



Reciprocal Peer Interviewing

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Abstract Feminist researchers are acutely aware of the difficulties facing researchers as they try to bridge social locational differences between interviewer and interviewee. What we call reciprocal peer interviewing offers a significant opportunity for interviewees to speak in their own voice and exercise control over the interview process. This paper reports on the application of this method to a study of women's contributions to provisioning within a low-income community. It involves women interviewing each other in dyads after both underwent a brief training session. The celebratory dinner that preceded the interview session had complementary effects but is not integral to the method. Comparable in some ways to focus group interviews, this method provided space for women to co-construct their experiences in response to the research questions. The qualities of the text produced through this dialogical form of active interviewing are illustrated and evaluated. Also examined are issues of interpretation and representation

Introduction

To conduct research from a feminist perspective involves delving into the multiple inequalities which structure women's lives (Cancian, 1992) in order to account for, as well as reveal, meaningful aspects of their everyday experiences (DeVault, 1990). At the same time, feminist researchers have long recognized the precarious position of the researcher who, in the act of speaking for others within the study, can easily reduce the capacity of women to speak for themselves (Treblicot, 1988). Olesen's (2008) review of feminist research led her to frame the problem as the "obdurate necessity to attend to representation, voice, and text in ways that avoid replication of the researcher and instead display participants' representations (p. 339);" she points to the need for an openness to new ways of conducting research.

This paper reports on the application of reciprocal peer interviewing as a method that offers an innovative approach to tackling the power inequities that mark the

different social locations of researcher and study participants. It involved women interviewing each other in dyads after both had undergone a brief training session. This method has much in common with several existing methods: focus group interviewing and participatory action research. It addresses the social locational difference between the researcher and those who are the focus of the research by withdrawing the researcher even further into the background during the data collection phase and giving freer reign to the verbal expression of women participants.

Recognizing the potential impact of social disparities on knowledge has led researchers to experiment with different ways of decreasing the social distance between 'the researcher' and 'the researched'. These innovations have ranged from general epistemological guidelines to specific practices. Self-reflexivity and collaborative research have been recommended as ways to develop awareness of the influence of power differentials, and take them into account, through engaging participants in various ways throughout the research process (Reinharz, 1992; Young, 2000). For some researchers (Campbell, Sefl, Wasco & Ahrens, 2003; Herzog, 2005), sensitivity to the needs of vulnerable women has meant allowing them an open-ended choice in the location of the interview. Researchers have engaged in ethnographic research to familiarize themselves with the social and cultural setting with the goal of increasing their sensitivity to the social context of interviewees (Taylor, 1998). Others have trained peer interviewers in attempts to connect with hard-to-reach populations, such as drug users, whose world is largely physically and linguistically inaccessible to outside interviewers (Elliott, Watson, & Harries, 2002).

Early feminist researchers gave specific attention to the nature of the social relationship between the researcher-as-interviewer and their women interviewees and sought ways to increase reciprocity in interviews through the active engagement of the interviewer (Bloom, 1997; Weems, 2006). Researchers such as Harding (1987) and Oakley (1981) as well as Reinharz (1992) advocated researcher self-disclosure as a basis for developing a close relationship with interviewees while, at the same time, they recognized how difficult this is to implement. In practice, researchers have found self-disclosure to be rewarding and facilitative of the research process but also a source of unanticipated ethical and practical challenges (Macdonald, 2003; Wahab, 2003).

The 'participatory model' of research advocated by early feminist researchers as a means of engaging in non-hierarchical research may not only be a monumental practical accomplishment but also may be an illusory goal (Cotterill, 1992). Continued critical reviews of the possibilities for bridging the social distance through rapport-building or reflexive strategies have led to increasing skepticism about the practical possibilities for doing so (Reinharz, 1993; Wasserfall, 1993; Rose, 1997; Rose, 2001). Such reassessments of reflexivity continue to emphasize the need for feminist research

to embody the goals of empowerment, non-exploitation and non-objectification, but call for practicing 'uncomfortable reflexivity' (Pillow, 2003). It has become clear that, even if the interviewer is from the same community and shares the same characteristics as the interviewee, the interviewer still remains in the privileged role of interviewer (Reid, 2000; Zigo, 2001; Boyd, forthcoming).

