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Aiming for transformations in power: lessons from intersectoral CBPR with public housing tenants (Québec, Canada)

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Abstract

Intersectoral collaborations are recommended as effective strategies to reduce health inequalities. People most affected by health inequalities, as are people living in poverty, remain generally absent from such intersectoral collaborations. Community-based participatory research (CBPR) projects can be leveraged to better understand how to involve people with lived experience to support both individual and community empowerment. In this paper, we offer a critical reflection on a CBPR project conducted in public housing in Québec, Canada, that aimed to develop intersectoral collaboration between tenants and senior executives from four sectors (housing, health, city and community organizations). This single qualitative case study design consisted of fieldwork documents, observations and semi-structured interviews. Using the *Emancipatory Power Framework* (EPF) and the *Limiting Power Framework* (LPF), we describe examples of types of power and resistance shown by the tenants, the intersectoral partners and the research team. The discussion presents lessons learned through the study, including the importance for research teams to reflect on their own power, especially when aiming to reduce health inequalities. The paper concludes by describing the limitations of the analyses conducted through the EPF–LPF frameworks and suggestions to increase the transformative power of future studies.

Keywords: public housing, power, health promotion, intersectoral collaboration, community-based participatory research

Contribution to Health Promotion

- There is currently a gap in evidence and practice concerning the meaningful participation of people living in poverty in health promotion strategies.
- While community participation and intersectoral collaborations are often recommended avenues for action, they seldom co-exist to create a space for people with lived experience of health inequalities in decision-making processes.
- With the proposed paper, we build on recent work from Popay *et al.* (Popay *et al.*, 2021) on community empowerment by using their proposed frameworks to critically reflect on a community-based participatory research project.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers and practitioners in public health have long called for intersectoral collaborations to tackle health inequalities (Rudolph *et al.*, 2013; Storm et al., 2016). There is currently a lack of intersectoral collaborations conducted with the people most impacted by health inequalities, that is people who live in poverty (Chircop *et al.*, 2015; Corbin, 2017). One avenue for addressing this gap is community-based participatory research (CBPR), which uses an empowerment process to contribute to social change (Wallerstein and Duran, 2010; Thomson *et al.*, 2021). In this paper, we reflect on power issues in CBPR projects that aim to support both individual and community empowerment. We used findings from a study that aimed to develop collaboration between public housing tenants and intersectoral partners from four sectors (housing, health, city and community organizations).

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Empowerment can be defined as a 'group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment' (Maton, 2008, p. 5). While empowerment has increasingly been used in studies, researchers have been critical, arguing that empowerment 'had lost its power' (Christens, 2019; Popay *et al.*, 2021). Most studies have focused on individual empowerment instead of adopting a multidimensional perspective (Cyril *et al.*, 2016). This led to suggesting the need to move beyond the 'inward gaze' concerned with individual capacities and local conditions to incorporate an 'outward gaze' concerned with the political and social transformations toward equity (Popay *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, Popay *et al.* (Popay *et al.*, 2021) assert that community empowerment strategies tend to emphasize 'inward' development, where community members are supported to help each other, while underplaying 'outward' oriented strategies aimed at more social and political transformations and redistribution of resources. In the same vein, some authors have criticized participatory processes as being de-politicized and therefore downplaying the role of power dynamics (Turnhout *et al.*, 2020). Settings like public housing are particularly interesting for understanding and transforming social and political conditions.

The public housing program in Québec, Canada, offers housing for people living in poverty. Specific aspects of the public housing setting, such as strict regulations or limited opportunities for participation, create a setting where tenants have little control over their environment (Radziszewski *et al.*, 2023). In addition, other factors have been shown to reduce their health and well-being, such as overcrowded and unkept buildings (Bond *et al.*, 2012), or apartments insufficiently soundproofed and prone to vermin infestation (Thompson *et al.*, 2017; Shah *et al.*, 2018). Some studies have also noted difficult social conditions for public housing tenants, including low levels of trust among neighbours (Hayward *et al.*, 2015), or stigmatization toward tenants from minority groups (Keene and Padilla, 2010). There are also positive aspects to life in public housing, such as access to community services and a sense of community with their neighbours (August, 2014; Freedman *et al.*, 2014; Radziszewski *et al.*, 2023). These positive aspects could be harnessed to produce social change in projects where public housing tenants come together to define and achieve common goals.

