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NARRATIVE AS COMMUNICATION ACTIVISM:

RESEARCH RELATIONSHIPS IN SOCIAL JUSTICE PROJECTS

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*When they talk about CASA or the project, Deb and Elizabeth use the words "we, our, or us," not "them or they."*

*Deb and Elizabeth are part of CASA because they understand us. They get it.*

*Lots of people study domestic violence, but they were the first researchers interested in us, the workers. We felt validated because university researchers thought what we did was important, and they asked us to help them understand our work.*

*They didn't lecture us; they listened to us.*

These are some of the staff's observations about our participation in the University Community Initiative Project (UCI), a grant-funded research collaboration between Community Action Stops Abuse (CASA) and the University of South Florida's (USF) Communication and Sociology Departments. CASA is a community service organization located in St. Petersburg, Florida that advocates for victims and survivors of domestic violence by providing both emergency assistance and long-term support. USF is a large, metropolitan, state-supported university that seeks to connect with its surrounding community by forging partnerships designed to assist with social problems.

Like the mermaid songs that M. Gergen (1992) theorized—distinct, yet blended; unique, yet familiar—the voices of those involved in the UCI project also have merged "so that each, in its own special timbre, lends to the harmony of the whole" (p. 127). Utilizing narrative vignettes linked by observation and analysis, we demonstrate the use of narrative as communication activism, theorizing this work as an example of K. J. Gergen's (2000) idea of poetic activism. Poetic activism challenges us to develop creative methods of analysis, presentation, and dissemination of research results. Perhaps most importantly, poetic activism offers researchers the opportunity to approach the research relationship itself "poetically," so that the partnerships created within a research project also can serve as effective change agents. Therefore, the process, as well as the product, of a research project can generate social reform.

Activism means changing the way people think, understand, and act. It implies action or involvement on the part of all participants, including researchers, as a means of effectuating social change. There are several aspects of communication activism that comprise our project; they include the establishment of a CASA/USF internship program, participation in each other's development activities, and the production of a booklet of narratives used as a funding, lobbying, and recruiting tool. However, in this chapter, we focus on the most important and foundational element of this multilayered, activist project: developing a research relationship that shifts the paradigm away from one of expert academics providing assistance to a needy community toward one that privileges a collaborative, engaged relationship between university and community partners, changing the model from charity outreach to social justice engagement.

To explicate the relational characteristics of this communication activism, we first offer a brief overview of CASA and the UCI project and then provide our theoretical and methodological frameworks. We then present a narrative colloquium that explains and models

the engaged research relationship we struggle to enact. We conclude the chapter with lessons learned about the development and maintenance of such a research relationship. We briefly discuss many of our interventions within the UCI project, but we frame these interventions as being dependent on revisions to all participants' understanding of the research relationship.

Community Action Stops Abuse (CASA)

CASA is a member of the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV), a local, state, regional, and national coalition that supports "community-based, non-violent alternatives" for recently and previously battered women and their children. The NCADV believes that:

> Violence against women and children results from the use of force or threat to achieve and maintain control over others in intimate relationships, and from societal abuse of power and domination in the forms of sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, anti-Semitism, able-bodyism, ageism and other oppressions. NCADV recognizes that the abuses of power in society foster battering by perpetuating conditions which condone violence against women and children. Therefore, it is the mission of NCADV to work for major societal changes necessary to eliminate both personal and societal violence against all women and children. (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, n.d., ¶2)

Domestic violence transcends gender; victims can be homosexual or heterosexual men, as well as women, although CASA contends that this is primarily a women's issue. According to the Riley Center (n.d.), a domestic violence shelter managed by the St. Vincent de Paul Society in San Francisco, 95% of domestic violence victims are women. The U.S. Bureau of Justice (1993) found that females are victims of domestic violence four times as often as are males, and the American Medical Association estimated that over four million women per year are victims

of severe assaults by boyfriends and husbands (Glazer, 1993). These statistics are not surprising considering that, according to Women's Rural Advocacy Programs (n.d.), domestic violence is the number-one reason for women's emergency room visits each year; 25% of all reported crime is wife assault.

CASA's (2000) vision is a community without violence—to "make home a safe place." Founded in 1977, CASA actively partners with other community agencies to reach a variety of disenfranchised and disadvantaged groups whose members have been battered, including the deaf community, gay and lesbian couples, and the elderly. The organization consists of a shelter, a community outreach building that includes administrative offices and a thrift store, two transitional housing complexes, a legal advocacy office at the county courthouse, a youth community center, and various other satellite service providers, such as a visitation center and legal aid offices. CASA is staffed by over 50 full- and part-time employees and hundreds of volunteers who do everything from knit blankets to raise thousands of dollars annually.

The UCI Project

For the past 3 years, our research has supported CASA's mission to advocate for social change by providing community education, outreach support, crisis intervention, and safe environments for survivors of domestic violence and their children. Our involvement with CASA began by chance, much like any other relationship. Marcie Finkelstein, the director of the Center for Engaged Scholarship, a think tank located at USF that specializes in identifying and funding university-community partnerships, met CASA's executive director, Linda Osmundson, at a dinner party. Linda mentioned to Marcie that CASA had been involved in many research projects with university researchers, but CASA's staff members felt that they had not benefited from those experiences. She indicated that researchers often arrived

unannounced and at inconvenient times, disrupted the work schedule, required the completion of endless forms, and then often left without even sharing any of their research results with the CASA community. Linda expressed feeling "ripped off" by what she perceived as self-serving academics who cared nothing for CASA or its increasingly difficult battle against domestic violence.

Marcie offered to introduce Linda to some researchers at USF who would design a research project *with them* instead of *for them*, utilizing narrative and other interpretive methods of analysis, with a shared goal of promoting community action to stop abuse. These introductions grew into the UCI project—a university-community collaboration consisting of CASA staff members and academics from a variety of disciplines: communication, psychology, sociology, women's studies, mass communication, and human resources. As doctoral candidates in USF's Department of Communication, we were invited onto the project because of our interests in narrative, social action research, and activism.

