the forced internment and visited the memorials that mark former assembly centers. Several students were delegated to reach out to the community. This group first contacted formal organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League for information. I also gave them the names of several key people in the local Japanese-American community, which helped guide them on issues they needed to be aware of, how to best connect with people to attend the show, sensitive matters, the needs and wishes of the community, and ways to ensure that support was available for participants. Students were aware that the historical photographs had the potential to evoke complex feelings of loss, trauma, joy, and grief. For this reason, students decided to ask to stage the event at the Fresno Betsuin Buddhist Temple with its deep roots in the local Japanese-American community, having held its first religious gathering in Fresno in 1899 and establishing the Temple in 1920. The head minister agreed to be present for the show and provide support for participants, if needed.

The show took place in November at the Fresno Betsuin Buddhist Temple. There was a reprise of the show in the spring of 2017 at the United Japanese Christian Church to coincide with a larger university project commemorating the anniversary of the unlawful Executive Order 9066 authorizing the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in 1942. Approximately 200 people attended each show. Students put together a large display of the photos grouped by themes (e.g., childhood, family, and military). There was a number under each photo to assist students in reporting precise information provided by people attending the exhibition, which took place over a two-hour period. The congregation of each faith institution provided refreshments and a place for people to sit and socialize, which offered the opportunity for participants to debrief. Students took turns circu-

lating in the room where they engaged with people viewing the photos, while others helped with refreshments. Students who were performing reporting tasks held clipboards where they made notes on the information given by visitors to the exhibit. They collected information about memories and any identifying information about specific photos that visitors wanted to share. The names of informants were not recorded. These reports were kept with the original photographs and later returned to the neighborhood association that owned the photos as documentation. In this way, the project offered a reciprocal service to the Japanese-American community. Nearly 15% of photos were identified. There were lively discussions in the halls where the shows took place. One man walked in and said that he had never seen a photo of his father in a military uniform. Students arranged for the man to receive a copy of the photo from the neighborhood association. Other members of the public milled around and shared memories. Most of the attendees stayed for over an hour. Many said that they were grateful for the interest in their community story. Professor Jody Hironaka-Juteau, Dean of the College of Health and Human Services, who is also a member the Japanese-American community, attended the show and stated in the students' video: "It's not just about identifying the photos, but a recognition of what happens when there are gaps in history and how we can utilize the community's potential in filling those gaps."



Section Summary

- The aim of the Japanese-American Photo Project was to provide experiential learning through democratic education so that students could better understand how to conduct outreach work, manage a common project, organize an event, and reflect on the significance of the history of the Japanese-American community in Fresno today through participatory action research.
- Democratic education seeks to connect students with the community, envisioning learning as critical thinking and relationality with the public.
- Participatory Action Research is a way of critically understanding the world by engaging in a research process with it.
- Participatory Action Research develops social work macro practice skills through its focus on process and reciprocity in making social change.

Research Design

This case study is an example of PAR, a method that aims to promote social change by studying the process of engaging in an action. The research design of the project was continuously developed collectively with students as the project progressed. It was planned as a descriptive case study that would explore how the project was implemented. The focus of the research was the students themselves and how they changed through the process of creating the Japanese-American Photo Project. Initially, I thought that there would be a rather orderly process of documenting and reflecting on the experience. I had different due dates throughout the semester where students were expected to turn in written assessments and reflections on the project at specific points in time. These essays were intended to be the main data for the PAR project. We planned to work with the texts as a group through a method of content analysis during the last few weeks of the semester as well as conduct interviews with one another to document the impact of the project. However, as the workload ramped up with the practical organization of the project, engagement with written work declined so a comprehensive data set of written texts became impossible to achieve. Further, exhaustion after the show meant that much of the data simply was not collected and instead interviews and reflective discussions became the basis of analysis. While much of the initial plans of the data collection of the research never came to fruition, documentation via reflective essays, collective discussions, and videotaped interviews provided a good overview of the project. The research data included notes, plans, learning diaries, reflective essays, and interviews of students conducted at the end of the course. The final product of the research was a collective debrief of the findings of the research in the last class of the semester and a series of videos were made where students talked about the meaning of the project. These videos were shared with the public and were used for teaching in other sections of macro practice.

As a teacher of macro social work practice, I wanted a learning assignment where students could apply a critical thinking lens to working directly with the community and one another. I wanted to use the theory of democratic education to launch an experiential learning project directed by students, not the teacher. Because the photos were local and told a story about a history that has often not been adequately taught, I felt that students could benefit from exploring this gap in the light of current political events. Finally, I wanted the students to consciously make sense of what they were learning through the method of PAR.

