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FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES

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Synopsis — Close relationships between researchers and participants engaged in a feminist participatory action research project have brought joy and insight, but also challenges. Through the project we collaborate to enhance participants' careers and, among some, develop feminist consciousness. In this paper we discuss methodological and ethical issues that derive from the closeness of the relationships between many of the participants and ourselves. We explore our subjectivities, the issues associated with interpreting participants' stories, actions and conversations, the risk of perpetuating uncritical assimilation or colonisation for Maori participants, and the challenge of matching practice with ideals of emancipation for all women. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Both participatory action research (PAR) and feminist research have been developed by researchers aiming for involvement, activism and social critique for the purpose of liberatory change. In a career research project in which we participate with a group of women to develop their careers and continue to talk with them about feminist concerns, we have drawn on both PAR and feminist research. Viewing the research as feminist participatory action research, as a form of praxis aimed at social change, provides many challenges. In this article, we describe our attempts to develop a method which is collaborative, liberatory and ethical. We begin by describing the elements of PAR and current issues in feminist research pertinent to our concerns. We then describe the project, and discuss the methodological and ethical issues that arise in the conduct of the research.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Reason (1994) describes three key features of PAR: first, a commitment to liberationist movements; second, a commitment to honouring the lived experience and knowledge of the people involved, often people from oppressed groups; third, a commitment to "genuine collaboration" in the research. Reason (1994)

also notes the significance of PAR in emphasizing the "political aspects of knowledge production" (p. 328). He describes a double aim:

> One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people—through research, adult education, and sociopolitical action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own language. . . . This is the meaning of consciousness-raising or *conscientization*, a term popularized by Paulo Freire (1970). (Reason, 1994, p. 328)

The construction of knowledge with people is for the express purpose of building power with/by those people. The emphasis of PAR has been on liberating oppressed groups through research as praxis. As Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) note, the forms of oppression have been particularly those of culture, ethnicity and region. They also caution against the co-option of participatory methods by the elite and powerful for the purpose of increasing their power.

The actual methods of participatory action research are diverse and often experimental. Dialogue with people is central (Fals-Borda, 1991). Often dialogue happens through com-

munity meetings of all kinds in which participants have the opportunity to identify issues and themselves as a community, reflect on the research process, make sense of 'data', seek opportunity for liberation and develop the community and the research further (Reason, 1994). Methods which emphasize collaboration and dialogue as appropriate to the community are favoured. In making sense of the material gathered, actions taken and the knowledge constructed, the assumption is that people are able to theorize about their lives and experiences and act in self-directed and consciously political ways to change their communities (McTaggart, 1991). Researchers are not separate, neutral academics theorising about others, but co-researchers or collaborators with people working towards social equality (Sommer, 1987).

FEMINIST RESEARCH AND PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Controversial epistemological and ontological questions are raised, if we believe there is such a thing as a feminist methodology (Reinharz, 1992). Reinharz comments: "Feminism is a perspective not a method" (p. 240). But it is a perspective which requires that we re-think the validity of research as process and knowledge-creator. Challenging the facade of neutrality implicit in traditional scientific research methods has been one way of "troubling the boundaries", as Butler (1990) writes, in order to examine and address gender blindness. Participatory action research, with its paradigmatic base in postpositivist understandings about the nature of truth claims, has the ability to trouble the boundaries of gender. This is particularly so if we follow Lather's call for "an approach that goes well beyond the action research concept proposed over 30 years ago by Lewin. . . . the vast majority of this work operates from an ahistorical, apolitical value system which lends itself to subversion" (Lather, 1991, p. 56).

At first glance, the ideals and methodology of PAR seem to fit well with the values and theoretical and practical concerns espoused within most feminist research, particularly those which emphasize emancipation, participation and collaboration, people's (women's) experiences and knowledge, and knowledge for the purpose of political action. However,

PAR has traditionally been conducted as if the social world were a place of gender-neutrality or gender-equality. Maguire (1987) commented on the male orientation of participatory research in which "women and gender as focus for analysis have been ignored, minimised or marginalised" (p. 52). She comments on the ways in which feminist theory and practice can be used to inform and develop PAR.

Many feminists have long believed that research should empower the women involved, that the researcher cannot possibly be neutral, and that research is a political process (e.g., Fonow & Cook, 1991; Lather, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). Reinharz notes the crucial link between feminist scholarship and activism: "the purpose of feminist research must be to create new relationships, better laws, and improved institutions" p. 175). She goes on to describe several key features of feminist action research. Change happens both by empowering women in the research and by distributing information which changes the actions of others. The process includes demystifying research itself, so that its political consequences are then available to all women. Doing participatory research inevitably changes the researcher, sometimes painfully, sometimes in exciting, sustaining ways. The self-reflexivity such changes engender is a feature of all feminist scholarship in some way.

Reinharz (1992) points out that feminist research aims to represent the diversity of people. Over the years the complexities of that aim have been elaborated. Fine (1994) comments on the relationship of researchers to those who are "other" in some way. In feminist research, women may be "other" to men, or "other" to the researcher, or "other" according to sexuality, ethnicity, or class, or many "other" aspects of women's lives. In her challenging essay on the process of "othering", that is using research ostensibly for "others", while actually effecting a "colonizing discourse", Fine (1994) suggests:

> . . . that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations. I mean to invite researchers to see how these "relations" get us "better" data, limit what we may feel free to say, expand our minds and constrict our mouths, engage us in intimacy and seduce us

into complicity, make us quick to interpret and hesitant to write. Working the hyphen means creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not, "happening between", within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence. (p. 72)

De Groot and Maynard (1993) explicate several ways in which feminist scholars can work to advocate, rather than appropriate, diversity. Their challenge to feminists in the 1990s is one which we see as a challenge needing to be applied to traditional PAR.

We wish to call the project we describe in the next section "feminist participatory action research." The research is designed to follow and assist project participants as they develop their careers and simultaneously raise their consciousness of and resistance to gendered oppression.

FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH: WORKING THE CONCEPT OF CAREER

In 1989, a group of colleagues at the University of Waikato initiated a course called "Women and Management." A group of committed students travelled that first exciting journey with us. The last topic covered in the course was 'career development and women'—a fitting topic for students about to graduate and make significant choices for their lives. Noting their reluctance to come to the end of the course and our reluctance to end our conversation with them, we suggested that a career research project be developed through which we could continue to work together.

Students from that year and the 4 following years of the course were invited to join the project. Over the 5 years, 100 graduates signed up. They were a group of people who had, by virtue of their course participation, seriously considered feminist issues as they related to topics such as the construction of gender, paid and unpaid work, management and leadership theory, and career development. Their reflections on their own careers, and the organisations and communities they are involved in are therefore informed by the feminist consciousness many had developed and wanted to con-

tinue to develop. After 8 years, about 70 active participants remain. Their involvement varies over time, depending on their life situations.

Over the years, through regular communication with participants, our aims for the research have evolved. We seek to

1. participate in the development of participants' careers;
2. expand our understanding of career development processes and issues for women;
3. use career development as a lens through which we might enhance our understanding of gender and sexism in New Zealand organisations and women's lives;
4. develop and encourage some feminist leaders for the future.

In our classroom discussions in the course from which the project began, we had encouraged our then students to use the term "career" to include paid and unpaid, public and private, employment and non-employment aspects of our lives. Although we might promote this broader definition, and certainly the more recent career theory also does (Humphries & Gatenby, 1999, 1996b), we need to retain a critical view of the assumptions underlying it. We note particularly the promotion of career as the vehicle for individual empowerment when structural changes in employment and income mean such opportunities are not available to all people equally. As we each celebrate our individuality and diversity through our careers, we are also increasingly placed in competition with one another for the decreasing stable, well paid jobs available in globalising economies.

In the participants' emerging definitions of career, specifically asked for in the research questionnaire, we see our own uncertainties about its use echoed. Struggles to maintain such a broad definition or to shape one consistent with participants' personal experiences have been one of the effective consciousness-raising aspects of the project. Their definitions of career demonstrate their struggle to fit what they know of their own lives with what they think career means. The struggle shows in their attempts to include paid and unpaid aspects of their lives, to acknowledge their relationships and the communities which affect their lives, to fit goals which are not only about traditional corporate success, and to acknowledge the gendering of their careers and lives

(Humphries & Gatenby, 1998). At times we have asked ourselves whether the term "career", with all its baggage, can be used safely. We persist in its use because it is a term with common currency and we believe that illuminating that currency and being aware of the ways in which it is and will be co-opted by others, even as we try to make it expressive of, and useful to women's experiences, is an important task.

THE CHALLENGES AND ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF AN EMANCIPATORY METHOD

We aim to involve research participants in taking some specific actions to develop their careers, through their participation as co-researchers in the project. We work with them to develop and extend their understandings of their own careers and to change the social structures in which their lives are embedded. We have been concerned that the research project does not merely add to the privilege of an already relatively privileged group of women. Therefore, we have continually provoked feminist discussion through the project so that participants consider how the structures they are part of impact and impinge on the lives of different groups of women. As some of the women take on increasingly powerful organisational roles, we continue our discussion with them about what it might mean to be a feminist leader and whether their institutional achievements are consistent with their feminist ideals of improving the circumstances of all women's lives.

Lather (1991) discusses the need for "an emancipatory approach to research" which recognises that no research is value-free, that societies are not just, and that postpositivism requires that we re-think our epistemological understandings of human life. Such research should be "explicitly committed to critiquing the status quo and building a more just society" (Lather, 1991, pp. 50–51). In this sense research becomes praxis. Mies (1991) call for an "emancipatory praxis process" involves a "re-unification of life and thought, action and knowledge, change and research" (p. 68). The project described here is explicitly a form of feminist praxis, aimed at making liberatory changes. Our intervention in the lives of participants, and aspiration to encourage some

participants to aspire to feminist leadership, has raised for us a number of ethical and pragmatic challenges in the practicalities of the research method, the exploration of relationships within the project, and the working out of our joint understandings.

ELABORATING THE METHOD: QUESTIONNAIRES, CORRESPONDENCE, PHOTOGRAPHS, E-MAIL, TELEPHONE CALLS . . .

For the first 8 years of the project, the base of the "data-gathering" has been a questionnaire sent approximately every 6 months to all participants. The questionnaire asks a broad range of open-ended questions, with lots of space allowed for the participants to express their ideas and feelings. In various ways, the purpose and content of the questionnaire have been extended. Participants have also found other ways to communicate with us and to reflect on their careers.

The questionnaire is not designed to measure supposedly 'given' factors over time. Often recognising the changing nature of what we need to ask as participants' lives progress is significant. Although we, the researchers, initially drafted the questionnaire, the participants have had opportunity at several points to revise it. Indeed they have made significant changes to it. For example, women who met at a project-related workshop requested more space and opportunity to write about the significant relationships in their lives. They wanted to be able to write about, to make sense of, family issues and their connection with career issues. The women also chose at one point to remove questions about paid work and income from the first page of the questionnaire, disliking the unintended importance that positioning signified for them. Our interpretation of this was that some of the women were shaken in their initial confidence. They had believed that when they left university they would get wonderful jobs in management. Now some were unemployed or employed as secretaries. For others, the balancing of personal relationships or community commitments with employment were more significant career issues than paid employment per se. Changing the questionnaire was one of the ways they were validating their experiences. The other participants showed their under-

standing by promoting the change in the questionnaire too.

The intention of the questionnaire, however, is not merely to gather information but also to prompt self-reflection about their aspirations, relationships and experiences of institutions. Often participants write things such as, "I never thought of that before", or "I didn't know I felt so strongly about this", or "this was just what I needed to help me decide what to do". Here is a testimony from one participant who had written to describe her participation in the project, in support of a funding application. While intentionally supportive in this exercise, her writing reflects the enthusiasm she has shown elsewhere, and highlights her choice of what is beneficial about her participation in the project.