The UCI project partners decided to engage in a long-term, comprehensive, participatory ethnography that employed interactive interviews to collect narratives told by paid and unpaid workers at CASA about their experiences of working in the field of domestic violence. We hoped that by nurturing an understanding of the complexities of working within a community service organization, we might assist our community—legislators, funders, and the public at large—as it sought to understand the complexities of the social problem: domestic violence.

The UCI grant project had the following goals:

1. Establish a collaborative relationship between CASA and USF, and document the process of developing the project as a collaborative university-community group partnership.

2. Conduct an ethnographic study of CASA, emphasizing the ways that staff, volunteers, and former shelter residents tell their stories and engage in sense-making in their professional and personal lives.

3. Study the use of stories by staff and volunteers at CASA to communicate domestic abuse as a social problem and dispel misunderstandings about it in the wider community.

4. Assess the feasibility of a volunteer program between CASA and USF; if advisable, develop an action plan to recruit students who would volunteer at CASA for USF course credit.

5. Produce a booklet of stories to be used locally, statewide, and nationally with victims, families, community groups, volunteers, scholars and related agencies in reframing domestic violence in our society.

One of the goals of the UCI project that seems especially noteworthy was our hope to dispel widespread cultural misunderstandings, or "collective representations" (Loseke, 1987, 1992) that affect perceptions of domestic violence within our society. Some of these collective representations include conflicting "gender narratives" (Wood, 2001) that condemn a woman for failing to leave an abusive situation and simultaneously condemn her for failing to "stand by her man"; the requirement that victims comply with prevalent cultural scripts (Baker, 1996), such as filing police reports or participating in therapy; existing "folk notions" (Baker, 1996; Loseke, 1987, 1992) affirming an "acceptable" level of violence in intimate relationships; and victims' frequent refusal to conform to collective representations as a way of retaining power within a powerless space (Baker, 1996; Hegde, 1996; Lempert, 1997; Murray, 1988). As Cacho-Negrete

(2000) summarized, "Nobody wants to be identified as a battered woman, because battered women are held responsible for their abuse" (p. 18).

All of the UCI project goals have been exceeded. The collaborative relationship between CASA and USF has grown to include partnered community events and active participation in each other's work and mission. Over 40 CASA staff members have been interviewed, and their stories have been compiled into a booklet that has been successfully used as a development, rhetorical, and recruitment tool. Almost 2,000 copies of the booklet, *Many Faces, Many Voices Working Against Domestic Violence, The CASA Story of Stories* (Curry & Walker, 2002) have been sold or gifted for fundraising, outreach, and education. An internship program has been established, and more than 20 USF undergraduate students have received course credit for volunteering at CASA. We have embraced CASA's vision of a community without domestic violence, and we believe the UCI project has contributed to that vision.

<center>Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks</center>

*Social Action Research*

It was significant that the first goal of the UCI project addressed relationship and community building. As partners, we understood that the goals, tasks, and products of this project would depend on the development and maintenance of a reflexive relationship among all project participants. This understanding is central to the social action and feminist epistemologies that framed this research project. According to Greenwood and Levin (1998), social action research involves participants and researchers co-generating knowledge through collaborative communication processes in which all participants' contributions are taken seriously, treating the diversity of experience and capacities of the participants as crucial resources in the development and implementation of a research project.

*Feminist Epistemologies*

The salient characteristics of social action research embody many of the principles of feminist methodology, and because CASA is, after all, an organization embracing and espousing a feminist-fueled gender movement—the battered women's movement—ways of knowing and being in the world as articulated by some feminist writers were important for grounding this project. For example, feminist standpoint theory argues that since "subordinate groups must know how to survive in their oppressor's world, plus know their own reality" (Dankoski, 2000, p. 4), their understandings of those realities are more complex, rich, and varied than those of the dominant group. This epistemology, although recognizing that women's perspectives often spring from diverse politics, ethnicities, and special interests, advocates methodologies that seek to "build unity, solidarity, and sisterhood" (Weil, 1996, p. 201). Weil (1996) theorized "an action framework for feminist community practice" (p. 203) that builds on "feminist values" (p. 201), such as nurturance, caring, recognition of each individual's dignity and worth, and a sense of responsibility for each other. Ceglowski (2000), Gatenby and Humphries (2000), Swigonski (1993), and Tillman-Healy (2001, 2002) stressed the development of close relationships within a research project that are based on mutual trust, disclosure, and ethics. Considering that we had been invited into CASA expressly as a response to dissatisfactions emerging from its members' participation in other research projects, we knew it was important to honor and privilege their understandings, methodological preferences, and ways of knowing.

*Research Relationships*

Literature on reflexive research relationships emphasizes interpersonal communication and the importance of listening to those who are participants or partners in the research. Boundaries blur in the interplay between researchers and research participants (Ceglowski, 2000; Ellingson,

1998; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Jorgenson, 1999; May & Patillo-McCoy, 2000; Milburn, Wilkins, & Wilkins, 2001). Jorgenson (1999) stressed the need to recognize such relational contexts in research when she wrote about the communicative process involving reciprocal perspective taking between researcher and respondents. During our UCI project, a critical question was, "How do they see researchers and us as researchers?," especially since the domestic violence workers told us from the start that they had negative perceptions of researchers. At the same time, we struggled with trying to understand what it is like to work against domestic violence. Thus, a collaborative research project becomes "an expression of relationships among persons" (K. J. Gergen & Gergen, 1999, p. 78).

