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## Collaborative Research: Narratives of Domestic Violence Workers & Volunteers

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Elizabeth A. Curry

### Introduction

My research paper focuses on multiple layers of retrospective sensemaking based on a university colloquium about “Developing the Research Relationship.” The original idea for the colloquium panel was a presentation by two research assistants about our research relationship with staff members of CASA, a community organization that works against domestic violence. When we expanded the panel to include two staff members from the research site who actively participated in the research project, it became an enactment of the relationships. The panel became a relational experience that was part of the continuing relationships and an occasion for reflexivity on my identity as a researcher. I took Karl Weick’s definition from Sensemaking in Organizations as my goal, “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). Jane Jorgenson’s article on Co-constructing the Interviewer/Co-constructing ‘Family’ provided my inspiration for this paper. Jorgenson cites the research process as communicative rather than elicitive and further shows that research is meta-communicative. Jorgenson wrote about her interview experiences in the field and co-construction of the researcher’s identity. In my paper I write about my experience in presenting my fieldwork to a research audience in the company of CASA staff members who participated in the research and could be considered co-researchers. This research paper is an academic sensemaking exercise, a storied example of sensemaking about an occasion of sensemaking, so I am writing a type of meta-sensemaking. Another way to describe the process might be as an

example of the second order cybernetics of the observing the process. This is a type of reflexivity that Frederick Steier calls ecological constructionism (Steier, p. 165). My work is a reflexive description of an occasion of reciprocal reflexivity with researchers, reciprocators, and a university community of students and faculty. The experience reveals multiple layers of sensemaking and frames within frames. My paper is a complex example of the interplay between individual and social activity that demonstrates key points from theories of sensemaking and reflexivity. “Self-reflexive methods can become “interdependently reciprocal, and the term ‘reflexive’ applied not to one researcher, but to relations between and among investigator and research participants” (Gergen & Gergen, p. 93). My intent is to demonstrate research as a relationship and the research relationship as a multifaceted social process.

In this paper I briefly outline the project that was the basis of my research relationships and how our research relationships were co-constructed. I explore the importance of stories as a methodology for sensemaking and share narratives of my sensemaking moments. Following the narrative section on “Moments of Sensemaking,” I share my observations of how these narratives are examples of Weick’s sensemaking properties and the social construction of research reflexivity.

We reflected on several questions during the panel presentation, and thus I reflected upon them in this paper:

1. What were the assumptions of the researchers and the partners at the inception of this project and relationship?
2. How did those involved build trust in the research relationship? What role did disruption play in the process?
3. How did this research change the researchers and/ other partners?

During and after the panel other questions emerged based on the enactment during the colloquium:

4. How did the stories of the research relationship combined with the performance of the relationship for the audience affect the relationship?
5. How do I know what motivates me to do this work?

I acknowledge that the moments I include in this paper are those to which I ascribe significant meaning. However, I also stress that the very essence of sensemaking is not an individual interpretation but rather a complex social process with many layers of interaction such as researchers and CASA partners, individual researchers and individual staff from CASA, individual researchers with each other, researchers and academic peers, researchers and academic faculty, and CASA partners and academic audience. As Weick describes this process “once people begin to act (enactment) they generate tangible outcomes (cues) in some context (social), and this helps them discover (retrospect) what is occurring (ongoing), what needs to be explained (plausibility), and what should be done next (identity enhancement)” (Weick, p. 55).

### Methodology

In this section of my paper I briefly describe the project that was the foundation for the research relationships, the panel presentation that was the occasion for the reflexivity, and the role of the narrative methodology I used for sensemaking.

I was one of two research assistants who worked on a University Community Initiative grant from the University of South Florida (USF), *Lived Realities Lived Realities* and the *Meaning of Working Against Domestic Violence: The CASA Story of Stories*. The focus of the research grant was to study the workers of the organization, paid staff, and volunteers. Two of the five project goals clearly demonstrate a commitment to developing a relationship:

1. Establish a collaborative relationship between CASA ([www.casa-stpete.org](http://www.casa-stpete.org)) and USF, and document the process of developing the project as a collaborative university-community partnership;
2. Conduct an ethnographic study of CASA, emphasizing the ways that staff, volunteers, and former shelter residents tell stories and engage in sense-making in their personal and professional lives (UCI Grant Proposal 2001).