Students reflected on the project in diverse ways. Students noted how difficult the project had been to put together in such a short time. One student noted: "It taught me how to plan a community project. It takes a lot

of work.” Another student stated: “I was able to learn so much that I didn’t know about... It showed me how to work in a project and work with other people.” A third student pointed out that while the goal of the project was to identify the pictures, the bigger purpose was just to share the pictures and make the connection with the community. They further noted that this class project was different from most class assignments like term papers because it could continue through community connection. Students thus saw the relational aspects of the Japanese-American Photo Project as one of the most significant outcomes.



Section Summary

- Research design constantly evolves with PAR projects.
- Participatory action research is processual and can be messy at times because it is continuously developed throughout the project.
- There can be many challenges in doing participatory action research with a group, especially regarding time constraints and the sharing of duties.

Method in Action

The Japanese-American Photo Project attracted a great deal of enthusiasm from the start. Students were excited to be active learners and directly engage in creating an informational event for the public. The students started by forming several committees such as the venue, outreach, design, and documentation groups to manage different aspects of the project. The lack of funding was the biggest initial challenge of the Japanese-American Photo Project, though students ingeniously found ways around financial barriers by finding donations from agencies and community groups to pay for arts and crafts supplies, photocopies, and refreshments for the event. To start the project, students had to first figure out how to make good copies of the photos because the originals were delicate and did not belong to us. As all students were completing an internship concurrent with the class, they decided to ask their placements if they would be allowed to make 7–10 photocopies of photographs from agency equipment which could be displayed in the show. Agencies showed solidarity and contributed to the project in this way. The College of Health and Human Services also stepped in to offer some financial support for crucial supplies.

There were committees that had to find appropriate venues and ways to inform the public. Students also had

to work together to decide on the best way to organize and present the show. In practice, this meant collecting all of the copies of photos, collectively deciding on how to display them, making a list of needed materials and purchasing them with money donated by the College of Health and Human Services, visiting venues, discussing with caretakers at the venues, and ensuring that the display could be executed according to plan. Students met with faith and community leaders to learn more about potential ethical and sensitivity issues surrounding the photographs. Faith leaders took a prominent role by discussing any concerns with their congregations before the show and relaying them to the students. At the show, faith leaders circulated and talked with attendees. Finally, students had to physically stage the show and be present for the event. There were moments of tension among students due to the fact that many had lots of demands on their time and could not fully participate in project work on weekends and other out-of-classroom times to assemble the show. Indeed, the pressure of time was ever-present throughout the project. I often met with students to try to troubleshoot issues and support them through the process. The College offered funding that allowed me to buy pizzas for the group the night before the first show, which provided a moment of camaraderie before the big day. During the show, students were relaxed and very happy to see how much their work was appreciated by attendees. All of the bumps of the process of developing the project seemed worth it to put on this important event.

In the reflective discussions at the end of the course, students stated that they had feelings of exhilaration and exhaustion at the completion of the show. One of the main results of the research was that students found the experience very meaningful but that it was much harder to execute than they expected. They reported that they learned about macro practice skills such as organizing and leading groups, planning a project, and doing outreach work in a very practical way. The brevity of the time, however, left many questions about the history of Japanese-Americans unexplored and did not allow students to reflect more deeply on that aspect of the project. It would have been great to be able to continue the PAR project in the next semester through the qualitative research class that many students would take. However, due to the complexities of schedules, it was not possible to assemble all of the students in the same group.

Researching the project was difficult because the time period was short, and students had many demands on their time. The lack of funding forced students to be resourceful in finding material to create the show. While most of the students met these challenges, there were others who struggled to find the time to participate. As the teacher, I walked with students through all of the planning meetings and tried to marshal key resources when needed. In October, as the show approached, many students felt tired. I asked an artist to consult with students about planning the visual design of the show, which really energized students to imagine and envision what the show would be like. The day of the show, students were elated to see the turnout and warmth

of the community engagement. In sum, the project had many ups-and-downs due to short time frame and amount of work, but both students and I found it meaningful because we were able to actually experience doing a macro practice project while processing our own identities and viewpoints in relation to the often hidden local history .



Section Summary

- Participatory action research projects can be messy with unforeseen challenges.
- Hidden histories can involve historical trauma requiring ethical care with community members who can potentially face distress.
- Participatory action research projects can face many challenges, especially with time, due to the fact that activities and research emerge together during the process.

