Really useful research and social justice: Exploring a feminist community-based and participatory action research project

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Introduction

This paper makes a case for really useful research being feminist oriented, participatory, community-driven, and oriented to democratic social justice. By democratic social justice I mean ‘the full participation and inclusion of everyone in a society’s major institutions, and the socially substantive opportunity for all to develop and exercise their capacities and realize their choices’ (Young, 1990, p. 173). Fraser places ‘parity of participation’ as central to achieving democratic social justice because of its inherent reflexivity and its concern with redistribution of resources, as well as recognition of cultural differences and political representation (Fraser, 2007, p 20).

The argument offered here is based on my assessment of a project initiated and led by the National Alliance of Philippine Women in Canada (NAPWC) entitled Filipino Community and Beyond: Towards Full Participation in a Multicultural Canada. A feminist approach to community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) was the core activity employed to meet this project's main concerns of the economic marginalization, exploitation, discrimination, and disenfranchisement of Filipino youth and women. These issues have been central to advocacy of Filipino activists for many years. At the end of the three year federally funded project (2006-2009), all of the objectives had been met, and in some respects exceeded. Much work however, remains; the organizers and participants will be continuing their work long after this project’s formal completion.

I was invited to be the evaluator of this project by the NAPWC organizers. As the external auditor, my main responsibilities were to provide feedback to the organizers and project participants, and to submit formal reports to the funders based on my review of the organizers’ reports and other materials generated by the project (conference papers, videos), as well as my participation at annual conferences. My assessment is also informed by my social location which; as Linda Alcoff (1991) argues, has epistemic significance. I am concerned with social justice and my work is informed by a
feminist standpoint and grounded in a CBPAR approach—values I share with the organizers. However, as a member of what critical race scholar Sherene Razack (1998) calls a ‘white settler society’, I occupy a different location within the Canadian hierarchy of class and cultural privilege.

In the next section, I provide a profile of the Filipino community in Canada (as outlined in the NAPWC proposal) and briefly discuss the context of Filipino domestic workers’ economic exploitation and marginalization. This is followed by an outline of the project’s objectives and key activities. Given this paper’s space constraints, the next section offers only a brief review of the project’s achievements. Using several concepts articulated by feminist and other critically oriented scholars, the final section reflects on this case study as an example of really useful research.

What’s the Problem?
In Canada, Filipinos comprise the fourth largest immigrant group (now over 400,000) mainly located in Canada's major cities. The population has grown 31 percent since 1996. Most Filipinos in Canada are also women (65%). As of 2009, the Philippines has become the main source country of immigrants to Canada. Many leave the Philippines searching for better economic opportunities and an escape from political persecution. The Philippines was ruled by the Spanish for over 300 years, followed by the United States. Although independence was granted by the US in the last century, US interests and power remain strong. Economic, social, political and cultural marginalization are the lived reality of the majority of Filipinos as 20 percent of the population own most of the land, control most of the resources and have political power, while the remaining 80% of the population live in feudal conditions.

In Canada, Filipinos are among the highest and most educated of immigrants and they have one of the lowest unemployment rates of immigrant groups. In the 1970s and 80s, Canada recruited Filipino women to work as nurses, teachers and in other professions identified as facing a skilled labour shortage. There were also many women recruited to work in the garment industry in Manitoba. Most of those who immigrated during that era achieved some economic security; their foreign credentials were recognized and they faced fewer obstacles in their application for permanent residency. The economic trajectories of Filipino immigrants, particularly women, have changed dramatically with the introduction of foreign worker policies programs beginning in the 1980s. This was a time when neoconservative ideology was becoming the dominant framework in Canadian politics, an orientation that has had powerfully negative impacts on women and minorities (see Carragata, 2003).

In 1981 the Foreign Domestic Movement (FDM) program was established. This was replaced in 1992 by the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) which, according to Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC)
‘helps Canadians hire foreign workers to live and work in their homes to care for children, the elderly or people with disabilities’ (see the HRSDC website for more information: hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/foreign_workers).