> The questionnaires may also be a data gathering technique—but they keep me on track with my thinking. They arrive in the mail in time for me to reflect on the last six months. They force me to sit still and acknowledge for myself what I have achieved and remind me of the directions I choose for myself. To sit and review them every two years . . . is magic—it is amazing to see the struggles, growth and development!

There has been a feminist challenge to the use of questionnaires in feminist research because of the apparent objectivity of any data gathered in questionnaires and of those reading the responses. The challenge appears somewhat misleading. Even the most seemingly abstract and impersonal questionnaires seeking statistical or numerical information may have an 'affective' impact. In the early 1970s, for example, one of us participated in a project attempting to measure the relative domestic contribution made by husbands and wives. While it only meant reporting total hours of involvement, this calculation still stands out as a consciousness-raising experience. Rothman courageously describes a heartbreaking response to a question about fetal movement and age of the baby now, from a mother who had chosen to abort after a diagnosis of Down's syndrome: "in shaky pencil, 'dead'. . . . and I had sent this idiotic, heartless set of questions . . ." (Rothman, as cited in Letherby & Zdrodowski, 1995, p. 584). We, too, notice that the questionnaires we send evoke emotion in our participants, sometimes very painful things, and that they, of course, involve us emotionally as well. One woman wrote about her father's death from cancer not long after the death of the father of one of us, also from cancer. Suicide of siblings, broken relationships and many other traumas draw some participants and researchers together.

Some participants have also elaborated this somewhat auto/biographical portion of the research of their own accord in several ways, often including more opportunities to write. Richardson (1994) asks that we consider writing as a "method of inquiry" because of its power to encourage self-reflection and sense-making. Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) comment on the therapeutic value of writing in our lives. Our participants sometimes note this themselves and they often find ways to write at length. We also wonder too though about the relationship of therapeutic writing to action which will bring about change. Does it diminish or encourage action? Perhaps both, depending on the context?

One participant chose to write at length for her project file about her experience of attempting suicide in her early university years and her ongoing struggle with an eating disorder. Her initiative to write and record these aspects of her life came after she had been asked to be the guest speaker at an annual prize-giving ceremony at her old high school. She had been asked to speak as a successful corporate woman. She chose to speak about more than the glossy success of her career and to tell the young women present about the more difficult aspects of her life and the ways in which they were as much part of her career as the corporate successes. She then sent us a copy of her speech and some extra notes to be kept in her project file.

At particular points in their lives, participants send us long letters, both with the questionnaires and separately. Of course, we must write back. We also write or contact participants when they describe in questionnaires or in some other way either particularly joyful or painful events in their lives. This is the nature of the reciprocity described by Lather (1991) as essential in emancipatory research. So we gradually develop, without knowing we would do this, a method which includes research by correspondence. Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) express their surprise that research by

correspondence is not used more often by feminist researchers. This method developed spontaneously between us, and has gradually taken a more central role. Each participant's file has begun to develop to specifically suit the uniqueness of her life, more than a questionnaire alone or perhaps even an unstructured interview could.

Some participants have also made e-mail contact and suggested an e-mail group. At times we receive long telephone calls or visits from participants struggling in some way. We also receive photos with letters and questionnaires, perhaps of a wedding or of a mother with a new baby. Adding photographs to the data we receive has led us to think about the nature of photography in making meaning in people's lives. It is significant that participants choose to send certain photos and not others. It is also important that we think about the meanings we attach to those photographs as viewers. Schwartz (1989) writes of photographs as "inherently ambiguous, their specifiable meanings emergent in the viewing process" (p. 122). We choose to make certain meanings from the photographs sent to us, as do the participants when they later reflect on their own files of information. The photographs they send reflect the joys they wish us to see, a choice we set beside all the other things, often not so joyful, they write and talk about with us. Often, because of the variety of media participants have available as part of the research conversation, we witness the choices they make in different places and at different times to speak out about some things or to be silent about them. No doubt there are silences we know nothing of too.

In particular, the e-mails, letters, telephone calls and visits speak to us of the private things going on in the women's lives. For example, one women writes a long, deeply moving letter about her experience of abortion, the difficulties within her marriage, the pain and grief she feels. As the very private letter unfolds we see the sense she is making of her pain. We also see, in her questionnaire, responses reflecting her pain. We see, and she sees, the way the otherwise unspeakable things in her life have guided many of her career decisions and dreams. And our view is enriched and elaborated through occasional visits to her home, her reaching out to us in times of our own personal turmoil and the sharing with us of a sequence of e-mail exchanges between her and another participant on the nature of trauma, grief and healing, hope and aspiration.

From another participant we receive in the same envelope a questionnaire showing her career decision-making, and a letter describing the damaging effects of several years of infertility, her career success in relation to her husband's, and the sexism she has encountered in their church. She writes of marriage difficulties she never dreamed she would face, which have profoundly shaken her. Had we received no accompanying letter, and had we not had several other opportunities to talk with her, we would have read her questionnaire very differently.

For each participant, a file is built up of all the things they send us or write as part of the project. Letherby and Zdrodwski (1995) describe data gathered by correspondence as akin to diaries written as part of research and note the greater confidentiality afforded through personal correspondence. The files of participants become something like diaries presented in a variety of ways. At the project workshops described later, participants have the opportunity to review their own files and to add notes about their developing interpretations of their lives as they look back and forward. This retrospective sense-making is in part a capturing of time in longitudinal research so that the research is both "contextual and processual in character" (Pettigrew, 1989, p. 28). In both the present and retrospectively the participants make sense of their careers and the gendering of their lives.

Sometimes we struggle with the concept of participation. Initially 100 people joined the project. Now the number is about 70 active files, although we are never sure of the exact number because the level of participation varies so much according to the wishes of the participants. Sometimes a woman seems totally "lost" to us through several address changes, perhaps a name change, and then suddenly she will contact us, often contributing a long catch-up for her file. At times we have contacted participants who have not been involved for some time, though we often do so with a sense of unease, an unease also expressed by Reay (1995), who raises questions about apparently unproblematic access to other women and pursuing reluctant participants. In her thought-provoking analysis of the power differentials and her own subjectivity in her research with

mothers, Reay comes to the conclusion that "even for feminists, research is ultimately about the researcher's agenda, rather than that of the subjects" (p. 212).

Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) discuss the concern that writers may not have realised the emotion involved in participating and that somehow researchers gain from the expression of pain in the lives of others. They point out, however, that participants choose to participate and that they choose the level of participation. Often we find participation depends on what is going on emotionally for the women involved and how they see the research integrating with their lives at particular times. Participation also varies a great deal between individual women, with some involved in all aspects of the research, while others limit their involvement. Our understanding of that is that the amount of participation must be left to each individual, that this is one way in which participants maintain their own power. Cotteril (1992, as cited in Letherby & Zdrodowski, 1995, p. 1995) points out that women who choose to be involved make a commitment to research, which even though varying between individuals, is always valid.

In taking a flexible and open approach to what goes with questionnaires and in our responding to them, and in taking a flexible approach to participation, the methodology works in a feminist way, acknowledging the role of the research in the women's lives and the emotion they invest in the research. The letters, photographs, telephone calls, and e-mail are examples of ways in which participants choose to elaborate the method so that it fits what they want to discuss. Using a variety of methods happens in several ways and for several reasons. Reinharz (1992) provides a useful explanation:

> Feminist descriptions of multimethod research express the commitment to thoroughness, the desire to be open-ended, and to take risks. Multiple methods enable feminist researchers to link past and present, "data-gathering' and action, and individual behaviour with social frameworks. In addition, feminist researchers use multiple methods because of changes that occur to them and others in a project of long duration. Sometimes multiple methods reflect the desire to be responsive to people studied. By combin-

ing methods, feminist researchers are particularly able to illuminate previously unexamined or misunderstood experiences. Multiple methods increase the likelihood of obtaining scientific credibility and research utility. (p. 197)

Choosing a methodology consistent with feminist commitments (Fine, 1993; Gatenby & Humphries, 1996) has in this project meant developing a range of methods which allow a variety of voices to be heard and a variety of issues to be worked with.

ELABORATING THE METHOD: SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE

Traditional research methods, perhaps a questionnaire alone, or a questionnaire and interview, would not have demonstrated so powerfully, if at all, the way in which some experiences are so profoundly part of women's careers. Often these are the experiences considered to be deeply personal. This is particularly so in regard to the things women, and researchers, are not supposed to talk about in the same sentences as topics such as 'management', 'leadership', or even 'career': "the continuing pervasiveness of male as norm makes some territories of experience dangerous to explore" (Marshall, 1995, p. 3). It is dangerous to explore issues of health, childbearing, grief, sexuality, community and family commitments for women in relation to their careers.

We are excruciatingly aware of the danger of speaking these unspeakable things. We know the way in which 'women's issues', those which are construed as compellingly 'feminine', can be used as further reason to treat women with scorn. Abortion, infertility, bulimia and pregnancy are all potentially 'hysterical' in management, potentially requiring 'hysterectomy' by not employing women at all. However, their remaining unspoken also does not ensure the safe passage of women. Some of the issues which tend to remain unspeakable in organisational life, such as mental illness and grief, though always gendered in their application, more clearly affect both women and men in their careers. They, too, we believe, need to be acknowledged, despite the dangers of doing so. It is clear from the experiences participants describe that these experiences have serious implications for the very definition of career,

their personal and private aspirations and opportunities.

RELATIONSHIPS AND SUBJECTIVITIES: WORKSHOPS, NETWORKS AND FRIENDSHIPS

In responding to participants and the involvement they seek in our lives, for example writing to us at times of our own personal crises, sending flowers, staying in our homes, getting to know our families, we are forced to think through our own subjectivities as part of the research. Forming relationships, often friendships, is part and parcel of the research. Sharing our own career happenings and reflections is part of the mutuality developing in the research. In reflecting on the 8 years of the project so far, our involvement has also depended on other events in our lives. Times of death and grief have both removed us practically from the project from time and time and also opened us up emotionally to some participants and their friendship.

Sometimes a friendship can be overwhelming, not unwelcome, but perhaps too needy of us in our own over-full lives. Do we have the time and energy for some conversations? Do we have the knowledge and expertise for some? How do we weigh the risks for ourselves and participants of opening up some conversations? Sometimes we struggle with setting limits in our sharing. We experience the negative feelings which Fonow and Cook (1991) recommend also be examined self-reflexively for what they reveal. We find a careful path to tread in both being supportive of a woman in the project and maintaining our own spaces. Having two researchers involved often provides a safety net, so that we each step in where the other cannot. The relationships between researchers and participants also change over time as we move further away from the original classroom relationships and as some of the women become more powerful in their organisations.

Relationships also develop among research participants. As well as friendships formed among the original students who took the course, the project has drawn women together in a number of ways. Every second year a career workshop is offered which participants can choose to attend over a weekend at the University campus. Usually about 25 attend. It is an opportunity to do some specific career exercises, sometimes with a career counsellor or consultant, to revise the research process, to hear about and contribute to the development of themes in the research, to review the personal files, to discuss feminist issues, and to meet and talk with other participants.

The agenda for each workshop is negotiated with participants. At the most recent workshop, two of the women offered to present something to the rest of the group. One arranged, unbeknown to the group, to arrive dressed in her police uniform (a stunning entry at the time) to talk about her experiences of sexism in the police force. The other made us all laugh while teaching us about gender and humour. The participants have found considerable value in presenting role plays and skits of incidents in their workplaces. The role plays, negotiated agenda and presentations by participants are the kind of events not normally thought of as research events, but which in this kind of project contribute significant understanding for all of us about the workings of gender, and which remain true to the participants' ways of communicating (Reason, 1994). Workshops are characterised by lots of talk, with structured quiet times for personal reflection. In writing about what they found useful about the workshops, participants almost all reflect on the value of sharing their experiences with others. The negotiating of meaning at the workshops works in further developing reciprocity (Lather, 1991).