*Narrative as Poetic Activism*

We theorize that both the research relationships developed and the tangible results of the UCI project are representative of K. J. Gergen's (1994, 2000, 2001) ideas of relational responsibility, generative theory, and poetic activism. Gergen proposed that researchers must look at the context of how human beings are related and interdependent. This idea of relational responsibility suggests that we must value process as much as product, as engagement is continuous and reflexive. Generative theory posits that action and discourse are integrally linked. Talk becomes our most effective change agent, for discourse leads to social action (see Adams, Berquist, & Galanes, Volume 1; Jovanovic, Steger, Symonds, & Nelson, Volume 1). Language and engagement, however, do not solely constitute poetic activism; reflexivity, impetus for social change, and community also contribute to the development of poetic activism, assisting in the creation of a methodology that is simultaneously tangible and ephemeral.

*Summary*

The challenges within this project have been complex and multilayered. Community-based

action research ultimately becomes a search for meaning, which moves us away from

competitive, power-driven processes toward more cooperative ways of knowing. These new

models require humility, care, and equity (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Stringer, 1999). During the

UCI project, we attempted to enact these qualities and values. In the remainder of this chapter,

we share some of the lessons learned during the project using specific examples, reactions of

our co-researchers and colleagues, and our own reflections. We also share episodes of

assessment, evaluation, and meta-communication. Throughout the project, we have created

opportunities for CASA and USF participants to discuss the research process and review the

progress of the project. These opportunities for sense-making have included luncheons,

interactive interviews, project meetings, multiple local and state presentations, a National

Communication Association conference panel that included the executive director of CASA,

and a university colloquium on the research relationship that featured two staff members from

CASA. These were times when we were actively engaging in communication activism

poetically, which enabled us to create project products, including a successful internship

program and narrative booklet of stories.

We have found that both engaged scholarship and social justice depend on relationships

involving time, trust and respect. To operationalize these relational characteristics, we plan to

address the challenges and successes of the UCI project with respect to the following themes: (1)

maintaining an empathetic stance as we learned from collaborative partners; (2) suspending

assumptions about the "other"; (3) dialogic, active listening; (4) coping with vicarious trauma in

a crisis-oriented setting; (5) discussing the process by engaging in meta communication with co-researchers; (6) developing ties and on-site involvement; (7) issues with leaving the site.

We envision the narratives emerging from this project—the stories within the booklet, as well as the stories emerging from the project—as bringing about political and social reform. Our experiences in the past 4 years have confirmed that these stories have served to change perceptions—the perceptions of the politicians and lobbyists attempting to enact social justice; the perceptions of the clerks, attorneys, and judges charged with administering social justice; and the perceptions of the community members and donors supporting and funding social justice. We theorize this project—our work together with CASA and CASA's work alone—as examples of K. J. Gergen's (2000) idea of poetic activism, work that generates theory and constitutes meaning in a relational manner.

## Colloquium of Co-researchers

This section of the chapter presents our lessons learned within the narrative framework of a university colloquium we presented about the UCI project called "Developing the Research Relationship." The narrative we have constructed is based on extensive fieldnotes we took during this colloquium, numerous conversations among all of the colloquium participants as we processed the event, presentations and papers that resulted from the exchanges during and about the colloquium, and our co-researchers' review of this chapter. The colloquium panel was initially designed as a presentation to the university community *about* our research relationship with CASA staff members. When we expanded the panel to include two staff members from CASA who actively participated in the research project, it became an *enactment* of our relationship as co-researchers. The panel demonstrated a relational experience as part of our continuing relationship. It also provided an occasion for reflexivity about action research; as

Weick (1995) maintained, "Research and practice in sensemaking needs to begin with a mindset to look for sensemaking, a willingness to use one's own life as data, and a search for those outcroppings and ideas that fascinate" (p. 191).

This colloquium and chapter are examples of using narrative to achieve academic sense making, storied examples of sensemaking about an occasion of sensemaking; consequently, we present a type of meta-sense making of reciprocal reflexivity among the researchers involved and our university community of students and faculty. The narrative is intended as a complex example of the interplay between individual and social activities that demonstrate the importance of social action research as a relationship. Finally, the narrative is an example of our vision of K. J. Gergen's (2000) idea of poetic activism, one of the foundational theories for our work. We invite the reader to engage the following narrative framework, which includes events of the colloquium and flashbacks to events throughout the project. In the concluding section of the chapter, we summarize the meanings we have come to understand and the lessons we have begun to learn about the importance of the development of "poetic" research relationships to promote social justice for victims and survivors of domestic violence; their advocates, activists, volunteers, and fieldworkers; and the communities affected by this significant social problem.

*Coming Together*

The hallway erupts in a cacophony of voices and bodies as afternoon classes empty. Students with backpacks flow in both directions. Some stop to talk in clusters, creating traffic jams. Toni, a doctoral student in USF's Department of Communication, waves and steps to the side as students surge around us. "Hey, Deb, Elizabeth! I'm looking forward to your colloquium this afternoon. The flier says that a couple of the panelists are coming from CASA. That should be really interesting. Not sure it's been done before, at least since I've been here."

Elizabeth responds, "The original idea was for Deb and me to talk about developing the research relationship. Since we position the CASA staff as our co-researchers, not just participants, we decided we should invite them to be part of the panel."

Deb jumps in, "Yeah, it will be lively because they've had really negative experiences before with researchers. Today, they'll have an audience of academics and researchers they can talk back to."

Deb and Elizabeth walk a few steps down the hall to the small lecture lab, and Deb begins to organize the informational brochures about CASA that they intend to distribute to the audience. Elizabeth glances at the clock. "I'm a bit worried about Judy and Clarissa. I hope they can find our building. You know, parking is a nightmare."

"Even though I sent them maps and parking passes, I know they'll be nervous. You finish arranging the chairs; I'll go downstairs and watch for them." Deb hustles down the stairs. The room begins to fill with students and professors, and soon, the room is full. A few minutes later, Deb shepherds Judy and Clarissa from CASA into the room. Elizabeth hugs them. They huddle together for a few minutes, and then settle into the chairs arranged panel style in front of the audience.

