Building Solidarity through Collective Consciousness in Feminist Participatory Action Research

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Introduction

"Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 189).

In this chapter, we consider the role of consciousness-raising in feminist participatory action research that has emancipatory goals; where knowledge that is generated to understand oppression, is used to change it (Henderson, 1996). This chapter was developed by a diverse team of researchers who have been involved with the Migrant Mothers Project (MMP), which addresses the structural violence of immigration policies in Canada through research, education, and community organizing. The MMP seeks to bring visibility to how patterns of migration are engendered and how immigration policies produce conditions that fuel violence while creating barriers for women who seek safety and support (Bhuyan, Osborne, & Cruz, 2013).

From the outset, the MMP has drawn lessons from feminist, participatory and qualitative (or interpretive) research to bring attention to women's lives, generate methods for women's voices to be heard, and to mitigate the power differences between researcher and researched (Bailey, 1992; Healy & Mulholland, 1998; Henderson, 1995; Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton, & Ciske, 2006). In their review of feminist oriented research, Gringeri and colleagues (2010) identify "attention to power and authority, ethics, reflexivity, praxis and difference" as sites of struggle, where researchers reflexively engage in the dynamic social and political contexts in

which their work unfolds (p. 392). As Kaufman and Lewis (2010) have reiterated, attention to "*how* we study determines *what* we know" (cited in Anderson-Nathe, Gringeri, & Wahab, 2013 p. 279).

In reflecting on the praxis of the MMP's feminist and emancipatory goals, we noted that some of the most important learning has taken place through lengthy conversations we have with each other, before and after conducting different phases of our work. Henderson (1995) identifies consciousness-raising as a method for participatory action research where researchers take part in "negotiation, reciprocity, empowerment, and dialogue within the research process" (p. 60). Through reflexively considering our individual and collectives experiences as women[1], social workers/service providers, activists, immigrants and refugees, we strengthen our capacity to engage in anti-oppression work while building a sense of sisterhood across our differences.

To illustrate the potential for consciousness-raising as a method for feminist research, we begin with a brief discussion of consciousness-raising in the contemporary women's movement in North America. We link our consciousness-raising activities to the context of research with women who are undocumented or have a precarious immigration status in Canada[2] (Goldring, Bernstein, & Bernhard, 2010; Goldring & Landolt, 2013). We then present a series of narratives from members of our research team who reflect upon their roles on the project during the first

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[1] The MMP employs a fluid definition of woman that is welcoming to people with a range of gender identities and expression.

[2] We use "precarious immigration status" to refer to the range of categories in Canadian immigration policy which include temporary or dependent legal status in Canada in addition to people who are undocumented. People with precarious immigration status are not equally vulnerable, but their precariousness results from lacking one or more of the following: basic social and political rights; legal work authorization; and/or "deportability" (the right of the Canadian government to remove an individual from Canada).

two years of the MMP (from 2010 to 2012). Our narratives illustrate how we each employ feminist and anti-oppression principles to: a) mitigate and distribute power and authority among research staff and community partners, b) honour our differences while seeking to build solidarity and mutual support; and c) to blur (or queer, in a theoretical sense) the dichotomy between researcher and research subject (Gringeri et al., 2010). We draw inspiration from the quoted text by Ahmed (2004) above, to consider how through learning about our personal and collective struggles, we foster a sisterhood that forms the basis of our collective action. Our consciousness-raising work leads us to draw upon our collective knowledge to understand the violence of immigration policy and to advocate for policy and service delivery to better addresses the marginalization of people living with precarious immigration status in Canada.

Consciousness-Raising as a Feminist Practice

Consciousness raising groups of the 1970s are well known for laying the groundwork for women's activism in the contemporary women's movement. In *Feminism is for Everybody,* bell hooks (2000) recounts how consciousness raising-groups, which often took place in women's homes, were spaces where women came together to share their personal stories of oppression and to develop a political understanding of sexism and patriarchy. In hooks' words:

> Understanding the way male domination and sexism was expressed in everyday life created awareness in women of the ways we were victimized, exploited, and in worse case scenarios, oppressed… communication and dialogue was a central agenda at the consciousness-raising sessions… only through discussion and disagreement could we begin to find a realistic standpoint on gender exploitation and oppression." (p. 7-8)

Early consciousness-raising groups, as well as their later manifestations in women's studies programs, have been critiqued for being dominated by white women with class privilege. In our approach to feminist research, we turn to structural social work and anti-oppression theory (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007; Mullaly, 2007) to take on the ambitious goal of confronting all forms of oppression, including our own role in perpetuating interlocking oppressions as social work professionals and university-based researchers.