The end result or tangible product of the grant project for CASA was the publication of a booklet, Many Faces, Many Voices Working Against Domestic Violence: The CASA Story of Stories, but we started with the goal of establishing a relationship.

As part of this ethnographic research project I attended CASA's volunteer training; visited the shelter, transitional housing, and administrative office; conducted interactive interviews with staff members individually and in groups; and attended special events of the organization for eighteen months before the panel presentation. During that time a project team consisting of the research assistants, principal investigator, professor from Communication Department, the co-principal investigator, the Executive Director of CASA, a professor from Sociology Department, and several other interested parties from the university met routinely. During all these events I took field notes and tape-recorded interviews and meetings that were later transcribed. One of the first papers I wrote and presented during the project was "Voices of Engaged Scholarship: Relationships & Research in University-Community Domestic Violence Project," which focused on interviews with the staff at CASA and the other university partners.

The Communication Department Colloquium was held twice a month and is open to all faculty and students in the department. It was instituted to enhance the sense of community within the department by exploring topics that transcend any specific area of study. Faculty

NCADV

facilitated most of the early sessions and graduate students were invited to propose topics. My colleague, Deb Walker, proposed that we organize a panel on “Developing a Research Relationship.” I concurred and suggested that we focus on our UCI project and include CASA staff on the panel. After our panel was accepted I met with Deb, the other research assistant, and the CASA staff members to outline the topic and allot time to each section. Following the colloquium panel I discussed the panel with others and took field notes within a week. I followed up with CASA staff within a month. I wrote this paper/article six months after the colloquium.

Narrative methodology is integral to the overall UCI project, the colloquium panel, and this paper. It is the basis for the sensemaking. Fred Steier suggests that “we understand and become aware of our own research activities as *telling ourselves a story about ourselves*, parallel to what Turner (1981) refers to as a social reflexivity. Perhaps we need think of *research as constituted by a process of social reflexivity, and then, of social reflexivity as social process*” (Steier, p. 3). In this paper I present moments from the panel presentation using a narrative methodology. These storied moments are selected based on personal introspection as a sensemaking method. The moments are cues in frames but at the same time the stories act to create frames. “Stories that exemplify frames and frames that imply stories, are two basic forms in which the substance of sensemaking becomes meaningful” (Weick, p. 131). Since sensemaking is an on-going process, it never stops or starts. Yet stories have beginnings and endings because we structure stories to create some sense of coherence to events in our lives. Certain moments within those stories are the time when meaning comes together for an individual or groups of individuals. It is the meaning within the interaction that becomes a memory moment; however, it is created in the context of social activities. Goffman refers to

framing as the “structure of experience individuals have at moments in their social lives” (p. 8). Weick asserts that, “To understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to the ways in which people chop moments out of continuous flows and extract cues from those moments” (p. 43). The colloquium panel was basically structured as a time to share moments in our research relationship. In this paper I attempt to chop moments from the whole and share the meanings created within the social activity of the panel presentation through narratives.

### Literature Review

In this section of my paper I integrate various streams of literature that I see as potentially informing my work. The most obvious topic is research as a relationship; however, sensemaking and reflexivity literature also are at the center of my paper. I begin by briefly citing social action research and engaged scholarship literature as the background for the relational aspect of the research and sensemaking.