*Colloquium Part I: Why Did You Let Us In?*

Elizabeth serves as panel moderator, introducing the panelists and then proposing, "Many of you have heard us discuss parts of this project in our classes. The handout we gave you has more detailed information about the UCI project, but the key to our presentation lies in the project's first goal: establish a collaborative relationship between CASA and USF, and document that process. All the other goals depended on the establishment of the research relationship. Today, we propose three broad areas of discussion (1) preconceptions about research, or, why did you

let us in? (2) what were our milestones as we began to build trust? (3) what would we do differently? We'll be sharing lessons learned about collaborative research that seeks to secure justice not only for a social issue but also for project participants, and, hopefully, we'll stimulate discussion because this topic is critical to everyone's work. So today, in keeping with our pledge to listen, we've asked our CASA partners to begin the panel. Clarissa, could you tell the audience why you let us into the site and your first impressions of us?"

Clarissa begins, "We just love Deb and Elizabeth now. Deb isn't afraid to get dirty; she sorts laundry, cooks, stocks the pantry—whatever needs doing. Elizabeth is the listener; she comes to visit, brings us chocolate, cookies, or pizza, and just listens. Now I don't want to offend you because you are all researchers, but at CASA we didn't have very good opinions of university folks. Our experiences with researchers had not been good—until Elizabeth and Deb." Some of the audience members chuckle at her candor.

Judy follows up, "Frankly, we have felt used by other researchers. They come with long surveys, lots of questions, and we spend hours of our time on the project, and then they leave, and we never hear from them again! I don't know how the rest of you work, but Elizabeth and Deb treated us with respect. They weren't pretentious. They used their first names. They were dressed nicely, but casually. They went to the CASA volunteer training and committed to spending lots of time with us. Elizabeth would talk with us and tape record our long, rambling conversations, full of thoughts and ideas. Then lo and behold, she would pull it all together and bring us a report, a paper, a story. Now some parts of the papers are a little boring to us, but the stories are great." Again, the audience laughs. "Elizabeth would ask us to read what she wrote, and whether she had gotten it right. She would describe us so well we could just see ourselves!"

Clarissa looks over at Elizabeth and says in a subdued voice, "And they were both human. I remember when Elizabeth cried at our first meeting when she told us about her friends who had been abused. Then we all knew that she could really feel the pain, that there was empathy." Clarissa looks at Elizabeth again, checking to see if it is okay that she told the audience about the tears. She continues in a more animated voice, "We all remember our first meeting so well! We had lots of questions and concerns. Deb took notes, and Elizabeth talked more. They watched as CASA staff members talked; they really looked at us and seemed to listen so intently. They acknowledged people who spoke and, at one point, told us what they had written, like a summary. They even laughed. You know what was the thing that closed the bond, the superglue to the whole thing? They said, 'We want to learn about you. We want you to tell us how we can learn about what it's like to work against domestic violence, what it's like to volunteer.' Wow! We weren't used to that approach."

*Colloquium Part II: Building Trust*

"One of the important developments in this unfolding research relationship," observes Elizabeth, "seems to have been building trust." She shifts in the metal folding chair. "Especially in light of your negative experiences with previous researchers, and given the sensitive and confidential nature of your work, could we talk a little bit more about why you trusted us?"

Clarissa leans forward with a big smile, clasping her hands together, eager to contribute. "You got it!" She looks at the audience. "In the field of domestic violence, we talk about folks who get it and folks who don't get it. Some people just can't understand why a woman doesn't leave her abuser or may seem to instigate her batterer . . ."

"At CASA, we believe these common cultural misconceptions are all forms of victim blaming," chimes in Judy. "The question people should ask is, 'Why does a man beat and

emotionally abuse someone he says he loves?' Most researchers don't get it, but we didn't have

to fight with Deb and Elizabeth about our core philosophies and mission. They got it!"

Deb warms at the praise, but feels a bit uncomfortable, too. She doesn't want the

audience to assume that they have engaged too much in the relationship and not enough in

research. At the same time, however, she embraces the subjectivity of the relationship. Deb

comments, "Elizabeth and I have talked about different ways of realizing you've achieved a bit

of trust, a bit of community, on site. We've talked about the differences between 'trust as a

moment' and 'trust over time,' for example."

Elizabeth jumps in. "For me, I was able to monitor trust levels through a series of little

moments. When I was first invited to stay for lunch, for example, or when I was no longer asked

to leave the room during a crisis call or conversation with a child abuse investigator, or being

asked to have a smoke with Judy." Judy laughs, coughs, and nods.

"I was also able to see 'moments' of trust develop," Deb agrees, "such as being given the

house master keys, for example, when working in the pantry or closet. I vividly remember the

day I walked up to the shelter and was immediately buzzed in without having to identify myself

through the security intercom—things like that. For me, however, trust seemed to be a more

gradual process than spontaneous 'moments' of event, especially at the shelter. Little by little, it

seemed, people took more to me, spoke more openly around me . . . ." Deb silently reflects on

her time at the shelter:

*After stocking the pantry all morning, I join the staff for lunch. Bonnie, the house*

*manager, interrupts the low, constant hum of conversations and hops up to turn up the radio.*

*Whitney Houston fills the room. "Lemme sing for you all!" she says, lip synching while holding*

*her Snapple bottle up like a microphone. "Oooooh, Herman!" she drawls her husband's name*

*out sexily, and we all burst out laughing. "This is for you, Herman," she cooes, as she moves her*

*hips suggestively. We all howl.*

*Judy nods toward me and says softly to Bonnie, "Remember, we have company."*

*Bonnie says, "Oh, right," and begins to straighten up.*

*"Oh, no, keep singing," I implore, eager to become one of the group. Bonnie sits back*