Our feminist consciousness in the MMP is inseparable from our attention to injustices facing women with precarious status in Canada; many of whom have endured many forms of violence in their home countries, during periods of migration, and after arriving in Canada (Bhuyan, 2012; Bhuyan et al., 2013). In particular, we seek to understand how the production of "illegality" for people with precarious immigration status corresponds to women's exposure to spectrum of violence (i.e. ranging from interpersonal and community violence to the structural violence of poverty and deportation). Our attention to intersecting and interlocking oppressions that produce violence against im/migrant women, inevitably shapes how we engage in research and social action. We continually ask ourselves, how can we authentically reach out to women who have precarious status without increasing their vulnerability? What types of meaningful solidarity is possible in a political climate where a conservative Canadian government, who has majority control, is restricting immigrant rights, while increasing criminalization and deportation of immigrants?

The MMP research team includes people with varied social locations vis-*à*-vis each other, the institutions in which we work (both academic and community-based organizations), and the broader community (i.e. an international student who is a research assistant, a doctoral candidate, a pre-tenured faculty researcher, a community member for whom the government has issued a deportation warrant). In addition to research staff (some who are paid and some who volunteer), the MMP has an active community advisory board made up of: service providers in the area of violence against women, immigration and refugee settlement, community-based lawyers, and women with precarious immigration status. In consideration of our diverse knowledges, skills and resources we rely on dialogue (and at times debate) to increase our consciousness of interlocking oppressions and find ways to maximize to ensure that our research informs advocacy for women and children to live free of violence.

Some guiding principles that shaped our approach include:[3]:

- We are the experts in our own experiences and have many different ways of knowing and getting information about our conditions.

- We promote a co-learning and empowering process that attends to inherent social inequalities between marginalized communities and researchers.

- We control the gathering and use of information about our communities. We decide what information we need to make the changes we want and how to get it.

- We gather information towards integrating knowledge and action for mutual benefit of all partners.

- We build on the strengths and resources within our communities.

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[3] These principles for Participatory Action Research are adapted from Incite-National.org. Retrieved from: http://www.incite-national.org/media/docs/5614_toolkitrev-par.pdf

In the remainder of this chapter, we illustrate the praxis of feminist research through a series of personal reflections from different members of the research team. Due to time constraints and competing responsibilities, many key people who contribute to MMP's consciousness-raising activities were unable to contribute to this chapter. Thus, the narratives represented here are not intended to represent the whole, but rather illustrate integral parts of our ongoing growth and development as feminist researchers.

Learning to Engage with Women Ethically and Authentically in Research Interviews

We begin with a narrative by Margarita Pintin-Perez, who was hired as a graduate research assistant in the Fall of 2010, to support the early development of the project before the MMP was fully funded. In addition to highlighting the importance of our collaboration with community partners, Margarita's reflection illustrates her personal development as a graduate research assistant who took part in bi-monthly meetings with researchers and community partners to develop our research protocols. As Margarita discusses, our intentional reflection and consciousness-raising as a group directly informed our research protocols, but also increased Margarita's capacity to engage authentically with women who have precarious immigration status in the context of a research interview.

By Margarita Pintin-Perez (MSW student and graduate research assistant[4])

As the first research assistant hired for the Migrant Mothers Project, I was fortunate to witness the evolution and realization of this project from an idea into a concrete research study. At the

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[4] Job title(s) during the first two years of the project.

time, I was gaining direct social work experience with an agency that supported migrant women who experienced various forms of violence. This proved to be an asset and also granted me access to community partners that were providing services to our proposed research participants. During the early stages of my work, I was responsible for coordinating bi-weekly meetings with the principal investigators, community researchers and community partners to develop our research design and ethical protocols. During these meetings we discussed all project details including: the project name, recruitment criteria and outreach plans, informed consent, and questions to include in our interview guide, in both English and Spanish. I noted how imperative it was for community partners to be engaged from the beginning; the initial meetings were not only helpful to develop the research study, but also to strengthen a partnership with the community members who have valuable knowledge and experience.