The standard research interview privileges the researcher as an interviewer who has control over her own self-presentation, allowing her to keep her personal views to herself, while calling for a public hearing of the interviewee's perspective (Cotterill, 1992). There is considerable evidence from research reports that interviewees are generally eager to find out personal information from interviewers and this can be interpreted, in part, as their efforts to reduce social distance. Boyd (2001) found that the women drug users she interviewed sought personal information from the researcher of a nature similar to some of the questions asked of them. Finch (1984) suggested that the types of direct questions asked by interviewees are a means to "place" the interviewer "as a woman and to establish that she is willing to be treated accordingly" (p. 79-80). In recognition of the inevitability of interviewees' questions, researchers have deliberately scheduled them into the interview process often to minimize their intrusion into the interview process (Ribbens, 1989) and sometimes to increase collaboration in knowledge-building (Wahab, 2003).

Theoretical considerations of the possibilities for intersubjectivity as both a research goal and a tool, tend to follow Ribbens (1989) early questioning about the possibility that feminist researchers can successfully dissipate the power they have over the research interview process. She recommended that, instead of trying to control it, researchers should acknowledge their power and factor it into the methodology and the interpretation of findings. Similarly, Gorlick (1991) used a materialist-feminist approach to advocate the linking of interview texts to examination of structured inequalities found in the data. Social constructionist views of the researcher-researched relationship have also questioned whether attempting to micro-manage the balance of power within the interview process can be productive (Lyons & Chipperfield, 2000). Using a poststructural framework Weems (2006), called for a rethinking of reciprocity in the conduct of research toward an analysis of the historical, cultural and local contingent discourses underlying practices of representation.

Reciprocal peer interviewing enters this debate as a method that addresses the issues of reciprocity from both the viewpoint of structural barriers to equality and concerns about discourse and representation. In keeping with Reinharz's (1992) advice to see the establishment of rapport as fortuitous rather than a given in the researcher-interviewee relationship, the role of the researcher-as-interviewer is deemphasized; the researcher is only indirectly involved in the interview since interviewees alternate roles in interview-

ing each other. In that sense, this method shares the virtues of focus groups that provide for co-construction of meaning among participants while minimizing the role of the researcher (Wilkinson, 1998). As in peer interviewing, there is interviewer training process involved and rapport is facilitated through the similarity in social background between interviewers and interviewees. Reciprocal interviewing between peers, however, prevents the problem that Boyd (forthcoming) encountered, that of creating a distinct group of trained interviewers whose position as interviewers added to power differentials between interviewer and interviewee rather than mitigating them.

What may seem like a short step in a practical sense, to train interviewers from the same community to interview each other, turns out to have radical consequences for leveling the interviewer/interviewee playing field. Reciprocal peer interviewing takes seriously the notion that interviewing is a social performance between partners (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) and a specialized type of conversation, an exchange of views (Kvale, 1996). It creates a greater potential for the kind of dialogue that maximizes reciprocity at the local level, as advocated by Lather (1986). Participants become less mere purveyors of data and more active participants empowered to co-construct their interactions (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003) and, as peers, they are able to withhold or report information in ways that they see fit. They are in a position to exchange knowledge with one another and to build on that knowledge. At the end of the interview, the two interviewers/interviewees both know more about each other.

The current study utilizing reciprocal peer interviewing sought to document the multi-dimensional aspects of the work that women perform in a variety of arenas. This work was defined as provisioning: the work of securing resources and providing the necessities of life to those for whom one has relationships of responsibility (Nelson 1998; Neysmith, Reitsma-Street et al. 2004; Power 2004). Our research questions sought to define the nature and extent of women's provisioning responsibilities for individuals and groups within a low-income community (See the interview guide in the Appendix).

Research Design

The nature and goals of reciprocal peer interviewing are closely linked to the participatory action research tradition that has long been applied within this particular community group located in a low-income neighbourhood (Reitsma-Street & Arnold, 1994; Diallo & Reitsma-Street, 1995; Reitsma-Street & Neysmith, 2000). In the early 1990's several key programs had been set up based on findings from interviews wherein community members had asked each other to articulate their dreams and visions for their community. What emerged from this foundational consultation was the development

of a community centre with outreach focused on programs serving children before and after school, with extensive participation from largely unpaid community members in the initial years. All research proposals involving the community group, including the one reported here, have undergone a review from the site-based research caucus.

