Struggling and Juggling: Research on, by, and for Cape Breton Women

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The inclusion of the subjects of research into the research process in an authoritative way is a difficult task. This paper, based on social action research with low income women in Cape Breton, retraces the steps of the "struggling juggling" research process. From this, we may learn something about how social action research can become a vehicle for social change. We believe that there was a crucial change in the way in which the researcher/respondents thought about themselves and their lives "on the system".

Through the research process, the researcher/respondents reconstructed themselves as creative, engaged community participants, breaking the bonds of their cognitive isolation, their lack of cohesiveness and their social stigma. Social action research also modified the understandings of welfarism of some agency personnel and widened the definition of life "on the system" in Cape Breton.[1] This paper describes these women, and their "world apart", and presents a critical discussion of the research process and its methodological and practical implications.

From August 1990 to January 1991, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton sponsored social action research on problems of, and solutions to, women living in poverty. The Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton is located in one of Canada's most economically depressed areas. Its concern is with women in crisis, crime prevention and successful rehabilitation. Elizabeth Fry serves women in the court system and women at risk - separated/divorced women and single mothers.

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1. It is important to note that the shifts in understanding among agency personnel and in the community seemed to occur among those who were 'predisposed' to be informed about the issues.

In August 1990, the Society acquired a research grant through the Department of the Secretary of State, Women's Program. The purpose of the research was to conduct an enquiry to identify the needs of low income women in Industrial Cape Breton and develop strategies for community action.[2]

In developing the methodology for this research, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton examined Freire's (1984) conscientization method and its application by Charlottetown [P.E.I.] Diocese's Social Action Commission (1987) in their analysis of the socio-economic problems of seven Prince Edward Island groups. This enquiry method stressed the active participation of group members in the research process. Through active, not tokenistic, participation, respondents as researchers came to "see themselves and their social situation in a new way and they themselves can decide to alter the conditions which they find repressive" (Social Action Commission, 1987:15). Within recent years, movements towards grassroots social action research have also been especially effective in creating an awareness of the realities of the lives of women. According to Kirby and McKenna (1989:28), social action research, like conscientization research, "is not research on people from the margins but research by, for and with them." Six low income Cape Breton women were hired as researcher/respondents; received training in social action research; conducted interviews with 30 low income women; analyzed the data and made revisions to drafts of the report, *Struggling and Juggling: Cape Breton women, economic constraints and strategies for survival.*

A World Apart

"This particular project has made me more aware of the specific problems other

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2. The majority of the women with whom Elizabeth Fry comes in contact are low income women. Through our acquaintance with these women, we have come to realize the extent of the 'reality gap' - the distance between women's real life needs and the social welfare programs that exist to meet those needs. Women spoke to us about their constant struggle to fulfil their basic needs of income security, adequate housing, health care, and protection from physical violence. All too often, attempts to address their psychological needs for emotional fulfilment and recognition of their worth fall by the wayside.

    At some stage, most of the women with whom we work decide that they need tools to change the pattern of their lives. A belief in right to choice and legitimate personal power has to be developed through repeatedly placing opportunities before them and being available while they sort through the consequences of choosing and implementing. Often with a small amount of guidance and support, our clients are better able to handle their life situations.

    The Society realizes that our clientele only constitutes a fraction of the women in Cape Breton who struggle to exist on limited incomes and deal with the stigma and stress attached to their lifestyle. Although we are aware that increased governmental funding to these women would help eliminate many problems, we realize the impracticality of waiting for such a solution, especially in this time of economic depression. Yet, something has to be done. We believe in the value of social action research to change women's lives.

women like myself are having. I'm not alone. It gives me hope that I'm not going to continue to experience this isolation". (Researcher/respondent)

A world apart is a metaphor which describes the lives of low income women. The financial restrictions under which they live and the isolation which results from this affects every aspect of their lives. Financial considerations dictate their physical mobility, their access to education, recreation and entertainment, where they can shop and what they can buy, and their access to each other. Restriction and isolation are the strongest themes which emerged from this research.