After several months of preparation, I was eager to speak with and learn from women with precarious status through our interviews. While we carefully organized the interview questions into themes and included gentle probes to keep the conversation on track, I had many conversations with Rupaleem (as my supervisor) about how to remain open to women's stories so that they could unfold in a natural way. Being a part of developing the research, allowed me to appreciate our intention behind each interview question and how it related to the project, which resulted in an ability to also paraphrase and find plain language to pose questions differently with women, depending on their level of understanding.

As I prepared for my first interview, however, I nearly lost sight of the interview as a process. The women we were interviewing have life experiences that are often hidden, criticized or

grossly stereotyped. These are women who must share their stories as a means to demonstrate that they deserve refugee status or public benefits. I grew to understand that this was more than sharing a story; our conversation offered permission for women to share their stories on their own terms.

I began to pay more attention to what I could do to help women feel safe and comfortable with me as a researcher. This meant that I needed to be comfortable bringing more of myself into the interview. I started to think about where and why these women share their stories in Canada. Who is the audience? What are the intentions and the objectives of sharing their stories?

As a research team, we understood that our interviews with women would only tap into some of the stories they share about their lives. We assumed that women adjusted and transformed their stories depending on their audience, and what they were seeking. Being conscious of how dynamics and differences can facilitate a type of variance or disconnect among women required self-reflection. Thinking about how our appearance, background, social, political or other indicator may be received by the participants. Could this affect the research? Could you trigger the participant? Could you be perceived as unsafe to disclose certain information? It's important to review and understand these realities, because they are part of what may impact or implicate the research process. After months of preparation, it was incredibly rewarding to sit with women as they shared their stories. It is her story, and too often undermined or hurried along.

Margarita's narrative addresses the at times contradictory demands between the administrative work of composing ethical protocols for university-based research and engaging with individual

women in an interview setting. Margarita also illustrates in what ways her participation in collaborative decision-making fostered her own transformative growth. Margarita's growing capacity on the project not only helped generate more meaningful interview conversations with women, but as Margarita took on leadership roles to hire and train additional research staff, she was well positioned to help create spaces for consciousness-raising as newer members of the research team joined our work.

Struggling to Ensure Principles of Equity in Participatory Action Research

We continue with a narrative by Bethany Osborne, who took on the role of Research Coordinator, soon after the MMP was fully funded. Drawing on her extensive experience in community development, arts-based research, and research management, Bethany became involved in all aspects of the research, supervising graduate research assistants, networking with our community partners, and supporting data analysis and data collection activities. In the narrative below, Bethany discusses the challenges of navigating the multiple and shifting identities of our research team and community partners, where hierarchies of professionalization, knowledge, and power regularly interfere with our anti-oppression and emancipatory goals.

By Bethany J. Osborne (PhD student and research coordinator)

As a front-line community worker engaged with diverse communities for over a decade, it has been essential to develop a reflective practice to recognize my own power and privilege in relation to the people I work with. When I entered graduate school, I did not want to be an academic researcher who did the kind of research that left communities feeling like they had been used, without gaining benefit from the process. I found critical feminist scholars who were

committed to similar principles (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Maguire, 1987; Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001) but the reality of the academy meant that it was difficult to do research differently.

As a PhD student, working as the Research Coordinator on the MMP, I work closely with Rupaleem and other research staff on the planning and administration of the project. One of my responsibilities has been to coordinate the Community Advisory Board (CAB) meetings and to maintain communication with our community partners. From the beginning, we discussed the importance of valuing the knowledge generated by all of the people involved in the project. We were also aware of the difficulty of demonstrating this to both committee members and to our funders. Increasingly, funders of academic research are using terms like "stakeholders," "community partnerships," "networking," and "knowledge transfer/mobilization." However, the way that research funds are designated (to fund graduate students for data collection and analysis) serves to maintain an imbalance of power and knowledge. People working in different communities are considered important in as far as they can provide access to the data held in particular spaces or communities. When they do take roles in generating knowledge, there are few (if any) resources to acknowledge their work. It is the responsibility of feminist researchers to work strategically within that system to find ways to honour the contributions of community partners. Our strategy was to do this in the form of a CAB. The CAB consists of women who differ by age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, immigration status, employment, and knowledge of immigration policy. Considering the varied social backgrounds and experience, we designated extra time and resources to get to know our community advisory board members, and to tap into their knowledge and expertise, and share leadership on project initiatives.