Research Advisory Committee

Although the broad research questions originated during the design phase of the larger study, each site set up a research advisory committee to ensure that the research process was in keeping with local research and ethical principles. The three community members who participated as advisory members in this site were respected and trusted professionals with training in social work who had assumed leadership roles in the past; they had extensive knowledge of the research process due to their involvement in the above-mentioned earlier research. The committee also included the widely respected director of the organization. The first author has also been a longstanding member of the research caucus at this site. This group of five met several times to discuss and debate various ways of carrying out the research.

Recruitment

The participants in this study were recruited by means of posters, and through the efforts of a research advisory committee member who went to program sites and handed out pamphlets. Recruitment was directed at women whose children attended on-site programs. Many of these women also had helped out with programs. Care was taken to make culturally sensitive arrangements that would accommodate the needs of the women who would come to the community centre for the research gathering. Transportation was arranged for all who needed it. Day care was provided for their children within the same building in which the meal was being served. It should be noted that advisory committee members wanted to ensure that women who were mothers felt secure that their children would be cared for in a safe environment, a very important concern for mothers living in low-income areas. The day care providers were the same workers who cared for the children during the day time.

The Celebratory Meal

The research advisory committee decided that a full-course meal would be served prior to training participants in reciprocal peer interviewing. It is not uncommon

for feminist researchers and community organizers to provide food when bringing people together (Madriz, 1998), and it was the norm within this community that food be provided at all gatherings. The serving of food was not only a cultural practice which signaled welcoming and respect, but is also a means of extending meager resources for those living in poverty. It is within this context that the enthusiasm of advisory committee members for making a social occasion that would honour the community work of women needs to be understood. Furthermore, the research questions in this study were centrally concerned with documenting the provisioning responsibilities that women carried as individuals and as community members. Thus provisioning in both concrete and symbolic ways was congruent with the conceptual focus of the study.

After considerable deliberation, the advisory committee members decided that several of them would personally prepare some aspect of a full turkey dinner. By contributing to the preparation and serving of the dinner, a symbolic 'table turning' was enacted across two dimensions. On the social class dimension, the hierarchical arrangements assigning lower class women to menial labour were overturned by the role switching that had advisory committee members assuming server roles. Furthermore, women whose daily job it was to provision for others, including frequent preparing and serving of food, now became those served. Being in the position of guest at a formal meal is a feature of middle-class life seldom available to women living in poverty.

The feast took place in a multipurpose room in the local community centre. The tables for the meal were covered with linen tablecloths and set with china and glasses etc. Most of the food had been prepared in the homes of advisory committee members and served along with the 8 kg turkey and all the trimmings. Women came in quietly, at first, and seated themselves around the main U-shaped table and several side tables. The food was located on a counter in front of the kitchen area within the room. The committee members very consciously placed themselves in the visible position of servers to these women without pretense or embarrassment and then sat down and ate the meal as part of the group.

All women who attended were members of the community and many had served as volunteers at the local community centre. They had not been told, however, that we were planning an elaborate meal for them. As they sat down to eat, the dinner guests were informed that the nature of the meal, and the effort that had gone into making it, was expressly designed to honour them and the work/provisioning that they do for family, friends and for the community organization.

Reciprocal Peer Interviewing

In the recruitment process, participants had been given a brief description of the nature of the research process that would take place after the meal. Following the feast, the dinner guests were given a more complete description of the research purpose and procedures. The university-approved ethics review procedures were fully carried out as a means to ensure their voluntary consent to engage in mutual interviewing with one other person in the room. Their consent form included their promise to maintain confidentiality. The women were given clearly articulated assurances that there was no obligation for them to stay and be involved in the research process to follow.

Altogether, 25¹ persons volunteered to be part of the interview.² The interviewer-interviewees were all mothers, and all but one lived physically in the local community. The interviewer characteristic most relevant for assessing the suitability of this method for use with different populations is education. Only two persons were enrolled in a university program; the rest had high school education or less. Whatever their level of formal educational attainment, the basic understanding of the reciprocal peer interview method is that all women are valued members of the community who are experts in their own lives and capable of learning and applying the interviewing requirements.