Our project and the USF University Community Initiative grant program are based on new models of democratic, participatory, and reciprocal research relationships emerging as part of collaboration between universities and communities (Boyer, 1996; Campbell, 1999; Ceglowski, 2000; Goldstein, 2000; Greenwood & Levin, 1992; Jones & George, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Papa et al, 2000). Greenwood and Levin define action research (AR): “Together, the professional researcher and stakeholders define the problems to be examined, cogenerate relevant knowledge about them, learn and execute social research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results of actions based on what they learned” (p. 4). The colloquium panel is an example of one technique the co-researchers employed to investigate the research relationship and interpret the results. An important component of AR is the “enactment of a commitment to democratic social transformation through social research” (Greenwood & Levin,

p. 3). The narrative methodology of our UCI project with CASA was designed to support CASA's outreach efforts in conjunction with its social justice mission. Community based action research is ultimately the search for meaning, which moves us away from competitive power driven processes toward more cooperative ways of living (Stringer, 1996). These new models require humility, care and, equity (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997). Engaged scholarship must be defined as a relationship involving trust and time. It is not just good citizenship but service tied to scholarly work in a field of knowledge that has implications for social change (Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997; Marullo & Edwards). Both the expertise of the researcher and the community members must be valued (Greenwood, 2000). Ernest Stringer outlines key concepts in the relationships in action research as: equality, harmony, acceptance, cooperation, and sensitivity (p. 29). Stringer also cites Tony Kelley and Russell Gluck in their call for evaluation based on the effects research has on people's feelings of pride, dignity, affirmation of identity, sense of personal control, responsibility, unity, and social ties (Stringer, p. 24). During the CASA project and the colloquium panel we attempted to enact many of these qualities and values.

These definitions of AR are consistent with feminist ethics of feminist ethnography (Dankoski, 2000; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Skeggs, 2001). There are few studies of the research relationship specific of domestic violence workers and universities. Two specific partnerships between universities and organizations dealing with domestic violence discussed conditions similar to those we experienced such as the distrust at the start of the research relationship and the importance of respect, long term commitment, mutual goals, nonhierarchical teams, personal relationships, and trust (Campbell, Dienemann, Kub, et al; Lennett & Colten). A study by Papa et al on Organizing Social Change Through Cooperative Action highlighted three themes of



feminist organizing: “Women’s empowerment is linked to sharing emotions (connectedness), evaluating personal actions for relational and environmental impact (integrative thinking), and helping one another through collective action (cooperative enactment)”(p. 117).

Literature on research relationships, reflexivity, and AR stress the interpersonal communication and the importance of listening to those who are participants or partners in the research. While researchers may offer insights and new understanding of a social activity, the participants, respondents, interviewees, and partners may help researchers understand their own actions and the boundaries blur in the interplay (Ceglowski, 2000; Ellingston, 1998; Ellis & Berger, 2002; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Jorgenson, 1999; Milburn, R. Wilkins & K. Wilkins; May & Patillo-McCoy). Our panel presentation on “Developing the Research Relationship” is a model of this interaction in two ways: (a) discussing our previous mutuality during the project and (b) presenting research participants’ views to the audience of researchers. Jane Jorgenson stresses our need to recognize such relational context in research when she writes about the communicative process that involves reciprocal perspective taking between researcher and respondents (Jorgenson, p. 211). Two other important points from her research apply to this paper: (a) the issue of relational control combined with emerging relatedness and (b) the multiple identities of researchers in any research setting. During our UCI project a critical question was ‘How do they see researchers and us as researchers?’ because the domestic violence workers told us at the start that they had negative perceptions of other researchers. However, Jorgenson cautions that clues in the interpretive process of ‘seeing the other’ can be “diverse and subtle” (p. 215). The moments that I write in this paper are reflexive or even self-reflexive but the term is used with the recognition that we create meanings collectively. Kenneth Gergen and Mary Gergen explore the social constructionist stance of

NCADV

reflexivity where language takes place within “shared systems of intelligibility” as an “expression of relationships among persons” not an internal cognitive process. (Gergen & Gergen, p. 78). This fits my experience with the UCI project and the panel specifically where I prepared cognitively for the presentation but the enactment in relation to others changed the way I experienced certain moments.

