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ARTICLE

Reflecting on community/academic 'collaboration'

The challenge of 'doing' feminist participatory action research

Debra Langan and Mavis Morton
York University, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article articulates many of the issues that feminist participatory action researchers confront in attempts to conduct collaborative research with community organizations and the state (see Brydon-Miller, McGuire, & McIntyre, 2004; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006; Sullivan, Bhuyan, Senturia, Shiu-Thornton, & Ciske, 2005). As recent PhD sociologists, the authors were hired as independent consultants by a provincial ministry[1] to evaluate an initiative to expand service provision to women who had experienced violence by their intimate partners.[2] Our analysis of what transpired during this consultancy experience is grounded in our participant observation and a reflective process in which we have engaged, periodically, over the past 10 years. During that time we have articulated, and re-articulated our 'story', both informally and formally, through solitary and collaborative writing and re-writing endeavors. Our immersion in this process has yielded ever-evolving understandings of this life experience, and the passage of time has allowed us to refine an analysis because of the distance in time between now and our involvement. We begin by outlining our understanding of feminist participatory action research (FPAR) that informed our work with the ministry, followed by our story of what happened and our sociological analysis of that story.

KEY WORDS

- Action
- Community
- Evaluation
- Participatory research

Feminist participatory action research (FPAR)

Through academic training, and our work as consultants on other community-based projects, when we began the work with the ministry, our understanding of FPAR was informed by the wider literature on this methodology.[3]

> FPAR blends participatory action research and critical feminist theory by advocating that women must be involved in all stages of the research process including identifying the problems to be explored, carrying out the research, and interpreting and acting upon the results. (Maguire et al., 2004, in Reid, 2006, p. 316)

For the purposes of clarification, it is important to explain further what we saw to be the elements of 'critical feminist theory', that related to our task; what we saw to be the key elements of 'participatory action research'; and how we understood these to be related in the research process.

A critical feminist theory of violence against women understands violence to be one facet of women's subordination in a patriarchal society that endorses men's power and control of women (Bograd, 1988; Gordon & Breines, 1983; Stanko, 1997). Women who are victims of violence are understood to be in dangerous situations, such that their safety is continually in jeopardy, even if they have been able to 'leave' an abusive partner (Morton, 1996). To bring this understanding of violence against women to the research process is to render it 'feminist research' because '[w]hat makes feminist research uniquely feminist are the motives, concerns, and knowledge brought to the research process' (Brayton, n.d., p. 1, in Morris, 2002, p. 53).

Our understanding of participatory action research (PAR) was that it was one example of a broad group of action research approaches which have in common 'the practice of engaging those whose lives are impacted by the research directly into the research process' (Boser, 2006, p. 11), 'in all stages of research including research design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination of findings' (Sullivan et al., 2005, p. 978). In addition,

> a fundamental premise of community-based action research is that it begins with an interest in the problems of a group, a community or an organization. Its purpose is to assist people in extending their understanding of their situation and thus resolve problems that confront them. (Stringer, 1996, p. 9)

'Action' or 'social change efforts' are also goals of PAR, as Sullivan et al. (2005, p. 978) explain:

> . . . [T]here is an explicit value that research lead to action (Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1991). Rationales for using a PAR approach include the opportunity for researchers and community members to learn from each other (Hatch, Moss, Saran, Presley-Cantrell, & Mallory, 1993), address power imbalances (Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998), empower participants (Fawcett et al., 1995), democratize

> knowledge (Sohng, 1996), enhance the relevance of research and connect research to larger social change efforts (Giachello et al., 2003).

Underpinning the social change agenda of PAR is the premise that power inequalities are a central characteristic of social life. As Boser argues 'Action research projects are often conducted with an explicit social change agenda, and work from the belief that the very process of participating in constructing knowledge about one's own context has the potential to redress power imbalance' (2006, p. 11). 'We believe that knowledge construction, if it is to contribute to social change, must be an activity that people can participate in' (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 170).

As noted previously, FPAR blends critical feminist theory and participatory action research. As described by Brydon-Miller et al., 2004 and Ristock & Pennell, 1996, FPAR is a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women's multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action, while confronting the underlying assumptions researchers bring into the research process. The case has been made that FPAR is particularly well-suited for research on the issue of violence against women (e.g. Mies, 1991; Parnis, DuMont, & Gombay, 2005). In this regard, Sullivan et al. (2005, p. 978) note,

> In the case of domestic violence research, where ensuring the safety of participants is paramount (Langford, 2000), participatory strategies that include advocates and women who are battered in designing and implementing the research can be critical to successful and mutually beneficial projects (Israel et al., 1998; Whyte et al., 1991).