CBPR aims to develop, implement and evaluate actions that reduce power inequalities, promote mutual benefits between community members and researchers, and strive for social transformation (Wallerstein and Duran, 2010). CBPR projects involve people and communities who have traditionally held less power to collectively develop meaningful knowledge and action (Israel et al., 2002; Ozer et al., 2010). This co-construction can inform social policies and practices that promote health equity (Wallerstein et al., 2018; Foell et al., 2020; Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2020).

Although promising, the CBPR approach is not free of power issues (Dworski-Riggs and Langhout, 2010; Muhammad *et al.*, 2015). Researchers are not neutral observers in the process; they are key drivers who bring financial and structural resources to a community that has most often not asked to take part in the research project (Muhammad *et al.*, 2015). Furthermore, society tends to consider scientific knowledge as more rigorous and valuable than other forms of knowledge, which compounds power differentials in research projects (Turnhout *et al.*, 2020). Researchers who engage in CBPR generally consider scientific knowledge as complementary rather than superior to other forms of knowledge (Wallerstein *et al.*, 2018), yet they operate in a conservative academic structure. It is therefore essential for research teams to be reflexive about the privileges associated with their own socio-professional position, but also about how the study is conducted (Dworski-Riggs and Langhout, 2010; Muhammad *et al.*, 2015). Given that CBPR projects generally seek to be adapted to a community's strengths and needs (Wallerstein and Duran, 2010; Muhammad *et al.*, 2015), each researcher should reflect on power issues that arise through their specific identities and contexts. To our knowledge, very few researchers have published their reflexive work related to their involvement in CBPR [see (Langhout, 2015) for exception]. This limits our understanding of the potential power issues that might arise in this context and the strategies that could be used to address them.

This paper seeks to share our research team's critical analysis of one CBPR study, named the Synergy project, we conducted in a public housing setting in Québec, Canada. More precisely, we aimed to document the power issues that emerged and share the lessons we learned through this experience.

METHODS

Researcher positionality

This qualitative research was anchored in both a constructivist paradigm and a critical approach (Tracy, 2020). Using the constructivist lens, we sought to highlight multiple and subjectively constructed realities reported by the various actors (Patton, 2015; Tracy, 2020). As for the critical approach taken by the research team, the CBPR project was grounded in a shared comprehension of social inequalities as unjust. The researchers on the team came from a range of disciplines, including community psychology, public health, sociology and urban planning. Throughout the project, a few members of the research team (J.H., J.-M.F. and H.G.) were tasked with the groundwork on the site. Some researchers (J.T. and K.F.) had sporadic participation in activities on site, while others advised the team from an outsider's point of view. Finally, one member (C.M.) conducted the implementation evaluation without being previously involved.

Conceptual framework on power relations

Researchers have recently proposed two complementary conceptual frameworks to identify diverse forms of power in communities: the *Emancipatory Power Framework* (EPF) and the *Limiting Power Framework* (LPF) (Ponsford *et al.*, 2021; Popay *et al.*, 2021; Powell *et al.*, 2021; see Supplementary Data S1 and S2). The EPF includes types of power that illustrate a collective control held by the community. The *power within* concerns the strengths and capabilities that can be harnessed to achieve a common goal. The *power with* focuses on the abilities of community members and groups to work together in a way that is mutually beneficial. The *power to* represents the pragmatic capabilities of developing structures that will lead to desired outcomes. Finally, *power over* concerns the exercise of control of one group over another group.

The LPF includes types of power that limit the control held by the community. It is possible to resist these limiting types of power through specific actions (Ponsford *et al.*, 2021; Popay *et al.*, 2021; Powell *et al.*, 2021). *Compulsory power*

refers to the direct, visible and formal exercises of control. This can be done through legislation or by representatives of the state. Communities can resist compulsory power by challenging unfair legislation and processes. *Institutional power* represents a less visible form of control exercised through rules, procedures and norms. This can be resisted by supporting new leadership that can make community concerns more visible. The *structural power* concerns the invisible processes in social institutions that reproduce social inequalities. Communities can resist this form of power through social movements of contestation. Finally, *productive power* also works invisibly by framing what type of knowledge is considered legitimate. This form of power can be resisted by challenging what is considered legitimate and who determines legitimacy.

The EPF and the LPF were initially created to be used during the development or implementation of a community-based project. In the current study, we adopted the frameworks at the analysis stage of a CBPR project to reflect on the power dynamics that unfolded.

