Stories of Relative Privilege: Power and Social Change in Feminist Community Psychology

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1This paper was developed using an innovative, highly interactive, and mutual editing process following requests from some feminist community psychologists for a more supportive relationship between editors and authors. After developing a narrative framework, the co-editors identified relevant material from among paper submissions and invited the authors to reframe their work in narrative form for this article. Co-editors and storytellers interacted by e-mail, FAX, and phone over several months bridging three countries and more communities, responding to each others’ work, and creating this article in the process.

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Stories about community work in New Zealand and Scotland are presented to describe and reflect on issues central to feminist community psychology. Organizing a lesbian festival, Ingrid Huygens describes feminist processes used to equalize resources across Maori (indigenous) and Pakeha (white) groups. Heather Hamerton presents her experiences as a researcher using collective memory work to reflect on adolescent experiences related to gender, ethnicity, and class. Sharon Cahill chronicles dilemmas and insights from focus groups about anger with women living in public housing in Scotland. Each story chronicles experiences related to oppression and privilege, and describes the author’s emotions and reflections. Individually and collectively, the stories illustrate the potential offered by narrative methods and participatory processes for challenging inequalities and encouraging social justice.

KEY WORDS: feminist community psychology; narratives; power; privilege; social change.

We do this bridging by naming our selves and by telling our stories in our own words. —C. Moraga & G. Anzaldua (1981, p. 23), *This Bridge Called My Back*

The purpose of this special issue is to “bridge” and strengthen community and feminist psychologies in terms of conceptual frameworks and related opportunities for building just and inclusive communities. Both feminism and community psychology value contextual analyses, challenge simplistic dichotomies, and recognize the importance of structural power and the dynamics of oppression and privilege (Fine, 1992; Lykes, Banuazizi, Liem, & Morris, 1996; Mulvey, 1988; Pheterson, 1996; Rieff, 1968; Ryan, 1981; Swift, Bond, & Serrano-Garcia, 2000). In this article, Sharon Cahill, Heather Hamerton, and Ingrid Huygens share stories about their community work in order (1) to explore dynamics, dilemmas, and learnings related to power and social justice, and (2) to show benefits that narrative methods offer for community research and action. Each narrator draws on feminist and community perspectives in discussing aspects of personal identity (gender, race/ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, age) and professional and political roles (e.g., researcher, activist). Before sharing their stories, the power of narratives to support or challenge social inequalities is discussed, and central story themes are introduced.

Who Tells What Stories? Whose Stories Are Heard?

Recent feminist and community literatures have shown the positive potential of narrative in research and in community building (Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988; Salzer, 1998; Thomas & Rapport, 1996). Stories provide an important vehicle for understanding and transforming individual and political realities since they allow the expression of important relationships that are difficult to recognize using tradi-