

Working with Marginalized Women: Lessons, Hopes and Fears

Cindy Hanson
PhD Student, Educational Studies,
University of British Columbia
c.hanson@usask.ca

DRAFT

**Paper prepared for First International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, IL
May 5-7, 2005**

ABSTRACT:

Drawing on three research projects, this session will explore some of the challenges and rewards in working with marginalized women. From finding participants, collecting data, to developing actions for disseminating the results, the research involves carefully selecting appropriate methods that enhance respectful atmospheres and stimulate participation leading to creative responses. Appropriate and respectful methodologies that allow flexibility, dialogue and participatory actions will also be presented. The researcher will draw on three community-based action research projects: a study on the unpaid work of women on social assistance with small children, a local study for a national project examining the participation of women in municipal consultations and a study on gender and poverty. The lessons learned, hopes garnered and fears developed as a result of the research will be shared.

Background

As a feminist trained in using transformative and critical approaches to education, I realize the importance of validating and incorporating the lived experience of the subjects of research. In this role, therefore I struggle to balance both my own interventions and power as a researcher with the lives of the women I am researching. I believe that there are political/transformative dimensions to this research because it seeks to validate the work of women, make the invisible/visible and bring about reflections and re-evaluations of women and work (Maynard, 1994). Participatory, feminist methods used in these studies recognize the critical role of experience and the importance of race,

class, and other forms of diversity. Postmodernism provides a theoretical position for hearing the voices of the women being researched. Thus by combining theory and practice I hope to create a model of respectful research, but also a critique of power and practice as they are played out in the research.

Doing respectful research in a way that is both meaningful to the researcher and the women involved, is fraught with challenges that are often overlooked. As a feminist with solid community roots and a background in adult education, anti-racism practices, and gender training, I am concerned that the work I do with people is meaningful and that it influences inequitable or unjust institutional practices. I hope to share some of the lessons I've learned as well as the challenges I've faced in engaging in community-based research from this perspective. My presentation will draw on research from three distinct research projects that took place in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (although two of them were national in scope) – all which involve the participation of marginalized women. All of the studies were funded by Status of Women Canada. They include:

- *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations* was a Saskatoon-based project that was part of a one-year national study conducted by The Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). This national study seeks to strengthen women's involvement in municipal public participation processes. The purpose of the study is to change municipal consultation practices and policies so that the full diversity of Canadian women have a meaningful voice in the decisions that affect their daily lives.
- *Who Benefits: Women, Unpaid Work and Social Policy* was a project of Working for Women (Saskatoon). It set out to determine the impact of social policy on the unpaid caregiving work of women on social assistance (SA) with pre-school children. Through the process of exploring the complex lives of women living on social assistance, the research raised many issues, including the effects of public policy on the lives of women on social assistance. Recognition and value for the *time* women spend on unpaid caregiving activities is now recognized by many national Census (Canada included) as a component of gender analysis in public policy. Because of demands on key resources such as time, work done in an unpaid capacity often restricts women to part-time or low-paid work, and creates

barriers toward their full participation in economic decision-making. We were concerned that with the complexity of forces affecting the lives of poor women, the demands on their time were less obvious and less likely to be considered by policy-makers.

- *Gender and Poverty Project* was a project of the Saskatoon Anti-poverty Coalition, undertaken in conjunction with the national study of the Vibrant Communities Initiative. Unlike the other two studies, this project used secondary documents and a workshop to garner key learnings about gender and poverty in Saskatoon.

This presentation will primarily focus on my participation as a co-researcher in the first two studies. From gathering participants, to gathering data, to deciding on how to share the findings, these projects hold both hopes for change and fears about power and obstacles to change. Finding participants in all three studies presented a particular challenge. By sharing an excerpt in the life of one of the participants, I hope to shed some light into the dynamics involved in working with marginalized women. The story which follows was used as a case study in the project report:

Participant story: Violet

Violet (not her real name) is a single parent with a baby. She went on social assistance while she was entering a program to assist her with a drinking problem. A few months later she found herself pregnant and unwilling to continue in an abusive relationship while she was pregnant, so she packed up a plastic bag of clothes and moved away. He followed. After staying for a short period at the YWCA and Interval House, she finally met a worker who told her about her rights. Then, she obtained a restraining order and moved in with her cousin. She worked under the table babysitting to supplement her SA benefits and used the money to buy things for the baby and an apartment.