According to Maxwell and Simkins (1985:49), "limited income means limited choices in the consumer market, in education, in employment, in housing and in many other areas." This emerged in every interview with thirty women and in the reflections of the six researcher/respondents. Surviving and supporting children on an annual revenue which falls below the low income cutoff means just that - surviving.[3] The quality of women's lives is severely affected by their financial constraints and this, in turn, leads to emotional barriers. Maxwell and Simkins (1985:47) identified "powerlessness", "alienation" and "isolation", "meaninglessness" and "anomie" as feelings produced by limitations. They also pointed out that the life attitudes evoked by these feelings include "submission to authority, defeatism, scepticism and mistrust, an orientation to the present and fatalism and apathy." We found this to be one side of the reality of low income women in Cape Breton.[4]

Living on a low income means having little choice about where to shop, what and how much to buy. When asked how they managed, respondents replied that they "budgeted", did things "on the cheap" and devoted considerable time and energy to "finding bargains".

Another way in which women are limited is in terms of mobility. Most respondents did not own vehicles. This dictates where and when women can shop, given the routes and schedules of public transportation. One woman told about how she gets her groceries in relays that sometimes take "three days" depending on taxi money. Transportation constraints not only limit shopping; they limit going anywhere for any purpose. Women are prevented from taking advantage of whatever may be going on in the community and of agency services and any events these agencies may be sponsoring.

Wilson (1983:152) has addressed the socially defined gender roles which have confined women "in territory and time." Indeed many feminists have

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3. The low income cutoff, according to Statistics Canada, is given by a minimum yearly salary according to family size and regional context. The low income cutoff statistics for metropolitan Halifax in 1989 are as follows: one person - $12,148.; two persons - $16,027.; three persons -$21,440.; four persons - $24,706.; five persons - $28,790. All women respondents exist on incomes which fall below the low income cutoff.

4. The other side of the reality of low income women in Cape Breton is their determination and problem-solving strategies in the face of structural limitations and isolation.

elaborated on the extent to which the creation of the public/private distinction has relegated women to the domestic sphere (for example, Baxter, 1988; Luxton, 1980). Further, as Mackenzie (1986:89) noted, "the rigid, spatially reinforced separation between production and reproduction ...was severely weakened by women's dual roles [as domestic and wage workers]." It is suggested here that the enforced joblessness of low income women has re-established the pattern of isolation in the household which was partially modified by the movement of women into conditions of paid labour. Their relative poverty and subsequent inability to pay for transportation is one manifestation of this process.

Child care is a constant concern for low income women. Again, this affects their ability to seek employment, to access agencies, to take training courses, and simply to have time for themselves away from their children. One woman who wanted to go back to school spoke about this problem. She was anxious to "say goodbye to social assistance" but could not find "somebody half-decent that [she] could trust and depend on to baby-sit [her] children". When a working women was asked what she needed to improve her life, she responded succinctly: "Adequate child care."

Most of the respondents were without male partners and could not avail themselves of either a male wage or male support. For these women, child care emerges as a crucial issue. There are the obvious economic factors. As Eichler (1983:262-63) noted:

"The majority of female-headed families in Canada are poor (National
Council of Welfare, 1987). Even in the best of cases, poverty tends
to have devastating effects which are likely to last a lifetime".

However, the social cost of demanding that women be "on call" at all times in the care of their children is equally devastating. Rosenberg (1987:190-91) explains why,

"For many women it [motherwork] is a job of perpetual shift work -
of always being on call....In that respect it is like policing or nursing,
with the exception that in motherwork there are rarely shifts off ...
They rarely get restorative "time outs," let alone extended vacations
or sick leave". [clarification mine]

This overall pattern of "motherwork" is exacerbated in the context of low income, economic deprivation. This increases the stress experienced by women and often leads them to feel guilty that they are not doing enough for their children. They are structurally unable to fulfil the "fantasy of the perfect mother" (Chodorow and Contratto, 1982). One woman spoke poignantly of these feelings:

There have been times when coping with work and financial difficulties and education, we tend to internalize the myths that we have to be wonderful at exactly everything we do - super everything. Most definitely; and sometimes I think most of the pressures we put on ourselves or we allow it to be put on us by accepting other people's ideas of where we should be at any given time.

The limitations on women's lives are tangible constraints and lead to less visible barriers which impede improving the quality of one's life.

Since transportation and child care limit mobility, much of women's time is spent alone or with their children. As Maxwell and Simkins (1985:49) found, isolation leads to "persons seeing themselves as different and separate from the society in which they live. They feel alone - no one really cares - and view the world as indifferent to their needs." Unfortunately, women's feelings of being apart are often complicated by the stigma placed on low income women, especially for those on social assistance. It is, perhaps, the potential for any woman to be trapped in poverty which compounds the stigma.