Under the LCP, 4,000 Filipinos (mostly women) arrived in 1994; in 2006 this number had grown to 22,000. This program has become very popular for Canadian families seeking child and elderly care. This demand, many critics of the LCP argue, has been generated by our government’s failure to support a publicly funded national childcare system. Government cuts to programs and services for the elderly and those with disabilities has also contributed to a shortage of caregivers.

Under the LCP, domestic workers are given temporary work visas. For the first two years of the LCP and until they acquire permanent status, they cannot bring their children, nor are they allowed to take training or undertake any upgrading. During this time, they must live with their employers, leaving many vulnerable to abuse. The economic struggles in the Philippines pushes workers into the LCP with many women leaving the Philippines and the care of their children with extended family. The families that remain in the Philippines are dependent on the remittances of these domestic workers. Indeed, the export and commodification of Filipino workers (mostly women) has generated a whole industry of immigration consultants, domestic worker recruitment agencies, and remittance services in the Philippines and Canada.

LCP workers who want to apply for landed immigrant status are eligible after they have been in the program for two years. Applicants must have worked for 24 out of a 36 month period with no more than two employers, a regulation which has led to some workers being trapped in highly exploitive situations (i.e. working 18 to 24 hours a day, caring for both children and the elderly, working for more than one family). Given the recent recession, some Canadian families have not continued with their contractual obligations leaving these domestic workers struggling to meet the 24 month eligibility requirement; as a result many face deportation. Furthermore, those who enter the LCP with professional credentials (like nursing or teaching) lose their professional status given the required minimum of two years in the LCP. They then must deal with major obstacles to regain their professional status. Even if they complete upgrading programs for foreign professionals, they face further discrimination as some employers will not recognize their foreign credentials and some also claim these workers do not have ‘Canadian experience’. This situation stands in contrast to an earlier era when Filipino nurses and teachers were welcomed.

The immigration application process is also costly. There are application and medical examination fees, plus original educational documents and divorce papers are also required; they are difficult and costly to obtain. Cut backs in immigration staffing and challenges to applicants’ employment documentation means there are also long delays, and as a result, some domestic workers whose temporary work visas have expired and who have yet to receive their
landed status, are left without health coverage. Some of these women have also been deported. All of these elements conspire to trap these workers in the low waged service sector jobs and a cycle of economic marginalization (see Zaman, Diocson & West, 2007).

A further injustice occurs in the process of family reunification (see Pratt, 2003) which, because of the barriers outlined above, often takes many years. Children, reuniting with their mothers struggle to reconnect after many years of their mother’s absence; they must now adjust to being parented by someone they do not know. They also face educational marginalization as their level of schooling from the Philippines is not compatible with the Canadian system. Many must start their schooling at a lower grade or must repeat a grade. If they reach the age of 19 before completing their secondary schooling, they are no longer eligible to attend programs in public school. While there are college completion programs, there are fees and other barriers such as transportation. Filipino youth also encounter racism in the school system. Furthermore, some feel they should be working to help their mothers bring in an income. As a result of this complexity of factors, many drop out, and without completing their high school education, they cannot access postsecondary education; furthermore, without these credentials, they are trapped, like their mothers, in a cycle of low waged jobs.

These policies and the circumstances of many Canadian Filipinos, combined with structural economic and racial marginalization, not surprisingly, have had a serious negative impact on their integration into Canadian society and their civic participation.

What’s the Solution?
These above concerns and the need for a national network led to the creation of NAPWC in 2002 and the submission in 2005 of a funding proposal to the Heritage Canada Multicultural Program. The NAPWC membership includes groups from Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Winnipeg and Vancouver which represent the concerns of various sectors including women, youth, students, nurses, immigrants and migrants under temporary status. The mandate of the NAPWC is to advance the struggle of Filipinos in Canada, particularly among the women, for equality, peace and genuine development (for further information see http://www.napwc.org/).