Participants were given a short training session prior to performing the peer interviewing. A brief introduction was given by the researcher who noted her involvement in the community and the personal and political reasons for her dedication to the work of the community organization. Following this, each of the twenty-five women was given a copy of the interview schedule and was asked to look over each question as it was read out loud by the researcher and its meaning and purpose explained. The interview questions asked about provisioning activities, women's reactions to the kinds of problems they experienced in carrying out these activities and their visions for the future of the community (See the Appendix). Participants were encouraged to ask for clarification and to use probes to elicit more specific information during the interviews. A role-play sequence demonstrated several ways of asking follow-up questions.

Following the demonstration session, women were given time to write at least preliminary answers to the interview questions that formed the basis for the reciprocal interviews. The open-ended questions about provisioning were directed at obtaining an accounting of the range of responsibilities that women carried for others beyond the categories of paid and unpaid labour. Filling out the interview beforehand accomplished two purposes. Their reading of the questions gave them familiarity with the

questions for their role as interviewers and their answers primed them for their responses as interviewees.

Interview participants were given considerable control over the conduct of the interviews. They were given the choice to pair themselves off in ways that allowed for cultural and linguistic homogeneity in interview dyads within a community that officially recognized Aboriginal, Francophone and Anglophone sub-groups. As it turned out, only one dyad consisted of persons who were already neighbours and friends. The rest of the interviewees were, at best, acquaintances. The peer interview dyads went to separate areas of the building where they could speak confidentially to one another; they agreed to be tape-recorded but were given control over the tape recording which they were told they could stop whenever they felt it necessary. The research committee members circulated throughout the building to provide technical assistance as needed and keep track of the time.³

The members of each dyad were given freedom to determine the format of the interview. It had been suggested that they ask each other the same question before going on to the next one. Most did proceed in this fashion; a few alternately interviewed each other with one subset of the questions at a time, or, in one case, the entire interview schedule. In order to maintain some uniformity in the progression along the interview questions for the interview pairs, the researcher blew a whistle in 20-minute intervals at which time they were asked to be at certain points in the interview. The total time in the interviews was, on average, one and one-half hours.

Two additional comments are in order. First, in keeping with the framework of collaboration with the participatory research tradition, there was accountability to the larger group. The results of the interviews were shared first with the participants and reports were given to the advisory committee and presented in a forum that included both community members and staff. Second, since the present study was not oriented toward community change but to provide data for a larger exploratory multi-site study, no further steps were taken to involve community members and staff in confirmatory processes to validate what we have observed or to develop derivative research questions or applications of the research. However, both are potential further steps that could be taken.

Evaluation of Reciprocal Peer Interviewing

This research process was designed within a feminist framework that consciously recognizes the importance of the work that women do (Neysmith et al., 2006). There were two political and economic resources that were important for the successful imple-

mentation of this research method. The long history of research involvement in the community by both advisory committee members and the researcher afforded some degree of trust by participants, while participants' knowledge of community processes and research methods permitted the introduction of unconventional approaches to data gathering. In addition, funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada made it possible to build in the details of the celebratory meal and to offer supports, such as transportation and child care, to the women who participated.

The celebratory meal is not a necessary component of reciprocal peer interviewing.⁴ The part it played in the research design was intended to symbolize that advisory committee members recognized power and privilege differentials even within a community with an established feminist participatory research tradition (Maguire, 1996). It set the stage for women to feel appreciated, valued for the expertise that they were bringing to the study which constituted a contribution only they could make. A follow-up letter from one of the participants commented on how well the "apron suited" one of the advisory committee members, a reminder that power inequities, and their associated boundaries, do exist and influence what is told as well as what was heard.

This interviewing method worked well within the exploratory goals of a larger study⁵ with research questions that were broad and allowed for a variety of responses. Exchanges of information by participants on parenting issues, advice on where to go for services or how organizations and programs such as Ontario Works function, were all discussed. Some of the conversations zeroed in on neighbourhood conditions, such as the lack of police response to syringes found in playgrounds. Health concerns were also frequently raised. The larger scale policy-oriented questions produced a wide variety of responses that would be useful for social action projects. Much of what participants reported showed agreement over the difficulties of raising children on low incomes. Participants referred frequently to feeling overwhelmed, while sharing strategies for working with and through organizations to obtain resources. Not surprisingly, school policies and advice about child rearing figured heavily in interviews.