I think it is important to note that a broad base of literature on trust and respect could be applied to the CASA project and the panel. Kramer and Tyler edited Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research, a book that offers organizational views that could be applied to our UCI CASA teamwork; however, I chose to follow a different path in my meta-sensemaking paper. In her book, Respect, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot’s narratives shape a view of respect that is not driven by power and hierarchy, but rather on the “way respect creates symmetry, empathy and connections” (p. 9). She examines “how people work to challenge and dismantle hierarchies rather than how they reinforce and reify them, as well as the ways in which the context...shapes the ways in which people engage in respectful relationships” (p. 10). I share her goals and hope this paper portrays my deepest respect for my co-researchers and the relationships we have developed.

### Stories of Memory Moments

In this section I have tried to share stories of key moments of the colloquium panel that focused on our research relationship. Since sensemaking is retrospective and relational, the narratives are not necessarily chronological. I chose to organize the presentation of the stories by starting at the end and alternating forward and back in time.

*Is a Love Fest Real Scholarship or Research?*

*“Tom, I can’t believe you didn’t ask a probing question or challenge us on some point! I was waiting for one of your confrontational cherry bombs! Your zingers always make things lively! You weren’t napping were you?” I quip with one of my classmates who is known for his way of stimulating provocative discussion.*

*“It was a great panel, the best yet.” He responds as faculty and students mingle with the panelists after the formal presentation ended.*

*Initially I’m taken by surprise by his compliment. “Well, Thanks.” Then I ask, “You don’t think it was too much of a ‘love fest’ do you? I wanted to be sure that we covered the problems as well as the positives.”*

*Tom chuckled, “You are known for your generous framing, but I think you gave us a realistic example of how the relationship developed. You should teach a whole course on the research relationship!”*

Reflecting on the moment: This moment still tantalizes and haunts me. A major topic of discussion with CASA from the inception of the project was how researchers conduct and share their work. The basis for the project was building a collaborative relationship. I feel confident that my twenty years of experience with community groups are an asset to my pursuit of my doctorate with emphasis on social action research. I have internalized collaborative behaviors that result from privileging respect for partners and partnerships. I can see how I will meld my previous work with my future endeavors, and I know I have much to offer a class on research. However, I feel haunted by my comment because I fell prey to the assumption that a ‘love fest’ of enhancing, supportive, appreciative inquiry was not as rigorous as the challenges of critical inquiry. I cannot believe I said something like that. I see how deeply ingrained a critical stance can be even when I philosophically reject it. I thought I knew how I wanted to conduct my

research, but my comment made me rethink my commitment. What kind of researcher am I or will I become if I do not confront this?

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*Demonstrating Our Dialogic Research Relationship*

*There is a long pause when I opened the floor to questions and comments. Then Dr. Larry Dishna 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. Or would this work in a similar way in a different organization?”*

*The room is quiet as the professor pauses. My mind starts to race, thinking of how I might respond and wondering if we should have presented lists and facts instead of stories and personal moments of our sensemaking process. I wonder if I can articulate this stance without being defensive. I wait because I’m familiar with his pauses, and I know he probably has additional ideas to share.*

*“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.”*

*The panel continues, but that moment hangs in my mind. I want to stop and talk about this more, but there is not enough time.*

*The next week Dr. Dishna is the colloquium speaker on theory and research in dialogic relationships. Someone asks him how we can apply dialogic theories of communication in our*

NCADV

*every day life and work. He replies, “Last week when the panel addressed developing research relationships, we saw, heard, and experienced an excellent example of applying dialogic communication.”*

*Later I hear comments on our panel from other faculty and students: “an excellent example of a truly woman centered program,” “such a good turn out, the best colloquium in the series,” “well organized event that made space for everyone to participate,” shows how students can connect the community with the academic curriculum.”*

Reflecting on the moment: The moments from each week merge for me. Comments from Dr. Dishna and others make me feel successful. Dr. Dishna prompted me to think about the panel as a performance of the relationship. I feel that our approach to the panel demonstrated a commitment to participatory research. Many faculty and students have previously heard of the CASA project because for the past two years I have presented papers about this site in various classes. However, I think the panel as an enactment provided a sharper image of the project and the research environment we were cultivating. I also feel that I am learning to live the theories I embrace and learning to see life in the theories I study in daily life.