Study setting

The CBPR project had a community empowerment goal to support public housing tenants developing their emancipatory power. The underlying theoretical proposition was that reuniting people with a lot of power (senior executives) and people with little power (public housing tenants) would contribute to co-constructing and co-piloting innovative actions in a public housing site.

More specifically, we designed the project so that tenants chose the priorities for change, as well as the nature of the actions that would be implemented to improve their residential environment. Senior executives, from hereon named intersectoral partners, had the role of listening to the lived experience of tenants and using their organizations' resources to support the desired changes. As described further, our evaluation of the power dynamics between the different actors evolved during the project. We planned activities specifically for tenants, such as monthly gatherings and weekly working committees, and co-construction meetings between tenants and intersectoral partners. While we had planned for six co-construction meetings, only two occurred because of different obstacles including the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, because of public health restrictions related to the pandemic, the housing authority suspended non-essential activities, including the Synergy project. While the situation disrupted the process by limiting contact with tenants, it allowed time to conduct the implementation evaluation.

The study was conducted in a public housing site in Québec, Canada, that was built in 1972 and had two-story buildings with six units each and a few individual houses for large families. When the CBPR project began in 2018, 176 households lived there, for a total of 519 tenants, including 321 adults and 198 children. The project started with a familiarization phase where a facilitator was regularly on site to participate in activities and meet tenants. A preparation phase followed where tenants were formally invited to participate in the CBPR project and collectively identify priorities for change. Tenants were recruited by the research assistant who went door-to-door to introduce the project and placed posters on the site. The process was designed to be inclusive of different forms of participation, with some tenants regularly involved in many activities while others came more sporadically. Financial compensations (20$ per meeting) were given participants. Also, food was offered before meetings, and a childcare service was available to support the participation of parents.

A community organization was already present on the site and sought to improve the quality of life of the public housing tenants, with services including a daycare drop-in, homework assistance and psychosocial intervention. Representatives from this community organization participated in the study. The other intersectoral partners were (i) the housing authority, responsible for the management of the municipal public housing stock, including the built and the human aspects; (ii) the health and social services centre, responsible for all the health and social services in the sector of the city; (iii) the borough city hall, responsible for local municipal services (e.g. roads, culture) and (iv) the local community coalition, which represented a diverse group of organizations (basic needs, cultural services).

Data collection

This paper emerged from an implementation evaluation of the CBPR project following a single qualitative case study design. The research team sought to document the project's progress including factors that facilitated or hindered implementation. The case study approach was chosen since the phenomenon being studied could not be isolated or dissociated from its context (Yin, 2018). The design was based on embedded levels of analysis, namely: (i) public housing tenants, (ii) intersectoral partners and (iii) research team.

Three sources of qualitative data were used: fieldwork documents (field notes, agendas, meeting minutes), observations and semi-structured interviews. The field notes were drafted by all research team members who went on the site throughout the project from August 2018 to August 2020. One researcher (C.M.) began the implementation evaluation by immersing himself in the fieldwork documents. He then conducted unstructured interviews with researchers ($n = 5$) during the Fall of 2019. C.M. observed five field meetings (January to March 2020) where he took notes on the actions and decisions made, and the interactions between the people present. Finally, he conducted semi-structured interviews with tenants ($n = 15$) and intersectoral partners ($n = 5$) during the Summer of 2020. The interviews explored the level of involvement of the actors, the relationships between them, the perceived benefits as well as the weaker aspects of the CBPR, the obstacles to producing change and the perceived power of the tenants to generate change.

Data analysis

Since the evaluation's objective was to document the project's implementation, a chronological case description was chosen as a general analytical strategy (Yin, 2018). An inductive content analysis was initially conducted with NVivo software through open coding and category creation before grouping the codes under higher-order concepts to generate categories and subcategories (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). This first phase of iterative analysis produced a case report containing a thick description of the project implementation, as well as a logic model.

The findings of the implementation evaluation suggested that the power dynamics at the three levels of analysis (tenants, intersectoral partners and researchers) could either facilitate or hinder the process. The research team chose to examine these power dynamics more closely, as they were related to the CBPR's theoretical proposition (Yin, 2018).