Circumstances can cause any woman to become low income, such as
loss of a spouse or loss of a job. The reality is that most women in
Cape Breton are either single and low income or have a spouse who
earns a low income wage. All women must make themselves aware
of this and act in a united way to confront it.

One in every six women in Canada is living in poverty, a rate 50% higher than men (National Film Board, 1987). In addressing this issue, typical questions are: Who are these women, and why are these women poor? Societal answers to these questions have tended to blame the victim. Blouin (1989:4) has pointed out that victim-blaming has been apparent in Nova Scotia laws.

"Until only twelve years ago, if for reasons of misfortune, including
poverty, a mother was not able to provide for her children adequately,
rather than supplement her income so that she could give her children
a decent life, she was declared a neglecting mother and her children
could, without warrant, be taken from her".

Respondents in this study have recognized the public's negative assumptions about their lives - especially those directed towards welfare and social assistance recipients. As one woman put it:

Definitely I think society has a very poor view of PSA [Provincial
Social Assistance] and welfare recipients. They feel that we are
wasting the taxpayers' money, getting a free ride and think it would
be nice if they didn't work and still get a nice big cheque every

month.

Another woman spoke about the feelings of degradation which are inflicted on those receiving social welfare:

> I mean it's a humiliating experience to tell everybody you're on PSA. I think we have the label as being uneducated, lower life and not up to par with the rest of the working class. We're lower than that. We got ourselves into this and we shouldn't go around having babies and that our morals are not quite up to par like the rest of everybody else. That's not the way things are. A lot of us don't like being on it and we're struggling to get off it.

There can be no doubt that this stigma affects low income women in the way they see themselves and is another dimension of the restrictions under which they live. Respondents explained:

> The minute you open your mouth and say you are on social assistance, you just watch people's face change; their attitudes change. Numerous occasions in conversation I go out of my way not to tell people. They just assume I'm working and going to university. There's a definite stigma.

One respondent discussed how this stigma has eroded her self-esteem and contributed further to her isolation, anger and depression:

> Yeah, if you go for anything or try to make life better for yourself, soon as you mention social assistance - the door is slammed in your face. That's the truth too. You can't get nothing. If your kids need something and you can't get it and you go home and you're looking at them and you know you can't do it, it really puts you in a downer. You get angry and hurt.

Another respondent suggested that these negative attitudes keep low income women from feeling part of the community:

> I feel a little on the outside looking in. I am just as good as anybody and probably better than most but my income prevents me from being part of the inside looking out.

It is especially frustrating for low income women when other women perceive them in this light:

> I stood in the bank and this woman was there saying - I was getting

> my cheque cashed, I was in college at the time - and she was saying 'All these single kids, the only .... time you see them is when they're out with their money, squirting it all over town.' I felt like telling her, 'Like, it's no wonder, it's the only time you see us because it's the only time we have money!' But I just thought, like this woman's not going to understand because obviously she's never been there before.

Women who are presently on social assistance had never planned on their lives turning out this way:

> I am forty-seven years old and if I had realized twenty years ago I'd be living like this today I wouldn't believe it myself. I have two small children and I find it a struggle trying to bring them up at this time. I feel I can't go out to work, only relief work at the school where my children go, and other than that I can't go because I have a coal furnace to look after all winter. I have to hand fire it and I just can't be gone all day and my children would have to come home alone. So, other than that, it's just one bad day after the other.

Unfortunately, social assistance is often the only realistic alternative to survive and support children. This woman offered her example:

> I only got grade nine. I'd like to go back to school. The only thing I am qualified to do is clean someone else's toilet. I think a lot of women quit school at a young age and got married or had kids without marriage, with no education and nowhere to go.

Women who leave abusive relationships usually are plunged into poverty. Widows try to live on meagre savings following the loss of a loved spouse. Many women have received training in traditional female occupations (for example, clerical) where there is a large supply and low pay. As one respondent explained her circumstance:

> But in the economy I'm living in right now, to get a job as a secretary they don't want to pay you half decent, just the basic wage. The basic wage is not going to pay rent, put the food on the table.