The proposal outlined four objectives: a) to fight racism, discrimination and violence, b) to develop policy analysis and engagement capacity in the Canadian Filipino community, c) to strengthen existing organizations, create new ones and build a national network, and c) to build links and partner with other organizations beyond the Filipino community. To achieve these goals, community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) was presented as the core activity. “This method of research is based on the principle of starting and learning from the experiences of the community and its members, collectively analyzing and synthesizing these experiences and planning action for social change and participation” (NAPWC proposal). Over the three years of the project other activities included consultations in Toronto, Montreal,
Vancouver, Ottawa, Calgary, and Edmonton; documenting and sharing of these meetings; running PAR workshops in every region; hosting regional roundtables, organizing annual national conferences; making submissions to policy makers; and linking with other anti-oppression and multicultural organizations. Organizers also submitted quarterly reports to funders. As well as participatory action research, collaborative research projects with academic researchers were undertaken.

**What's Been Achieved?**

I attended the first conference in 2006 where I witnessed a great deal of passionate commitment to social justice; anger and depression about the oppression of Filipinos and the slow pace of change; and a sense of urgency and hope for the project. By the third annual conference in November 2008 there was much to celebrate. It is my claim that participatory research and mobilizing processes along with feminist leadership were key factors in the organizer’s ability to meet all of the proposed goals in such a short time. By 2009, the activist Filipino community had grown substantively; new organizations had been created and existing ones strengthened and expanded; and participants’ skills at research, analysis and policy engagement had grown substantively. New partnerships with academics had also been formed. While there was much celebration, participants also pointed to the persistence of exploitation and marginalization and the structural basis of these struggles.

The knowledge generated through CBPAR and academic research was, for many participants, transformative. Many spoke about how they began to realize that their experiences of oppression and frustration were shared by others and had structural origins. Youth participants learned, many for the first time, about their mother’s immigration history and its connection to the colonial past of the Philippines and current policies in both the Philippines and Canada. Several of the younger participants had entered or were in the process of applying to university where they wanted to continue with their research on issues affecting the Filipino community. The intergenerational aspect of the project was noteworthy.

While traditional reports were written, the results of the research were also shared using visual art, theatre, dance, poetry. Conferences and meetings were always opened with song and cultural rituals of greeting and appreciation, and cabarets or cultural evenings were an important part of the program where participants took turns sharing their experiences through theatre, song, dance (hip hop), and poetry. Food and celebration were also components of all gatherings, as was a family orientation (children were always present at these gatherings and cared for by the community). Arts-based methods were thus central to the effectiveness of this project; they were an extension of the community-based participatory orientation and
reflected a culturally relevant approach. The project website also posted video clips of activities and press releases.

Another key achievement was a working more effectively with media resulting in more news coverage and more critically informed reports. The media’s critical role in shaping public sensibility as well as public policy is a key concern for racialized groups. A recent example of media influence on policy can be seen in how a series of articles about the unregulated and exploitative nanny industry (written by Robert Cribb in March and April of 2009 in the *Toronto Star*; http://www.thestar.com), got the attention of the Ontario provincial government which has recently introduced legislation to regulate the industry.

The project also led to significant development of capacity with respect to policy engagement. Using the knowledge generated by CBPAR, NAPWC participants and organizers made strategic connections between their lived experience of marginalization and policy. Through participatory processes such as mock policy forums, they also rehearsed and practiced how to make effective submissions and answer questions. The Filipino community in Montreal, led by youth, successfully lobbied city council to replace and rebuild a local basketball court that had been demolished for an upscale housing development. Filipino nurses groups have experienced more openness in their relations with professional licensing organizations. At the federal level, the LCP and its rules and regulations have been the focus of this project’s advocacy, with calls for the program to be dismantled. Slow progress has been made on this front; the federal government regards the LCP as a “win-win” program. In their view, it helps Canadian families meet their child and elderly care needs, and also provides employment for Filipino migrants. There have been some shifts in government’s position and some recognition of the problems with the LCP (although the government’s responses to these issues are problematic); furthermore there is some recognition of the value of consulting with Filipino organizations and learning from LCP workers. The process of conducting research, generating knowledge, preparing submissions, and engaging with policy makers has led to human rights claims and calls for representation in decision making as it affects the Filipino community.