Therefore, one researcher (S.R.) led the second round of analysis by using the case report to document the different types of power identified based on the EPF–LPF. The entire deductive coding was reviewed and discussed with two other authors, the principal investigator (J.H.) and the researcher who conducted the implementation evaluation (C.M.). As shown in the next section, the analyses highlighted instances of growing power among tenants as well as some shifts in overall power dynamics.

FINDINGS

Through the analyses, we identified types of power and resistance from the EPF–LPF (Ponsford *et al.*, 2021; Popay *et al.*, 2021; Powell *et al.*, 2021). The findings are presented separately, but it is important to note that the power issues identified in the study were intricately linked (see Supplementary Data for examples of each type of power). While the embedded design allows for the identification of specific individual and organizational behaviours, we recognize the limit of this division. Two vignettes are included to better illustrate the relational and dynamic nature of the power issues.

Tenants

Evidence shows that there were many examples of *power within*, some of *power with* and a few of *power to*.

Power within

The first sign of *power within* was the important number of tenants who decided to participate in the CBPR project. There were 33 tenants present at the first official meeting and this continued throughout the project, which represented around 10% of the total adult tenant population. Intersectoral partners mentioned that this degree of ongoing participation was unusual on the site compared to other activities. While the financial compensations probably motivated this high participation rate, the ongoing participation also highlighted the interest of tenants in spaces where their voices would be valued. Tenants described having developed self-confidence, teamwork abilities and a sense of community.

During the activities, the research team aimed to support tenants in developing a shared vision about concerns to prioritize, as mentioned by this tenant:

> For me personally, it's a way to learn about the needs of others, to put myself in their place, to know what is happening in other people's family and I also learn about other problems that I did not know existed.

One way to gather information was to conduct door-to-door surveys to include tenants who did not actively participate in the Synergy meetings. Not only was this strategy efficient in including more people in the project, but it allowed tenants to develop their abilities. Some tenants said they were initially shy about knocking on their neighbours' doors but developed confidence as the activity progressed.

Power with

There were comparatively fewer examples of *power with* identified among the tenants. Tenants developed *power with* through their collaboration with the facilitators from the research team who supported them in formalizing and articulating their ideas. Another essential component of the Synergy project, which could be considered a form of *power with*, was the gathering of tenants and intersectoral partners. One tenant mentioned that this was what motivated him most: 'And sometimes we have the impression that the housing authority doesn't listen to us, so Synergy for me was like the way to improve what we could have or the hope to push the housing authority to do the renovations'.

However, creating ties with other organizations was a long and arduous process, as highlighted by a tenant: 'To make it happen, you have to find the right partners and the people who make decisions, the people who are responsible. The real people in charge. (…) That was the most complicated part'. Two collaborations began to form during the project. Following a discussion about pedestrian safety, a community organization offered to conduct an exploratory walk with tenants to identify the problematic areas. Similarly, a committee on health issues was formed with a first meeting attended by 17 tenants as well as a community organizer and a public health nurse from the local health centre. However, there were few concrete outcomes of these meetings. Work on both issues of pedestrian safety and health were cut short by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Power to

There were few examples of *power to* within the Synergy project. The most salient example was the newspaper committee (see Vignette 1). Funds from the research project were allocated for the first printing and, as an example of *power with*, the health centre offered to print the second edition. Given its positive impact, the borough offered a grant to allow the pursuit of the newspaper. However, there was ambivalence within the tenant committee to accept the grant. This situation illustrated both a lack of *power with*, given the impossibility of finding a solution with an organization, as well as a lack of *power to*, since tenants were unwilling to take some of the power they were offered in managing funds. Alternatively, this could also be seen as the exercise of their *power to*, given that the tenants clearly expressed their needs and refused to get involved if these were not respected.

Intersectoral partners

The intersectoral partners exhibited numerous examples of *institutional power*. A few examples of *structural,* of *productive* and of *compulsory power* were observed throughout the study.

Institutional power

Several examples of *institutional power* were identified. The main mode of communication between the tenants and the housing authority was through a centralized call centre. However, tenants were not satisfied: 'The housing authority, I feel like there's no one listening. It's like, they give us a number to call, we call, they answer, but there's no follow-up. It's like you're going around in circles. It's discouraging'.

