Untold Stories: Valuing Women's Contributions to Community Life in Kamloops, British Columbia

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Women's contributions to community life are often overlooked. This study aims to document the stories of women's participation and contribution to community life in the Kamloops area, from 1920 to present. Women who played a prominent role were invited to share their stories of helping to create and sustain women-centered organizations, many of which continue to exist today.

Although sporadic attempts have been made over the years to collect the stories of women involved in community, no systematic effort has been made to document their stories. Too often we fail to honour women because they are not in traditional leadership roles – they are not often elected representatives or the head of their chosen profession. Today many of the women who were deeply involved in the creation of many women-centered organizations are aging, moving away, and dying. Because many of these women are in their eighties and nineties, the time to hear them tell their stories is now.

The community-based research project discussed here is led by the Kamloops Women's Resource Group Society (KWRGS), which provides a unique opportunity for women volunteers (65 years of age and older) to identify, invite, interview and document women's stories of community. The goal of this project is to honour women aged 65 years and older from all backgrounds in virtually every area of human endeavour: sports, agriculture, technological innovation, scholarship and academia, politics and government, the arts and business, to name just a few. By drawing attention to the many extraordinary achievements, past and present, of ordinary women in Kamloops, the project aims not only to raise awareness among Canadians but also, to inspire future generations to make history. The results of this study will provide insight into the capacity of so many women who, across such a diverse society, are able to make positive changes and leave legacies of community service that continue to have lasting effects on our communities and lives today.

Community Involvement

Definitions of community are many, varied and contested (Dominelli 2006). Women were neglected in community work discourses until Marjorie Mayo (1977) highlighted the relevance of gender. Women

have always participated in community activities, but their significance has been diminished in favour of men's actions. In community work, leadership roles tend to be assumed by men while women adopt the supporting roles (Dominelli 1990). The unpaid contributions of women to community care and their place in the community have been assumed for several decades (Dominelli 2006). Women have remained undaunted by the obstacles they face in reaching equality and providing their families with a better quality of life, and continue to work to create a better world (Dominelli 2006). Among them are women whose strengths inspire us through their dreams of change.

The project activities include volunteers in a number of areas. Volunteering is defined as "an activity intended to help others, it is not done primarily for monetary compensation or material gain, and it is not based on obligation" (Denton et al. 1999). Volunteers were involved in the creation of a community advisory; consultation with community groups; development of an interview team comprised of women to document women's stories; conducting interview meetings; transcribing stories; writing up stories; education and sharing women's stories within the Society and the general public; and involvement with all participants in reporting and dissemination of the stories. In discussion with the women involved in this project, we found women volunteers state that:

> …you volunteer just because, you volunteer from parental role models, you volunteer for others, you enjoy what you do, it's fun, busy, keeps you going…

This project makes an important difference in community life by encouraging women to remain involved in our community. The importance of telling our stories and documenting women's lives and work provide value for individuals by validating, sharing, and promoting their contributions, by creating educational opportunities, by documenting examples and models for evaluation and celebrating successes, and by providing visual, audio, and printed testimonies to inform future policy-making. The project enhances lifelong learning and participation in community through the use of the Society's networking meetings.

The stories told by women involved in this project are shared in written media releases, reproducible images (digital, photo and video) and visual stories. The compiling and disseminating of the stories and the impacts will be shared with community partners, including the Kamloops Museum and other appropriate parties. The Kamloops Women's Resource Group Society will archive and publish the stories. The results will contribute to creating stronger networks and associations between community members, community organizations, and governments, and improve our community's ability to understand our present by sharing stories of our past.

Nomination Process

The Kamloops Women's Resource Group Society invited the community to submit nominations of women over 65 years of age who were central figures in helping to create and sustain community organizations. A Steering Committee led by women (over 50 years of age) selected from all the nominations the 12 women to be interviewed. Nominees not chosen have been archived for possible future projects. The project and the process honour and appreciate senior women, their skills, experiences and wisdom.

