



Community-University Partnerships: Connecting for Change

Proceedings of the
Third International
Community-University Exposition (CUexpo 2008)

edited by

**Darlene E. Clover
Catherine McGregor**

**May 2008
University of Victoria
Victoria, Canada**

“Where Do They Bury Jane Doe’s?”
Bearing Witness to Action Research and the Sex Trade

Debb Hurlock, and Connie Barlow

University of Calgary, Faculty of Social Work, and United Way of Calgary and Area

Peer Researchers: Tammy, Nicole, Holly, Kim, and Viki

Abstract: This paper explores the interrelated aspects of knowledge and ethics in a community-based research study that uses photo-voice to understand the lived experiences of women who have left the sex trade.



“So, that’s a picture of a graveyard. I contacted the medical examiner and just asked questions, like, ‘where do they bury Jane Doe’s that he finds on the streets of Calgary?’ And, they actually do burials for them. But, it’s really, really hard to get information about what facility they actually go through to do the burials. You, know, the lucky ones have the grave markers and headstones... on every headstone there’s a date of birth and a date of death. The dash between the two is what signifies your life. What do you want your dash to be?” (Tammy, Peer Researcher, 2007)

So, the Story Began

In June 2007, a group of five women who have left the sex trade, combined with five women from the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, and United Way of Calgary, and AIDS Calgary came together to “make sense” of the “dash.”¹ This lush combination of community agencies, academia, and ex-sex trade workers was embedded within the principles of community based research (CBR); a process continually chiseled through the reflective action of interpretation (Gadamer, 1989) and iteratively informed by our individual situatedness, our “finite existence in time, history, and culture” (Heaney, 2000, p.105).

Photo-voice was the core method in which the stories emerged out of and around, as the women captured, reflected, and re-created images that brought to life the particulars of their lived experience of sex trade. Also, the women used their photos to create personal

¹ This study is partnership between Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary, United Way of Calgary and Area, and five women who have left the sex trade. The peer researchers for this study are Tammy, Nicole, Viki, Holly and Candace. The team is also made up community practitioners and academics: Lori Villebrun, Justine Moreau, and Kathleen Sitter (United Way of Calgary and area) and Roseline Carter (AIDS Calgary Awareness Association).

digital stories, testimonies of their wounds and growth, insights into the caverns and cadences of their lives. We met twice a month at United Way; gathering around food from a local Mediterranean eatery, our bodies tucked snugly around a stout oak table, the familiar hum of the florescent lights, the quiet pale of the walls. We belly-laughed wildly, we cried with a primalness that is refreshing, we held womb-like clumsy silences, the kind that can only give way to deeper conversations and crossings of knowing one another.

It is now March 2008, and our study continues. However, this paper is not about outcomes, or artistic products of photo voice; rather it is about the ambiguity, and the ethical messiness that tethers and evolves the process of CBR. CBR is like a spider's web; it is generative, and spins from the interpretive and diverse family of approaches that is the spirit of CBR, such as feminist theory, and phenomenology (Reason, 2006; Haraway, 1988; Gadamer, 1989). In doing this, we privilege the knowledge of lived experience, which was our starting point. CBR (re)constitutes the subjugated knowledge and experiences of women, who have been buried by a patriarchy, and a traditional society that has positioned them as "sub-human."

It is important to note then, that when we refer to the knowledge created in this action-oriented approach, that we recognize various forms of knowledge. Primarily, we work within a feminist interpretive paradigm (Harding, 1997; Lather, 1991; Haraway, 1988;), thereby yielding a relational and reflective knowledge. "Relational knowledge comes from connecting and leads to further connecting. It is reciprocal" (Park, 2000, p.88). But, this CBR study does not only rest within co-creation of knowledge, but rather sees the process of engaging in the co-creation of new knowledge *as* action; or feminist praxis (Lather, 1991). In CBR, "we are faced with problem of not only what we can know but also of what we are to do" (Caputo, 1987, p.236).

There are many beginnings that arise out of long histories, constituted and contested in the reality of social inequities. Often it is difficult to discern where good CBR begins and ends. It is like a spider's web... [w]hen the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are spun in mid air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health, and the houses we live in (Woolf, 1993, pp. 43-44) and begins in the midst of something; sometimes in the midst of personal or professional relationships, sometimes in the midst of practice. Often it begins because we are struck by a social inequity, and are moved by the desire for social change, and good. In these moments we read ourselves into CBR, for "research is grounded in autobiography, even if unacknowledged" (Heaney, 2000, p.11).