Participants were positioned as structurally equal in that their responses to the interview questions were unmediated by the researcher and the flow of the conversation was more under their control than in the standardized interview. We see this conduct of the interview, with participants alternating between being interviewers and interviewees, as influencing the validity of the data in two ways: First, reciprocity seemed to increase rapport; it shaped what was said by interviewees about their experiences and how it was received and interpreted by the interviewer. Secondly, the interviewing was thorough and active (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). We emerged with decreased

concern about the quality of the data gathered but the familiar qualms about the fact that we, as researchers, would be interpreting it. The following sections pick up these two validity issues which, taken together, represent the interplay between the *how* and the *what* of the interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

Validity issue # 1: The Process of Co-constructing Meaning

As Weiss (1974) found in her earlier work, within this study, rapport was the quality that shone through the interviews performed by peers. Being members of the same low-income community gave women a similar knowledge base that facilitated mutual understanding. The empathy and affirmation conveyed in their talk with one another is evident in the following short segment from an interview:

Int. 1: I would just like to add that my wealth is my health.

Int. 2: Yes. Absolutely.

Int. 1: It isn't my will; it's my health.

Int. 2: Yes, because you have the energy to do things.

Int. 1: That's right.

Here the co-interviewers/interviewees weaved back and forth not only in turn-taking but switched interviewer-interviewee roles to emphasize the importance of health.

Divergence from the standard interview in another sequence occurs when one interview partner reacts spontaneously and non-manipulatively to the extensiveness of the provisioning responsibilities mentioned by her partner. Her response then begins a chain of turn-taking that produces a listing of the varied provisioning activities they each do. By being both the interviewer and interviewee in the interview process, they could draw on their own experiences and empathically help to examine the experiences of their peer in the dyadic interview. The sequence began with a response to a question asking about other family members for whom the women take responsibility:

Int. 3: I have all my nieces and nephews that I baby sit for and for my sisters and my brother, I teach them proper manners... I help my mother, my father and my sister and I help my sister babysitting for her and listening to her problems and all that jazz.

Int. 4: Wow!

Another excerpt illustrates the subjectivities brought to bear in the playful role playing facilitated by the level of comfort and rapport established in the interview. Within the following interchange, one partner, through her laughter, signals that she is

not entirely serious about her statement, but, in reaction to her partner's mock horror, indicates that she may have anticipated her partner's response:

Int. 5: (referring to the question on her interview schedule) Were there things you had to do without?

Int. 6: Yes.

Int. 5: Like what?

Int. 6: Ah, make-up (laughing).

Int. 5: No, you're... you can't go out without make-up (both laugh).

Int. 6: Well, I guess I could.

This dialogue indicates a complex and sophisticated set of co-constructed understandings.

Interchanges in response to questions sometimes moved into advice-giving, a sharing of knowledge, as in the following exchange in the course of answering the question: "Have you had trouble making ends meet at any time during the past few years?":

Int. 7: Yes, lots of trouble... money to give to them so they'd (her children) go out and spend it themselves... that's a big concern right now... some teachers will tell the kids, well, you should be getting an allowance for this and this and that and that's not helping the situation... (with the kids saying)... my teacher said we should be getting paid money to help you do chores in the house. I'm like, "Wow!" What your teacher thinks and what I think are two different things.

Int 8: I'd be going to the teacher.

Int. 7: Well, I've been trying to make an appointment...

Int. 8... I would just show right up and say, "Excuse me, but, in our house, everybody helps with the house work..."

Int. 7: Exactly. That's the way I feel. (The interchange on this topic continued with one suggestion from Interviewer 8 about a novel means of giving credit for family chores and after one more urging to take the matter to the principal, they moved on to another question.)

This knowledge sharing can be seen as part of a dialogue that involves careful listening and results in clarification and expansion of a topic. The communication that resulted resonates with Kvale's (1996) injunction to regard interviews as a form of conversation and as an on-going accomplishment (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). The directions taken by participants in our interviews echo some of the beneficial claims of conscious-raising and self-expression reported by Wilkinson (1998) for her focus group research.