While FPAR research does not necessarily entail qualitative research, many researchers who pursue this approach prefer an inductive, grounded (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) approach in that it allows for a 'close up and personal' understanding of the perspectives and experiences of those for whom, and with whom, the research is being conducted. Denzin and Lincoln's definition of qualitative research illustrates how this approach fits nicely with FPAR criteria, because of their shared emphases on interpretive, naturalistic approaches that 'transform the world':

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3)

Morris (2002) similarly describes action research as 'a process that allows someone or a group to create or add to knowledge about an issue or situation through

a collaborative and reflective process' (p. 52). The researcher can also become self-reflective. Allen (2005, p. 992) notes that 'an increasing number of qualitative researchers have begun to write "vulnerably" about their intimate "self" as an active participant in the fieldwork "scene"' (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Birch & Miller, 2000; Charmaz & Mitchell, 1997; Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001; Stack, 1972) in keeping with the principles of collaboration and reflection, even though to do so is 'generally shunned as trivial, self-indulgent and lacking in academic capital (Letherby, 2002; Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Pratt, 1986)' (Allen, 2005, p. 992). As researchers we believe that '[o]ne of the ways change happens in action research is through critical reflection of the processes, methods and results of the research' (Morris, 2002, p. 53). Furthermore, 'researching our experience is [also] part of our action for social change' (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 169).

Our story

We were very excited when we learned about the opportunity to apply for a government-funded project that would evaluate services to abused women, for it represented what we perceived to be a wonderful opportunity to do FPAR. Our initial interview for the job was informal and obliging: we chatted over coffee with a representative of the ministry at a country diner. We thought we were very clear about our commitment to a critical feminist theory of violence against women, and a FPAR methodology and what this meant with respect to how we would conceptualize the research process and how the data would be gathered and analyzed. The interviewer seemed to agree with what we were advocating, and encouraged us to put this in writing. The tenor of this meeting was cordial and relaxed, and we saw the interviewer as a 'feminist' whose philosophy and practices were in keeping with ours. The nature of the encounter fit with our preconceived notions of how feminists *should* relate to one another, even though intellectually we know that to be 'feminist' does not prescribe a particular character, set of moral principles, or practices. At the end of the meeting, we were told that we were the successful applicants, without reservation or hesitation.

We prepared a document that explained, in brief, only some of the themes that characterized our understanding of FPAR as described in the previous section. In this document, we talked in terms of 'our understanding of male violence against women', and 'the evaluation research', but we did not use the term 'critical feminist theory', neither did we elaborate in detail on each of the points that we made with respect to 'our understanding' or 'feminist participatory action research', or the 'evaluation research'. We also did not provide any references to the scholarly literature to legitimize the content of our document. The document that we prepared contained the following information.

> Our understanding of male violence against women comes from a feminist analysis which sees women abuse/assault as a social and political issue which is directly connected to imbalances of power between men and women. Violence against women acts as a symbol within the culture of male power, and is used as a mechanism of social control. The evaluation research will be guided by feminist participatory research. This means that abused women and the coordinators/service providers who would be part of the initiative must be involved in all stages of the research process. A central goal of our research would be to improve responses to abused women. Women's experiences of, and responses to, abuse are not homogeneous, but differ in terms of race, class, sexual orientation, ability, and age. Researchers must be aware of power inequities between those asking for information and those giving it.

As we explain later in the analysis section, upon reflection, this document should have contained a more detailed, appropriately cited, elaboration of our commitment to FPAR, and what that would mean in practice.

We submitted our document to the ministry, and were asked to attend an interministerial committee meeting. At this meeting, we outlined our research premises as stated above, and received feedback and input. Three stakeholder groups were represented: officials from various ministries, service providers, and us as researchers. Our perception was that the meeting went very well, and that those present were 'on board' with our orientation to the research. There did not appear to be an alternative research philosophy or plan in place, and we continued to see our role as consultants whose expertise on FPAR was sought. Based on what we had learned at that meeting, we began to work on a research proposal that would reflect the interests of the stakeholder groups and what we anticipated might be the interests of the abused women. Following the meeting, we noted in our field observations that there were differing interests between the ministries and the service providers[4] and our recognition of that tension made us feel responsible for negotiating an outcome that would satisfy all involved. It seemed that the ministry's main interest was to evaluate whether they should fund the expansion of service provision to abused women. To determine this, they advocated examining whether *the service providers were doing as they had been told* with respect to the ministry's goals. In contrast, the service providers were interested in how the ministry's initiative would be realized in practice, and in how the abused women would perceive the ministry's initiative, based on their lived experience of it. So, we found ourselves in a difficult position. We were committed to a participatory research process, but the question became: 'With whom is the participatory process taking place?' We saw the service providers as an important voice, and they were presented to us as part of the team with whom we were working, but the ministerial officials came to be clearly identified as our 'bosses' and their interests were different from the service providers. We felt aligned with the service providers' interests, yet we were expected by the ministerial officials to be beholden to *their* view which turned out to be very different. Last, but by no

means least, another conundrum was apparent to us: we were being asked to evaluate an initiative that had not yet been implemented! Although we attempted on more than one occasion to signal this problem to the ministry, they refused to acknowledge this as a problem (until the end of our involvement, as we explain later).