I note that each person’s comments reflect their specific area of interest, research, or concerns. Our research reflects who we are and who we are in the process of becoming. I’m becoming more aware of how my previous life experiences, skills, and interests meld with my work in the Communication Program.

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*The Beginning: Why Did You Let Us In?*

*I was very conscious of privileging the shelter workers’ voices by asking them to begin the panel. After a brief introduction the workers from CASA, the outline of our points, and a*

*handout about the project, I asked Clarissa and Judy to tell the audience about why they let us into the site and their impressions.*

*Clarissa began, “We just love Deb & Elizabeth now. Deb isn’t afraid to get dirty. She sorts laundry and cooks and volunteers all over. Elizabeth is the listener. She comes to visit and brings us chocolate or cookies or pizza, and she 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, and our experiences with researchers had not been good – until Elizabeth and Deb.” Some of the audience members chuckled at her candor.*

*Judy followed 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. 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 volunteer training and committed to spending lots of time with us.”*

*Clarissa added, “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!”*

*Judy continued, “Elizabeth would talk with us and tape record our long, long conversations sometimes rambling full of thought and ideas. Then lo and behold she would pull it all together 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 laughed. “Elizabeth would ask us to read what she wrote. She would ask us what we thought! She would ask us if we thought she got*

*it right. And we would all sit around reading and talking. She would describe us so well that sometimes it was really funny! You could just see yourself!”*

*Clarissa is nodding, “They made us feel special because they thought our work was important. 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.”*

*Clarissa looked over at me, “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. We all knew that she could really feel the pain.” Clarissa looked at me again, like she was checking to see if it was ok to tell the audience about the tears.*

Reflecting on the moment: I realize that Judy and Clarissa are in a room full of the type of people they generally distrust – researchers. But they trusted Deb and I enough to participate in the panel. Clarissa really knows how to “work a group” as she would say. Her smile, her passion, and her candor are engaging. I noticed that she was wearing more sedate, conservative clothing and jewelry than her usual dramatic colors and dangles. Judy acted very natural but cleared her throat in a way that suggested some anxiety. Judy tells it like she sees it. She is the senior staff with her white-gray hair. They make a good pair. When I invited Clarissa I did not think about race, but while we were presenting the panel it occurred to me that we were demonstrating our values with inclusion of people of color in the academy environment.

I had heard some of Judy and Clarissa’s observations before the panel, but their comments seemed to take on different meaning when I heard the comments directed to the academic audience. We had all changed in some way. I wondered if we taught them a different

NCADV

model of researchers or if they shaped us into different researchers – then I reminded myself that it is in the process. It was clear we had co-constructed our version of research. Now we were doing something similar in presenting our experiences to our colleagues. CASA staff felt validated by our research, and I felt validated by their response to our style of research.

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### *Building Trust*

*I introduced this segment of the panel. “So how did we know when someone trusted us? Because our time is brief and we want to give you specific examples, we will each share one or two “milestone moments” -- times when we felt trust was demonstrated in some way. Deb, you start us off.”*

*I thought we had agreed upon the panel format in our pre-planning meeting but Deb said, “I don’t look at things that way—in moments, so I’d rather talk about my interpretations and observations of the process.” Initially I felt surprised and off balance then frustrated when Deb shifted gears. I wondered why we even had pre-planning meetings. I reminded myself that Deb was nervous and timing was probably more important than how she approached the topic. I reminded myself sometimes ideas jump into our minds as we talk and it probably didn’t matter if we all followed the outline exactly.*

*I chose to share a few moments about safety and confidentiality such as when the staff would buzz me into the shelter unlocking the security door without an explanation of my name and purpose of visit. I was no longer just a visitor. I felt that the staff had bestowed a sense of legitimacy on me. They had accepted me into the group. Confidentiality is critical at the CASA Shelter. It can be life threatening, and the staff is vigilant. In the beginning workers would frequently remind me that something was confidential if I overheard certain calls or*