When I began to work with the project, one of my responsibilities was to build the CAB, bringing

together people from a number of different professional backgrounds and personal commitments.

I started with a core of women who had been involved in Rupaleem's previous research advisory

groups and began to invite people that I knew from my work in diverse communities. Cuts to

social service funding have meant that people working in the sector have increased workloads

and have to be selective about the different projects that they become involved with. Knowing

this, I often used my personal connections, meeting people where they were at: a local

community college where we both worked, or for coffee in the neighbourhood that is convenient

to them. Once people were recruited, we needed them to know that their presence and their

knowledge were important. We struggled with how to do this and spent some time in our

meetings discussing how people wanted to contribute. The formation of the principles guiding

our research is one illustration of our collective work to articulate the common values we bring

to our research, to help orient new people who join us midstream, and to identify concrete ways

people on the CAB could take leadership roles related to data analysis, facilitating a solidarity

group, or producing digital stories with women based on their experience with violence and

immigration.

Another important group of people on the CAB were women with precarious immigration status.

Early on, we noted that two women who identified themselves as "community members"[5]

remained silent during the meeting, but spoke openly with our staff on a one-on-one basis. Upon

reflection, we recognized that through our facilitation of the CAB meeting, we ignored a subtle

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[5] Women who take part in our CAB, who do not represent a specific organization, commonly refer to themselves as "community members".

dichotomy that emerged in our conversations about "us," as service providers or academics, and "them," as women with precarious status; a language that "othered" the community members we had intentionally recruited. In order to address this challenge, we worked one-on-one with "community members" prior to each CAB meeting to solicit their ideas and identify strategies for them to be more involved in the project. We took active steps to fulfill the vision of one of our community members, by creating a Solidarity Group (see Fernanda's narrative below), where a community member served as a co-leader and co-facilitator. We also co-hosted a workshop led by the Survivor Voices Inclusion Project (http://oaithsvip.com/), where women from our project spoke openly about the oppression they faced when seeking services at women's shelters. Over time, we noticed a steady increase in community members' active participation, to the point that one of our "community-members" who took the lead in producing digital stories with women who have precarious status to raise public awareness, stated to other community advisory board members that the MMP's strength comes from the combined efforts of three groups: academics, service providers, and immigrant women. This moment was incredibly powerful for me and others on the project, because it demonstrated that it is possible to do research differently in the academy. Though we had faced many challenges to building solidarity with women, at the start of our work, there are moments when our collaborative approach is seen as the source of our strength.

Bethany's narrative discusses our creative approach to share power and knowledge among the different stakeholders in the project, in both word and action. It is not easy to do this with integrity but it is essential if we are going to repurpose our research, to not just answer research

questions but to actually participate in positive change in marginalized communities. In order to

do this, we needed to be committed to building community.

From Community Organizing to Community Building in the Academy

In the following narrative, Rachel shares her approach to community building through her role as

coordinator of the MMP's community outreach and research interviews with migrant women.

Rachel was hired at the same time as Janet Juanico Flor Cruz, who had prior experience as an

ethnographic researcher in Mexico City and was working in Canada on a temporary basis.

Rachel and Janet worked closely over nine months, to connect with women in different

community-based organizations and conduct research interviews. Rachel and Janet were also

responsible for transcribing the Spanish-language interviews and translating them into English.

Rachel's prior experience as a community organizer with undocumented Spanish speaking

immigrants in the United States was evident in her capacity to recruit women for our interviews,

but also in her commitment to our solidarity work. Rachel raises important questions about the

limits of our solidarity work, given the constraints we faced as a university-led project that is

funded for research activities as opposed to community-building.