Soon after the interministerial meeting, we submitted our proposal, and there were two indications (from one of the ministries only) that minor changes to our proposal were recommended. One recommended change involved language. Our use of the phrase 'wife assault' was called into question, and the suggestion was made to use the gender-neutral phrase 'victims of domestic assault' or 'victims of partner abuse' instead. Such a change would, in our opinion, contravene the feminist approach that we advocated, one that maintained that it was important to blatantly acknowledge the fact that it is women who are overwhelmingly the victims of 'domestic' violence (Chesney-Lind, 2006). We thought that the issue was one of communication and the ministry's lack of expertise, so we attempted to better articulate and communicate to them what we thought it was important to know. For the next two months, guided by meetings, faxes, and conference calls, at the ministry's request we re-worked our proposal over and over again. The communications from the ministry were worded in ways that masked the extent of the differences and changes that we needed to make if we were to do as the ministry wanted. What initially appeared to us to be suggestions for slight modifications later turned out to be in fact directives for us to totally re-do the research plan that we had developed. They rejected the open-ended interview questions that we had constructed for service providers and abused women, and demanded a close-ended survey that would yield quantitative data that would reveal whether service providers were complying with the proposed initiative. We were told not to talk to any front line people (either those who worked directly with abused women or the abused women themselves). Given our commitment to FPAR, our first priority was to interview abused women who had experienced the initiative. Increasingly we began to feel as though we were unable to fulfill a research process to which we were committed. We developed the impression that the ministry was most interested in producing data that would *support* the continuation of the expanded services, seemingly with little regard to how this impacted the experiences of abused women. This impression contradicted our earlier impressions of what the ministry wanted. Thus began a disturbing pattern of relating, what we have come to think of as 'crazy making'. Repeatedly, we would draft evaluation tools that we hoped would meet their expectations without totally abandoning ours, to which they would initially agree, followed later by a withdrawal of that agreement. As we note later in an analysis of our experience, in light of these differences the emotional impacts upon us were profound.

Finally a meeting was set up between front line service providers, provincial coordinators, and ministry representatives, and we were directed *not* to attend

that meeting. We had become the 'uninvited guests'. No longer could we be eluded into thinking that we were involved in a participatory approach. Instead, we moved into the role of trying to meet their expectations. The ministry made it clear that their interests, as stakeholders, were the only ones that mattered.

Had we not done so much work at this point, we might have 'taken our toys and gone home'. But we were in a very vulnerable position because, despite their promises, the ministry had not yet sent us a contract to sign. Hence, they were not obligated to pay us for *any* of the substantial work that we had done. We went ahead with the research in part because we needed paid work and we were used to working with not-for-profit agencies where it was not uncommon to be remunerated well into a project. We expected an agreement and consensus would emerge from our efforts to engage in a participatory approach. The project was a high profile one (involving many ministries) and promised future opportunities for involvements directly in line with our education and experience.

Beyond our employment concerns, we were ideologically invested in FPAR. We saw ourselves as having been hired to make the model work, so we 'normalized' the challenges that confronted us. We expected conflict (see Coghlan, Leatherby, Tanner, Wilson, & Bywaters, 2007) and positioning during the research process, so we persevered. To 'give up' would have suggested that FPAR was not possible, and it would mean that we had given up on an opportunity to work with abused women to improve services to them. We did not want to succumb to either of these possibilities, so we kept trying to get them to understand our approach and its importance. We provided a written articulation to the key ministry representative which critiqued what they had directed us to do, and that elaborated FPAR. We also provided a new, very detailed proposal. Our investment in our approach became stronger and more confident as we tried to more explicitly state and convince the ministry of the importance of our approach. These efforts were met with strong disapproval, and we were now given *specific* questions to ask via a survey questionnaire method. The approach involved a mainstream, quantitative approach to evaluation and the questions we were being told to ask were biased and leading. They would, in our opinion, *guarantee* a positive evaluation of the initiative. It appeared that the ministry needed a positive evaluation to legitimize future funding, and they thought they could, in a sense, pay PhD 'feminist' researchers to produce such an evaluation. It became clear to us that the *integrity* of the research would be seriously compromised and our research ethics violated if we complied. We decided to work on further developing the questionnaires with the idea that we would appease the ministry by including this method of data collection, but still combine it with a FPAR approach that would give voice to the lived experiences of the service providers and the abused women.

