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GREY MATTERS

A GUIDE TO COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH WITH SENIORS

Nancy Marlett and Claudia Emes

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Prologue: Seniors' Collaborative Research Manual

This manual represents a major step in making collaboration between seniors, academic researchers, and community researchers a reality. It is of interest to:

- Aging adults who are interested in research and would like to understand research in their reading and everyday lives.
- Individuals who have a specific project they would like to undertake.
- Groups of aging adults who would like to engage in research as independent researchers doing their own projects such as collecting oral histories or conducting needs surveys.
- Researchers who would like to hire seniors as part of their research team.
- Researchers who are interested in forming collaborative partnerships in applying for research grants and conducting ongoing research projects.

- Policy-makers and planners who are concerned about hearing the authentic voice of seniors, as part of a planning process.
- Teachers in Gerontology and Aging Studies who are looking to train students in research methods appropriate to their field of study.

We began with an investigation into the methods best suited to collaborative, seniors-led research. We looked at four primary research categories: field-work, interviews and survey questionnaires, focus groups, and narrative interviews. All proved to be acceptable to seniors and appropriate for collaborative research. We asked seniors why they wanted to conduct research and where the research done by seniors might lead. We investigated how to train seniors to do research in an inquiry model that included formal training, mentoring, learning by doing, and reflecting. The results of this work far exceeded our initial expectations. Aging adults are capable and motivated. They have first-hand knowledge of the cultures of aging and their creativity will introduce new approaches to understanding emerging social problems.

We use the terms “seniors,” “aging adults,” and “elders” interchangeably, although our group preferred to use the term “seniors,” despite the politically correct language of “aging adults.” In general, we use the term “seniors” to denote our senior researchers and “older adults” to refer more generally to the sector of the population being studied.

The manual uses a mixture of lay and academic language. We have attempted to use technical terms sparingly and define these within the text. There is a glossary that provides a quick reference to technical words. We chose not to include formal references; however,

lists of good resources are to be found at the end of each chapter. The majority of these are available either online or at a local university.

Section 1 provides the rationale and background for the book. Chapter 1 introduces the need for aging adults to be involved in research about seniors and what we have learned about the principles and practices of doing research in partnership. It is a useful guide for discussions among seniors, researchers, research funders, and policy-makers as they explore the importance of collaboration. We hope that this chapter will encourage academic researchers to forge new alliances and prompt research funding bodies and policy analysts to increase their expectations of collaboration in funding criteria.

Chapter 2 is the story of our research project with goals, processes, and evaluations.

Section 2 is a research manual; Chapter 3 considers Field-work and Participant Research; Chapter 4, Surveys and Interviews; Chapter 5, Focus Group Research, and Chapter 6, Narrative Research. Each chapter includes sections on: when to use the method, recruitment, and the relevant ethical issues to be considered; research roles; how to collect and analyze data; and, some hints about training seniors for that particular type of research. In some cases we challenge existing research practices or design new approaches based on the feedback of our senior researchers. In each chapter we consider a research project done by seniors as the example: the Elder Abuse Project at the Kerby Centre; the Snowbirds Seniors Fellowship of Bragg Creek; the Okotoks Seniors Club; and the Ogden House Seniors Housing project.

Section 3 discusses how to create, implement, and share research in a partnership. Chapter 7 begins as a brief overview of the stages and steps of designing research, and what we have learned as the materials in the manual have been used by others. There are four major steps in Chapter 7, which begins with deciding on a research question and focusing your efforts.

Chapter 8 outlines the steps to developing a funding proposal. Chapter 9 then continues with conducting and evaluating research, sharing results, and taking action. The appendices include an article on resilience and older adults, a handout on the principles of PAR, an example of a research proposal, a template for recording the activities and observations, focus group workbooks, a narrative workbook, a narrative interview guide, a workbook for rural settings, and a glossary of terms.