Native women are located differently on the system - administered under the paternalistic and patriarchal Indian Act on reserve and intersecting as 'other' in the non-native system off reserve. "According to the Parallel Report (1990) of the National Committee on the Status of Women, native women are among the poorest in the country" (Sinclair, 1990:34). As Silman (1987:11) reported for New Brunswick's Tobique Reserve:

"Unemployment, suicide, school drop-out rates, health problems and housing shortages are at epidemic levels on most reserves, Tobique being no exception. ... Native women long have endured the grim reality which underlies these statistics...."

Battiste (1988:69) has described how contemporary Mi'kmaq people in Cape Breton have come to a structured dependence on welfarism:

"Centralization (1940s-1950s) reduced the rural Mi'kmaq people to absolute poverty for the first time in their history. ... The federal government's answer to the economic catastrophe was the Canada Assistance Plan. Welfare, called "fool's gold" by many Mi'kmaqs, brought a new kind of prosperity to the centralized reserves in the 1960s. For the first time, families entered the cash economy. Their old economy had been rich in foods and other natural goods, but the new economy opened a vista of automobiles, televisions, and store-bought groceries and clothes. Along with the cash incomes came the federally created "band governments," and for the first time there was pavement on the roads, electricity and centralized sanitation.
     Although the economy had never seemed better to the Mi'kmaq, it also created a subtle and troublesome dependency on non-Indian goods for their diet. Some leaders viewed it with suspicion, reminding others of the plight of the original Mi'kmaq traders. Their fears were warranted. Since rural businesses cannot compete with welfare benefits, most of the Mi'kmaq farms and fishing activities folded. A first generation of Mi'kmaq children has grown to adulthood without learning to fish, hunt, trap or farm and feed themselves by their own efforts. The cash economy also required new skills; Mi'kmaqs had to find non-Indian jobs to support their families. Education became the key to the future, but the prison house of the present".

The bleak employment possibilities for Mi'kmaq people in Cape Breton have been documented in the Royal Commission on the Marshall Prosecution (1989) which has identified the lack of Mi'kmaq people employed in the service sector and the stagnating industrial sector. One Mi'kmaq respondent spoke of her many attempts to find employment - all in vain:

I never got a job. I even went for those "chicken feed" jobs.

The two-fold path this had produced for Mi'kmaq women has been discussed by Battiste (1989:62):

"Some families have fallen under the bondage of alcohol and drug

abuse, but within the extended family network are hands that help, share, and guide so that all children can survive within the family ... and nation ... Mi'kmaq women represent a resiliency, so ill-defined by modern thought, but so well known in the hearts of Mi'kmaqs. Throughout tribal and modern changes, from reserve life to modern life, and back to reserve life, Mi'kmaq grandmothers, mothers, sisters, and aunts typify a spirit of commitment, dedication, and physical and mental hardiness that allow the people as a whole to withstand economic hardships and social changes."

Mi'kmaq respondents expressed this commitment and support:

I live for my children. My family and friends are very supportive. If it weren't for them, I wouldn't have made it.

Women on welfare who locate jobs that can support them often find that the gains are spent on daycare, transportation and working clothes. Most find it impossible to save and the loss of their jobs means that they are forced back to the treadmill of welfare. An agency representative from the Ann Terry Project, a local women's employment agency, explained the dilemma:

If you can't afford child care, how can you look for work? ...Women are finding jobs with minimal wage positions or entry level positions that pay a low wage. If they have to pay child care and other expenses, they are usually working for nothing. Women need to make $10.00 an hour in order to cover child care and additional work related expenses.

An agency respondent assessed the dilemma of feeling apart and neglected:

In isolation, you see your situation as a crisis whereas coming together would show them the commonality of their lives.

Agency respondents emphasized the lack of self-esteem and self-confidence that low income women demonstrate. One woman addressed the question of self-esteem:

I'm learning to like myself. I'm building my self-esteem. I've never really liked myself before. Once I get my self-confidence back and learn to love myself and stop putting limitations on myself, stop saying I can't do this, I can't do that. I have a hard time making decisions. I count on other people.

Another woman replied that, in order to improve her life, "in one word, I need

confidence". Respondents spoke at length about learning to like themselves and what made this more probable. Of crucial importance is coming to understand that you are not alone and that this situation in which you find yourself is not your fault. Overwhelmingly, women came to this realization only when they were able to break out of their isolation and share their experiences with others. This was one of the key accomplishments of the research process which is detailed in the next section of this paper.