Now four months since we began working on the project, we received by courier a contract that had been signed, in triplicate. The way in which the

contract was worded affirmed for us the power hierarchy with which we were dealing. There were problems, from our perspective, in the contract, so many problems, in fact, that we each hired a lawyer and they recommended changes to numerous sections in the contract. Days after receiving the contract, we articulated to the ministry, in writing, our itemized concerns with respect to the content, and an agreement that we were prepared to sign. In the midst of these negotiations, as we had promised in the deliverables, we submitted the evaluation tools. The interministerial committee's critique of these tools was returned to us along with a request to revise and return the tools within 11 days. We did the revisions as they requested, and provided also a lengthy response to their earlier feedback on the tools. This feedback provoked an angry response. The key ministry involved requested additional revisions to be completed within 24 hours. In spite of our best efforts, we were unable to complete these extensive revisions with such a short turn-around time. We sent our revisions back to the ministry, with the explanation that more time was needed. Days later, we were fired. Our initial concern became the reason they gave for terminating the contract. The ministry explained that since the initiative to be evaluated had not yet been implemented, it was too soon to do an evaluation! We were told that to receive our fees for the work done to date, we had to complete the revisions of the tools as directed earlier. We did so, and received a cheque a few days later.

Analysis

In the analysis of our story that follows, we engage in what Harding and Norberg (2005) call 'studying up', that is 'studying the powerful, their institutions, polices and practices, instead of focusing only on those whom the powerful govern: "By studying up, researchers can identify the conceptual practices of power and how they shape daily social relations"' (p. 2011). We also engage in what we call 'studying down' in that we explore the ways in which our involvement impacted us as researchers at the level of lived, personal experience. We employ three levels of analysis. Beginning with the macro-level, we consider the broader social and political context in which our consultancy experience occurred. Next, we move to a meso-level analysis of interaction, and examine how our dealings with the ministry were complicated by: competing understandings of what constituted legitimate research; contrary agendas; and power inequities. Finally, we consider how the consultancy impacted us at the micro-level of lived experience.

The social/political context

We were recruited to this project at a point in time when violence against women had lost some of the social and political gains that had been won during the

Battered Women's Movement in which 'battering' had started to be articulated and understood more as a phenomena resulting from, and connected to, larger issues of women's oppression (Morgan, 1985). However, the 1990s saw a return to a more medicalized and individualistic understanding and approach to violence against women in intimate relationships. As Williamson argues, ways in which 'the repositioning of domestic violence as a health care issue could have the effect of domestic violence being constructed as a problem merely for ''individual'' women, rather than a globally shared social issue of concern' (Williamson, 2000, in Lavis, Horrocks, Kelly, & Barker, 2005, p. 447).

As such, the profile and 'management' of 'domestic violence' within the health sector increased.[5] Lavis et al. (2005) explain the impact that the medicalizing of social issues like 'domestic violence' have on the way in which the issue is conceptualized and addressed. The impact for women is that individualistic explanations and treatments are sought and individual women are held accountable.

> . . . [T]he process of medicalizing social issues, while disempowering in all patient and health service professional encounters (Gallagher and Ferrante, 1987), is particularly disadvantaging for women experiencing domestic violence (Reissman, 1983; Kurtz, 1987). Acknowledged is the danger that causes and interventions may become viewed from an 'individualistic' perspective with the concurrent social aspects becoming obscured . . . the complex health and social factors involved are redefined, becoming accountable in terms of the individual woman's attributes and her responsivity. Indeed, it has been argued that the social control of women is established and maintained through these processes of individualization and medicalization (Zola, 1972; Ehrenreich and English, 1979). (Lavis et al., 2005, p. 446)

With this new medicalized interest, came a redistribution of funding away from 'prevention, education or advocacy' (Morton, 1996, p. 391) and more toward 'essential' services which provide funding for shorter term 'fix her' strategies. As part of this new 'neo-liberal' trend, our understanding was that there had already been a commitment to put money into services to assist this new population ('new' in terms of managing the population of abused women in a different way than had historically been the case). Given the trend towards the increased medicalization of this issue, ways to support this trend were encouraged. Lavis et al. explain that,

> [T]he development of an official and professional obligation for health professionals to intervene in what was previously constructed as a social care issue . . . . has resulted in a public, political and organizational reframing of roles and responsibilities. (2005, p. 447)

As such our collaborators did not seem interested in an evaluative process that might dilute the medicalization of violence against women.

The interactional context

Upon reflection, we recognize that our initial impressions of what we were getting into remained very influential throughout our involvement in the project. We came away from that initial meeting thinking that we had landed a wonderful opportunity to work as consultants on a high profile project with women who understood, and agreed with our politics and our theoretical and methodological preferences as academics. On many occasions after this meeting, we encountered information that contradicted that first impression, but we were unable (reluctant or reticent) to realize the full import of what these contradictions would mean for us, and for the project. Our enthusiasm and commitment to the project was very much buoyed by the ambiance of that first meeting. Our subsequent interaction with the interministerial committee, and what appeared to us to be the securing of an agreement with them as to how we would proceed, suggested to us that we were working *with them* in the context of our participatory approach.