When the baby was born, her caseworker told her that she must go after the father for child support. Her plea that she didn't want to have anything to do with him and that she had a restraining order against him went unheeded. She finally got her mom to call his mom and found out that he also was living on SA; hence, he wouldn't have to pay benefits.

Recently Violet started a training program but she had trouble getting regular childcare and missed days when her daughter is sick. Her commitment to the program was questioned and she bitterly said, "They call me and tell me I'm not committed. How encouraging is this? I feel like quitting. My girl is small and she's still breastfeeding. She needs me."

Violet is angry about the system of SA and about low wages paid to women trying to get off of welfare. "What's the point she asks If you work irregular shifts

it's hard to get a babysitter and if you turn down shift they won't call you. I'm so tired or having no food in my fridge and no bus fare.”

Identifying Study Participants

Finding participants like Violet is not always straight-forward. In the *Who Benefits* study, consultations, originally with women's groups, proved to be a non-productive way of finding study participants. Later, by expanding the advisory group to include anti-poverty organizations, we were able to identify 25 study participants. In some cases, finding one participant would lead to a personal connection with another. The success of this project in terms of the participant strength and willingness to support the project, led to lasting relationships with some of the participants. There are several cases where the participants from this first study translated into participation in subsequent studies. The fact that participants could not be located initially through the women's organizations perhaps suggests a dis-connect between the lives of poor women and women in equality-seeking organizations, albeit unintentional but nevertheless real.

For the study *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations*, focus group participants were contacted through various strategies. A letter introducing the research was circulated to various community groups, personal contacts were made with individuals who might be interested in participating, and a flyer announcing the study was posted on bulletin boards of community organizations around the city. The flyer announced that three focus groups -- identified as Group A, B, and C would meet for two sessions each at three local community sites. Meeting more than once was deemed important by the researchers to ensure that the relationship between the participants and the researchers would have more time for safety and trust to be developed, and in addition, the process of meeting more than once would allow for more

reflection. A fourth group – group D -- also participated in this study, but met only once. This latter group was an existing group in a nutrition program – the group leader heard about the focus groups and asked us to come and work with this group. No doubt within academia such practices would appear unusual and some might say, unethical. Within the world of poor women, this is essentially the way things work and if we didn't open the research to flexibility and create openness and trust, the participants would simply lose faith and walk away.

The co-researchers conducted four sets of focus groups, three of which met twice, one of which met once. In total 46 women were involved in the focus groups. In the first set and the fourth set of focus groups, the vast majority of the women were Aboriginal. In the second group most women were immigrant, refugee and visible minority women from countries such as, Guatemala, Nepal, Iran, Afghanistan, Ghana, China and South Africa. The third group of women contained a mixture of advocates, service providers and visible minorities, some of whom had lots of experiences with municipal consultation processes.

The *Gender and Poverty Project* which was guided by the Anti-poverty Coalition actually advocated personal contacts as a way of finding participants – the informal networks that are not understood in formal research. It was through individual contacts that they were able to find participants for the initial workshop and to build a group who would work on follow-up.

Behavioural ethics approval for *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations* was granted by the University of Saskatchewan. Nonetheless, because of the complexity of ethics forms, the researchers also developed a letter in simple English so that the participants would not be “dumbed-down” in the process of seeking ethical approval. The other two projects mentioned here were not associated with a university

and hence, letters of consent aimed at protecting participant confidentiality were read and explained to the participants; then, they received a copy of their signed consent form. To ease the transition and difficulties associated with attending a focus group, assistance with transportation, childcare, and food (or a per diem in lieu) were provided in all studies.