At the first workshop participants asked that a project network be formed. A group from one city also agreed to form their own network, and for 5 years met monthly to talk about their career issues. On the occasions we were invited to join their gatherings, it was clear that they offered powerful support and friendship to each other (Gatenby & Humphries, 1999; Humphries & Gatenby, 1996a). They have also drawn other women who are not part of the research project into their feminist circle. In two other cities, networks also formed. When participants have been overseas they have been able to contact other project participants.

Here is an extract from a letter by one of the participants, in support of a funding application, but also outlining the value of the workshops and networks, and illustrating the role of relationships in the project:

To express how Bev and Maria's project has impacted me, I will begin by discussing 'Women Unlimited'! I was a founder member of 'Women Unlimited', a network of female graduates living in Auckland who meet once a month in the flat of one of the members. Bev and Maria encouraged the birth of 'Women Unlimited' by helping us get started/organised at the second project workshop in Hamilton. Then it was up to us—I am really proud that we took the network on to, at last count, four years of meetings. The length of time we have kept meeting is testimony to the success/need for such a network. Initially, we decided to take minutes and to have a topic (for which a member was responsible) for each meeting, also rotating the Chair and Secretary roles to help each of us develop confidence to assist us when back in the paid work place. We also began with a small fee (because every organisation we had ever known charged a fee) which we never used as a network so when Bev lost her baby girl we used our pool of fee money to send flowers in recognition and support of the loss Bev was suffering. From that point on, the meeting hostess provided drinks and nibbles and we rotated meeting location such that this was not a burden for anyone. Over time, our meetings have become informal (no minutes), have included several graduate women not involved in the study and have established strong friendships. It is a safe place to connect with women of similar age and aspiration, without the 'homework' demands or formality of most organisations. It is a place we can gain a sense of relativity, have a good cry if we need to, share experiences, encourage each other that we were not alone and, perhaps most importantly (and unusually for NZ culture), openly acknowledge, congratulate and celebrate each others' successes and achievements! I could write a book on what I learned at these meetings.

I mentioned Bev's loss because it provides, for me, the first sign of our experience as a group, that our involvement in the research was to be a holistic one. We were never, for long, going to be able to consider or speak of our thoughts, experiences and achievements at a superficial level. Our paid career and personal development has been so linked with our 'private life' experiences. For exam-

ple, grief, sickness, marriage and children have all impacted our paid careers. As such, we have been able to support each other and learn from each other by sharing our experiences as Bev and Maria have provided a safe sharing environment at the workshops. Specifically, the workshops have enabled me to consider what it is to be white and young in a male dominated business sector. But they have also enabled me to consider the additional issues facing my fellow Maori women graduates. Until the workshops I had never realised that I was not the only one struggling with personal grief and illness. I had never really believed in stress- related illness and was stunned at the second of our workshops when five (under 30 yrs) of our group of 25 openly discussed the physical illnesses created while trying to keep up with the demands of paid work. I had not really considered what it might be like to be a young mother trying to keep up with 'the boys' and nurture a young life while also trying to maintain a sense of self. I had never been exposed to counselling techniques.

The workshops might have been a way of gathering 'data' for Bev and Maria—but in return we were exposed to career development theory/activities and most importantly we were exposed to each other. Without these workshops I would not have been exposed to techniques I have been able to transfer into my work activities (for example, ice-breaker techniques), I would never have been able to develop the confidence to do things with my life that I have been able to do and I would never have developed relationships with people that I could lean on in times of need and equally support in times of their need!

We do not imagine for a moment that everyone feels so positively about their involvement in the project, nor that it is so significant for all participants at all times. Nevertheless, this participant and several others have written passionate pieces expressing the significance of their participation in the project in several aspects of their lives.

The workshops and the networks are the community meetings central to PAR, described by Reason (1994). They have shown us the significance of building communities and of women having the opportunity to identify

this kind of community as a way of beginning to change the other communities they take part in. When we describe the project to other groups of women they too express their longing to be part of such a community.

At that first workshop participants also developed a project logo and suggested a project newsletter including information about their activities, suggested reading and so on. They specifically asked for more feminist reading so we often attach challenging or fun material. Sometimes that can be tricky. On one occasion we considered including a particularly illuminating feminist article critiquing marriage and wifeliness as a social institution at the heart of patriarchy. On reflection we did not send it since several women in the project were forming long term relationships with men, and for some that included marriage. They were expressing their happiness and the love they felt. Would it have felt like we were 'getting at them', 'pouring cold water on their joys'? It may have. On the other hand, we note that some are expressing discomfort at the way in which relationships with men disempower them. By not sending the article do we add to their disempowerment? Our decision was to make space in another way for this kind of discussion among those wishing to be involved. We have reflected often on our decision not to send that article.

We are aware that what we send out to participants is always political. We cannot know how what we send will be interpreted. We are reminded of the "complicity" Fine (1994) describes in enacting research. Maguire (1987) notes the problems she encountered, of juggling the roles of researcher, educator and organiser. She also comments on the tension in participatory research between "facilitation" and "subtle preaching", because of the underlying aim for both social change and self-determination. We sense the tension in the possibilities for various roles we may undertake, as observers, supporters, listeners, advisors and so forth.

Decisions about what issues to raise with participants and how to raise them or lead discussion are often difficult. We are conscious that participants vary in the level that they are resourced or supported to carry such a discussion into their lives. Our own participation and disclosures vary, not only according to the practical realities of our lives, but also according to the emotional realities of living with feminist ideals in a patriarchal world. We are mindful of our personal experiences; the times we decide not to open discussion of some issues in our own relationships, or to compromise our insights and not challenge unsatisfactory situations in favour of peaceful homes and tolerable lives. It is painful at times to see some of the things occurring in the lives of the project women, things which we too have experienced. As Reinharz (1994, p. 47) points out "Anyone who reads biographies of women knows that to a large extent they are painful to read." Sometimes participants raise things we find unsettling or even threatening, things we have experienced in our own lives, and may have chosen to ignore. At times we are not willing to open up those conversations. And if we are not willing, then what is it like for participants sometimes as they reflect on their significant relationships in the light of the consciousness-raising in the project?