Methodological differences

We see now that our written articulation of what constituted a FPAR model should have been more in-depth in the very first document that we submitted to the ministry and the interministerial committee. As the project unfolded, we did elaborate what the FPAR model involved, however it would have been prudent to have provided such an elaboration at the outset. In leaving the initial interview with the impression that the interviewer was familiar with the research model we proposed, we assumed further that the other stakeholders were similarly familiar with FPAR, and we thought that if they were not, we could ensure that they were 'in the know' when we presented our ideas at the first interministerial committee meeting. We realize now that our understanding of FPAR was in all likelihood unfamiliar to the stakeholders involved. More importantly, our attempts to 'teach' them were ineffective because they remained firm in their investment in what they believed to be legitimate, mainstream, 'scientific' research models. We believed in the importance of participants' perceptions of their lived experiences, casual interviews, and qualitative data that would be generated through FPAR. We intended to engage in grounded, reflective, applied research, such that general themes would guide our inquiry, and from this theoretical insights would emerge that would inform the ministry of how to best support women who were experiencing violence in intimate relationships. Like Kirby and McKenna (1989) we believed that 'research and action have to be grounded in the experience of the participants' (p. 166).

In contrast, the ministry believed in the importance of objectivity, standardized questionnaires, and quantitative data that would be generated through an external evaluation research model. They wanted a deductive, basic research

approach that tested specific theories. They demanded that interview schedules be submitted in advance of any data collection, and one of the reasons for this was, as Parnis et al. (2005) note, because of the 'assumptions concerning risk in research undertakings' (p. 649). In our case, the ministry, we think, did not want to risk getting evaluation results that were negative about the initiative. Furthermore, they stated that putting the abused women at risk was a concern, given our plan to interview the abused women, and our attempts to convince them of our concern and care for the women's safety fell on deaf ears. For us, the outcome of the evaluation was not a concern as long as it accurately reflected the nature of the abused women's experiences with respect to the initiative and as long as the findings were used to inform future initiatives that were aimed at helping abused women. The women's safety was similarly a concern for us, and we had prior experience in making contact with abused women in ways that guaranteed their safety. These became central points of difference between us and the ministry. We first suspected that they had no appreciation for the differences between doing quantitative and qualitative research when we were asked to generate a clearer statistic through our FPAR approach. Several indications began to signal to us that although they seemingly agreed with us on the use of qualitative methodology, their critiques of what we had written throughout the process illustrated their lack of understanding of and/or agreement with qualitative methodology. If they did understand FPAR, then it would seem that they intended all along to use a traditional survey methodology under the guise of having used a 'feminist' methodology. Whatever the case, we minimized the extent to which our orientations to the project differed, and we persistently and enthusiastically tried to explain in writing, as we went along, what a FPAR approach entailed. Kirby and McKenna (1989) capture how we perceived and responded to the research challenges:

> . . . [A]s people deliberately engage in this type of research, as they become creators of knowledge, they become more confident in their ability to 'intervene in reality' in a meaningful way. They are less intimidated by traditional research approaches and become better critics of such results. (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 167)

Eventually, even as we protested the research methodology that they were calling for, we began to try to produce the questionnaire schedules that they were demanding. Like Parnis et al. (who attempted to conduct qualitative research in association with hospital-based services), we were 'seeking out women's opinions about an institution through that institution itself . . . and were, to a degree, co-opted by [the institution]' (p. 649). As a consequence, we 'felt unable to conduct fully the feminist qualitative research we were committed to' (Parnis et al., 2005, p. 649). To this day, we question whether giving them more written information about FPAR at that initial meeting would have made them 'see the light', and endorse FPAR! Even though we continue to revisit this question, we are not

convinced that this would have changed what transpired because our political agenda differed from theirs.

Differing agendas: Giving women a voice versus boosting a political profile

Beyond the differences in our methodology preferences, our agendas as consultants differed from the ministry's agenda. As Shore notes, 'competing agendas can exist in communities, which requires researchers to be aware of the political nature of community work and be comfortable and skilled in working through conflict' (Shore, 2006, p. 11).

