



On Being Open and Vulnerable

Katherine Cloutier, Michigan State University

Shari Murgittroyd, LMSW, Michigan State University

Allegra Smith, Michigan State University

Sharon Marie Hakim, SCRA Mini-Grant Team

A Story of Reclaiming

Video available from: <http://vimeo.com/61563396>

The Community Mini-Grant was founded in 2010 with the intention of supporting small, time-sensitive community-based projects that are consistent with SCRA's mission, principles, and goals. We are happy to support the great work being done by SCRA members and their community partners, and even happier to be able to highlight examples of this work and share them with the GJCPP readership. Below, Katherine Cloutier provides us with personal reflections from a research project focused on sexual assault on a college campus. The Community Mini-Grant contributed significantly to the dissemination of the research, which took the form of a digital story showcasing event. This method of dissemination is described throughout the piece below.

Sexual assault throughout college communities is a problem that cannot be ignored any longer given the high rates among university students in the U.S., especially women. When women reach college, approximately 20% of them will experience sexual assault (Krebs, Lindquist, Warner, Fisher, & Martin, 2007). It is a challenging topic to address, a controversial one. Fully

addressing the topic requires a level of confrontation that is not always supported by those around you, but one that should not be tip toed about. When stepping into the role of researcher for a topic such as this, I've found that your qualifications are assessed at a *different* level. Your capacity to handle issues of ethics and confidentiality are questioned, and your *intentions* with campus affiliations all of a sudden seem *suspicious*. Further, these points of tension arise from a just standpoint, one that is concerned about the survivor community; and rightfully so. While these points of friction influence the research and outreach processes, they *are* something to be grateful for. Because I am one person, one researcher, one woman, and addressing all of these possibilities on my own is a challenging, nay impossible, feat. Systems such as review boards, faculty and programmatic support, and collaborative partnerships may present road blocks, but I must stress, such apprehensions from the surrounding systems are merely speed bumps, and should never dismantle *any* such initiative. They serve to strengthen them.

I applied for the SCRA Community Mini-Grant to support my thesis project *Exploring Diversity through Photovoice: Building a Contextually Informed Response System to Sexual Violence*. A portion of the funds was to be used for the dissemination portion of the project, the viewing of a digital story. Photovoice is a method that enables participants to take photos and write narratives in response to brief questions. What did this process look like for my thesis project? Survivors of sexual violence from the Michigan State University campus taking photos and writing narratives about their lived experiences of rape and sexual assault. At the end of the project the participants (survivors of sexual violence) themselves assembled the photos and narratives and created a digital story, a video compilation of their lived realities. This digital story was shown at two different events, planned by myself and the participants. One event was a tightly knit survivor community of other survivors, campus-community activists, allies; the other event was open to the entirety of MSU. Program developers, administrators, professors, students, survivors, anyone.

The events. The events were mobilizing. I was moved, the participants were moved, and some audience members were moved to the point of tears. Undoubtedly some were maybe angry, uncomfortable, nervous. And efforts were made to address the range of feelings that were likely to occur. Specifically, a sexual assault therapist was at each event in the case that the digital story would be a trigger for audience members. This sexual assault therapist was involved in *every* aspect of the project: She was present during every meeting throughout the entire project (the regular Photovoice meetings as well as the digital story events); she was involved in the planning as well as the showcase events; she sat in an adjacent room that participants could walk to within 7 seconds. This woman, clinically licensed in the state of Michigan, has an extensive background in trauma response and crisis intervention. We had an extra facilitator (a colleague from my community psychology graduate program) present during every step in order to *assist* participants during these 7 seconds if necessary. In fact many similar precautions were taken. The 'framing questions' which participants responded to through photos and narratives were carefully framed in a way that didn't force participants to talk about their personal experiences of sexual violence, but rather allowed for a global perspective of sexual violence (i.e. Asking *What is most helpful to someone after they have experienced assault?* rather than *What was most helpful to you after you were assaulted?*). Participants were frequently encouraged to consider the implications of sharing their stories, good and bad. When participants created self-portraits they were discussed at length to emphasize that these photos need not be included in the digital story. That decision was up to them. But returning to that initial point now: Partnership. The partnership with the sexual assault therapist was critical, and I couldn't have been more grateful

for her presence, support, and encouragement. Because I am not a therapist, and I am not going to imagine that I can fulfill even a remotely similar role. Partnership is essential and adds a sense of wholesomeness to such initiatives. It forces every project contributor to own their positions within the project, to address their perspectives, strengths, weaknesses, and skills. On participatory research and partnerships, one of the project collaborators commented:

Participatory research methods for survivors of violence is an ideal practice for individuals to regain a sense of power and control in their lives—a critical component of the healing process. How fabulous that research can actually inform practice for trauma professionals and facilitate the healing process for participants. More traditional forms of research related to violence against women have been fraught with layers of precautions in the name of protecting subjects, yet still seem somewhat invasive during data collection, and with a clear power differential between the researcher and participant. Empowering participants to choose the medium in which they tell their story, with whom they wish to share their story, and establish their goals for impact at the systemic or community level just feels right. Of course this is how it should be done. And what a surprise for survivors—a method where they get to call the shots, they decide who and where and when. They are empowered.