In Liebow's (1989) writing about his experiences of participant observation in a community of black men, he comments "it seems as if the degree to which one becomes a participant is as much a matter of perceiving oneself as a participant as it is of being accepted as a participant by others" (p. 44). We notice that we withdraw our emotional participation at times, distancing ourselves, while at others we are clearly participants ourselves experiencing many of the things the other women are and seeking opportunity to write and talk about them. Through the project we actually have opportunity to change our own communities too. So at workshops we share our personal stories also. We have begun keeping our own files of the e-mail conversations between the two of us, written as colleagues and friends, and reflecting the professional and personal trials and tribulations of living and working in our communities. That includes the e-mails about the joys and stresses of the distribution of housework and emotional challenges that come from our lives with our partners and children. Kirkwood (1993) describes her emotional responses to research with abused women as both "confusing and painful" and "integral to forming an analysis of the interview material and to my understanding and use of a feminist approach to researching women" (p. 18). Although at times we might choose to withdraw, in order that we may carry

on, we are always clear that our emotions are invested in this research and in the women involved, and that some of the moments of illumination happen precisely because of that investment.

Sometimes we are unsure of just when and how to probe tentative observations in questionnaires or letters that worry us. If we are concerned about suicidal comments what do we say and do? If we are concerned that a participant may be anorexic, what do we say or do? How do we offer support to a woman feeling the pain of abortion and possibly separation when making contact may raise suspicion in her partner that we are interfering and may be damaging to her marriage? Fonow and Cook (1991) comment on the ethical dilemmas and risks in intervening in the personal lives of women. Our decisions are usually intuitive, often made after lengthy discussion between us. We have to trust that the respondents will respond assertively themselves, if our involvement is not what they want.

We feel the weight of responsibility of the sharing of some secrets with us and the intervention our research provides. Here is an autobiographical description by one participant of the way the research as a conversation has affected the way in which she makes sense of and enacts her career.

How has the research affected me?

When I left university I was confident of managing a successful career. I had come across terms such as 'glass ceiling' and 'pay inequity' and felt prepared to do battle with these problems. I had not expected that a significant hurdle to my own career progress and aspirations would be the career advancement of my partner, that I would have to make a trade-off between marital happiness and personal ambition. Some days I feel I am married more to the flourishing management career than to my husband. During my unhappy periods of unemployment in a distant country, the project leaders, seeking to fully understand my situation, questioned whether I might come to consider my supportive role simply as a phase of unpaid employment. They questioned what this might mean in terms of my personal satisfaction and aspirations. Could I envisage turning skills employed at home and in the community to my

advantage on return to paid work? Could I consider outcomes in terms of relational gains? These questions prompted a flurry of study and reflection on the corporate wife phenomenon (Kanter, 1977) carried out in conjunction with the project leaders and with input from several of my co-participants. Taking the notion still further, I have drawn on my own five year experience as the basis of a novel in which I explore the raison d'être and impotence of a corporate wife as central themes. The analysis and feedback has proved refreshing and insightful. As a result, I am learning to accept this period as one aspect of a varied career, rather than a time of failure and dormancy. I believe the 'corporate wife' issue is woefully untouched in the literature; little or no research has been undertaken in a New Zealand context.

Although we might have concerns about our support of this participant making us complicit in the patriarchal system of employment in which her work is rendered invisible and unacknowledged, we are excited by the drawing together of her personal and academic knowledge in her novel.

INTERPRETATION AND POWER

In writing the project newsletter, we have been confronted with issues surrounding the reduction of the power differences between researcher and researched at the heart of feminist participatory research. Acker, Barry, and Esseveld (1991) conclude that it is not possible to completely eradicate the contradictions in the relationship between researchers and researched. Although the newsletter was conceived as a joint document which all would contribute to, the reality has been the contributions from others have been rare. We know that we continue to hold much of the power because we have the time and the funding to direct the research (not that either time or funding are easy to come by for us either). We have the opportunity through our other work to read and think about feminist issues. The exercise of that kind of power seems to us a legitimate one. It is our power to interpret the lives of the women involved, which needs much more careful thought. One way we attempt to make our interpretations trustworthy has been to establish the credibility of our

analysis by sending out what we write to participants, inviting their comment and by discussing whenever possible what we are noticing with them. Even so, many want to place us in the role of expert, and, of course, our initial relationship with them has been as teachers and students. Combine that with the fact that they do not see the files of other participants and we realise that we are in a powerful position to interpret as we see fit. Entering academic and public debate about the lives of women has been another way of thinking about trustworthiness, as has been involving peers from time to time.

In the use of participants' stories, we find challenge in selecting which stories to use for publication in articles and teaching. Some information would be identifiable at least by other research participants, particularly where there are close friends within the group. Their intimacy with each other varies within the group as does comfort with their levels of self-disclosure. Letherby and Zdrodowski (1995) note that researchers do hold a balance of power because they choose what to do with data, how to make it public, and what to make of it. There are some ways of choosing to keep check on that power: discussing with participants what is made public; sending out drafts of papers, working with participants to write up individual stories as cases; providing forums, such as the workshops, for joint sense-making of the things they share. Often, though, there are no comments on the drafts we send out, or participants listen to us as 'experts' at sense-making (after all, they see us as the academics). There are some participants who will engage us, challenge the trustworthiness of our interpretations, and we continue to work at making more opportunity for that kind of challenge.

We are mindful of Lather's (1991) warning against "imposition and reification on the part of the researcher" in praxis-oriented research: "In the name of emancipation, researchers impose meanings on situations rather than constructing meaning through negotiation with research participants" (p. 59). One of the significant difficulties arises when we work with women who do not feel the need for emancipation, who do not feel the need of feminist understandings. Acker et al. (1991) comment on their experiences and the contradictions raised for them in trying to do liberatory re-

search and having to reflect on the experiences of both women experiencing consciousness-raising and women not experiencing any such thing. The danger is in reflecting only the former, because as feminist researchers, liberation is our aim. But in what way do we combine both feminist understandings, and the lived experience in all its variety, of the women participating in the research?