Our agenda

As noted in the original document that we provided, and as we elaborated previously with respect to our understanding of FPAR, social change was one outcome that we sought through our evaluation research. Harding and Norberg capture our intentions:

> Feminist researchers have insisted that their research projects have practical implications for the improvement of women's lives. Thus they have developed the controversial notions that research itself can contribute to producing a liberatory transformative subjectivity in an oppressed or marginalized group and that this kind of engaged research can produce knowledge that such a group desires. (2005, p. 2011)

We believed that by interviewing various stakeholders who were impacted by the provision of new services, in particular the abused women, we could at least provide feedback to the ministry that would inform and thereby improve how services were provided to abused women. The abused women who had received services were the people whose voices we valued most, but, like Parnis et al. (2005), we saw interviewing the service providers as important because they had contact with, and would ultimately lead us to, the abused women. But, as Chrisp notes, try as we might, we just couldn't 'get it right':

> Although an experience of incongruities in the relationship between the academy and the community is not new for researchers interested in transformative research practices, it is one that remains problematic . . . The researcher can never seem to 'get it right'. For others, seemingly necessary compromises have an impact on the integrity of the work . . . (Chrisp, 2004, p. 80)

Their agenda

Over time, we came to realize that for our employer, the research was about satisfying funding requirements and boosting their political profile. They needed for us, or someone else, to provide research-based evidence that would justify a project that increased the medicalization of violence against women that had to that point in time not been so explicitly sought. Political empire-building was at least part of what was transpiring. This report would become known not only to

politicians but would also receive media attention. To us, their agenda represented 'pernicious influence' and 'questionable conduct' (Allen, 2005, p. 994) and intensified the ethical struggles that we were already dealing with because of what we had come to recognize as the differences in our theoretical and methodological commitments.

It is important to note that we had made an assumption (without necessarily being conscious of it until later) that since our ministry partners had sought out 'feminist researchers' that this meant some kind of commitment to principles aligned with feminism and/or feminist research. However, Ramazanoglu and Holland remind us that this is in some cases an unwarranted assumption:

> . . . [E]nvisaging a feminist research strategy does not mean that feminist knowledge is necessarily favourable to women. Feminists have to come to terms with the discomforts of producing knowledge of how women exercise power, promote injustice, collude in their own subordination, or benefit from the subordination of 'others'. (2002, p. 148)

Our sense is that they identified as 'feminists', even though the way that they envisioned the research process, and the way that they treated us were not, in our assessment, in keeping with the most fundamental of feminist principles. Furthermore, our endorsement of a 'feminist' methodology allowed them to frame the research as 'feminist'. This was important politically for the ministry because the research was in the area of violence against women and the rhetoric was that 'best practices' in social policy and program delivery were founded on a feminist analysis of violence against women. Feminist lobbying, advocacy and research had been informed by a feminist analysis of violence against women, thus laying the foundation for major policy and legal changes in the area of violence against women (Chesney-Lind, 2006). Sadly, in many cases it is these very same policy and legal changes which have come to be used *against* the women they were developed to protect. In this way some of the important and hard-fought changes (e.g. mandatory charging, zero tolerance, coordinated intervention) have become part of a current backlash which calls into question the apparent 'feminist' foundation of these now 'mainstream' policies.

(Ab)use of power

The differences in research understandings and political agendas that we describe above unfolded in a context of *power relations*. Even though we were familiar with Kirby and McKenna's point that 'research is a process that involves questions of interpretation and conceptualization; as such, it is a political process' (1989, p. 169), we failed to appreciate this when we began the project. Allen notes the importance of recognizing 'differences in the relative power of Violence Against Women stakeholders . . . the history of adversarial relationships among stakeholders, . . . [and] the need to overcome divergent viewpoints regarding the nature of and response to domestic violence . . .' (2006, p. 48).

As keen, newly-minted PhDs, we were naïve about how the power differences in this situation could interfere with our commitment to a FPAR approach. As Shore describes, we believed in 'an equitable research process':

> An equitable research process requires partnerships that are inclusive where there is a 'leveling of the playing field.' A leveled field creates an environment where all the stakeholders' voices are heard and respected throughout the research process from designing the study, to gathering the data, to disseminating the findings. (Shore, 2006, p. 15)

'Team work', collaboration, and coordination were principles that seemed to be advocated by the ministry, and this was in keeping with the broader trend of collaborative and coordinated efforts to address violence against women. As Allen notes:

> . . . [E]fforts have focused on bringing together relevant stakeholders from an array of community sectors (e.g., criminal justice, health care, education, social services systems, all levels of government, religious organizations, and businesses) to respond to intimate partner violence against women in a comprehensive manner. (2006, p. 46)

The fact that we were told we were to work with a committee that brought together various stakeholders led us to believe that we were in a collaborative context. Furthermore, our prior work as consultants on community initiatives to address violence against women had been characterized by collaborative, equitable research experiences, that were, as Blumer, Green, Murphy, & Palmanteer describe,

> . . . aimed at providing a space for the multiple voices of many people who are interested in co-creating possibilities through research, where the entire team interprets together and all members share in the responsibility (Gerstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002; Poole, Hollingshead, McGrath, Moreland, & Rohrbaugh, 2004). (Blumer et al., 2007, p. 49)

Although the ministry's values and ours appeared to be aligned, despite the initial appearance of a collaborative approach there was in fact, a hierarchical organization, albeit unspoken, among the stakeholders. The dominant discourse of 'collaboration' masked, at least initially, the explicit power hierarchy that made it impossible to actually work in a way that was in keeping with a FPAR model. In particular, the power wielded by the key representative of the ministry that brought us 'on board' was the voice that, in the end, mattered, because in reality they were operating according to a very formal, hierarchical, traditional committee structure. So, although, there was the appearance of a cooperative, collaborative model at work, in reality what the key representative said was to be the version by which we all abided. Allen (2005) explains the power of the 'steering group' as an entity often used in such contract collaborations.