In Our Action, is Our Knowing

The practice of CBR is continually re-constituted through reflection, self-understanding, and the transformation that occurs dialogically in relationships with others. CBR is a multifaceted endeavor as its work calls forth a "family" of methodological approaches (Reason, 2006). CBR is a hybrid process that is centrally concerned with attending to social inequities, and in doing so, attempts a natality of knowledge within the inherited scientific traditions, and our emancipation from colonized methodologies. In this way, aspects of knowledge and ethics in CBR and inextricably coupled and compelled, disrupting the history of the privileged ways of knowing that arise from class, gender, education, financial wealth, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. In this study, the group of

women, some of aboriginal decent and some of Caucasian, have lived many years in a position and in a society that devalues them . We started with a belief that their knowledge is valuable. It took time for us to create a space in which the women trusted that their knowledge was equally valued.

To do this requires a marginalizing of our own privileged knowledge, often the kind that constitute privilege, in this case, being middle-class white, highly educated women. We continually ask ourselves, are we privileging one-person's knowledge more than the other? We try and remain attuned to how knowledge is being co-created, as well as recognizing the perceived power differential. We also abandoned the notion of "expert" and followed the hermeneutic assertion of being experienced rather than an 'expert.' CBR, in its truest shape requires that it be grounded in the experiences of those it claims to explain (Heaney, 2000).

The Particulars of Ethics

Our study involves multiple voices and mediums of data: we are utilizing photo-voice, creating digital stories, conversations, and text. With the completion of the first transcript, it was circulated amongst the team. Nicole, one the peer researchers, looked to the language of the transcription and challenged us as team and our claiming to attend to "equity." She emphatically drew attention to the language of the transcript and how team members were separated and identified by "participant" and "researcher." Nicole asserted at the end of the meeting: *"You know, I just had to say, you guys are like the "researchers" and there's that fucking word, "participant". No equality there."* If they are to be truly peer researchers, then this was not reflected in the language of the transcripts.

One of the researchers apologized and said, "that is an excellent point, thank you", and the conversation quickly turned to check out ritual that the group had created. The remaining transcripts were identified by the individual person speaker, or just "researcher". Nicole's noticing of the language signified her comfort in challenging other researchers in the room, and interrupted our slippage into the traditional and hierarchal forms of research. She unsettles this, and left us with a deeper recognition and reminder of the power of language in creating equality. The conversational nature of CBR does not mean an there is an absence of conflict. Heaney describe conversation as moving from "one frame of reference to another, from knower to knower, being modified, amended, revised, abridged, contradicted, focused, and broadened in cross-disciplinary reinterpretation. It is heterogenestic, yielding many truths" (Heaney, 2000, p.115). Like a family that routinely knows one another habit's, the conversation easily flowed from Nicole's assertions, to other discussions.

When Does Ethics Oppress and When Does it Protect?

CBR, because it is contingent, ambiguous, complex, paradoxical, and relation also means that in the traditional view of academia, it is a continually rife landscape of ethics. The institutional ethical systems have been established to ensure maximum safety and minimum risk for research participants; often it is always the best and most appropriate process for CBR. CBR requires us to not be distant, to not be detached, to read ourselves into the work, all, which are considered ways to not maintain the safety of participants. In time, we hope that with more CBR showing up and as the pods of CBR find other another, that this will shape and influence the institutional ethics process to consider the ethics of CBR, and the relational investment that this approach calls for.

Nicole created a twelve-minute digital story, *"Imprints on my soul."* In fact, if you watch the digital story closely, the text, interspersed like dropped threads through her digital story, when combined, create a powerful poem; an inter-textual subjectivity of her lived experience. She begins with the image of her one and half year old baby, a close up on his feet, because she says, *"I have to kiss them everyday. I love feet...I just think feet have been everywhere."* Her story begins with baby's feet, and ends with the image of herself, walking in the annual Take Back the Night March. She bears a hand painted sign that read, *"No matter if I walk it, or work it, I have a right to be safe."*

In the midst of Nicole's digital story, she placed an image of a man. The image was taken when she and Tammy (fellow peer-researcher, and friend) were taking pictures for the study, and a John had approached them. A man, neatly dressed, mid-fifties, loosely tucked golf shirt, stepped out from his red Mercedes and asked them for a date. Laughingly, Tammy and Nicole both said they were not working anymore, and he growled back with some mumbling about them being too old anyway. While walking away, returning to his emblem, they snapped pictures of him. The "Consent to be Photographed Form" that we use to photograph someone just did not seem appropriate in this moment. In Nicole's digital story, she had included this image of the John. While wanting to maintain the integrity of Nicole's work, she had created, and balancing my own professional ethics and commitment to my institutional ethics board, I expressed our dilemma that we did not have his consent to use his photograph. And, although taken from behind, it was discerned enough to be recognizable. I asked Nicole what she would like to do, and if she had any thoughts of how to handle this. I acknowledged that I thought we were protecting the John and not protecting Nicole in this particular situation. Nicole, in her wisdom and creativity, kept the image, in her digital story, but placed a black box over the John, with the text "I don't permission to use this John's photo, so I had to cover him up."