We also have some challenges which we continue to think through in relation to the participation of the Maori women in the project. Maori have had to face the ravages of colonisation over the last century and a half, largely by British immigrants. Their efforts to seek self-determination are ongoing. As indigenous women of Aotearoa/New Zealand, and in a context of ongoing assimilist organisational policies and practices, Maori women are in a unique position of resistance or compliance, not only with patriarchy, but with non-Maori society. We hope to facilitate the gathering of a Maori women's caucus through the project. We note the way in which some of the Maori women have explicitly expressed their pleasure at using their positions to work more closely with iwi/tribal groups and their desire to work with the Pakeha women in the project and other people in their organisations to address issues of racism. At this point, we have opened up the research to invite a Maori colleague to join the research team and work both with all the participants in general, and the group of Maori women specifically.

As white, middle-class academics, we also need to consider the power of our research to hide differences in women's experiences. Fine (1994) challenges us to think about our participation with the Maori women in the project when she writes:

> Early in the century, 'twas noble to write of the other for purposes of creating what was considered knowledge. Perhaps it still is. But now much qualitative research is undertaken for what may be an even more terrifying aim—to 'help' them. In both contexts the effect may be othering: muted voices; 'structure' imported to local 'chaos'; others represented as extracted from their scenes of exploitation, social relationships, and meaningful communities. (p. 79)

It is our position as white middle-class educated women which gives us the power both to

abuse the position of trust we are in and to make space for other voices—one of the "profound contradictions that face researchers who step out" described by Fine (1994, p. 80)—in engaging with Maori women about their struggles to overcome oppression. The project could silence their voices; it could allow Pakeha women involved to talk over the top; it could allow only certain things to be said. We are certain it does all of these things at times. Occasionally our work with the Pakeha women in the group does a little better: from one participant, "They have also enabled me to consider the additional issues facing my fellow Maori women graduates". In our attempts to make space in which Maori women may determine their own directions for liberation we are always aware that we make space for their potential action and dialogue, which space they choose to take up or not. We cannot do their actions, nor talk their dialogue. We are searching, tentatively and often nervously, for the "moments of social justice" which Fine (1994) sees as possible in research and writing which works consciously against "othering".

In interpreting the lives and experiences of the participants, most of whom are heterosexual, we might also hide the experiences of lesbian women. One woman in the project has openly identified as lesbian throughout both the original course and the project. Occasionally, we have been uncomfortable with homophobic remarks from other participants. At one workshop, we involved two facilitators who were lesbian women with interests in women's careers, partly as a strategy to provide a safe environment—an environment in which the participant chose to challenge the homophobic comments. When we know of only one lesbian woman in the project, it is difficult to weave in and discuss the differences and similarities of her experiences to those of the other women whose experiences appear overwhelmingly heterosexual. We need to find ways to challenge the silencing we unwittingly allow.

Funding is always a difficulty. When we examine relative need, the investment of money and time in a group of women who are, by any measure, comparatively well off and successful, may appear an indulgence. Yet when we are invited to talk to other groups of women about the project, they urge us to develop the project to include more women. They indicate that they themselves would like to participate.

They and we see the potential of the project as a major affirmative action for women in our country. We also believe that working with groups of women who have feminist commitments alongside their privilege and potential institutional power may be one way social change will occur.

Among the more controversial themes of the research is the discussion of ourselves, researchers and participants, Maori and non-Maori, as being appropriately socialised women most likely to be assimilated as uncritical functionaries into the global economy predicted ultimately to alienate or peripheralise many women (Chomsky, 1994). Calas and Smircich (1993) warn that while statistics may indicate increasing numbers of women holding senior managerial positions, a closer inspection of the roles suggest that many of these are service, wifely roles to the male power-brokers who have moved on to the international arena. This is a difficult discussion to have with women, many of whom are celebrating their achievement of what feel like senior management positions their mothers would be unlikely to have had available to them. They do not see themselves as unwittingly making life worse for women in general, and indeed who among us does? But in the discussion of this critique we hope to find the dimension that enables us as "successful" women to see the role we play in an unjust system.

The women do find ways to support other women around them. One participant, for example, has ongoing contact with teenage girls at her old secondary school and provides considerable feminist leadership for them. This has included arranging 2-day visits to Auckland for groups of girls interested in corporate careers to visit network participants' organisations and meet with the network group. Others have involved themselves in equal employment opportunity initiatives in their workplaces. Many deliberately seek to support other women as this participant describes: "I am motivated in ways which might encourage the career advancement of other women." The same participant also acknowledges her role in shaping her daughter's life:

I have found myself watching Babar videos and afterwards discussing fairer alternative endings with my two year old daughter. We have questioned why the surprises in Mac-

Donald's Happy Meals are different for boys and girls. Recently the socialising effect of my being at home while my husband goes out to work became clear when my daughter laughed hysterically at the idea of Mummy going out to work. I now recognise that her future career expectations will be influenced by my own success, just as my mother's achievements inspire me.

However, if there are two classes of New Zealand women being established, as leading New Zealand feminist Sandra Coney (1997) suggests, then our research may be encouraging the division between those classes through the support of an already privileged group:

The pattern that has emerged in the last decade is of two distinct groups of women in New Zealand: a small group that is prospering and a large group of poor or low income women that is struggling. The free market has widened the differential between women, fuelling inequality within the female labour force. . . . The fact that these women have created their own wealth increases their distance from poorer women. . . .Many low-paid women and beneficiaries are providing cheap services that enable well-to-do women to follow careers. . . . These career women are benefiting from the economic disadvantage of other women. It is hardly surprising that they are not coming forward as strong advocates for their poorer sisters. (p. 77)

We also observe that a number of well-to-do or alternatively incomed women are adding to the flood of 'consultants' on the labour market, whose short-term contract employment often undercuts reasonably paid longer-term work required by many women to avoid poverty.