Data Gathering: Respectful, Participatory and Creative

Perhaps the most successful part of *Who Benefits and Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations* was the way in which data was gathered. In *Who Benefits* the 28 participants met for discussion (focus) groups that used original, participatory methods to gather data. Within feminism, focus groups are considered collectivistic not individualistic as they take attention away from the researcher and move it between participants thus, allowing the focus to move to the “multivocality of participants' attitudes, experiences and beliefs” (Madriz, 2003, p. 364). In addition or in conjunction with the focus groups, data was collected on the unpaid work of women on SA, the time it took to do that work, supports and challenges they faced in doing that work, and the impact of social policies such as mandatory job searches on their unpaid work. The study used participatory methods of data gathering and qualitative methods of data analysis. A respectful, sharing atmosphere was created which served as an enabler for women to get and give mutual support – an example of this was the time set aside during each discussion group to discuss issues such as where to get coupons, freebies, or good, second-hand clothing. Regular meetings of the advisory committee (largely made up of women's organizations from Saskatoon) directed the research, and reviewed preliminary and final results from the focus groups. Women from the first and second

groups came together for the third focus group. Another group of participants met at the Saskatoon Family Support Centre for focus groups four and five which repeated the first set of sessions. The atmosphere of the discussion groups was relaxed, and they were carried out as workshops.

At the first focus group, the participants brainstormed all the activities they did which were unpaid. Then they identified which of these were work and approximately how much time this work took on a daily basis. Finally, the participants were asked to identify what things supported them in doing this work and what things made it more difficult. The tool that was used to gather data for this activity was a large house drawn on poster board. The house was held up by arrows that pointed into the house – on these points the women were asked to list the things that supported them in being able to do their unpaid work. Then, arrows pointing away from the house were drawn as women listed the barriers or obstacles that made it difficult to do the tasks in the house. (Demonstrate).

The researchers took the points from the brainstorming and the house and categorized them into key themes. Finally, participants were asked to record their work over the next 24-hour period on a hand-out called *A day in my life*. In the second focus group, the same participants were asked to review the work they had written down, comment on how this work changed if they were asked by the Department of Social Services to undertake a job search, and to discuss how much time each of the activities associated with a job search took. Finally, the participants prioritized key topics into areas where they felt they could influence policy and make recommendations for government. They moved into small groups for discussion on these areas. In addition, stamped addressed envelopes were provided to any women interested in giving individual

feedback which they did not feel they could share in a group. In addition, members of the focus groups volunteered to participate in the meeting to decide on actions that could result from the study and to review the findings to ensure their validity. So, although the researchers held power in terms of writing and disseminating the final report, a willingness to share responses and incorporate other perspectives and thoughts was communicated to/from the group. By incorporating an action component in the project, the women also had the opportunity to speak in their own voices to policy-makers. The process, I believe, succeeded in meeting the intention of raising the self-esteem of the participants who were encouraged to value and acknowledge the work they were already doing individually and collectively.

Data gathering methods in the *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations* were similar in that they were guided by first exploring what women already knew through their individual and collective experiences about the topic. In this study, following introductory exercises, we began with two brainstorming questions which addressed the ways people may be involved with municipal consultations. As researchers we recognized, after running the first group that many participants were unsure of what municipal responsibilities were, so for future groups we made a list of municipal responsibilities on a flip chart in order to help solicit responses. Then, we implemented a small group exercise using paper cuts of fish and boulders. In each group, the participants brainstormed obstacles to the involvement of marginalized women and recorded these on the boulders; then, they recorded enablers or ways to overcome the obstacles – these were recorded on the fish. Afterwards, the participants verbally reported these findings to each other as they attached their fish and boulders onto a river made out of flip chart paper posted on the wall.