While generally, our research findings concur with those of studies cited, it is important to note the cultural and historical specificity of the experience of the "struggling and juggling" women. In terms of day-to-day existence, women's poverty in Cape Breton is not 'just like' women's poverty in Vancouver (Baxter, 1988) or Halifax (Blouin, 1989). Indeed, women's poverty in Industrial Cape Breton differs greatly from women's poverty in rural Cape Breton; the poverty of Mi'kmaq women is constructed and experienced through the politics of "special status" (Weaver, 1983) and through the lens of the social construction of what it means to be Indigenous women in Canadian society (*Canadian Woman Studies*, 1989). In seeking to paint broad brush strokes, social science researchers often lose sight of the tremendous diversity in women's lives. The researcher/respondents never lost sight of what separated them one from the other; yet, in order to accomplish the goals of the research process they had to try to transcend those divisions, or at least minimize their impact. As suggested earlier, they had to re-create themselves for the purposes of this project.

We suggest that this is a crucial methodological point for the social action agenda. Conceptualizations of women's lives on the system must not rely on "invented traditions" (Hobsbawm, 1985). The manufacture of women's solidarity does as much violence to women's sense of themselves as does their standardization in the welfare system. Further, strategies for tangible changes in community must be rooted in community realities of what women see as positive and enhancing in their diverse experiences.

The Research Process

The "struggling juggling" research objective was to identify the needs of low income women in Industrial Cape Breton and make recommendations to address these needs. The participation of low income women in data collection and analysis was the key component in the success of this research.[5] Not only

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5.   Women collecting either PSA or Municipal Welfare, the working poor and women collecting alimony, maintenance and child support often are categorized into this group. Our sense of what it means to be a low income women is that this status also includes psycho-social characteristics. Some of the psycho-social characteristics manifested by low income women

were low income women the focus of the study; they conducted interviews and engaged in data analysis. These women brought to the research process experiences and knowledge gained from "living the life." Their critical reflections on day-to-day problems transformed these accounts into explanations of the social, economic and political structures under which they lived. We believe that the women's respected and active work in the research process resulted in an enhanced sense of self and the possibilities of collective action. **Their** information and analysis was the basis on which **they** designed strategies for **their** social, economic and political transformation. Our goals as project animators were modest in that we sought to help women change the way they think so that they could change the way they live.

Project funding from the Secretary of State Women's Program made provisions for a stipend of $30. per day for each researcher/respondent. This covered transportation, child care and lunch expenses. This did not affect the women's PSA [Provincial Social Assistance] as Judy Martin, Supervisor of the Family Benefits Division at the Nova Scotia Department of Community Services, had been made aware of the project and supported it. Since the money was just enough to cover expenses incurred, it was not considered a wage income. The Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton, the project's sponsor, was emphatic in pushing for this arrangement. As one of the researcher/respondents later remarked, "Without the stipend we were paid, most of us would not have been able to stay involved."

Applicants were interviewed for the positions and successful "respondents as researchers" came to the Elizabeth Fry office in Sydney on Thursdays and Fridays for the duration of the project. The purpose of the project was discussed and the researcher/respondents were given reading material in preparation for training sessions.[6] Training sessions brought the researcher/respondents together for the first time. It was interesting to see the connections among them. Many knew each other from high school, previous training courses or through other acquaintances. This enhanced their sense of connection. Additionally, it reinforced the necessity for anonymity and confidentiality. Cape Breton is a small community and this aspect of research ethics became even more important. The point was made clear by the inter-

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are: low self-esteem, social isolation, loss of control, dependence on welfare, lack of educational and emotional skills, blocked opportunities, and social devaluation. This is what the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women (1990:48) calls the "vicious cycle of women's disadvantage." As a Nova Scotian single mother trying to leave social assistance put it, ..."it's almost as if the people who designed welfare tried to figure out a system that would keep these women poor and on the system for the rest of their lives...and they developed the perfect system..." (in Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1990:192).

6.   Reading material included the first three chapters of Kirby and McKenna (1989), Barnsley (1987) and Guidelines for the Researchers which Sandra and Shauna, the co-coordinators, had drawn up concerning what was to be expected of the researchers in terms of hours, work habits, etc.

relationships among the women. It was easy to see how this could extend to the women they would interview.

Ongoing training sessions were an essential part of the project. We introduced the researcher/respondents to the concept of social action research. They were enthusiastic about the project and more than willing to apply themselves to the workshops we organized in preparation for the subsequent collection, transcription and analysis of data. It was obvious from the beginning that, not only did the researcher/respondents have a vested interest in the project, but, also, no one in a position of authority had ever before asked for their input. These discussions also gave project organizers a clearer picture of the realities of low income women's lives.

