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We've Got Nothing/Everything to Lose: Lessons Learned from an Anti-poverty Action Research Project

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Abstract: This paper explores my efforts as a feminist activist scholar working with a group of poor women engaged in creating, on their own terms, a viable economic venture. Negotiating through this landscape marked by different class, race, status and institutional locations illuminates the challenges to conducting research and establishing relationships of solidarity.

Point of entry....

I have been exploring what it means to recognize and utilize one's privilege and location as an academic researcher and to work toward collaborative, participatory and action-oriented adult education research built on principles of solidarity and coalition-building. This paper is an effort to provide more detailed and field-based accounts of the relational elements of collaborative research, to explore what it means to include oneself in the research, and what it means to be critically self reflexive. The title of this paper comes from an exchange I had with one of the members of the collective I have been working with for the past three years. I had given some feedback on the 'viability' of one of the ideas they were pursuing suggesting that their idea might not work because they could not compete with what was already available in the larger market. There was an awkward series of exchanges and finally Amanda, the leader of the group, made it clear that my comment had upset her. She reminded me that as poor women caught up in the web of legislated poverty they had nothing to lose by trying some of these ideas, except perhaps their hope of a different future. I keep returning to this moment, along with many others, and reflecting on how they can inform my understandings of how to build respectful relationship with this group. I view these episodes as part of a dance we (myself and the group members) are being choreographed by structures and ideologies sometimes invisible to us, and are choreographing our own project using our passions, vision and commitment. My hope is to use this re/view to engage in a conversation with others also interested in stories about the struggles to work collaboratively and in solidarity with communities of people outside the academy who face significant barriers to being acknowledged as citizens in their own communities and nation states.

As I work with these women and reflect on the different moments of conflict and of connection, I have experienced important insights into understanding their experience, my relationship with them, and what it means to it bring one's activist orientation to research based on relations of solidarity. I have found the literature on community-based research somewhat limited and the adult education and feminist action research literature more helpful, but currently most of my

insights have been supported by a number of authors who have engaged in a critical analysis of democracy, difference, what it means to listen across difference. I will return to these authors' ideas later on in the paper. In addition to opening up space for me to understand my role as researcher/activist/feminist/mentor, I have learned much in the project about what it means to be poor in a rich country, about how repressive and cruel the current trends in welfare reform have been. This project has illuminated for me how citizenship and democracy are thought about and who gets included at a time when social welfare and lifelong learning politics are reduced to a brutal kind of economic rationality that is supported by a rabid form of bootstrap mentality. I think about what it means for an academic to build respectful relationships with women who face significant hurdles to finding social and economic security. My connections with the group create spaces where our common humanity and desires are revealed. I have also been reminded of the fragility of our relationships and the wide gulf between us. This moment along with many others takes me to a place where I must evaluate my own intentions and somewhat romantic notions of what it means to build alliances. I also need to develop ways to sustain my commitment to community-based research and building alliances within the traditional structures of the university where my relationship with these women does not fit narrow notions of scholarship.

Coming together...

This project and my relationship with the women, particularly the leader of the collective, Amanda, is ongoing and still very much alive. It seems best to start by giving a brief introduction to how I connected with this group, the members of the collective, what we/they have been doing. Three years ago I was contracted by a joint committee of the provincial and federal government to prepare a summary report based on a review of a wide variety of evaluation studies (mostly government funded) of welfare-to-work programs. My job was to review these reports and identify what elements of programs seemed effective in supporting welfare clients to leave welfare and find paid work, with a particular focus on single mothers. Frustrated with the lack of feminist analysis and lack of studies where the perspectives of single mothers on welfare were included, I held a day-long focus group with eight single mothers on income assistance, with the help of a local anti-poverty organization. I submitted my report, including the ideas expressed by the women at that meeting, to the government committee and gave copies to the anti-poverty organization and all those who had attended the day long session. Not surprisingly, there was little government action taken on my recommendations. Arguments grounded in a critical feminist analysis do not fit well with the dominant policy framework driven by fiscal restraint and a tendency to focus almost entirely on the goal of efficiency and reducing welfare roles. But there were other outcomes. Two of the women from the focus group contacted me a few months later inviting me to a meeting in their housing complex where they were exploring the creation of an anti-poverty group. I have been linked to this group since then but my key relationship is with Amanda, the one who initiates, persists and sustains the group.

The group had a variety of ideas about how I could be helpful to them and over the last three years I have occupied a number of roles within the group. These roles have always been determined through a dynamic negotiation between myself and the group which has had significant change in membership, except for the group leader, Amanda and her mother Anne. I have used research funds to purchase computers and internet access, to provide short-term

training to help the members use these tools. I also bought books and supplies and shared with them much of the academic literature I have used in my teaching and research that explores welfare policy reform, participatory action research, and community development. I helped the group make links with various resource people, and have looked for sources of funding for them. I have traveled with them on field trips to visit other poor women's collectives and sold gift baskets the group had made to my academic colleagues to raise funds to support further initiatives of the group. Two members of the group joined me in making presentations at a welfare policy workshop and I am presenting with one of the group members at an upcoming academic conference. I have also had Amanda come and speak to a graduate class about using the internet as a site of anti-poverty and anti-globalization organizing.