By Rachel Mehl (MEd student and graduate research assistant)

I started working with the project, as the Graduate Research Assistant who was hired to

coordinate community outreach and to recruit women to take part in the research. I brought my

personal experience organizing in solidarity with undocumented migrant communities in the US

and my passion for migrant justice on a global scale to this research project. As feminists

seeking to practice an anti-oppression framework, we straddled multiple spheres of actors and

actions that often overlap, but can also contradict one another. Individuals involved with the MMP included women who were leftist activists, community organizers, settlement and anti-violence against women workers, and academics. We did not always agree on how we should approach the barriers that we encountered, but we were committed to dialoguing about how to diminish barriers and to reflecting on the process.

Women who have experienced domestic violence, who are living in a shelter, and/or are in the process of a refugee claim have already been obliged to interact with many institutions, to repeatedly tell their stories, and to "prove" their worth. They may be reticent to interact with yet another institution to retell their stories. In almost every case, it was relationship and trust that brought participants to us, and it was the frontline workers that we had developed relationships with who mediated that trust. Initially front-line workers expressed deep concern about their clients' safety and risk of participation. For example, one women's shelter worker distrusted a recent community organizing campaign that publically denounced cases where immigration authorities deported women who were residing in family violence shelters. This shelter worker was wary of the MMP, due to Rupaleem's affiliation with this grassroots campaign and was concerned that the MMP would expose her clients to further public scrutiny. During this meeting, Rupaleem and the worker also discussed their different perspectives on community organizing tactics for immigrant rights and the potential for women with precarious status to be caught in the crossfire (so to speak). This conversation built a sense of trust that we were working towards the same goal to eradicate sexism and interlocking oppressions; after our meeting, this shelter worker introduced the project to women in her shelter. In fact, we learned that all of our recruitment relied on our developing trust with service providers and

demonstrating our long-term commitment to women's welfare.

Our recruitment challenges mirrored the contradictions of engaging in federally funded university research while attempting to make the knowledge produced and the funds themselves useful to organizations and individuals whom the state criminalizes. The Canadian government's violence toward Latin American women migrants (refugee claim denials, detentions and deportations) and the denial of rights to women with precarious status (to healthcare, freedom of movement, and safety from abuse) presented us with an urgency to use our research to support women's claims to basic rights. Despite the risks and barriers, women found their way – physically and emotionally – to the interviews. I saw women sense out the safety of places and spaces, within hostile terrains, and engage in reflective action to find ways to protect themselves, and their children in each new space.

In this context, we struggled with how to use our project and knowledge production for mutual benefit, paying careful attention to power disparities that existed between ourselves and the women who were our research participants. We struggled with what solidarity could look like in academic research where funding cycles are short term. Community organizing teaches us that this work needs to be accompanied by a long-term commitment, in order to bear fruit. At the early stages of the MMP, it was unclear how we would continue to honor the relationships that we were building through this project; the uncertainty in our own long-term commitment was a constant struggle for MMP staff, as we sought ways for our work to not become just another academic project that fails to follow through with our promises and commitment.

In Rachel's narrative, she discussed two themes that are pertinent to PAR: the potential risks for

service providers and research participants in connecting to an academic research project; and

the apprehension we encountered in service providers as well as potential interview participants,

that our research would mutually benefit all stakeholders. A consistent tension in the MMP, that

Rachel mentions, has involved finding ways to balance the time needed to complete tasks related

to our research interviews, while also carving out time for our community building and solidarity

work. Although Rachel was deeply committed to the MMP's solidarity work and helped to

develop the solidarity group that took place the winter and spring of 2012, her job

responsibilities required her to spend most of her time conducting, transcribing and translating

interviews. Rachel's question of "How can we do research differently given the many restraints

that we have" thus in part, stems from the struggle we faced as a research project where our

"research" activities would often compete with our community building and community

organizing goals.

Holding a Space for Women with Precarious Migratory Status

In our next narrative, Fernanda Villanueva reflects on her journey as co-facilitator of *Nuestra*

Fortaleza (Our Strength), which was as 12-week solidarity group that we co-hosted with one of

our community partner organizations. The Solidarity Group was initiated by M., a community

member who has precarious immigration status and has been serving on the community advisory

board for the MMP since it began. It was M.'s vision to create a safe space for women with

precarious immigration status to share tips, resources and mutual support. Through many weeks

of consultation with our community partners, the MMP partnered with the Toronto Rape Crisis

Centre/Multicultural Women against Rape (TRCC), to co-host a solidarity group for Spanish

speaking, adult women, with precarious status. The group was open to women irrespective of their participation in the research, and a total of 10 women dropped in during the 12-week group. The group was co-facilitated by a team that included Fernanda (an MSW practicum student, supervised by Rupaleem), a staff from TRCC, a student intern at TRCC, and M. (a community member from the MMP community advisory board).