*down, but she smiles at me and starts telling us about Herman's habit of giving things pet names.*

*"What is it about men that they have to name all their body parts?" I ask, raising my eyebrows*

*to look suggestive. All the girls laugh, and Bonnie says, "Oh, Herman's name for that is Mr.*

*Pop-up. 'Course, it never pops up when I want it to!" We all scream with laughter.*

*"Betcha' it never comes when you want it to, either?" I lewdly suggest. More shrieks of*

*laughter. "No pun intended," I add dryly to hoots and giggles. Bonnie wipes tears of laughter*

*from her eyes and says, "You know what I'm talkin' 'bout, girl!" After we calm down and*

*resume eating, Judy leans over and says, "You have to excuse us. We're a little crazy. When you*

*do what we do, you have to be."*

"How did you all find the time to do all this?" Toni asks from the audience. Murmurs of

agreement ripple through the room. Elizabeth and Deb smile at each other. It is a challenge,

among many others, that they have discussed quite frequently.

*Colloquium Part III: Processing Problems*

"It's hard," Elizabeth and Deb agree. "Managing time and negotiating schedules were major

challenges."

"It was one of the staff's main concerns about the project," interjects Judy. "We were

worried that accommodating researchers would be difficult, not only from a time standpoint but

from the standpoint of confidentiality, too."

"You see," Clarissa again leans forward. "We work in a crisis environment. We may schedule an appointment or interview with you, and have every intention of keeping it, but then things might just explode. We might get several crisis calls all at once; we might have walk-ins, police drop-offs, emergency pick-ups. . . . Like today, we were later coming here than we planned to be because a mother abandoned her baby at the shelter." The audience shifts uncomfortably in their chairs, their faces show mixed emotions, and the room grows quiet. "We don't know if that mother is alive or dead. We don't know where she is now. Maybe her abuser found her or maybe she is trying to escape. She knew the baby was safe at the shelter; maybe that's why she left the baby—to protect the baby from the abuser. But we can't keep that baby." Clarissa pauses.

Judy continues, "This morning shelter workers had to call DCF (Florida's Division of Children and Families) to transport that baby to foster care. We know that the mother will probably lose her rights to the baby because of the abandonment. We must follow the law, but it breaks your heart too. Staff members were upset, shelter residents were upset, and it involved lots of paperwork! So then we look at the clock, and it's time to come here, so we go tearing up the interstate to get here. First thing when we walked in that door, we told Elizabeth and Deb about it, not as an excuse but because we wanted them to know. We knew they could understand what that event meant to the staff."

"We've learned to approach the project with flexibility because of situations like Judy and Clarissa just described," muses Elizabeth. "We found the assumption on the part of previous researchers that the research participants had to alter their schedules to accommodate that of the researchers a bit, well, presumptuous . . . maybe arrogant. Who were we to assume that our needs should supersede those of families in crisis?"

"But then how is it possible to complete a research project in one semester?" asks one of the new doctoral students in the audience.

"It's not," Deb asserts flatly. "There's no way to propose it, get it approved, conduct it, analyze it, write about it, and present it in one semester."

Elizabeth softens Deb's candor. "But you can write the proposal for it one semester, and begin orientation and data collection in another. This began as a year-long grant project and has extended into several years."

"That brings up another challenge," Deb adds, "getting out. The next time I engage in a long-term project like this, I'll have very clear guidelines for ending it. It's a tough balance to achieve: You want to be involved and have a long-term relationship, and you develop a sense of responsibility toward the organization . . . ." She pauses. "But after awhile, you are forced to move on, or things occur that make it difficult to sustain that level of commitment."

"Mmmmm, I can see where that would be challenging," says Judy. "I knew Deb was writing her dissertation and attending a lot of conferences and that Elizabeth was the primary caretaker for her chronically ill mom and still meeting consulting obligations, but I had no idea how crazy the drive between St. Petersburg and USF in Tampa is."

"But it's funny," Elizabeth interjects, "because CASA became sort of a refuge for me . . ."

"It made us feel good to go there . . ." Deb interrupts, "I would often complain about having to go, but then when I got there everyone was so nice . . ."

"And they'd make you feel so good," adds Elizabeth.

"That's when I'd feel guilty about feeling resentful," Deb says, taking her glasses off and rubbing her eyes, feeling hesitant about bringing up a sensitive issue, but deciding that it is

important to demonstrate frank disclosure in this colloquium about research relationships. "Guilt and resentment, actually, were always difficult emotions for me to negotiate as I continued volunteering. For example, when I began volunteering at the legal advocacy office at the courthouse, I found out I had to pay $40.00 to attend a mandatory training session. I got a parking ticket because the advocate who was supposed to relieve me was late, so I'd feel angry, then guilty about my anger. I'd also get angry at the clients. I'd try to tell myself that the people I was trying to help were battered, bruised, traumatized, resentful, and defensive, but I'd still be left feeling like some of them were just plain nasty."

"Well, some of 'em are just plain nasty, just like all folks, no better, no worse," Judy says sympathetically. "You just can't take it personally."

"I know, but still, I'd think to myself if one more woman puts her hand up in my face. . . . Then I'd feel so guilty for being so impatient and insensitive," Deb allows her thought to trail away.

"It's okay to feel resentful and impatient sometimes," Clarissa says softly.