As someone who has access to funding, who knows the academic territory, I have also been conscious of creating ways for the group to develop their own capacity to conduct research. I must be constantly vigilant about creating new relations of dependency. It often feels good to be useful and wanted, but there is a cost. I have attempted to be as transparent as possible with my interests and the imperatives I face in the academy in relation to conducting research and publishing. I have had conversations where the women have noted that we both occupy marginal spaces. Although I live in a material world of abundance relative to their struggles, my untenured, junior status in the university along with my commitment to work with and in community, positions me somewhere in-between their world and the academy. Rather than bemoan my work on the borders, I have come to appreciate that it is a useful location from which to see how institutions are powerful organizers of experience and opportunity.

The group has explored a wide variety of income-generating activities and the possibilities of undertaking such initiatives as a collective, rather than as individuals entering the market place and competing with each other for jobs. Some of the ideas they have explored include making products to sell (e.g. gift baskets with homemade jams), setting up a communal kitchen, establishing a cooperative 'flea market' where the group would rent or purchase space and for a small fee, rent tables and space for other groups to sell products and recycled items. At this stage, they have decided to focus their energies on developing a fairtrade cooperative venture where they would sell products made by women's cooperatives in Central America using the internet. They have made connections through the internet with several women's cooperatives in Central and South America. More recently they joined forces with a Latin American organization which is also interested in fairtrade practices, particularly the creation of a coffee cooperative. The group has also attempted to articulate some principles upon which to base their work. They want to work collectively, rather than as individuals, competing for space in the market; they want to engage in activities that respect and honor women's work, particularly the unpaid and invisible work of caring for children and families; they want to work with dignity and challenge the poor-bashing that creates isolation and divides those on welfare into the deserving and undeserving poor.

It is also crucial to emphasize that this group has strong differences of opinion, they have had conflicts with some members leaving. This diversity and the group's struggles to achieve consensus illustrates how poverty is not the same experience for everyone. Some have a very strong class analysis and bring a feminist Marxist critique of welfare and capitalism; others see the market as an opportunity to be grasped. One of the key lessons I have learned in working

with this group is how easy it is to impose one's middle class and romantic notions about anti-poverty organizing on this group. As Amanda has noted, the thing that keeps them going, that in spite of their differences keeps them working together, is their desire to get out of poverty and bring in some income. Given their daily struggles to keep mind and body together, there is little energy and space left to engage in non-local anti-poverty activism, to imagine how their concerns fit with disruptions to post-industrial globalized capitalism. Their hopes and desires are grounded in their everyday lived reality, not in abstract notions of class struggle.

What has been a strong thread woven throughout their activities, trials and experiments with different ideas, is self-determination, that is, they want to find a path out of poverty *on their own terms*, not on terms dictated by the rules and regulations of welfare or other policies. But once again, it is important not to assume there is a common understanding of what self-determination means. For example, some group members have encountered and utilized resources and programs within the borders of the social welfare system and find these programs useful. Others have been through the various requirements of the system and view it as corrupt, with little to offer them. The strings attached to resources that are available limit their movement, their hopes and keep them tied to a system that monitors their daily existence. A substantial amount of energy has been directed toward finding funding sources outside of the narrow range of options available in the current welfare-to-work system. The continual surveillance that they live with under current welfare regulation together with the monitoring that they would have to submit to if they participated in other welfare-to-work programs is one of the dominant images I am left with in working on this project. Turning the gaze around is one of the ways this group finds some energy, but it has costs and benefits. The more they/we engage in a critical analysis of the structures of oppression, the more they/we can resist and create spaces; the more clearly they/we understand the repressive character of the welfare and economic system, the more it seems hopeless to fight and resist.

Connecting the dots...

The larger context in which my collaboration with this group is situated is welfare reform. Adult learning has become a central tool utilized by 'welfare to work' policy reformers-reforms that are dominated by concerns with expenditure reduction and poor-bashing ideologies that reflect rather rabid forms of individualism and blame-the-victim views of poverty. Adult learning is also central to anti-poverty efforts that challenge and disrupt these practices. This study situates itself in that contradictory space-where adult education is implicated in disciplinary measures that are part of welfare-to-work practices and is at the heart of efforts to resist such repressive measures. Activism and advocacy are important elements of this resistance. In this research project, I am interested in bringing these orientations and commitments to developing an activist-oriented research process, which is exploring the learning that is central to their/our/my activism.