*conversations. Eventually, they stopped reminding me; they trusted me to respect the confidentiality of the Shelter residents or callers. Deb agreed that she had similar experiences.*

*Our panel discussion moved naturally into how we handled problems in the process of building our relationships. I began, “At the Shelter I learned about juggling a crisis orientation to scheduling –and that doesn’t mean having computer problems when a class paper is due.” My fellow students in the audience laugh. “I was using my previous experience as director of a non-profit organization to approach Clarissa who was the Shelter Manager at the time. Preparing for my first interview with Clarissa I was thinking – ‘Don’t overstay your welcome, they’re busy people...one hour or maybe 90 minutes max.... be aware of their time...don’t talk too much, listen’ I came to understand that in a crisis environment, you may start late and get interrupted. You multitask and reprioritize constantly. On the first day we started late but I stayed for about four hours, and they invited me to chat informally at lunch. I have learned a lot about how time flows at CASA. That might be one of the most important things in our research relationship.”*

*Judy smiles and elicits more chuckles from the audience when she jokes, “And we know when Elizabeth has a paper due for class. Seriously it works so well for us, we don’t have to entertain Elizabeth or apologize. Sometimes she’ll just come in, get cup of coffee, and sit or maybe read til we can take a break to sit on the porch and talk.”*

*I can see Clarissa is ready to quickly follow up on my comments, I nod to her, “I do feel terrible because sometimes I need to cancel my appointments or I’m running late, but Elizabeth understands. Like today we were later than we planned to be because we had a mother who abandoned her baby.” There is a ripple of alertness that suffuses through the audience. “We don’t know if that mother is alive or dead. We don’t know where she is now. Maybe her abuser*

NCADV

*found her or maybe she is trying to escape. She knew the baby was safe at the shelter. Maybe that is why she left the baby –to protect the baby from the abuser. But we can't keep the baby. This morning Shelter workers had to call DCF to take that baby to foster care. The mother will probably lose her rights to the baby for abandonment. Staff was upset, shelter residents were upset, and it was lots of paperwork! So Judy and I were tearing up the interstate highway to get here. First thing when I walked in that door I told Elizabeth and Deb about it. Not just as an excuse but because I wanted them to know. I knew they could understand what that meant to staff."*

Reflecting on the moment: Deb and I have worked together on several panels and projects. We have very different styles but we have learned to give each other space. What I saw as a disruption to a plan was just Deb's way to reacting to the present situation.

I distinctly remembered my first interview at the Shelter, but it wasn't until I was talking on the panel that I was struck by the critical nature of understanding each other's sense of time. Initially I was using this as a lead into other more critical issues. It was during the panel that I defined timing as a singularly significant factor. The idea mushrooms now as I think of how we took turns talking on the panel. How our audience observed this interaction.

Clarissa's example of the abandoned baby was a disruption to the generalities we were discussing. It was an example that clearly demonstrated our point, but at the same time it served as a dramatic reminder of the rawness of domestic violence for victims and CASA staff. I think Clarissa's story served as reminder of different worlds she sees between the university researcher and her work for social justice. However, she also told the story to emphasize that Deb and I had bridged the two worlds. When Clarissa told me about the abandonment, I imagined the pain of

the staff. I thought of them first and only somewhat of the mother. I did not see all the ramifications and issues. Clarissa and Judy think of the staff and the mother and the child.

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### *Processing Through Problems*

*As we moved into discussing the problems we encountered in the project we noted one event that could have been a 'showstopper'. I framed our panel discussion, "It could have ended the relationship. The problems and misunderstandings were the result of a public performance that we brought to the Shelter. It was a dramatic reading of an autoethnographic paper 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 jumped in, "Some CASA staff saw it in very different ways such as dramatizing their daily work, exploiting a victim, or promoting erroneous stereotypes of abuse victims. We were trying to be polite, 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 every day."*

*Deb clarified, "The misunderstandings 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 but we also felt an allegiance with the CASA staff." Deb gave some additional examples and others were eager to describe the specifics of that day.*