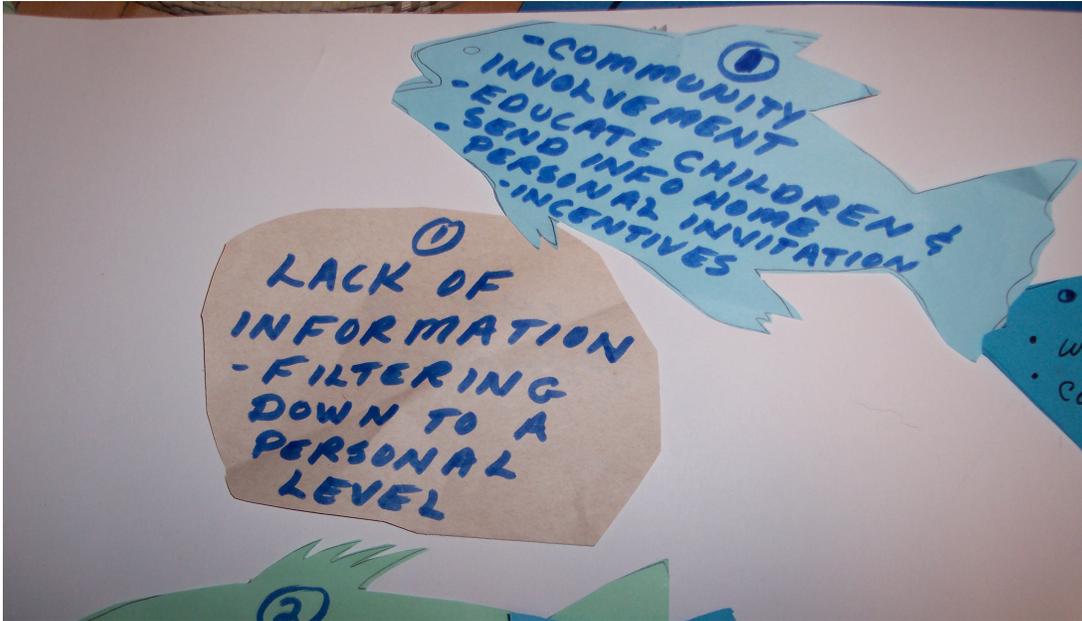


photo: C. Hanson

Finally, the women were then asked to identify steps and tools to increase their participation. This information was recorded on chart paper using an illustration with steps. The use of visuals and illustrations definitely garnered additional interest and enthusiasm.

Information about municipal governments were provided for the second focus group for each of the groupings. For three of the four groups, two City of Saskatoon staff provided information about the city's organization and processes. Then participants were divided into small groups to verify the themes emerging from the data of the first session. In addition, they were provided with an opportunity to discuss these further – adding points to those already mentioned from the thematic sorting provided by the researchers. After de-briefing and recording the information on flip charts, the women were each given five stickers to place on the five solutions they felt were the most important

strategies or priorities for increasing the participation of women in municipal consultation processes. Of the five stickers, one was a star that they used to indicate their favourite recommendation. To close the second session, we invited participants to participate in an individual reflection writing exercise. They wrote personal notes to the City divided into two parts: 1) I would be more involved in City politics if ... and, 2) I want you to help me by.... The data gathered from these statements is included in the report (citations for both of the reports are provided at the end of this paper).

Action Components:

In order to ensure the women's participation in making their needs known to policy-makers, the research for *Who Benefits* included an action component. Through discussion, the participants agreed to meet with the media, policy-makers, and the Minister of Social Services to discuss their needs as mothers living on social assistance. At our final meeting the women said that they wanted to keep on meeting; despite our reiteration that this was a research project. To our surprise, they decided to form their own organization. We assisted in explaining the role of organizations and possible structures, and then we left and they continued to meet for some time afterwards – inviting us to a potluck several months later. As a personal commitment to the participants and a practice of offering reciprocity to the “researched” the researchers invited at least one participant to attend each of three conferences where information about the study was disseminated: Calgary, Saskatoon and Regina.

From the study, *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations*, participants in Group A communicated a desire to meet the participants from the other focus groups; this desire was shared by the other groups and deemed an action

component resulting from the research process. Unfortunately this *meeting* was poorly attended. Subsequent follow-up by either the City of Saskatoon or by the study participants has not taken place. Although the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has posted the national study and tool kit, at the local level my personal sense of frustration and abandonment of the research participants has not been quelled by the City of Saskatoon posting the study on their web-site without enacting recommendations or making them public. In this case, then the external powers over the research have limited its potential, so that although on one level the research may have embraced a respectful methodology, the impact for the women or for change cannot be deemed as such.