Another example of *institutional power* was shown while working on one of the priorities the tenants chose, namely the inadequate access to washer–dryer appliances. On the site, the tenants were not allowed to have their own appliances. They shared one washer–dryer combo for 18.6 households, which tenants considered largely insufficient,

Vignette 1 : The newspaper committee

The newspaper committee began as a strategy chosen by the tenants to improve the communication among neighbours and provide information on the resources available. Seven tenants were involved and a research team member facilitated the group. During the first edition, the tenants said they had to learn to work as a team on the various stages of content creation. While all the tenants participated in the research portion, only two wrote articles. According to the facilitator, this was related to a lack of interest in this task as well as to literacy difficulties. For the second edition, pairs of tenants with complementary strengths were created to help each other. Tenants seemed more at ease and their interest in the project increased. There was also a strengthening of the team bond, with the group applauding each person after they read a section they had written. This was indicative of the *power within* growing in the process. During one meeting, a tenant responsible for contacting the public housing community organizer to have information for the newspaper brought in the email they received. The message was complex, given that the language used was formal and the message concerned organizational changes. This could be perceived as a form of *institutional power*, a use of specialized language to control the information shared. The group took the time to read the email and to unpack its meaning, which represented a form of *resistance* through a participatory structure. Throughout the work done by the committee, there was uncertainty about the question of funding. This eventually became stressful for team members, undermining their motivation. The money had to be transmitted via bank account, which the committee did not possess. The most realistic option was to use the structure of the Tenant Association. At that moment, the Association was placed under the responsibility of the community organization and the public housing authority, given previous financial mismanagement. The community organization agreed to support the newspaper committee, but given their limited financial and human resources, they required that the newspaper be annexed to the Tenant Association. This implied a presence at the monthly meetings and regular budget updates. These strict conditions to access the funds were another example of *institutional power* since it was ultimately a way of controlling resources. During a discussion on these modalities, no member of the committee agreed to volunteer for the task, even though this would mean the end of the newspaper. The tenants explained their refusal by two main factors: a lack of confidence in the Tenant Association and the fact that this involvement was voluntary, with no financial compensation. Although disappointed at the idea of ending their activities, the committee decided to refuse the 500 dollars in funding from the city rather than to get involved under these conditions.

Vignette 2: The vacant parking lot

The tenants had identified a vacant parking lot as having the potential to create a gathering space. This suggestion was brought to the intersectoral partners, who showed enthusiasm. The research team set up a committee with tenants and interested intersectoral partners to develop the occupancy plan requested by the public housing authority to provide some funding. The situation showed promise, reflecting both *power within* (knowledge of their environment, creativity in ideas for occupancy) and *power with* (collaborative work to develop the plan). The intersectoral partners offered diverging visions; some suggested more costly and fixed structures, others preferred low-cost, movable furniture. While the project was initially met with positive feedback, the housing authority slowly withdrew. Representatives mentioned developing long-term projects for the site was impossible, given that major renovation would be conducted in the next 5 years. These examples are illustrative of *institutional power*, where the intersectoral partners had different agendas on how the occupancy of the parking lot should be done rather than prioritizing the tenants' perspective. The housing authority then requested a survey among the tenants living on the site to ensure that they agreed with the redesign of the parking lot. The research team perceived this situation as a lack of confidence in the CBPR process. The door-to-door survey was nonetheless undertaken, but while this was happening, major pavement work was done in the parking lot. Surprised, the research team contacted the housing authority to find out who decided to resurface the asphalt. The representatives from the maintenance division said that it was the result of the CBPR project. However, resurfacing the parking lot was never a solution suggested or discussed. This issue was partly organizational, with clear lack of communication, but it was also a product of *institutional power* where the group of tenants were not trusted in their knowledge of their environment and needs.

yet satisfied the organizational norm of one combo for 20 households. Furthermore, the housing authority had outsourced the contract for these appliances to a private company who took decisions based on cost-efficiency. The company therefore had no incentive to provide more appliances.

It appeared difficult for intersectoral partners to change the way they interacted with tenants, trying to control the agenda through *institutional power*. During the co-construction meeting, the tenant spokespersons explained the priorities for action they collectively chose during their monthly meetings. The intersectoral partners initially seemed eager to engage but asked for surveys to provide quantitative data to validate the tenants' needs. This created a situation where the burden of proof was put on the tenants to give credibility to the issues they had already collectively prioritized (see Vignette 2).