*As moderator I shifted our discussion. "In the interest of time I want to focus us 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 nodded, “We learned that our way of processing problems is also something that researchers do. Both CASA and the academics talk it thru. We were going to discuss it anyway but then Elizabeth said, ‘Lets 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 that it started to make sense.”*

*Carolyn Ellis, the professor who sponsored the project, commented from the audience, “So it wasn’t a success in the way we anticipated, but it was a huge success in that it helped us find some messy issues and look at our different perspectives. We learned a lot about each other because we didn’t avoid the difficult situation.”*

Reflecting on the moment: The disruption of the performance at CASA is still an event many of us are processing because it involved such critical issues. During the panel our voices were loud and it was hard not to all talk at the same time. I think the panel audience experienced this feeling as we described it. But we shared the main point with the audience that research often involves a disruption of assumptions. The difference in social action research is how you work together to process the events, seek to understand, undertake sense making. This was also an example of the multiple identities researchers may face and the importance of reciprocal perspectives.

I ended by telling the academic audience that I was still in the process of making sense of that event and our reactions. I said, “I haven’t been able to write about it yet.” I now realize that writing has become important to my sensemaking process and identity as researcher.

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*Changed by our Relationships*

*Toward the end of the colloquium panel Dr. Patricia Kane asked, “Has this research project and the research relationships changed you? If so, how? And has it shaped your future research?”*

*Clarissa held up some papers and then patted her heart, “No matter what happens or when Elizabeth leaves CASA, I’ll always have part of Elizabeth in the stories she wrote. She wrote my story and I’ll have that as part of our relationship.”*

*Judy nods, “I cried when I read the story that Elizabeth wrote – my story. And 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 finally read the story. This project has changed me. In families with domestic violence you are taught to keep secrets, not to talk about things. But Elizabeth listens and doesn’t judge. The whole process of being open to talking about myself and my work has helped me be more open, to give my opinion more easily.” They both looked to me.*

*I hesitated momentarily. It seemed like my mind was blank but actually I was flooded with emotions about the change. I didn’t have a succinct sound bite for an answer. “I didn’t want to do this research in the beginning. I had worked on a different project for months,” I began and the audience laughed because the comment was incongruous with our previous discussion on the panel.” I went to a meeting because Carolyn Ellis, my advisor invited me,” more laughs followed. “And because she said that she thought I was a good listener. Then I heard the CASA executive director speak. She was charismatic. She touched my mind and my heart. Frankly I think I also saw the chance to do something almost no one else had done, tell*

*stories of workers, not just victims. I like to work on things that are a bit different. Once I got involved I stayed for almost two years because (1.) I had a relationship with staff members and (2.) I was drawn to the philosophy of empowerment and the type of work done at CASA. It isn't easy to do but we try. And I've been looking at empowerment for a long time in my personal and professional life. So I went from somewhat reluctantly committing to a meeting to embracing a site for a potential dissertation about the life stories of CASA workers and my life story –stories of the research relationship perhaps.”*

*Deb shared a different story. She said, “I had a different take on it. I knew immediately that I wanted to work on the CASA project. I was having difficulties with other sites and I needed a project for my research class. The meetings with the executive director and CASA staff also inspired me. It fit my interests in studying volunteerism, so I volunteered in several different departments of CASA, where Elizabeth spent more time at the residential program.”*

*Later after the program ended panelists chatted with faculty and staff over coffee, but we didn't want it to end. The panelists and Carolyn, the faculty chief investigator, Deb and I went downstairs to hang out together, smoke, and continue the conversation. We found ourselves talking about the panel; we were talking about how we talked about our research conversations. We continued to add layers to the research relationship and the social process of sensemaking.*

Reflecting on the moment: Pride, dignity, affirmation of identity, sense of personal control, responsibility, unity, and social ties are measures of success in Social Action Research (Stringer), that I felt the colloquium and the university community project embraced. I am humbled by the power of written narratives for the CASA panelists.