The project coordinator organized training workshops for volunteers (over 50 years of age) on interviewing skills, transcription, and videotaping skills. Volunteers working in small groups documented the stories of the 12 women participants. The work involved conducting in-depth interviews using various tools such as video cameras, digital photographs, visual art images, and tape recorders. Volunteer transcribed the videotaped interviews. Writers reviewed videotaped interviews, transcripts and compiled letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings. All documentation and material was collected in both print and video to share with the public.

Data Collection and Research Partnerships

Feminist researchers have long been attracted by the ideals and methodologies developed in the "participatory research" and "participatory action research" (commonly known as PAR) traditions. Broadly speaking, these traditions, based in the liberation politics of the 1960s, are committed to the emancipation of marginalized and oppressed groups. Consequently, in their research they honour the principles of respecting, valuing and bringing into the foreground the lived experience and indigenous knowledge of those being researched. They also try to develop methods and models of research practice that minimize hierarchical relationships between researchers and researched, and that involve a genuinely collaborative approach throughout all stages of the research process (Reason 1994).

Participatory *action* research carries with it the additional requirement of actually working with the participants to help them *effect* change. While embracing these principles, feminist researchers have shown that PAR traditionally lacked an awareness of how masculine conceptions of knowledge and gender dynamics within the research process itself impeded the "foregrounding" (meaning, bringing to the forefront) of women's experience and the full participation of research subjects. Feminists have also emphasized that participatory research must be an empowering process for the researched, who are said to become "co-subjects." This means that as well as co-directing the research process, the participants jointly "own" the products of the research. Such democratization of the research endeavour is supposed to foster or reinforce a belief among the research subjects that they can be agents of social change.

Qualitative interview guides were developed that could be adapted en route; this flexibility offers scope for making one's organizing frameworks sensitive to the meanings and issues raised by the interviewee. Qualitative methodologies are seen as less structured and consequently more *flexible*: For example, as mentioned above, the interviewer can modify the interview process to explore in more depth aspects deemed important by the interviewee, which means that any and all of the data collected can be considered important even if this does not correspond to initial "hunches" of the team. Feminist standpoint theorists tend to be more favourably disposed toward qualitative methods because, in principle, they allow women to be "experts" about their own experiences and to "correct" the researcher when questions are on the wrong tack. For example, every woman's story was read, corrected and approved by each of the 12 women participants.

In-depth interviews were conducted with all 12 women participants to learn about their community involvement. In some cases more than one interview was carried out to gather this information. Participants were asked to provide consent for the information collected and compiled for the project, which included written work, DVD material and photographs. The purpose of collecting this material was to honour the community work performed by women participants over the course of their lifetime. All participants were invited to review all of the information provided in written and video format prior to being published. Sample exploratory interview questions were developed to learn about women's community involvement, the reasons for their work, and the process for how they became involved at different periods of time.

A partnership was strengthened through this project between social work and visual arts faculty and community agencies. Panet-Raymond and Bourque define partnership (1991: 9-10) as "an egalitarian and equitable relationship between two different kinds of groups, with different missions, activities, resources and operating methods. In this relationship, each partner makes a different contribution but both consider each contribution to be equally important. Genuine partnership, therefore, is based on respect for and mutual recognition of the contributions of the partners in an interdependent relationship." In this context, the goal of the partnership becomes "an exchange of different kinds of services and/or resources that are recognized to be of equal importance or value by the partners involved." The same authors (1991:10) contrast this model of partnership with "paternal-ship," in which "relationships are unequal and the objective is generally domination." In the entirely different context of research undertaken in New Zealand (Park 1992: 582), the term "partnership" does

not necessarily imply that the partners are equal but that the relationship is a joint commitment based on negotiation.

Characteristics of Women's Groups Representatives

The women volunteers who participated in the project had a personal interest in the theme of the project in which they were involved. It was important for all the stakeholders to have compatible personalities, to be able to acknowledge and recognize their respective skills and to be open and clear in their actions. It is clear that the criteria for a successful research partnership are based in very large part on the *qualities* of the people involved. Aside from personal qualities, the quality of the relationships among the various partners also ensured the success of the experience. Real partnerships between research teams and community groups require the involvement of both from the beginning and at each successive stage of the research project. The partners must have an egalitarian and complementary relationship. Every woman involved in the project valued the process of honouring women's achievements and contributions to community life.