Another example of knowledge sharing occurs when a somewhat older interviewer paired with a younger woman takes a mentoring role by providing an intergenerational perspective, showing a deep level of empathy and, perhaps, giving hope for the future for her younger counterpart:

Int. 9: I just don't seem to have time for anything.

Int.10: Yeah, I remember feeling that way too when she [her daughter] was younger.

I'd be working 10-hour days and, then, there really wasn't time afterwards for anything... And, now it's a bit different for me; I do work but it's not every day and...so, I have time to...for other things right now.

This interview interchange can be read as a form of empowerment through sharing of knowledge between partners. This contrasts with the researcher's strategic use of empathy to gain access to more intimate details of an interviewee's life experience for the purposes of creating knowledge (Kvale, 2006).

The procedure for implementing reciprocal peer interviewing appeared to have involved the women in a holistic way, engaging body, mind and spirit as they responded to questions that asked them to share their ways of living and being. As a consequence, the information shared seemed to reflect important insights for themselves and opened up a window into their lives for the researchers. Nonetheless, the knowledge that was produced still needed to be mediated through the act of interpretation by the researcher (Hartsock, 2006); and Alcott (1991/2) leaves no room for illusion that we can speak for others in ways that go beyond context.

Validity issue #2: Interviewer Competency and a Researcher's Interpretation

Peer interviews exert validity claims as discourses that are close to the ways in which women talk together about their experiences (DeVault, 1990). Although women speaking together cannot be seen as necessarily producing more 'truthful' articulations of their 'real' interests, nevertheless, "...speaking constitutes a subject that challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge... (Alcott (1991/2: p.23). The researcher in reciprocal peer interviewing allows herself to become a supportive 'outsider' to this conversation but is still responsible for interpreting what was said. She is dependent on the quality of the follow-up questions for clarifications and explanations made by the 'interviewer-as-surrogate researcher.'

The transcripts showed that all interviews to be technically competent. The interviewers covered the gamut of questions asked and the tapes showed that the whistled signals

were effective in ensuring that the peer interviewers kept pace in answering the questions. There was almost no topic that was not discussed in enough detail for it to be understood by an outsider. A researcher-as-interviewer would have asked for more probes in place of some of the affirmative monosyllables that were used by the partner in the interviewer role. Some interviewers were better at listening and encouraging reflection than others but lack of probing is attributable to the challenges in interviewing that all novice interviewers face (Roulson, deMarrais & Lewis, 2003). A longer training session prior to the interviews could have helped them to increase their interviewer skills. The lack of follow-up questions may also have reflected their desire to keep the researcher out of the conversation and represent their exercise of control over the interview process.

In this study interviewer dyads were able to turn off the tape at will. However, the tape recordings indicate that the predominant use of stopping the tape was to determine their progress in the interview and figure out whether they had missed questions. Interviewee/er pairs stopped the tape from time to time, usually between questions, so it is difficult to determine how much the gaps represent private conversations between interview partners. The most sensitive question in this study had a dichotomous “yes-no” answer that was only in a few instances followed by an elaboration, an indication that the “researcher-as-audience” figured into participants’ responses. While it is possible that taken-for-granted understandings might have left some topics uncovered, what the interviewers did mention appeared to be meaningful to them.

As with focus groups, the interviews were guided conversations but without the presence of a moderator and only the indirect influence of the researcher through the interview guide. The dyadic process did not expose participants to the possible inhibiting effect of group dynamics involved in focus groups (Frisby, Crawford & Dorer, 1997) but did give interviewee/interviewer pairs the opportunity to hear and react to each other’s ideas and stimulate them to think more expansively about their provisioning activities. There were many examples throughout the interviews of the women’s active involvement as they asked for interpretation of the question and engaged in dialogue about their activities. In the following excerpts we highlight aspects of this process.

The challenge posed by one interviewee/er to another in the following excerpt points to the interpretive possibilities within more active interviewing (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). The interviewee/er pair is responding to the question concerning their involvement with other community groups:

Int. 3: ...personally, I have no experience and I haven’t had any experience before or now...hopefully in the future...

Int. 4: No experience, working with groups...?