**A Case of Really Useful Research**

There is much evidence in the NAPWC project that through CBPAR ‘the participation of the community in the research process facilitates a more accurate and authentic analysis of social reality’ (Hall & Clover, 2003, p. 134). This project is also a powerful example of research that contributes to the ‘intellectual and political movement for people’s self-reliance and empowerment’ (Fals Borda, 2003, p. 34). This empowerment has occurred in large part because the participants, as feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) argues, are subjects, not objects of research. Furthermore, like Smith’s
feminist methodology, this is really useful research because of its power to reveal how the everyday is shaped by social and institutional relations. It is also really useful research because it has generated new knowledge which supports a kind of ‘counterstorytelling’, a process in Critical Race Theory (CRT) which names the lived reality of oppressed peoples and how institutions serve the interests of power (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995).

The NPAWC project is a case of really useful research because it was effective in mobilizing the community and creating new spaces for dialogue and policy engagement. Fraser (1997) calls such spaces ‘subaltern counterpublics’ which are ‘parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses’ (p. 81). These spaces and processes are essential to achieving equality in stratified democratic states, and are not without their challenges. Some counterpublics are weak with little influence on decision making, while strong publics ‘translate such 'opinion' into authoritative decisions’ (Fraser, 1997, p.90). Engendering the authority of Filipino advocacy groups, based on the knowledge created through CBPAR, has been at the centre of this project.

Being recognized as a strong public with authoritative voice is a challenge common to communities of colour. As Sherene Razack (1998) has observed, such communities must deal with institutions that ‘make power relations invisible and keep dominant cultural norms in place’ (p. 9). This can be seen in the resistance by policy makers to recognizing the oppressive elements of the LCP. The cracks in this resistance, on the other hand, can be tied to this project’s use of CBPAR which supports a process of ‘reframing’ which George Lakoff (2004) sees as central to progressive movements’ policy transformation efforts. In the reframing process, core values oriented towards social justice are identified; this is evident in the NAPWC project. Community-based knowledge generated through CBPAR illuminated how support for the family and rights of children were being undermined. By reframing policy discourse towards goals of social justice, rather than the interests of globalized capitalism which relies on the exploitation of vulnerable groups in order to accumulate wealth in the hands of the few, this project is an example of really useful research.

To conclude, I return to this paper’s introduction and the notion of democratic social justice as outlined by Fraser. The NAPWC project is a case of really useful research because it addressed concerns with redistribution of resources through efforts to change the LCP, as well as challenge professional policies that create barriers to recognition of foreign credentials. NAPWC advocacy has also engaged with the politics of recognition, bringing attention to the racial basis of policies. This project can also be seen to address the matter of political representation through its capacity building in relation to policy engagement.
More recently, Fraser has noted how ‘globalization is changing the way we argue about justice’ (Fraser, 2007, p. 17) where the struggle is not just about ‘how’ to achieve social justice, it is also about ‘who’. A way to attend to both concerns is through the ‘all-affected principle’ which ‘holds that all those affected by a given social structure or institution have moral standing as subjects of justice in relation to it’ (p. 25). Within globalization, it is not geographical proximity that creates fellow subjects of justice, rather it is their links to a common structural or institutional framework. One of the powers of the all-affected principle, in Fraser’s view, is its inherent reflexivity. There is much in the NAPWC’s project and use of CBPAR that contributes to such reflexivity and democratic participation; thus I argue that this is a case of really useful research.

References:

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