Collaborative connections among service providers and researchers are imperative for a quality multidisciplinary response to victims of violence and sound methodology. Of course we've known this best practice for quite some time, but it is important to keep it in the forefront of service development and outreach. It is remarkable how quickly relationships become strained when politics and ego are determining interest or investment in service provision, education, and research. Ethical practice and relationships are compromised when the human service population is no longer at the forefront of our planning, actions, and implementation. How do we hold professionals accountable for making decisions based on their own vested interest or livelihood versus decisions for our service population...our campus community, vulnerable populations, individuals who have been traumatized? Team building and multidisciplinary consortiums can be extremely effective, but politics/egos within those bodies still compromise the overall effectiveness of the teams. In my opinion, the biggest obstacle to effective and ethical service provision for trauma survivors lies in the ignorance of unintended first responders and the upper administration creating policies to address sexual violence. Collaborative efforts can help bridge gaps in education and ethical decision making, but only to the degree that individuals in power are open to changing their world view and the mores they are accustomed to. We live in a culture that blames the victim and justifies perpetrator behavior. Without doing our own work and striving for education and social change, current cultural values will pervade and inform community response. Human beings are doing this work. Human beings who are still evolving and may not yet possess capacity for self-awareness and how actions impact others. Community collaborations can inform our actions and shape policies to implement ethically sound services and research methodology.

Back to ethics. Protecting participants? Protecting survivors? Concern for survivors in the larger community who come to view the digital story? Yes, hell yes. No doubt the ultimate and greatest concern. But guess what? We're talking about grown women who are inevitably at a relatively focused point of their healing. Absolutely researchers should take every precaution to

minimize potential risk among the participants. But never should these precautions *inhibit* participants; women who have the ability to influence the extent of disclosure and confidentiality that illustrates their participation in a project. Women who have been the most integral aspect of their own healing.

And so self-portraits *were* created. Self-portraits were bravely (and in some instances without a second thought) included in the digital story. Self-portraits were projected onto large screens, in front of large audiences. And these *selves* were there, they were present. And what did they do? They stood up, and said “Yea, that’s me. And there’s more I’d like to say.” Some of these women didn’t sit in the audience as spectators; they sat in the front row. They spoke, in some instance they were practically yelling. To have hidden their identity, their participation, would have been, well, impossible and completely inorganic. From the words of one of these brave women:

Being a part of this Photovoice research project has offered the opportunity for growth and change not just to the Michigan State University community, but also for each of us six participants. This study has helped me to re-examine my assault experience, and also equipped me with the awareness and the solidarity with my fellow survivors to be more cognizant and accepting of my own reactions when I was assaulted for a second time, six months after the project ended. It is because of this Photovoice study that I am able to make peace with my brokenness. I now know how absolutely essential it is to share the diverse experiences of sexual assault survivors with the campus community, so that we may recognize that there is no one "right" or "appropriate" reaction to sexual violence. I hope that our words and images can be used to raise this awareness, and to dismantle stereotypes and stigma surrounding these experiences.

So what am I trying to say here? I am saying that the push back, the overwhelming attention to detail, the precautionary efforts to minimize the risk to participants and survivors at large, the lengthy process of IRB that inevitably occurred, the lack of support from certain individuals along the way. Thank you. The project wouldn’t have been as strong without all of these things. But again, I am one woman, working with six female survivors, an extra facilitator, a sexual assault therapist, and a stellar committee and committee chair. I had the support of a campus coalition (Violence Free Communities), and together we all addressed and anticipated every instance of ethics and risk *we could come up with*. And I am sure we may have missed some along the way. But there comes a point when you have to loosen that belt of control, and open yourself up. Open up completely, organically. Open up for people to share their stories, open yourself up to critique, become vulnerable to those around you, your colleagues, other survivors. Just be open and embrace the fact that you cannot control *everything*. In fact, it is much more beautiful when you give that up a little bit. You must trust participants, and they must trust you. You must be open, you must be exposed, and must must must be comfortable with being uncomfortable. You will stay in an arrested position otherwise. No one can be 100% prepared or in control, you’re kidding yourself to think otherwise. You’re doing a disservice to your participants. Because believing that you can be in such control indirectly assumes they cannot. It’s dishonest, disingenuous.

Remember...

As graduate students, developing community psychologists, don’t be afraid to admit to your partners or educators, to those around you that yes, you have a lot to learn, that’s why you are

where you are. But it is okay to remind those same people that you may know a little more about certain topics than they had previously assumed. No matter what the surrounding perspectives, you're going to make people think. Be open, be vulnerable.

Acknowledgments

A note of gratitude to the participants in the Photovoice project, my Master's Thesis committee and committee chair, the partnership coalition, the project partners including the sexual assault therapist and community psychology colleague, as well as the contributing campus programs. Finally, a special thank you to the two contributing co-authors on this article: Allegra Smith, a participant in the Photovoice project, and one of the partner coalition members.

SCRA Community Mini-Grant

Applications for the second round of SCRA Community Mini-Grant funding will be considered starting July 1st, 2013. The maximum award is \$1200 and all SCRA members are invited to apply for funding in conjunction with their community and organizational partners. Applications are available on the SCRA website (www.scra27.org/practice); all project proposals will be considered as long as they are submitted within 2 months of their start date. We especially encourage applications from international members. For questions or more information, please email: SCRACommunityGrants@gmail.com

References

Krebs, C., Lindquist, C., Warner, T., Fisher, B., Martin, S. The campus sexual assault study final report xiii, 5-5. (National Criminal Justice Reference Service, Oct. 2007), *available at* <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/221153.pdf>.