Int. 3: Mhmm. Well, uh, I’ve had experience, I guess you can say...

Within this demonstration of co-construction, it is possible to interpret one member of the pair empowering the other to give voice to her experiences (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). At the same time, it suggests that the ownership of the joint construction needs to be seen as more diffuse than that in the one-way researcher-interviewee exchange (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

The extent to which one peer interviewer took an active role in restructuring, is illustrated in the following sequence of questions and responses in relation to the final questions on the interview schedule that asked about larger social processes. In one of the peer interview pairs, one partner, acting as the interviewer, restructured the ending questions so that they did not just repeat what had been previously said by her partner in an earlier part of the interview. To encourage her partner to start talking she said, "We're just gonna talk about...what do we think will happen in the future. [*Several comments were made back and forth about uncertainty of where to start.*] The interviewer persisted: "Just talk about something. What do you think the future's going to be like?" After a false start by the interviewee, the interviewer noted their similar ages. Then, the partner in the interviewee role started out a answer by saying: "I don't...they way they're talking, they're talking about...new stuff coming out." The conversation then went to the risks of technological failure, the complexity of life today and a wish for a simpler time period.

The influence of one partner on the other in the interview interaction was sometimes more subtle as in the following exchange that shows one partner switching back to the interviewee role and modifying her answer after having hearing her partner's response:

Int. 7: (referring to mother and father visits with children). I spend quality time with them which is, ah,...they're happy to see me when I do have the chance to stop by... (p.70)

Int. 8: For me, for number 2 (on the interview schedule), uhm,...I didn't originally put my parents down, but then, I guess, after listening to you, I do make sure that they get to see the kids 'cause I don't speak to my sibling at all...big issue there (both laugh)...

Here, similar to the advantages of focus group process, the more dialogical process of the interview allowed for an expansion of persons involved in provisioning activities.

The task of the researcher in reciprocal peer interviewing still remains the difficult one of interpretation of the intended meanings of the interview partners (Olesen, 2008).

It is tempting to suggest that allowing the "object to object" (Brinkman & Kvale,

2005) might be the best way out of thorny interpretational and representational issues that face the researcher. In this study, interviewee pairs were given their interviews for review and feedback and a community forum was held to present the findings at this site as well as cross-site findings. Were we to have pursued a more nuanced understanding of provisioning activities, our process would have involved participants in co-constructing the subjectivities that they saw emerging from the interviews. These additional views would have added to interpretational and representational alternatives, although participants' views of their subjectivities within the interviews should not be privileged as necessarily more authentic (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003).

Conclusions

As a method that is rooted in feminist epistemology, reciprocal peer interviewing offers the advantage of encouraging the production and sharing of knowledge between interview partners more equally positioned than is structurally possible in even the most principled feminist researcher-woman interviewee pair. The method was found to be particularly appropriate for giving "voice" to low-income women not accustomed to examining their contributions to the welfare of others in the larger community (DeVault, 1991); they were able to establish the kind of rapport that allowed them to refract facets of their own experience through dialogue as similarly situated conversants (DeVault, 1990) while ensuring that the researcher did not "overhear" their private conversations (because they had control over the tape recorder).

More symmetrical power relations, similarity in social backgrounds and current livelihoods of the women participants, and their greater control over the interpretation of the questions and the pace and content of the recorded interview, we argue, provide for the quality of interaction between participants that correspond to the features of an active interview (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003;2004). Women used the interview to their advantage and their capabilities as communicators were evident throughout the interviews. While responding to the questions asked by the researchers, interviewees also engaged in redirecting the conversation to areas of their own lives from time to time to discuss matters that were of particular relevance to them. Their joint accomplishment in addressing problematic aspects of their lives allows for the kind of emancipatory dialogue that makes possible learning as envisioned by Friere (1993) and advocated by feminist researchers (Cancian, 1992).

The reciprocity in communication involved in the position and function between interviewee/er-interviewee/er pairs is separate from a critical analysis of the researcher's responsibilities vis-à-vis the potentially corrosive effects of the misuses of power

in our contemporary interview societies (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Kvale, 2006). Given the pervasiveness of the confessional narratives in the media, it is important to consider that participants were so adept at taking interviewer roles because they have assimilated these techniques and attitudes as part of their cultural understandings, so that “life and art have become mirror images of one another” (Denzin, 2001). Researchers require critical sensitivity to the ways in which interviews replicate rather than challenge dominant cultural understandings and are social constructions emanating from a complex set of subjective-objective interplay (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997).