Structural power

There were few examples of *structural power* during the project implementation. The most salient illustration was the heated discussion around the financial compensations for the tenants. Initially, the research team had established 15 dollars an hour compensation, which some intersectoral partners thought was excessive:

> Of course, in the beginning, we were a little worried about what would happen once the project was finished and what it would create, and we didn't want to find ourselves with additional things to manage or unmet expectations. To have created new needs that we might not be able to meet.

While this could be seen as a pragmatic concern, it also underscored a level of control over the resources the research team offered. The amount of compensation was eventually revisited to 20 dollars per 2-hour meeting while providing food and material (e.g. paper and pens).

Productive power

In a few instances, the intersectoral partners showed signs of *productive power*. This was identified through discourses with stigmatizing undertones. Some intersectoral partners mentioned that tenants were not mobilized enough and were complaining instead of looking for solutions. One partner explained: 'it's as if the residents wanted to have

everything handed to them'. One tenant summed up their perception:

> Well yes, if you already have a preconceived idea about me, it doesn't matter what I do, it doesn't change anything. I'm always going to get the house dirty, I'm always going to smoke in it, I don't know… I'm always going to be drunk. You're not going to do anything, you're not going to do anything serious for me.

Compulsory power

There also were a few examples of *compulsory power* within the study. The washer–dryer issue was further complicated by the fact that it was partly regulated by provincial legislation, which dictates the prices that can be charged. Another legal aspect limiting tenants' control over their environment was the strict contractual obligations between the maintenance workers, part of a strong city union, and the housing authority. These obligations, such as 4-day weeks and the illegality of hiring non-union workers, benefited the maintenance workers' well-being. However, it left little leeway to find solutions to the significant issues regarding maintenance and cleanliness.

Research team

The study showed many examples of the power we held compared with the other stakeholders, categorized as *power over*. There were also many examples of resistance to *institutional power*, as well as a few examples of resistance to *structural* and *compulsory power*.

Power over

We entered the project with considerable *power over*. We obtained the participation of four senior executives from important intersectoral partners. We submitted a grant proposal for funding, which succeeded in a very competitive call for proposals, giving us access to financial means. This situation represents the **potential** *power over* that we initially held as a research team. However, we sought to limit the **actual** *power over* that we exercised in the CBPR.

We had designed important aspects of the project, but we tried to include tenants by sharing power with them so they could decide on the format of the meetings (duration, frequency), the issues to address and the solutions they wanted to implement. We also provided financial compensation, an inherent part of this power relation. Some of the activities, such as the door-to-door surveys, were not chosen by the tenants. The intersectoral partners suggested this data collection method, and as a research team, we did not question the need for quantitative data. While we tried to minimize power differentials, tenants showed a keen awareness of these differences:

> Yes, I think that these people [the researchers], they have an education, they have contacts, they are well placed in the hierarchy. So they have more impact than the average person. (…) They are like on top of the mountain, so when people tell them that they are professors at the Université du Québec à Montréal, their message will get through more easily and more quickly.

As a research team, we also held a certain level of *power over* the intersectoral partners, mostly an ability to influence decisions rather than an ability to constrain the partners in implementing specific actions. During the project, we understood that the top–down approach focusing on the senior executives was a mistake. The principal investigator acted as a mediator between the senior executives and the tenants, which was described as 'artificial' and unsustainable outside of the project. We realigned afterwards by including frontline workers from each sector more closely.

Resistance to institutional power

The research project was, in itself, a form of *resistance to institutional power* with its objective of creating a space where the tenants' voices would be valued and considered in decision-making processes. The important mobilization among tenants underlined their interest in such opportunities. However, because the project bypassed existing practices, it created tensions within the intersectoral partners' organizations. Nevertheless, it seemed that the partners gained some valuable insight from the Synergy project with the potential to influence their practices:

> And, you know, Synergy, I think, the way they intervene, the way the facilitators listened to the residents, the way they mobilized, it kind of inspired me. That's, for me, that's one of the big positive points. And, you know, to try not to be defensive, but rather (…) try to think a little bit outside the box, to try to understand the residents' point of view.

Resistance to structural power

Through the project, we were looking for areas of *resistance to structural power* that could be leveraged to shift the distribution of resources and to prioritize the tenants' needs and concerns. This was apparent during one interaction with an intersectoral partner reported in one researcher's field notes: 'He mentioned that because of the Synergy project, some resources allocated to the Northeast sector of the city would go to the [Synergy public housing site] and the tone was quite disapproving. He said we were bypassing the usual procedures'. Some intersectoral partners said they felt antagonized and misunderstood by the research team.