I continue to think about my answer to the last question about how the project changed us or shaped our future. I had been asking myself similar questions but the answer during the panel

rang true to me. I was aware of the influence of interpersonal relationships in my decision-making, but the empowerment issue was almost a surprise to me when I answered. That's what made it a moment, a cue.

I was also struck by how Deb and I showed that there are such different ways and reasons that people become involved in projects.

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### Concluding Reflections

The act of writing this paper has been yet another layer in the meta-meta-sensemaking process. It has been an example of Laurel Richardson's sensemaking in writing as a method of inquiry. "Writing is ... a way of knowing – a method of discovery and analysis" (p. 923). Weick's version of this stems from Graham Wallas who said "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?" (p. 12). During the panel I said things that intrigued and even surprised me. I used writing to organize my sensemaking, and now the readers are part of this process. Duranti and Goodwin assert "the notion of context stands at the cutting edge of contemporary research" (p. 32). They stress that context and talk shape each other in mutual reflexivity. In this paper I use narratives to bring the reader into the context of the talk, and to elaborate on how the context and talk were interactive elements of sensemaking. My reflections on the storied moments and at the end of this paper are not final conclusions because understanding is multifaceted, on going and ambiguous. Mary Catherine Bateson writes about allowing oneself to be open to "peripheral vision" rather than reducing questions to single answers. She suggests stories that stem from our reflections are a style of learning based on our every day experiences. "The process of spiraling through memory to weave connection out of incident is basic to learning" (p. 11). So the

sensemaking in this paper has been a learning experience for me and I offer it to the readers as a learning experience.

I have been conscious of Weick's properties of sensemaking during my writing as inquiry, and I tried to draw the reader's attention to those properties by sharing various moments that demonstrate: Identity, Retrospect, Enactment, Social, Ongoing, Extracted from Cues, Plausibility. I worked on organizing my retrospective view of the panel and our research relationships into a coherent presentation. The process for all the panelists, the audience and the readers is on going and part of a social process for us and now for the readers. As Goffman proposes, bystanders are not just bystanders. "The primary perspectives, natural and social, available to members of a society such as ours, affect more than merely the participants in an activity; bystanders who merely look are deeply involved too" (p. 38). The "bystanders" or audience of the panel were not just bystanders and the readers of this paper are not just passive bystanders. WE are all part of the spiraling sensemaking process.

The moments I shared in this paper are grounded in the construction of identity, construction through the process of interaction. As researchers we interacted with our partners during the project, and as panelists we interacted with each other and the audience. I began to find a sense of consistency, and coherence as a researcher in the interactions and in process of writing. Weick stresses the sensemaking *process*, where there is no result to the process only moments that we codetermine (pp. 32-33). Simply stated, "People create their environments as those environments create them" (Weick, p. 34). This paper addressed enactment on many levels of that sensemaking property. The narrative moments also showed clear examples of interruptions or disruptions that created breaches in the on going flow -- often with emotional reactions. (p. 44).



I used the narrative methodology to represent the retrospective enactment of the social process of interaction. These moments are extracted cues or context that I saw as sensemaking by those involved in the panel or audience, as well as moments that were plausible to me. In the process of writing I endeavored to make these cues plausible to the readers. These cues or moments are what Weick calls the “seeds” from which people develop a larger sense of what’s happening (p. 50). My narrative moments show that the audience comments were a significant part of my sensemaking. Dr. Dishna particularly validated the plausibility of the panelists’ descriptions of building research relationships.

I have re-read my stories and they seem plausible, but I acknowledge that these are written through my own filters. I have extracted moments of cues that are somehow linked to other ideas, feelings, or things I think are important. Accuracy is not the goal but rather plausibility as I share my sensemaking about the sensemaking of others in our social interaction. It all will continue to shift for a long time after I have written the stories and this paper; however, Weick’s description of a story served as my concluding assessment of success: “A good story like a workable cause map, shows patterns that may already exist in puzzles an actor now faces, or patterns that could be created anew in the interest of more order and sense in the future. The stories are templates. They are products of previous efforts at sensemaking. They explain. And they energize” (Weick, p. 61).

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