"But even worse, Deb, was your fear for the clients' safety, your vicarious traumatization," observes Elizabeth. Elizabeth remembers Deb's hysterical phone call after she had a particularly challenging day volunteering at the courthouse:

*"E, I can't stop crying! I wish I could just quit. This isn't for me. I don't have the patience or sensitivity for this kind of work, plus I'm scared all the time." Deb sobs the words out.*

*"What do you mean?" I ask soothingly.*

*"The clients!" Deb wails. "I'm terrified for them! I'm scared to death when they don't get their restraining orders, when they come in to file motions for dismissal before the abuser*

*has even attended the first batterer's intervention, and when they refuse my help, and I don't have anyone to talk to! It's not like the shelter, where there's community. At the courthouse it's only me and the clerks, no other advocates. . . . How do the paid advocates do it?"*

*"It's hard for them too. A lot of paid advocates leave the field because of these reasons. What you're going through is common. I know it doesn't make it easier." I try to talk Deb down by offering several solutions: sharing her fears with her volunteer supervisors, working on body language and vocal tone to project a more calming persona to the clients, and taking occasional walks around the building to ease off stress. She eventually calms down.*

"Most domestic violence advocates experience vicarious traumatization," asserts Judy. "We work in an environment of violence, anger, frustration, and trauma every day. So researchers must be ready for risk and even safety issues. We need to be aware and help them learn to cope with trauma, both physical and emotional."

"Elizabeth experienced vicarious traumatization, too," Deb observes and leans toward Elizabeth to invite her to share her story.

"Yes, I marvel at the ways in which the traditional divisions between researcher and those being researched have blurred within this project. My friends, classmates, and even several of my mom's nurses disclosed their abuse to me. But the most emotional day for me was when I learned that one of CASA's advocates had been beaten with a pipe. I cried driving all the way across the bridge. I was crying because she was hurt, and because CASA staff members trusted me enough to tell me about it. They said they wanted me to write the story someday, but I haven't been able to write it yet."

There is a subdued atmosphere in the room. Deb and Elizabeth had both agreed that it would be critical to talk during the colloquium about the challenges and problems of conducting

research. They worried that the camaraderie among all of the colloquium participants might be interpreted as "too good to be true," but had decided that it also exemplified the mutual respect and deference necessary for poetic activism to occur in a collaborative context such as this one.

Elizabeth moves the group to the final section of the colloquium. "Our time is almost up," she says, "so we want to mention an event that could have been a showstopper. It could have derailed the project and destroyed our research relationship." The audience sits up with attention. She continues, "Problems and misunderstandings resulted among us as a result of a public performance that we brought to the shelter. It was a dramatic reading of an autoethnographic essay written by a colleague about her experience in a violent relationship. We thought this would be an excellent way to show how stories can be used as research, but we didn't do enough work on preparing ourselves or the staff for such an event."

Clarissa jumps in, "CASA staff saw it in very different ways, such as dramatizing their daily work, exploiting a victim, and promoting erroneous stereotypes of abuse victims. We were trying to be polite and listen, and we kept looking at our coordinator, but it was upsetting. We didn't feel like you were acknowledging our professional expertise. We just couldn't figure out why you would have someone do a story like that because we hear those stories every day."

Deb clarifies, "The misunderstandings among us about what we saw as research and what we were going to do with their stories was so important! When the performance was over, we were all unsettled. Elizabeth was smoking on the porch, and it was hard for us because we wanted to confer with the professors who were there, but we also felt an allegiance to the CASA staff."

As moderator, Elizabeth shifts the discussion. "In the interest of time I want to focus on how we processed what happened—not just what happened but what it meant to the relationship,

how we created the meaning to the event. We talked about it in many meetings with different people who were involved. In talking about the problem, we moved our relationship to stronger levels."

Judy nods and says, "We learned that our way of processing problems is also something that researchers do. Both CASA and academics talk problems through. We were going to discuss it anyway, but then Elizabeth said, 'Let's have pizza and sort things out.' We found out so much that day. But I still don't think we could see exactly what kind of research you were talking about. It wasn't until we read the stories in the book that it all started to make sense."

Elizabeth replies, "And this wasn't the first time we had talked about our talk. We had practiced reflexivity from the beginning, so we could use the same model to process conflict when it did occur. In the end, the performance wasn't a success in the way we anticipated but it was a huge success in that it helped us to identify some messy issues and look at our different perspectives. We learned a lot about each other because we didn't avoid a difficult situation. We were able to clarify our ideas about what constitutes research, and we were able to address other concerns as well. For example, the performance caused CASA staff to question our sensitivity, so it was important to reassure staff of our intentions in staging such a realistic and volatile performance. This incident could have derailed the whole research project, but it strengthened our relationship. It became mutually transformative. It was an example of Gergen's theory of poetic activism because we challenged each other's assumptions and reframed our ideas, yet continued to work together for productive change."

*Colloquium Part IV: Discussion*

There is a long pause when Elizabeth opens the floor for questions and comments. Finally, Dr. Kenneth Cissna, a faculty member in the Department of Communication, speaks, "As I listened

to the four panelists I was struck by how you were demonstrating your research relationship while you were talking about it today. I could see the respect and trust you have for each other. I was thinking that perhaps this is an idiosyncratic example, that these four women were just a certain combination that worked. I wonder if this relationship could have developed with four different people involved in the project. Would this work in a similar way in a different organization?" Dr. Cissna pauses and then continues, "But as I thought about it further, I realized that the panelists have shown us a model of a research relationship that we could all develop. This isn't just one specific example; it is a way of building trust, a way of researching and working in the community, and, as such, is an excellent example of applying dialogic communication."

Dr. Doni Loeske, chair of USF's Sociology Department, and one of the CASA project participants, asks the panelists, "Has this research project and the research relationships changed you, and if so, how?"

Judy and Clarissa look to Deb and Elizabeth who glance at each other. Elizabeth hesitates momentarily and then says, "That's an important issue. I hope that our panel today demonstrates the recursive nature of our relationship. Frankly, I didn't want to do this research in the beginning." The audience laughs because the comment is so incongruous with the panel presentation. "I went to a meeting because Dr. Carolyn Ellis, my advisor, invited me. When I heard Linda Osmundson, the CASA executive director speak, I was intrigued because she was charismatic. I'll never forget how she described the victims as courageous women, facing incredible odds. She touched my mind and my heart. I also saw the chance to engage in research that would make a difference. Once I got involved, I continued because I had developed relationships. I was also drawn to the tensions of working through the philosophy of

empowerment at CASA. It resonated with my personal philosophy, and now it's my dissertation topic."