Resistance to compulsory power

The project appeared to offer unforeseen *resistance to compulsory power*. The intersectoral partners frequently repeated that they faced 'constraints' which were related to budgets, legislation or other forms of accountability toward provincial entities. Intersectoral partners seemed to have less leeway than expected. This was especially salient for the housing authority:

> And elsewhere it's not a question of "do I have a washer or dryer in my unit", it's more like "is my leaky roof going to be fixed" or "is my balcony going to be repaired" because you have health and safety emergencies elsewhere that we already don't have enough money to deal with.

DISCUSSION

Through this paper, we have documented the power issues that occurred when we tried to increase public housing tenants' control over their environment. Using the EPF and the LPF (Ponsford *et al.*, 2021; Popay *et al.*, 2021; Powell *et al.*, 2021), we have identified numerous illustrations of power

developed and exhibited by the various groups. This adds to the initial exploration of the EPF and LPF offered by the authors and shows that the combined frameworks proved a promising analytical tool. In this discussion, we conclude our reflexive exercise by sharing lessons learned through the project and identifying the limits of our analyses.

The project was able to create spaces where tenants exercised their *power within*. As a research team, we recognized the expertise and knowledge of tenants by providing financial and material compensations for their work and by creating spaces for them to collectively express their concerns. Tenants did access some degree of *power with*, and there was also some evidence of *power to*, mainly through the newspaper committee that successfully produced three editions. However, the gains made in these types of power had limited transformative effects on tenants' living conditions. The project was not able to support tenants in exercising *power to* challenge intersectoral partners' structures, such as having more washers and dryers. To have a real effect on social inequalities, *power within* represents an important yet insufficient first step (Ponsford *et al*., 2021). It becomes critical to recognize and resist the different forms of limiting power.

The intersectoral partners exhibited many examples of *institutional power* through inefficient communication mechanisms or strict regulations. Each individual person highlighted their desire to contribute to the project and did so positively by investing their time in the process. However, they tended to reproduce institutional patterns, such as trying to control the agenda and asking for proof concerning issues prioritized by tenants. This might have been influenced by some pre-conceived notions about public housing tenants, which represent a form of *productive power*.

Intersectoral partners also had less leeway than the research team expected, as they faced *compulsory power* that influenced how they managed the washer–dryer service contract or the maintenance workers. The budgets for public housing programs have been rolled back in the past decade in Canada [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), 2022] and internationally (Slater, 2018; Benfer *et al*., 2021; Morris, 2021). The sociohistorical context of public housing programs seems to have created a 'world of constraints' for housing authorities. This situation hinders local CBPR projects like the one described in this paper since the intersectoral partners are wary that giving more resources to one site means giving less to another. If the research team had given more attention to this discourse, this zero-sum thinking could have been reframed by promoting the project to reconsider internal power-sharing processes with the tenants. While we tried to convey this idea in initial meetings, not enough energy was spent accompanying the intersectoral partners through their participation. Authors have recommended using memorandums of understanding at the onset of a project to clearly describe the governance process of CBPR, including the expectations of time and budget contributions of each group (Wallerstein *et al*., 2018; Turnhout *et al*., 2020; Egid *et al*., 2021). Nonetheless, the reference to constraints sometimes felt like a diversion to avoid serious reflections about the intersectoral partners' internal structures. Indeed, securing funds from the housing authority to achieve some of the tenants' objectives, such as redesigning the vacant parking lot, was impossible. However, a considerable amount was used to resurface this parking lot, which went against the tenants' idea of creating a gathering space.

This paper also sheds light on the power issues related to the research team. We arrived at the site with a certain level of *power over* the other groups as we were the ones who conceptualized the project and had the human and financial resources. In retrospect, we offered only mild resistance to the limiting types of power we encountered. We were reluctant to confront the intersectoral partners because we wanted to keep them engaged with the project. Many discussions within the research team concerned the balance between collaboration and confrontation, especially with the housing authority since they were granting us access to the public housing site. We felt what other researchers have named 'dual loyalties' experienced when doing research in polarized settings (Kronick *et al*., 2018). Yet, engaging in a CBPR project with people having different levels of power has high probabilities of producing conflicts (Turnhout *et al*., 2020). We could have taken these opportunities, such as the parking lot resurfacing situation, to use the conflict as a tool. For example, we could have organized a debriefing session with all parties involved to clearly state everyone's perspective on the problem.