Participatory action research (PAR) and community-based research (CBR) are familiar approaches to the field of both adult education as well as feminist scholarship. Sometimes it is useful to identify this project using these categories. However, the methodological concerns in this project are not simply a means to an end, or a way to explore a series of research questions. The methodology of this project is as much in the foreground of the study as are concerns with investigating the policy context, learning opportunities and paths taken by a group of low-income

women seeking ways to create an economically viable, collectively oriented, and non-exploitative venture. In general, I find the term 'action' as a qualifier to the process of research to be far too vague. What kind of action, with whom, and toward what ends, are questions I have when thinking about this project and in exploring the literature. As someone who attempts to weave into my academic work, a feminist and social justice orientation, it makes more sense and seems more honest to use the term 'activist' to qualify my research.

As I pursue this project of critical self reflexivity and my search for more meaningful and honest ways to describe my 'walk and talk', I look for ideas that help me make sense of my stumbles. I am frustrated with facile references to the importance of self-reflexivity and impatient with a kind of 'recipe' discourse that does not offer detailed documentation of what a critically self-reflexive process actually involves. I search for ideas and discussions that do not avoid asking hard questions about relationships, difference and privilege. Where I have found the most resonance with my work and experiences of conflict and connection in this project is with Susan Bidkford's (1996) explorations of what she calls 'political listening'. Building on the work of Hannah Arendt, she argues for solidarity, rather than compassion, as the basis upon which to build democratic governance, processes and institutions. I would expand her argument to include solidarity as a principle for democratically-oriented research. Compassion according to Arendt is another way to describe co-suffering, which refers to "... identifying with and feeling the suffering of others" (p. 76). The danger of this approach, Arendt argues, is that it "erases any distinction between people" and thus can be perverted into pity, which is anti-political because attention is directed toward those who are suffering rather than persuasion and discussion which are the essence of politics. Solidarity, on the other hand is not a *feeling* like compassion, rather it is a *principle* whereupon a community of interest is established with the oppressed. The focus is not on individuals, rather it is on what is between us.

Solidarity ... treats the oppressed as actors and equals, not merely as victims. Solidarity means regarding others as capable of taking an interest in the world and speaking for themselves, capable of political action, and therefore meant to be listened to and not simply cared for. In other words, the action that solidarity guides is *how we pay attention to one another* [my emphasis]. (p. 79)

Respect is key, for Arendt, to how we pay attention to one another. "What love is in its own, narrowly circumscribed sphere, respect is in the larger domain of human affairs...it is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem" (p. 80). Respect, for Arendt, is central to political action, as are forgiving and promising. Promises are necessary but fragile and risky and so, given the unpredictability of the political world in which no one can fully succeed, we need to forgive.

In closing...

As I reflect on my experiences with this project, on moments like the one mentioned at the beginning of this paper, I recognize that I must occupy a contradictory place, or at least a location of tension. In my efforts to listen, to understand my experiences as well as the members of this group, I must be cognizant of my desire to collapse the space between us, thus falling into

the danger of taking action based only on compassion. I am not as ready to dismiss compassion as key to solidarity work as perhaps Arendt was suggesting, but I take to heart her declaration that solidarity is the principle for this kind of work. I have witnessed how these women are capable of taking an interest in the world and speaking for themselves, that they are capable of and have undertaken political action. I must be honest and say that I did not begin this project with them with that *belief*, rather it was more in the realm of a *hypothesis*.

The more I listen, and monitor my desire to simply 'care for', the more space there is for the members of this group (and myself) to be constituted as actors and agents. Building relations of solidarity does not mean that I am silent when I worry about whether their ideas will fly, it means that I express these thoughts in relationship, and listen for their reactions and learn from these exchanges. Working in solidarity means that I make promises, realize that I cannot fully meet these promises and ask for forgiveness both from myself and others.

As I write this paper, I re-read Alcoff's (1991) article that outlined several questions to be asked about discursive practice. First she suggests that we interrogate the impetus to speak, indeed that we fight against it because it reflects a desire for mastery and domination. Have I, in speaking out in this paper, simply engaged in an effort to acquire mastery, to reposition myself as dominant? I cannot deny that the imperative to publish is closely tied to both of these objectives. My struggle is to engage in a discursive practice where I am sharing my reflections about my experiences and intentions for engaging in solidarity work with a group of poor women, being every vigilant of how this can reposition me as the one with legitimacy. I am left with a sense of both new understanding (mastery?) as well as a deep appreciation of my humanity and cravings for acknowledgement (humility?).

I have struggled in this paper to deal with the question of voice. I recognize in my writing, my discursive practice, that I have referred to the collective as 'them' and sometimes I have tried to bring myself/them I/we together. There is a tension here and perhaps the tension should not be viewed as a problem to be resolved, rather embraced or at least noted and pondered. Have I engaged in a kind of distancing of myself and others, have I produced, under the guise of preparing a critically reflexive account of my experiences with this group of women, a colonizing discourse? Michelle Fine (1994) speaks about working the hyphens, the place that separates and merges. My hope is that I may eventually contribute to the creation of texts that resist Othering, that are part of what Fine calls a set of critical conversations where "...qualitative social researchers [are] eroding fixed categories and provoking possibilities for qualitative research that is designed *against* Othering, for social justice, and pivoting identities of Self and Other *at* the hyphen" [author's emphasis] (p. 81).

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