> Most funders also use 'steering groups' whose memberships are carefully selected according to various considerations, such as members' understanding of (and

> empathy with) the aims of research and policy more generally. These 'steering groups' have the power to 'steer' contract researchers who are therefore placed in a subservient role in the process (cf. Imrie, 1996). (Allen, 2005, p. 997)

There were a number of examples of the key ministry representatives using the power that they had. There was no trust in our abilities as professionals and they repeatedly questioned our expertise as researchers. While it became clear that they wanted everything stated in writing, this is neither the way that we entered into the work with them initially, nor is it the way that the contract articulated our obligations. They refused to recognize the time lines of the project that they initially had agreed to, time lines that fit within the time available, overall, for the completion of the project. Although we had set clear deliverables, with time frames, and abided by these, they continually imposed new expectations and new deadlines upon us, and kept us scrambling to meet their expectations. There were numerous instances of them imposing work on us on their whim. These unexpected requests were in violation of contract agreements as to what work we were supposed to do. There was no attention to, and/or appreciation of, details. We ended up feeling 'damned if we did, and damned if we didn't'. In pondering how we could have 'done it' better, we come back to the same, central point: they were the funders, they wanted things a certain way, and this was the situation from the beginning. It is hard for us to imagine how, in any academic/community arrangement, the wishes of the funder would not take precedence over the ones being funded. There was also the added academic pressure as articulated by Allen to win research contracts.

> Constant exposure to the 'disciplinary gaze' of research funders and university managers throughout my academic career has, on reflection, produced a level of 'docility' that has manifested itself in my high level of self-motivation to 'win' research contracts and provide 'satisfied clients' (i.e. research funders) with 'what they want'. (Allen, 2005, p. 997)

In a similar vein, Ali et al. (2007) argue that increasingly funding priorities and influences may affect the autonomy of the research(ers). Kirby and McKenna's (1989) notion of 'methods from the margins' aptly characterizes what was going on in this project. First, and most importantly, the subjects of the research, the abused women, were on the margins in terms of their situations of powerlessness in a society that under-acknowledges, and poorly deals with, violence against women (see Morton, 1996). As researchers we were on the margins in terms of employment and professional practice – although PhDs, we were contract workers who had no long-term security within the work force. Our FPAR approach further marginalized us because it challenged mainstream methodologies, both in terms of the critical feminist theory that informed the approach, the method of data collection that we proposed, and the social change that we intended. As Kirby and McKenna note: 'Doing research from the margins chal-

lenges the status quo' (1989, p. 170). We entered into what was a mainstream work environment and rather than adapt to that environment, we attempted to 'sell' our marginal identities and our marginalized FPAR for the benefit of a marginalized population.

Experiential context: Emotional upheavals

Dorothy Smith's writings on 'bifurcated consciousness' (1988) describe our experience during this highly conflictual and stressful time. Smith argues that the work of sociology has traditionally been an objective endeavor, one that is removed from women's everyday lived realities. Smith points to the way that women who teach sociology experience a disjuncture between objective sociological information and their own social experiences. In our situation, we experienced a disjuncture between our understanding of feminist research and our social experience of trying to *do* feminist research. It was very difficult for us to reconcile our investments in a feminist approach with our lived realities of trying to *do* this approach. The personal stresses that were fueled by this bifurcated consciousness were incredible. The energy and time that we put into trying to negotiate with the 'employer' far exceeded the amount of time for which they had committed, verbally, to pay us. We each spent many hours working on the project, only to be 'shot down' again and again. One conference call in particular that Debra was involved in was extremely denigrating, her credentials were questioned (even though she had taught numerous university courses in methodology to sociology majors), and our arguably well-developed research instruments dismissed. Our later meetings with the ministerial representatives were conflictual and demoralizing. Our confidence, at times, was shaken, explained, in part, by Megan Boler who notes: '[S]elf doubt and shame are common especially to women's experience within higher education; women who experience the "imposter syndrome" and continue to be plagued with doubts regarding their intellectual authority' (Boler, 1999, p. 3). While we agree with Shore who argues that there is a need for academic researchers to have '. . . sensitivity to potentially complicated partnership dynamics and the skills to navigate these dynamics' (2006, p. 11) we certainly were not 'comfortable' or 'skilled' in working through such conflict (Leatherby & Bywaters, 2007, p. 93).