Preparing this paper gave us the opportunity to think about what we could have done differently. During the project, we did not sufficiently clarify the unearned advantages held by the privileged groups, both intersectoral partners and researchers, and pursued through various types of *limiting power*. Given that power is central to CBPR, it is recommended to discuss openly about related issues, including each person's role and expectation in the process (Nixon, 2019; Turnhout *et al*., 2020). Yet, most participants in a study among researchers who engage in participatory health research acknowledged that they rarely or never define power or discuss such issues in their projects (Egid *et al*., 2021). One strategy that could be helpful in future projects is to openly discuss privileges and power differentials with those who hold the most power (Nixon, 2019; Turnhout *et al*., 2020). To do so, we should have anticipated the defences raised by the intersectoral partners by getting to know their respective realities, their organizational culture and constraints. We should also have secured some financial resources from each partner before the beginning of the project in the form of a participatory budget controlled by the tenants.

Another strategy we could have used to improve our critical allyship practice was to step back (Nixon, 2019; Turnhout *et al*., 2020). As a research team, we arrived at the public housing site with a funded research protocol and used techniques we were comfortable with. To document the problem with the washer–dryer situation, we suggested conducting a survey with the tenants. This method showed our reliance on data to identify problems. The intersectoral partners also showed this habit by asking to conduct two more surveys on different issues. However, one could wonder, was that form of evidence necessary or was it an example of *productive power* where we gave more legitimacy to one form of knowledge (numerical data) over another (testimony based on lived experience)? Research projects are based on gathering data to enhance knowledge about certain issues, yet stepping back as a research team could have left space for tenants to offer more congruent methods.

We must acknowledge that using the EPF–LPF frameworks as an analytical tool in this paper has many limits to consider. The frameworks were developed for the initial stages of a project to underline important aspects related to power dynamics (Popay *et al*., 2021). Unfortunately,

the articles presenting the framework were not published when the Synergy project was developed (Ponsford *et al.*, 2021; Popay *et al.*, 2021; Powell *et al.*, 2021). It could have helped anchor the research team's understanding of power dynamics and led to deeper conversations with intersectoral partners to better prepare them for the project. Using the frameworks as an analytical tool is nevertheless promising since it allowed the research team to reflect on dynamics that were present, including their role in the project, which is a novel addition to the literature. However, describing power dynamics within a static typology made it challenging to offer a nuanced portrait of the project. While recognizing this limit, the description of various aspects of power present in a CBPR project, including illustrations through two vignettes, offers a rare window into this research process.

Indeed, the research team themselves recognize that their initial position about tenants having little power and intersectoral partners having much power was restrictive. The analyses showed that both EPF and LPF frameworks can be perceived and experienced by different actors. Intersectoral partners also mentioned instances of emancipatory power, suggesting their participation positively influenced some of their practices. Future studies in public housing should consider this and reflect the multiple and dynamic ways that power is shared in research, including with the researchers.

CONCLUSION

This paper documented power issues in a CBPR project aimed to promote community empowerment of public housing tenants through co-construction with intersectoral partners. If intersectoral collaborations remain a forum for privileged people to find consensual solutions to problems experienced by people who live in poverty, they are unlikely to succeed. How to transform these collaborations remains unclear and needs to be further explored. Recent papers suggested that to increase the capacity of CBPR projects to achieve health equity, a more transformative approach should be used, such as an anti-racism praxis (Gilbert *et al.*, 2023) and a focus on systems change precursors and outcomes (Angus *et al.*, 2023). The role and position of power of the research team remain important to consider and to reflect on.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

Supplementary material is available at *Health Promotion International* online.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

As principal investigator, J.H. designed the study with the insights of all the co-authors listed on this manuscript. J.H., J.-M.F. and C.M. participated in data collection, and all co-authors participated in critical research meetings that were part of the data analysed. S.R., J.H. and C.M. collaborated in the data analysis. S.R. wrote the main sections of the manuscript with important input from J.H. Finally, C.M., H.G., J.-M.F., J.T., K.F., S.C. and A.B. provided feedback to improve the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethical approval (3005_e_2019) was granted by the institutional research ethics board for research involving human participants at the Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada. The participants have signed a written consent form which was thoroughly explained to them before taking part in the study, with all their questions answered if applicable.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data used for this study is available upon request.

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