Deb shares her story. "The meetings with the executive director and CASA staff also inspired me, but I knew immediately that I wanted to work on the CASA project. It fit my interests in studying volunteerism and the construction of volunteer identities. I volunteered in several different departments at CASA and really learned how different each experience could be, and that's what I'm writing my dissertation about."

Clarissa holds up some papers, pats her heart, and says, "No matter what happens, or when Deb or Elizabeth leave CASA, I'll always have part of them in the stories they wrote. Elizabeth wrote *my* story, and I'll always have that as part of our relationship. That booklet of stories has changed us in ways we didn't even expect. Some of us worked together, but we hadn't shared our stories with each other, so the team is tighter now than ever before. We use the booklet for training new staff members, advocates, and volunteers. We take it to all kinds of presentations for those who work in domestic violence, like the Florida Coalition Against Domestic Violence, and even to presentations at community group meetings."

Deb elaborates, "We've also used the booklet to do campus and community outreach, advocating for CASA and against domestic violence with our sociology and communication classes, with the Victim's Advocacy Office and Panhellenic Council on campus, with the local Creole Club, at professional conferences . . ."

"We sell them at fundraisers for $5.00 each, and all the money goes to support CASA programs," interjects Clarissa.

"It's even been used a lobbying tool with state government legislators in Tallahassee to secure greater funding for domestic violence service providers! CASA's legal advocate believes

that the booklet of stories was instrumental in getting Florida's first 'date rape' legislation enacted," adds Elizabeth.

Judy nods in agreement, "It is unique to have such interest in our work, in our stories. Most researchers study the victims, and sometimes they don't realize that many of us were victims or had family members victimized before we started this work. I cried when I read the story that Elizabeth wrote about me. I've told that story for almost 15 years whenever I gave presentations about domestic violence. My daughter never really wanted to hear it, or she couldn't hear it, but she could read the story. This project has changed me and my family. In families with domestic violence, you are taught to keep secrets, not to talk about things, but Elizabeth and Deb listen without judging. The whole process of being open to talking about myself and my work has helped me be more open, more confident."

Deb's final remark brings the panel to a close, "In our conversations with staff members, I've heard them say how the booklet of stories and the research process has changed individual staff members, even CASA as an organization. It has changed us all. But I want to close by reminding you that our work is part of CASA's efforts to stop domestic violence, to change society. It's all about achieving social justice for women and children and families who are abused. This work is our poetic activism, in response to the poetic activism that CASA advocates practice each day."

After the colloquium, as Elizabeth and Deb walk down the hall, they overhear several positive comments about the panel from other faculty and students. Deb says, "That really worked! We performed it while we talked! We enacted the measures of success in social action and feminist research projects that Stringer (1999) talks about: pride, dignity, affirmation of identity, sense of personal control, responsibility, unity, and social ties."

Elizabeth stops and faces her colleague, "After all this time, I am still humbled by the power of narratives, for the CASA panelists, the advocates, volunteers, and even today for our audience. I'm also humbled by everyone's gracious participation. You know, this project wouldn't have been possible if Doni, Linda, Carolyn, and Marcie hadn't sponsored the grant proposal . . ."

"Or if the CASA participants had refused our research," adds Deb.

"And this colloquium wouldn't have worked without Judy, Clarissa, and all of the other audience members who spoke up and made a contribution," Elizabeth says. "So I guess the panel was an act of poetic activism about poetic activism, with people engaged in poetic activism reframing how people see research relationships, action research, and domestic violence."

Reflections on Communication Activism

In this chapter, we presented a narrative representing a university colloquium that focused on the research relationship. We use narrative because it privileges the voices of our co-researchers from CASA, addresses the specific ways our relationship with them developed, and serves as an embodiment of the communication activism this project encompasses. The colloquium became an enactment of our relationship in format, content, and context. We now review the seven categories of challenges and successes within this social action research project: (1) the adoption of an empathetic stance that promotes respect and facilitates collaborative learning; (2) a suspension of assumptions about the "other"; (3) dialogic, active listening; (4) coping with vicarious trauma; (5) meta-communication; (6) cultivating the research relationship; (7) issues with leaving a research site. We also want to re-examine the specific interventions this project has enabled. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we want to reiterate our stance that poetic activism—both within our work as academics and CASA staff members' work as advocates—is

exemplified within the enactment of these seven categories and can be enabled through feminist, social action research using narrative.

First, this research project demonstrates the development of the empathy, mutual respect, and collaborative learning that occurs among co-researchers. The colloquium narrative exhibits multiple examples of mutual empathy among the participants. From a shared understanding of conflicting professional and emotional demands to a demonstration of mutual concern and caring over distressing events, the colloquium panelists experienced mutual empathy. Empathy does not occur coincidentally, however. It grows from reciprocal respect. As Greenwood and Levin (2000) asserted, in social action research, the expertise of all participants must be valued. We entered the UCI project eager to learn from our research partners. By obtaining our partners' feedback throughout the research project, inviting their executive director to be a co-principal investigator of the study, structuring our colloquium around their presence and contribution, and demonstrating our willingness to learn from their experiences, we showed our research partners that we respected their work, as well as their contribution to and involvement with the project. Mutual respect allowed empathy to develop so that collaborative learning could then occur in which we learned about their work and they learned about ours. Stringer (1999) identified the key concepts in the development of relationships among partners of action research as being equality, harmony, acceptance, cooperation, and sensitivity. During the UCI project, in general, and the colloquium panel, specifically, we attempted to enact these qualities and values.