Practical Lessons Learned

The Japanese-American Photo Project was a social work macro practice class project that emerged spontaneously. It used PAR to explore how students learned about social work macro practice through the process of the project. Though the novelty of the project brought excitement and a sense of urgency, the biggest challenge of the project was the lack of time. The relentless schedule of the semester imposed many limitations on the development of the project and research on how and what students learned. Having more time to immerse students in the history of the Japanese-American community would have provided a deeper background for them to consider its implications for contemporary events, especially regarding migrant detention which has had an impact on local populations. This type of an activity could have provided a stronger basis for learning about macro social work, particularly at the intersection of historical trauma, restitution, and ways of healing. More time could have supported students to be more thoughtful in shaping the event more, consider a broader plan for the research, and even collect data from attendees of the show about their experiences. Students with many demands on their time due to families and work could have participated more fully if a longer-range schedule was in place. As students only had a couple of weeks between the last show and completing the research results, the format of creating videos was chosen as the best way to present the research on students' learning. More time could have given students the ability to reflect on the project on a

deeper level and would have significantly strengthened the final results. In sum, the high motivation to do this innovative project in a short period perhaps mimicked the reality of many community projects but did have some negative impacts on creating a strong piece of research. Despite all of the shortcomings, it seemed to be a meaningful project for many of the students and event participants, and it has certainly inspired me to think about teaching, learning, and research in more innovative ways.



Section Summary

- Participatory action research projects can enhance students' learning about social work macro practice through practical experience.
- Spontaneous projects bring a sense of excitement and enthusiasm, but time constraints and lack of clear planning can also bring many challenges to implementing a project.
- There are many different ways of documenting research outcomes, including videos and debrief sessions.

Conclusion

The Japanese-American Photo Project is an example of how a spontaneous idea can grow into a collective democratic education learning exercise. The hidden history of the Japanese-American community was relevant to macro practice reflection on the contemporary situation in the United States with regard to detention camps and immigrants. Using democratic education as the point of departure offered students engagement with the community to better understand and theorize contemporary social realities through the lens of macro practice. In researching the history of the internment and listening to the stories, students practiced radical empathy, a key attribute of reflective social work macro practice, by considering the lessons of this historical trauma to future generations. The process of PAR encourages engagement with communities, ethical and reciprocal practices, and self-reflection. Using PAR as a research method was the best way to capture the emergence and development of the project, though there were many challenges in collecting data, including time constraints, exhaustion, and the lack of a clear plan.

This project taught me a lot about teaching macro social work practice and supporting groups of students. It is important to explore hidden histories centering concepts like radical empathy so that social work students

gain the skills to recognize injustice and advocate for the most vulnerable. Many students reported in class discussions that they saw parallels between the historical experience and trauma of Japanese-American survivors of the camps and the difficult situation in which many undocumented people and mixed status families currently found themselves entangled. Despite many of the shortcomings of the research, I would not hesitate to embark on another PAR project like the Japanese-American Photo Project. Working with students as part of a team helped me learn more about students' own struggles to fully participate in their education and manage with the ambiguity of how the project would come together. I also learned a great deal from their resourcefulness and can-do attitude. Finally, I was inspired by the openness of students to learning in community. I hope that readers will be encouraged to initiate research projects from simple and even largely unformed ideas that can be collectively molded into meaningful activities that shape future professionals.



Section Summary

- PAR promotes engagement with communities, ethical and reciprocal practices, and self-reflection.
- PAR can be especially effective when carrying out research with students in an educational setting.
- Completing a PAR project in an educational setting may require additional time.



Discussion Questions

1. What hidden histories could be explored in your context, and how would they be important to educating social work students about research?
2. How could democratic education contribute to a research project in your context? What kinds of projects could you imagine?
3. Why is participatory action research useful for macro social work projects?
4. What challenges could participatory action research bring to a project and how could they be overcome?



Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. What is macro social work practice?

a. Economic theory applied to large social work systems.

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

b. Social work with communities, advocating for social justice.

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

c. Criminal justice reform.

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is B.

2. What is participatory action research?

- a. A type of research conducted in collaboration with the community studied.

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

- b. A type of research conducted solely by academics.

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

c. A type of research using large data sets.

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is A.

3. Why is participatory action research useful for macro practice learning?

a. Because it relies heavily on theoretical frameworks.

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

b. Because it emphasizes objective observation.

Incorrect Answer

Feedback: This is not the correct answer. The correct answer is C.

c. Because it emphasizes process and engages with social practices.

Correct Answer

Feedback: Well done, correct answer

Further Reading

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