Because the MMP funds did not cover time for research assistants to coordinate community meetings for mutual aide and support, Rupaleem (as a social work faculty member) created a social work practicum for Fernanda, through the faculty of social work's practicum education office. Fernanda was in her first year of the MSW program at the time and had several years of prior experience working in a community health clinic and helping refugee claimants complete their applications in Canada. As a practicum student, Fernanda's learning goals involved group work facilitation, coalition building, communication skills, and professional writing skills that took the form of weekly reflexive essays, some of which are posted on the project website (www.migrantmothersproject.com). Through Fernanda's reflexive essay below, she illustrates the importance of honoring the differences among a team of facilitators, as a prerequisite for engaging women with precarious status in solidarity work. She also discusses how she navigated the common ground she shared with her co-facilitators and participants of the solidarity group, as a young refugee in Canada.

By Fernanda Villanueva (MSW practicum student)

When I first met the co-facilitators for the solidarity group, the power differences were very clear and all four co-facilitators took on their expected roles. The service provider with a lot of

experience took the lead, while the other student intern and I took more support roles. M., who

had initiated the project, maintained a quiet and reserved demeanor. I realized that before we

could create solidarity with the women who we hoped would join the group, we needed to

develop a sense of solidarity among the facilitators. Working from a feminist and anti-oppressive

lens required that I acknowledge while all four of us were refugees from Latin America, our

different social locations, histories of oppression and privileges intersect to highlight both our

similarities and differences as co-facilitators and as women taking part in the group.

Developing a better sense of who I was in location to the other women, allowed me to navigate

and build authentic relationships with each woman in the group. I began to change the way that

I interacted with my co-facilitators, validating the different strengths that each woman had and

demonstrating my own strengths. Slowly, others began to do the same and as that happened, the

power dynamics between us became more balanced; our interactions moved more in the

direction of respect, and an acknowledgment of equity. It was this unity that gave us the

foundation to begin working with women with precarious status in a way that could also uphold

the vision of solidarity we were working towards. Building solidarity with women who have

histories of violence and oppression by their partners and social structures required gently

building relationships based on trust. It required that we listen to their stories of struggle,

acknowledge their stories of resistance and of perseverance.

Engaging in self-reflection and being aware of my social location in respect to the women was

uncomfortable and painful at times, but it was essential. I had come to Canada as a refugee from

Chile when I was a child and as women talked about their experiences, I could often identify with

their struggles. At the same time, I had to acknowledge the many privileges that I now have as a Canadian citizen and a graduate student in social work are privileges that women in the solidarity group, and their children, may never have access to. I realized that the process of self-reflection was not about denying my challenges or minimizing my own achievements, but it was about paying attention to what they were and how each one could potentially impact the relationships that were being formed.

Working from a feminist and anti-oppressive stance is not simply memorizing a theory discussed in school, or memorizing a sentence in your organization's mandate, it involves immersing yourself, your beliefs and your actions in the principles of working from this approach. It is being able to acknowledge the many intersections of oppression that exist for the individuals you work with and ensuring that you continuously draw on the individual's personal strengths and their expertise to shape and guide their lives. More importantly, it involves engaging in critical-self-reflection to understand who you are, what you unknowingly bring with you in the spaces you enter, and how this may impact the interactions you have. It was with these principles that the solidarity group become a unique experience for those involved. If we had used another approach, the solidarity group would not have been such a powerful exchange. We were able to work together, creating a space where our collective strength supported each of us.