"Since I've received the Camera": The Ethics of What Gets Opened Up

"...what I've recognized in the last few weeks since I've received the camera is that... like I have gone from one extreme to the other with my emotions right like...I've done therapy, I've done counseling, I've done the steps, I've done this and I've done that and I really thought that I was at a place in my life where I had acceptance regarding the lifestyle that I had, and through some of the experiences and some of the like situations and stuff – I suffer from terminal uniqueness and I feel like nobody can fucking understand what I have gone through right? And like the sheer terror – I don't want to say terror but for lack of a better word – that I feel right, like it baffles me that I have been out of the sex trade for six years and I am still brought to tears and to the point of anxiety when I think about it... And that's what I struggle with." (Tammy, Peer Researcher, 2007)

Through this process we are learning that recovering from the sex trade is a life long process. We are learning that there are many women trapped in the sex trade, and there is a lack of resources to support them. We are learning that they are trapped within a society that renders these women silences, violence, and invisible. The group of peer researchers has been out of the sex trade for various amounts of time, ranging from one year to seven years. In this process, and in particular, utilizing photo-voice, has asked this group of women to return to some of the places they lived, to some of the places that still haunt them. As Tammy told,

us, "I have quit this study seven times since I've started." But something shifts for her on person level, learning a healing from the process and she re-commits. As researchers engaging in CBR, what ethical and moral responsibility do you have when things are opened, or, when there are "triggers?" Or, that in letting people see into their lives, they realize that they did experience and suffer unimaginable crimes. Viki V, in particular was triggered through the process, and she weaved it into the photovoice: "It doesn't seem as bad until you get someone from the outside looking in and they're horrified and shocked and disgusted. So that's a trigger."

"And, It Wasn't Based on Being Saved..."

*this gentleness we learn
from what we can't heal.*
(Wallace, 1985, p.77)

In his Keynote address for the Community-Based Research Network Symposium, Randy Toeker, spoke of how "CBR is partnering with those who have been wounded" and that they are wounded, "not incapacitated" (2004). CBR is not only a process, and about 'what happen', but is also a teacher and an archaeologist, for when we teat at Wools' spider's web we discover, what Nicole inscribes as the "imprints on her soul" the sometimes brutal tracings of social inequity.

At one of our last research meetings, the women spoke of how, they surprising, experience healing from the study. So, we continue our journey together, learning, and holding the new knowledge of the gentleness that we learn when we accept our wounds, some that will never heal, and some that will:

Nicole: ...it was so healing and therapeutic, and it was, for me it was, that it was probably easier and more pertinent and quicker to do it this way then it was to lay on a couch...doing therapy..

Viki: Yup me too. I think it was because we were focused on something else, and it was like, a side-effect, of it, like I didn't come in here to be healed, we came in to do some work, and it was side-benefit, and if it ever shifted to "Come in and have a benefit" it would be like... (they all laugh and gesture a flipping a finger).

Nicole: But the way it was done for me was, it was a process of empowerment, in that way that in the end there will a result, an exhibit and things like that, and we were paid well, and that helped too. But there was no shame in it, it was based on doing something for your community, giving back...for me it was part of my living amends, that's just for me, so that maybe I can help someone who sees my picture or whatever happen, happens. That's what attracted me to it, and then all the other stuff as well. It was well-round, it involved community on a topic that I feel absolutely passionate about, I know other sex trade workers that are retired or still working, who feel the same way. It was really well-rounded, and it wasn't based on being saved.

Engaging in CBR is about all the good things we already know, such as community-university collaborations, social action, programmatic changes, and influences on policy. It is also about recognizing the wounds of those we work with, as well as our own. When we speak from and hear with our wounds, we find a place of simplistic humanity, seasoned in our bones. It means discovering and meeting at points of interstices and junctures that can only be met by people of difference coming together. Perhaps that is why we are compelled by CBR; driven by a belief in social justice, combined with a conviction of the need for untold stories to be voiced, to be heard, and perhaps, quite simply, to have someone bear witness to our “stubborn particulars of grace” (Wallace, 1987).

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