What transpired took an incredible toll upon our personal and family lives. We lived 100 kilometers apart, each had a young family at home, and we were working at other jobs to make ends meet. Debra had just survived the dissertation defense (newly-minted 'Dr') and this was the first time that she had taken the lead on one of our consultancy contracts. She felt she had a lot to prove both in terms of supporting her family financially and in terms of doing good work in the eyes of her more experienced colleague (Mavis), and the ministries and the future organizations that might review this project. Mavis had a new baby, and we had

asked the ministerial representative whether it was okay to bring the baby to the first interview meeting at the country diner, and the answer had been a clear 'yes'. Mavis brought her baby to that meeting, and to the subsequent interministerial meeting, and nursed the baby at these meetings. This was Mavis's first new contract having this appendage, and she wanted to satisfy herself and the world that she could be a good mother (i.e. able to satisfy the demands of a 'high need' nursing newborn) without compromising her professionalism. We have come to understand (see Davidson & Langan, 2006) that nursing a baby while performing in a professional, academic capacity can engender very negative responses, ones that arguably (and ironically) can be described as 'violence against women'. In retrospect, we believe that Mavis's nursing of her baby denigrated us in the eyes of our employers.

The magnitude of the repercussions for our futures was enormous. We believed that what happened with this project had huge implications for our future possibilities and also our reputation within the violence-against-women community. This interministerial committee represented every ministry in the province relevant to women's issues. Any government funding available to consultants like ourselves would come from one or more of these ministries. We were risking our reputations and the possibility of future work with any ministry in the province. From our respective home locations, we cried, we walked, and we talked our way through it all, one day at a time.

Conclusion

The mix of academic interests and commitments with political interests and commitments in a partnership arrangement potentially presents a distressing dilemma, and this contrasts starkly with the widespread enthusiasm about academic/community/state partnerships (Boser, 2006; Gatenby & Humphries, 2000; Sullivan et al., 2005). Our analysis is that academics and representatives of the state are often coming from two 'different worlds' with conflicting understandings of what constitutes legitimate research, competing agendas, and power inequities. This does not mean that partnerships cannot be successfully negotiated and carried out to the benefit of both academics and the state. Still, our experience speaks to how trying to do politically informed academic work is difficult in ways method and methodology books rarely prepare us for. We entered into a research process which purportedly intended to evaluate and improve the services that are provided to women who have experienced violence from their intimate partners. But our assumption that there was a shared understanding of FPAR, and the political context of the research seriously compromised this objective. It was clear to us that, if conducted as the ministry directed, the research would produce findings that would endorse the ways in which services were being pro-

vided, regardless of the lived experiences of the abused women who received these services. Careful attention should be paid to clarifying how various stakeholders understand and are invested in theoretical and methodological research possibilities; making explicit the agendas of the parties involved; addressing how power inequities will be dealt with during the research process. For those of us who are committed to using FPAR in an effort to address social inequalities, attending to these issues has important implications, not only for those doing the research, but more importantly for those whose life situations we aim to positively affect through the research process: first and foremost, the abused women.

Notes

1 Due to confidentiality agreements, we are unable to specify the type of state ministry involved.
2 Due to confidentiality agreements we are unable to provide details about the nature of the initiative or the evaluation research that was involved.
3 In the interests of providing up-to-date sources, we reference the recent literature on FPAR, still the same themes were seen in the scholarly literature prior to, and at the time of, our consultancy.
4 Historically, the community response to intimate partner violence against women has been characterized by inadequate services (Gondolf, 1988; Pence & Shepard, 1999; Sullivan, 1991) and a lack of coordination across the systems involved in responding to domestic violence cases (Hart, 1995; McEvoy, Brookings & Brown, 1983). (Allen, 2006, p. 46)
5 Parnis et al. (2005, p. 691) discuss some of the barriers they encountered in doing feminist qualitative research on violence against women issues within medical institutions in part due to the 'disease-oriented' approach to which hospitals in which they are located tend to subscribe.

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Debra Langan is a Research Associate at York University, Toronto, Canada, working on experiential education, knowledge mobilization, and graduate education initiatives. Previously at York, she was a Sessional Assistant Professor of Sociology, specializing in critical social psychology, qualitative methodologies, families and intimate relations, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. *Address*: 107 Queen Street East, Cambridge, Ontario, Canada N3C 2A9.
[Email: dlangan@yorku.ca]

Mavis Morton is a Sessional Assistant Professor of Sociology at York University, Toronto, Canada. She specializes in violence against women, women and the law, feminist critical criminology, justice and social policy, feminist participatory action research (FPAR) and evaluation research, public sociology and community based learning/service learning. *Address*: 10 Aster Crescent, Brooklin, Ontario, Canada L1M 1J8.