Our efforts to address power imbalances in the interview process were focused on increasing the participants’ opportunities to co-construct the interview. The participatory model that Heron and Reason (1997) have outlined is meant to ensure more active involvement of participants throughout the research process although their emphasis is on their increased participation in research design. Our multi-vocal dialogical texts suggest new challenges and opportunities for interpretation and representation and the logic of the method leads to recommending an even greater role for participants in that process than usually considered (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). This level of collaboration remains a challenge for us as it does for all researchers engaged in reflexive inquiries requiring the “critical subjectivity” that allows for awareness of interrelations between modes of knowing and relationships that inform them (Heron & Reason, 1997). Involving participants more directly in the interpretive process than is standard might also, by virtue of increasing the interpretive alternatives, mitigate unwitting researcher collusion in the abuses of power possible within the interview society.

While during reciprocal peer interviewing phase the researcher has faded into the background, s/he needs to reappear as an interpreter whose task it is to neither privilege the researcher nor the women researched but to work somewhere in that middle ground between:

... the old tyranny of authoritarian expertise that discounts women’s experiences ... and a new tyranny of “experientialism” that claims for first-person experiential utterances an immunity from challenge, interpretation, or debate (Code, 1995, p. 36).

The complex multi-layered co-constructions involved in the reciprocal peer interview potentially reflect the questions posed by the researcher, their interpretations and their own representations to themselves and each other as well as multiple other audiences. The additional sets of relations in the reciprocal peer interview underline the importance of analytic sensibility to both content and its context that can shed light on the

meanings of the co-constructions of peers who used dialogical methods to explore the fabric of their lives. (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). A nuanced multi-perspectival analysis that attends to the quality of the dialogue within the interview might reveal how the reciprocal peer interview was able to be a potential vehicle for empowerment.

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Notes

- 1 A few women left after the meal and did not participate in the study.
- 2 Women were given \$20 toward defraying any expenses they had incurred to participate in the interviews and as an honorarium to recognize their contribution.
- 3 The time keeping was largely done to ensure that the time did not go past the bedtimes of the children who were in child care within the centre.
- 4 Staff members were interviewed using the same format but without the celebratory dinner.
- 5 The data from this site were pooled with the data from the other five sites and collectively analyzed.

Appendix: Questions for the Reciprocal Peer Interview on Provisioning

- A. List the people you are responsible for: _____
 What activities do you do for them?
1. who live with you _____
 2. other family members _____
 3. family and neighbours _____
 4. groups in the neighbourhood _____
 5. groups outside this community _____
- B. How do you manage to get all these activities done?
- C. Has it been harder to carry out these activities in any way in the past few years?
 A lot harder __ Somewhat harder __ A little harder __ Not harder at all __
1. Are there more people to be responsible for? __ Who? What activities?
 2. Is there anyone or any activity that you just could not continue handling responsibility for?
 3. Is there anyone or any activity you wish you did not have to take responsibility for but have no choice? Many __ Some __ A few __ None __
 4. What are the things that make it harder to carry out these activities?
- D. Is there anyone or any group who has helped you? What have they done to help?
- E. Have you had trouble making ends meet at any time during the past few years?

A lot of trouble__ Some trouble__ Not much trouble__ No trouble __

1. Were there things you had to do without?
2. Did you have to go without paying bills?
3. Did you exchange services with others?
4. Did you do any odd jobs to earn some extra money?
5. Did you have to sell something(s) to get money?
6. Did you have to do anything risky to get by?

F. What do you think about what the future will bring?

1. What changes do you expect as far as the people and organizations that you take responsibility for?
2. In general, what do you think will get easier or better for people in disadvantaged communities in the next few years?
3. What are the things that will most likely get worse for people in disadvantaged communities in the next few years?
4. Do you see things that would make it harder for you to take responsibility in the future for other persons or organizations outside your home?
5. What can this organization do for this community in the future that would help you to improve your life and the lives of those people and groups you take responsibility for?

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