Second, this process of building trust required the suspension of particular assumptions about each other. CASA members had to suspend their assumptions about researchers and we had to suspend our assumptions about the inviolatibility of the ivory tower. In that sense, we each had to suspend our assumptions about the other. Behar (1992) wondered if there can

actually be a "fully feminist ethnography amid the many unresolvable separations between the women doing the research and the women being researched" (p. 108). We wanted to begin to breach these separations. We strove to become "vulnerable observers" (Behar, 1996), seeking to understand and be understood, teach and be taught, and transform and, in the process, be transformed. By agreeing to volunteer on-site, actively seeking our partners' feedback about our work, and making that work accessible to this community by creating readable texts that also could appeal to a nonacademic audience, we proved to our co-researchers that we were committed to their cause, their work, and their lives. Consequently, *their* poetic activism resulted in *our* poetic activism. As a result, we began to share a sense of purpose and to care for each other, frequently acknowledging the benefits of the project to all involved and affirming each other's commitment to it—and to each other.

Third, the development of mutual respect and trust and the suspension of assumptions about the "other" rested on the success of dialogic, active-listening processes. We attended to listening in a number of ways. We met frequently with our co-researchers, both formally and informally, to review project progress and obtain their opinions and feedback. We designed the project and chose the methodology specifically in response to our participants' requests, and we quickly made adaptations when some of these choices weren't effective, such as when we realized that autoethnographic performance was not as useful for our participants as were written narratives. When these ruptures did occur, we quickly attended to "damage control." We learned to expect and work through conflict: talking, processing, suggesting alternatives, and sharing emotions.

Fourth, sharing emotions and managing conflicting feelings became very important to coping with the vicarious traumatization that invariably occurs in crisis-oriented settings when

conducting social action research. Talking through feelings of guilt, resentment, fear, horror, and frustration provided an important outlet for the vicarious traumatization often experienced by advocates, volunteers, and researchers within the field of domestic violence. Empathic listening by the colloquium participants facilitated Deb's sharing of her conflicting feelings about client advocacy, Elizabeth and the CASA advocates' sharing of sorrow for victimized friends, and the advocates' sharing of the story of the baby abandoned at the shelter. This sharing of emotions, coupled with empathic listening, facilitated the assuagement of painful emotion, permitting us to take solace in each other and in the work we were doing. Listening to and writing the stories for the book allowed us to become intimately involved in this crisis-oriented setting. Sharing ourselves with each other in so many ways resulted in enhanced emotionality, safety concerns, senses of loss or misgiving, and a host of other challenges. Not only have we used humor as a coping mechanism for these feelings, such as during the vignette describing lunch with the CASA advocates, but we created other outlets for these emotions, from phone calls to shared lunches to "time outs" to personal celebrations. In so doing, the research relationship was strengthened.

Fifth, this meta-communication helped us to process and learn from these experiences. The challenge of the autoethnographic performance at CASA, for example, is still being processed today because it involved such critical issues. During the colloquium panel, as we discussed this episode, our voices grew loud, and it was hard not to all talk at the same time. However, we shared the main point with the audience that research often involves a disruption of assumptions, a willingness to explore that disruption, and an acknowledgment of the other within that exploration. Such discourse reflects our commitment to poetic activism within social action research, as we continue to work together to process these events, reach some understanding

about them, and continue to learn from them. These steps constitute the process of meta-communication.

Sixth, all of the project's participants—advocates and academics alike—understood that this would be a lengthy, complicated project, and we embraced that challenge. We recognized that it was important to be involved, to participate, and to not only demonstrate commitment by being prompt and dependable but also by joining the community in other ways, such as by attending CASA fundraisers, grand openings, and thrift store sales. These opportunities for immersion in the site cultivated our research relationship with CASA staff members, as well as demonstrated our commitment to poetic activism through our actions and the products of our actions.

Finally, this intense level of activism poses special challenges when leaving the research site. From the perspective of research as relationship, involvement does not end, it merely lessens and does so gradually. Clear-cut understandings about the level of the research commitment from the beginning of the project are imperative, as are the development of exit strategies for gradually leaving the research site. Despite the funded-grant project ending years ago, we are still immersed in our research site, responding to needs that we continue to recognize, not because we are paid to do so but because we remain activists. We conduct staff development workshops, enrichment activities for the residents of CASA's transitional housing, and arts and crafts for the children involved in CASA's after-school program. Elizabeth volunteers at the youth center helping children with homework, and Deb cooks dinner for them on Tuesdays. It is a continuing, ever-evolving relationship that challenges us to remain committed.

Conclusion

The type of communication activism that we have articulated in this chapter is not easy to enact, but if enacted effectively, can result in great successes. An important component of poetic social action research is the "enactment of a commitment to democratic social transformation through social research" (Greenwood & Levin, 1998, p. 3). The narrative methodology of the UCI project was designed to support CASA's outreach efforts in conjunction with its social justice mission. The attainment of the UCI grant project goals also supported this commitment. We established a collaborative community-university relationship, documenting that process as we studied the stories of CASA's staff and volunteers. We developed a successful volunteer program with CASA through the university's Communication and Sociology departments that has resulted in a formal internship program, an informal honors program, and the hiring of USF volunteers for paid staff positions. We created a booklet of staff stories that has changed some of the perceptions of victims, survivors, advocates, volunteers, funders, donors, judges, and legislators.

We also, however, moved beyond goal attainment to achieve something far more special: We engaged in the process of reshaping our understanding of research relationships, community involvement, and the power of narrative. As Ellis (2002) contended, "The personal is political. We learned that a long time ago. Maybe it's time to rethink what that means and to remember that the reverse is just as true—the political is personal" (403). Poetic activism offers an opportunity to rethink the connections between communication activism and personal narratives, because, as Ellis concluded, "ultimately, both approaches are about making a better world" (p. 403).

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