Fernanda's narrative discusses the importance of acknowledging one's power and privilege when working with a group to foster solidarity against oppression; this process intentionally blurs the conventional lines of researcher and researched to identify commonalities among a group of women, but also brings points of difference more closely into view. Each of the women who

took part in the MMP solidarity group had histories of violence that brought them to seek refuge in Canada. Through engaging in critical consciousness-raising with her fellow group facilitators, Fernanda demonstrated the necessary journey of acknowledging her shared history with women in the group, while noting the differences produced by Canadian immigration policy, which has offered her and her family refugee status, while denying basic human rights to others. The blurred lines between researcher and researched, thus, present opportunities for shared understanding; researchers, however, continue to have the responsibility to gauge how their points of privilege may impact their relationships among a group of diverse women, to find strategies to complement each other's strengths, while striving for equity rather than equality.

Reflexivity as a Continual Process of Becoming

Flavia Genovese further explores how the fluid nature of identity can shift one's understanding of violence and immigration. Flavia was hired as a research assistant during her final year in the MSW program; she had completed a practicum with one of the MMP partner organizations and was trusted by the organization to help with recruitment and research interviews. Flavia also worked closely with Rupaleem to code and analyze our interview transcripts. During Flavia's tenure on the project, she experienced a shift in her own immigration status; when her student visa expired and she entered an uncertain period while applying to become a permanent resident in Canada. Her reflexive essay, considers how our dynamic identities and life experiences can lead to new insights that inform feminist research.

By Flavia Genovese (MSW student and graduate research assistant)

At the start of the project, I often reflected upon how my front line experience as a social service provider impacted my ability to draw upon the commonalities, as well as differences in experiences among women we interviewed on the MMP. After graduating from the MSW program, however, my perspective on the project shifted when my student visa in Canada expired. After living most of my adult life in Canada as a temporary resident, I experienced some difficulties associated with precarious status while applying for permanent residency—not having health insurance, being uncertain if I would be allowed to remain in Canada, and having to pay costly immigration fees. During this time, I was in need of an expensive medical surgery but did not have health coverage. This additional personal struggle gave me first hand knowledge of feelings of immobility and unjust limitations rooted in having a precarious status. Through my work on the MMP, I learned that several of the other researcher assistants and community partners struggled with similar experiences as part of their own stories and brought this knowledge to bear in my work analyzing our interviews with women.

Our interview approach allowed women to talk to us about the important aspects of their lives, as women who have faced violence, but who also strive to support their children and build lives in Canada. We wanted to avoid the lure to re-construct and re-author women's narratives, so strove to understand the cultural nuances which informed their stories and whenever possible allow their words to speak for themselves. In the data analysis process, I started to pay close attention to the way women spoke about their emotions, feelings and overall health. We began to notice a common language used to speak about the impact that women's immigration journey had had on their mental health. Many of the women clearly spoke of experiencing emotionally and physically painful circumstances. But we also learned from women about their

resourcefulness, strength and perseverance as they fought to support themselves and their

children.

Acknowledging commonality among research staff and our community partners, was one of the

many strengths inherent in the MMP. It allowed women's narratives to be understood from a

position of community rather than one of isolation and difference. These were important lessons

for me to learn as I embark on my career as a social worker, to be willing to engage in ongoing

self-reflection, willing to find spaces and places to connect and understand the different

experiences of women with whom I work.

Flavia's narrative highlights one of the core values in the MMP: to ensure that our research

approached women as experts of their own experiences and as people who are agents in their

lives, despite encountering numerous forms of violence and oppression. Flavia's narrative also

illustrates how changes in her own immigration status, deepened her sensitivity to understanding

how precarious status and migration contribute to women's poor health. As a research team, we

had several conversations about wanting to document the affects of precarious status on

women's lives, as a way to demonstrate the structural violence of immigration policy. We also

were cautious about invoking a bio-medical gaze, one that we are immersed in as social workers

in North America. Our approach to interpreting women's narratives (through organizing

interview transcripts by "code" and generating analytic "themes") thus involved playing close

attention to the range of ways women talked about their health and well-being, while refraining

from reducing their talk to western categories for mental illness (i.e. depression, anxiety, suicidal

ideation). The result was research data and analysis that focuses not just on the impact of

violence on women's lives, but the ways in which they navigate difficult circumstances, to survive and thrive, building lives for themselves and their children.

