



PROJECT FACT SHEET

A Synchronicity of Colour in the Mirror

Lorna Butler, PhD, and Joan Evans, PhD, of Dalhousie University's School of Nursing set out to learn about the experience of living with breast and prostate cancer in the Black communities of East Preston, Cherry Brook, Truro, and Lincolnville. "What we learned about," says Dr. Butler, "were people's lives and how they perceived themselves and their communities in relation to the dominant culture within Nova Scotia and the health care system in particular."

The purpose of the research was to explore meanings of sexual identity and sexuality as a dimension of health in African Nova Scotians living with cancer. The research team had assumed that race was an issue. But Black women believed that the experience of living with cancer cut across differences of race as socioeconomic factors affected a woman's ability to live with the disease. They perceived class to be a major factor that affected the lives of both black and white women who were poor. However, in male focus groups, the idea of including white men from the community was not raised.

Participants' stories illustrated that feelings of disenfranchisement were related to problems of racism, classism (discrimination or prejudice based on social or economic class) and geographic isolation – significant barriers to people accessing health care services and treatments.

Overall, the researchers found that Black communities in Nova Scotia face significant disparities in health and gaps in the accessibility of health care services. People from these communities experienced unique challenges in health and health care. Participants in Drs. Butler and Evans's study indicated a clear need for resource people in

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their own communities. Such resource people would have the advantages of understanding the experiences of women and men of colour and would understand the barriers many encounter in accessing information and treatment. Developing such a resource will require a bottom-up, community-development approach where communities are actively involved. Communities must be supported and nurtured to believe in themselves and their ability to implement programs in their own best interests.

Dr. Butler and Dr. Evans used participatory action research, a method of research where creating positive social change is the driving force. It involves the principles of participation, reflection and empowerment of groups attempting to improve their social situations. In participatory action research, the researchers and the research subjects collaborate to study a system and then implement positive and desirable change. Participatory action research also places the results of the research within the participating community. The findings from this study will be acted upon by members of each community in ways that are meaningful to them and reflective of their needs and experiences with cancer. Advocacy groups have a key role to play in developing community capacity. Women were generally identified as family and community leaders and may provide the foundation to spearhead health promotion initiatives within black communities. ▣

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