Coney (1997) acknowledges that there is, of course, still gendered oppression of "well-to-do' women:

There have been costs for the women who have prospered in the past decade. In New Zealand, as elsewhere in the Western world, women managers and professional women complain of the double burden of juggling a home and paid employment. One effect of economic restructuring is that skilled professional workers are working longer hours. (Conversely, unskilled and semi-skilled work-

ers are often working shorter hours than they want and need.)

Many professional women report that they are too busy and too tired to find time for themselves. Torn between a personal desire to succeed in their careers—bolstered by a social climate that says they should want to do so—and the emotional needs of their families and personal relationships, women are experiencing new variations on the old female tormentor, guilt. (p. 75)

Our research confirms these dimensions of gendered oppression. It may also help widen the gap between different groups of women. We are concerned about bringing this gap to the attention of the participants. Workshop discussions about the emerging restructuring of employment into core and periphery workforces (Humphries & Grice, 1995) has been one way of opening the discussion. Encouraging participants to read authors such as Sandra Coney is another. Not all participants are in the well-to-do class either, and finding spaces for their stories to emerge is also important. Finding ways to discuss our role and the role of privileged women in the lives of other less privileged women is much more difficult.

DISSEMINATING KNOWLEDGE

Despite convincing reasons for using a variety of methods, we have felt the concern of some of our mainstream colleagues viewing the research and what they see as the 'looseness' and 'unscientific' nature of our methodology and findings. In her essay illuminating possible meeting points and intersections between organisational theory and feminist theorising, Berman Brown (1995) notes the male bias of organisational theory and research. She challenges academics in organisational studies:

. . . to pay genuine attention, rather than lip service, not only to the words used to describe such issues as the relationship between gender and power, of maleness and management, and of the construction of sexuality within organisations, but also to their reality. . . . It is possible that if these issues were securely on the research agenda, this would cause a blurring of the boundaries between the subjects and objects of research, the re-

search method chosen, and the problems of a personal, political and ethical nature that such research would entail. (p. 202).

Engaging in research on careers from a feminist standpoint inevitably challenges the construction of existing knowledge about careers. One challenge from this project is for career theorists to fully engage with the role of emotion in career development. Gurney (1997) makes the following point in regard to making sense of 'home' in people's lives: "the epistemological freedom accrued from treating the emotional as equally significant as the economic is massive . . ." (p. 383). We make the same point in regard to making sense of 'career'. Using feminist theory and methodology opens up powerful possibilities for a deeper, richer and more valid understanding of the notion of career.

Some academics suggest the research is little more than a 'support group for women', albeit an apparently successful one. Such comments completely undervalue the significance of the relationships between women within the project and the methodology in the sense they, and we, make of the things they tell us about. This is just as true for traditional research methods, though less often acknowledged. The criticism reflects an unwillingness of some empiricists to enter philosophical debate with researchers from a number of alternative positions. We make no pretense of neutrality, of unemotional involvement. Our concern is to be reflexive and explicit about our subjectivities because of their role in the knowledge we construct. Our research also explicitly aims to contribute to social change for women. Where that is the case, the successful 'support group' reflects success and validity in terms of the particular methodology we have chosen.

Finding appropriate and provocative ways to disseminate the research is also a challenge. Marshall (1995) notes the significance of exploring new writing forms: "Form is analogic, it carries 'presentational knowledge' (Heron, 1992) from which we shape our conceptual understandings. Creating appropriate form rather than conforming is therefore a vital act in sense-making" (Marshall, 1995, p. 7). We wonder if we might present one aspect of our findings as a fairy story telling of the dreamed-of lives of the women as aspired to in the questionnaires, though not yet achieved for any significant number. The happy ending would include lovely husband, lovely children, lovely home, part-time but highly paid and stimulating job: the life of 'balance' (to use the term the women most frequently use) they aspire to. We wonder too about a photographic study or an autobiographical collection about their lives both of which might reach a wider audience than academic journals. Still we conform also and write academic articles, though there are difficulties there too. As for ethnographic accounts, it is difficult to write in article length in a way that feels honest and does justice to the complex lives we observe. Always we are omitting far more than we can include.

We also share our knowledge as often as we can through oral presentations to the many groups who want to hear about the research. In distributing findings to a wider public audience too, we are often faced with questions asking us for the "truth", perhaps the "statistical truth" about women's careers, and we have had to develop everyday arguments that convey succinctly and persuasively the nature of our research, the nature of what we consider legitimate knowledge claims, and what we come to know.

LEAVING THE PROJECT?

At some time we will need to consider in some way what leaving the research field may mean. For the moment we have time in our lives and resources for the research. Although we hope we will be able to continue, that may not be the case. How could we honourably leave the project? How might we honourably involve other researchers who may take over from us? The files clearly belong to the individual women. But what of all that we have learnt? Mellor's (1988) conclusion after some years of research with a worker cooperative was that she "could not see how a longitudinal project could become anything other than the personal property of the researcher" (p. 80). Have we contributed what we have learnt to our communities as well as engaging the women as agents of social change? What might our instruments of accountability and evaluation look like? Cancian (1992) argues usefully for distinctive methods which empower women and do not claim objectivity, but which claim alternative scientific standards, such as their adequacy in promoting equality, the quality of

participation, the incorporation of social action, and the creation of opportunity for debate. These standards and those of the ongoing conversation among feminist scholars will provide guidelines for evaluation.

FINAL COMMENTS

In this article, we have exercised the reflexivity Fonow and Cook (1991) describe as the "tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically, and explore analytically the nature of the research process" (p. 2), in order to explore the methodological and ethical dilemmas which arise in developing a project using feminist PAR. This has included our thinking about our relationships with the women participating, our own subjectivities, the nature of coming to "know" things with them, the ways in which the method has grown, concerns about appropriately working with diversity, and the possibilities for liberation through praxis-oriented research. We have found many challenges in PAR as a methodology, but find those challenges sometimes answered, sometimes teased out, sometimes heightened when we consider the feminist assumptions at the base of our work. We are left with many questions along with our commitment to continue.

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