The Results: Lessons, hopes and fears

Postmodern theory in feminist fieldwork demands continuous reflection in order to examine issues of power and identity as they play out in the research process (McCorket & Myers, 2003). Certainly from the onset, our positions were unequal and influenced by external powers. These positions however, evolved through the process of gathering data and making recommendations. Nonetheless the questions that emerge from the researcher positions beg probing. For example, how does my position as a white, educated feminist influence my work with Aboriginal, immigrant, or poor women? How do we challenge the culturally constructed notions of power in the research and enter into different locations simultaneously? Where are the struggles and spaces where resistance can surface? How do the sponsoring organizations and the funders influence the results? Through a process of dialogue and respectful engagement, I hope to continue the process of getting closer to answering these questions, examining women's realities and achieving knowledge through praxis (Reinharz, 1992; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

I concur with several feminist researchers in acknowledging that for both the researcher and the study participants, social locations shift and change and that the division of insider/outsider becomes a false and limiting dichotomy (Naples, 2003; Wolf, 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2000). In one study, for example, through the process of working with an Aboriginal co-researcher, I learned that my knowledge of marginalized women offered me different, yet valuable insights – that is, I could identify with their position of class, single-parenting, not being in an academic position of power, whereas my colleague shared an Aboriginal identity, but different experiences. As researchers, it is imperative that we acknowledge that we are not working with a homogenous group whose members all share the same characteristics; neither, however can we completely ignore our differences in interpreting the data. Being reflective about how we are intervening and how power is being played out in research relationships is critical (Wolf, 1996). Sometimes working with a co-researcher can make the differences more recognizable, however respect is also required in this relationship.

By using research methods that engage in conversation and dialogue, and embrace different learning styles, I believe these research practices however, were respectful, practical and political. For example, in *Who Benefits*, the process offered participants a chance to examine their own lives and to strengthen practices of solidarity and relationships by connecting the subject of the research to political processes (Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Haraway, 1991).

Who Benefits and the *Gender and Poverty Project* both were studies that involved existing community-base organizations. While this presented unique obstacles, the results were ultimately more satisfying. In both cases, the study participants were offered an opportunity, or in the case of *Who Benefits* they seized the opportunity, to use their new

learnings and solidarity with each other to work for change. The situation created in *Who Benefits*, I think demonstrates how important it is to use respectful, participatory and creative data gathering methods. But as the study *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations* shows, regardless of what is done during the study, the sponsor of the study must be committed toward enacting changes that emerge or yet again, the participants are left in the margins. My hope is that research with marginalized women works to move them out of the margins and this means both a personal commitment on the part of the researcher and a commitment on the part of the sponsor and funder to be responsive, honest and inclusive.

REFERENCES

Esteva, G. & Prakash, M.S. (1998). *Grassroots postmodernism: Remaking the soil of cultures*. London: Zed books.

Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM). "Increasing women's participation in municipal decisions making: Strategies for more inclusive Canadian communities," FCM. 2003.

Hanson C., Hanson L., and Adams, B. (2001) *Who Benefits: Women, unpaid work and social policy*. Research report. Status of Women Canada. Saskatoon, SK. Available on web site of Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women. www.criaw-icref.ca/hanson.htm

Haraway, D. (1991). *Simians, cyborgs and women*. New York: Routledge. 183-201.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2000). "Racialized discourses and ethnic epistemologies." In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.). *Handbook of Qualitative Research (2nd Ed.)*. (pp. 257-277). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Madriz, E. (2003). "Focus groups in feminist research." In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. (pp.363-388). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

McCorkel, J. & Myers, K (2003). "What difference does difference make? Positions and privilege in the field." *Qualitative Sociology*, 26(2) 199-231.

Maynard, M. & Purvis, J. (1994). *Researching women's lives from a feminist perspective*. London: Taylor & Francis. 1-26.

Naples, N. A. & Desai, M. (Eds.) (2003). *Women's activism and globalization: Linking local struggles and transnational politics*. London: Routledge. 1-47.

Reinharz, S. (1993). "Neglected voices and excessive demands in feminist research." *Qualitative Sociology*. 16(1). 69-76.

St. Denis, V. & Hanson, C. (2004). *Increasing Women's Participation in Municipal Consultations: A federation of Canadian municipalities/City of Saskatoon research project*. Saskatoon, SK. Available for download at www.city.saskatoon.sk.ca/org/leisure/race_relations/FCM_Report.pdf (Also for more information For more information, contact cpurdon@fcm.ca (Email) or visit www.icmd-cidm.ca/ev.php

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (1999) *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. New York: Zed Books.

Wolf, D. (1996). *Situating feminist dilemmas in fieldwork*. Westview Press. 1-55.