The process of this participatory project honours women's skills, experience and wisdom in support of social well-being and quality of life in the community. The project aims to share the best practices of women who have remained involved in community life throughout their lives. Opportunities for volunteering, mentorship and leadership training were created for women of many generations through the Society.

Artist as Researcher

Artwork was developed as part of the project in response to the lived experiences of women's stories. "The aim of research in the visual arts, as in other similar forms of exploratory inquiry, is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and consolidate" (Sullivan 2005). The involvement of an artist/researcher allowed for the creation of a visual statement that does not simply illustrate the women, but reveals them as larger than life. The women as they were interviewed for this project often stated that they were "just" housewives or "just" mothers or were "just" doing what needed to be done, thus diminishing their contributions. The larger than life images of the women are meant to emphasise the significance of their contributions to contradict notions that their involvement in the community has been insignificant.

Each of the 12 women was visited and photographed individually. Meeting with all 12 women allowed for the comparison and contrast of their stories and achievements. Before meeting with each of the women, the artist/researcher prepared by reading the woman's their biography, and when possible by, reading the transcripts from the videotaped interviews. The women were photographed in their home or yard so that visual surroundings could provide clues about what they perceived as important to them and this could be included, as well as their personality, interests, and accomplishments. With the photographs it was possible to make digital enlargements to more than life-size scale, usually 40 inches x 115" It is impossible to dismiss the larger-than-life-size images of the women and the scale of the photographs allows access to the presence of the women in unexpected ways. Using graphics software, the large images were divided into tiles and parts and then stencils were created for screen-printing. The women's images were pieced back together during the printing process as the sections were printed side by side on transparent drapery fabric panels. Each print has a discernible grid, reminiscent of quilting quilt-making.

What became apparent in the process of making the screen print was that the method of preparing the image for printing, replicates by analogy, the methodical and repetitive work done by

many of the women over their lifetime, in activities such as quilting and needlework, the daily chores, and housework. Marking the women's images with a quilt-like grid bears witness to the patchwork of roles they have performed for their families and communities. Each woman is the sum of many and diverse parts.

Printing on fabric that stretches and moves and receives the ink unpredictably is a process of embracing and coming to terms with imperfection and disappointment. From the inevitability of imperfection, emerge the possibilities for transcendence, realized through insights about one of the women or by "happy accidents" that occur in the process of printing. There is only one chance to make the print work and because of this, the artist/researcher has to relinquish the degree of control that usually accompanies printmaking and the creation of identical multiples. Normally the printmaking process results in several original prints and only those that meet rigorous standards are included in the edition.

The process of screen-printing, as used in the project, is comparable to painting. The process leaves a mark—from a moiré pattern, variations in ink coverage, intensity, degraded stencils, mis-registration, or any other number of incidental marks problems that are inherent to screen-printing and are often considered flaws—the way that a brush leaves a signature mark in painting. The mark signifies not failure but is analogous to the process of work in to women's lives: a continuous coming to terms and persevering.

The screen prints are designed to be suspended in a space wherein they are separate from each other but overlap and are visible from all directions, allowing sightlines through the transparent material and intensifying the images in areas where they overlap. As the viewer moves around and between the suspended images, the women visually meld into each other. The overlap and interplay of the images is revealing in light of Joanna Isaak's statement, "One woman's work or words lead onto or enable the next woman to work or speak" (247:9). The work that the women in the Untold Stories Project have done will only have the capacity to "lead or enable" if it is recognized and made available to others. The work of an artist/researcher adds to the multifaceted research methods and approaches used to collect and communicate the stories of the 12 women.

Reflections

This paper discusses an innovative community development project that aims to document women's stories of community involvement. The continuing role of women in a community's growth and development has become increasingly important today. Through women's experiences it is possible to explore and to document the developments in community work in a small city. By linking historical material to the present, the project aspires to publish women's untold stories in order to enhance the quality of life at the individual and community levels. The Kamloops Women's Resource Group Society hopes to further document women's stories of community involvement across the lifespan of Kamloops women and to develop resources for building more socially cohesive communities that promote egalitarian social relations.

Acknowledgments

Refernces

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