Creating Space for Feminist Consciousness Raising in Participatory Action Research

We end with a narrative by Rupaleem Bhuyan, who is the principal investigator of the MMP and a full-time social work faculty member at the University of Toronto. Rupaleem discusses the challenge of creating spaces for feminist consciousness-raising at a research intensive university. Her narrative emphasizes the politics of knowledge production where knowledge produced by university-based researchers is often assumed to be more objective and legitimate than community-generated knowledge.

By Rupaleem Bhuyan (principal investigator and full time social work faculty)

In the spring of 2011, I became the principal investigator for the Migrant Mothers Project, when three research proposals were funded through the Canadian government and a University of Toronto institutional award for "New Researchers." My affiliation with the University of Toronto is perhaps one of the more pivotal factors in my consciousness-raising as a feminist researcher who collaborates closely with students and community partners on the MMP. As a woman of colour of South Asian descent, with a background in feminist and immigrant rights organizing, I am committed to generating knowledge to inform collective action. I have sought to employ participatory action research methods as a means to democratize the production of knowledge, to de-center whiteness[6] within social work education, and to infuse my paid work with community engagement and activism. As a pre-tenure professor at a research-intensive

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[6] I refer to whiteness, not as a social identity, but as a dominant yet highly invisible socio-cultural perspective.

university, I have the resources (and frankly, the job pressure) to apply for research funding. I also feel institutional pressure to be a "productive" scholar in the eyes of the academy.

One of the ongoing challenges on the MMP involved finding resources to support community-generated knowledge, while fulfilling our obligations as an academic research project. Gratefully, one of our funders required that 10% of our budget be spent on "community researchers." While this was a modest proportion of our overall budget, we committed to paying small honorariums ($50/meeting) to each community partner who has precarious status. The remainder of our funds, however, were allocated to pay for graduate student researchers, research travel expenses, and research related supplies. As our community building grew to include a 12-week solidarity group, community events, and a digital story-telling project, we had to scramble to find resources to ensure that community-generated knowledge could take form and be disseminated on terms established by our community partners. This required additional fundraising, establishing cooperation agreements with partnering community organizations, recruiting social work students through the practicum program, and volunteering countless hours above and beyond what our "jobs" required.

The community building which we fostered through and by our collective consciousness of interlocking oppressions increased our potential as university-based researchers to mobilize the resources and status of an institution of higher education, for the benefit of those who face ongoing marginalization and exclusion. While this work is undoubtedly rewarding, both personally and collectively, it too often remains under acknowledged and less visible in institutions of higher education; the fruits of this work do not translate well to an academic talk

or publication. Nevertheless, the transformative power of feminist consciousness-raising is embodied in the women who have taken part in the MMP, each of whom continue to engage in activism and social change as feminists, social workers, community-based researchers, and educators.

Conclusion

The narratives presented in this chapter illustrate in what ways members of a research team engage in collective consciousness-raising to manoeuvre around interlocking oppressions, inside and out of the university, towards developing knowledge for social action. This chapter also illustrates the key role that graduate students play in carrying out feminist, participatory action research that is university-based. Graduate research assistants are often rendered invisible or neutral in analyses of power in the production of research knowledge. References to graduate research students also presume they fall on the "researcher" side of a researcher-researched dichotomy. Even when researchers—typically referring to the principal investigator and co-investigator—employ feminist and anti-oppression research methodologies, there has been little attention paid to spaces within a research project that enable the development of feminist consciousness, including attention to the common ground we inhabit in our journey towards a more socially just world.

Through our narratives we highlight the blurred lines between the life experiences of women who took part in the MMP as research assistants and the lives of immigrant women we sought to understand through our research and community building activities. We learned that our critical reflexivity and dialogue deepen the praxis of our feminist, participatory action research through

a) considering the complex positionality and knowledge of each person who is involved in the MMP; b) sharing leadership roles among student researchers and community partners to produce knowledge for social action; and c) providing space for women with precarious status to generate their own knowledge to raise public awareness of their experience of marginalization and to call for social action.

We recognize that many of the lessons we share in this chapter may be specific to our project and the social and political context in which our work unfolds. We hope that through illustrating the transformative potential of engaging in feminist consciousness-raising as researchers, students, faculty, and practitioners in social work and allied fields, we inspire others to create spaces for collective consciousness-raising to deepen their knowledge of themselves, the inequalities they work against, and how a sense of community among feminist researchers that can be enriching and empowering.

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