During the training sessions, we did exercises designed to draw out "conceptual baggage" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989) about poverty, research methodology and ethics. We also did role playing of various scenarios which might arise during the interview process. Several sessions also entailed familiarizing researchers with micro computer processes. This was a practical skills acquisition which expanded both their job prospects and sense of personal accomplishment. It is important to point out what alien terrain the research process was for these women - even those who had university degrees. The idea that **they** could carry out research and that their views were authoritative was a crucial shift in their sense of self and of the way in which research gets done and used for policy purposes. It was necessary to explain the extent to which this type of research is stressful at times. We emphasized the need for the researcher/respondents to support each other and also made them aware that they must pace themselves in scheduling the interviews.

At first, the researcher/respondents were overly preoccupied with 'doing it right' (that is, by the book) and each felt that only she was feeling unequal to the task. Their confidence grew with their fascination with what they were finding out. They became eager to 'push the boundaries' of the research process and share insights with one another. The extent to which they became committed to one another and to the research process only became clear to the project organizers when we realized the sense of loss which the women experienced at the completion of the research process. We had not planned for a 'de-celeration' and were dismayed at our lack of insight.

The open-ended questions which the researcher/respondents designed focused on experiences and problems of trying to survive day-to-day on low incomes. As low income women, the researcher/respondents had ideas about what they would like to ask now that they were given the opportunity. It was difficult to steer their thinking away from structural changes to the social assistance and municipal welfare systems as they had many personal experiences and grievances to relate concerning both systems. We tried to emphasize the need to examine all problems and to look for solutions in the community, other agencies and within the women themselves. The accustomed mode of thinking was to blame the system and to look to the system for solutions.

The interview guide asked what women's lives were like, how they managed on their incomes, how they felt about themselves and what they felt they needed in order to improve the quality of their lives. The preliminary section of the guide included demographic information about respondents' age, marital status, source of income, number of children, etc.

The researcher/respondents were concerned about the rights of the women they interviewed. Since they didn't have past experience in gathering data verbatim, we decided to transcribe from actual tape-recorded interviews. The respondents, who were known to the researcher/respondents, had voiced concerns about having their interviews tape-recorded. Therefore, the decision was made to draw up a contract for the researchers to give to their respondents. The contract guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity; this meant that only the researchers would have access to the tape recordings of the interviews and a pseudonym would be used at all times. The interviews were discussed solely among the research group members. The research team met after each set of interviews. Researcher/respondents read their transcriptions and group discussion followed. This not only fostered group unity but it allowed us to examine information as it was being received and to begin a preliminary analysis of the common themes that were emerging. The researcher/respondents documented their experiences and ideas in the discussions of the interviews. In this way, they were not mere collectors of data but, indeed, contributors and interpreters adding what Kirby and McKenna (1989) called "another layer of data" to the research process.

In total, thirty low income women were interviewed. The respondents ranged in age from 16 to 59; the average age was 33 years. Five were currently receiving municipal social assistance and eight were recipients of PSA. Several were supplementing the benefits with part-time work or maintenance payments from ex-husbands. Three depended upon their husbands' employment for their source of income, three were employed full time, four received band welfare [through Indian Affairs], another received Widow's Veteran's Allowance, two others were receiving Canada Pension Benefits and Compensation Benefits, and one depended on Unemployment Insurance. At the time of the interviews, one woman had no income and two didn't report their source of income.

The respondents tended to rent accommodation. For several, this was subsidized regional housing. Eight owned their own homes. One rented second stage housing through the Cape Breton Transition House Association, one had boarding accommodations, and another lived with her parents. There were five Mi'kmaq women and one Black woman among the respondents.

Ten of the women had completed grade twelve and six had finished grade ten. There were women who had additional courses such as cosmetology, secretarial, merchandising, and hospitality. Two were completing a university degree. The remainder indicated that they had a grade nine or lower levels of

education.

All but two respondents had children. The children ranged from toddlers through school age, while several older respondents had grown up children. One mother cared for her disabled hydrocephalic child. Seven of the women were single, five were married, two lived in common-law relationships, four were separated, nine were divorced, and three were widows.

Generally, interviewing took place in respondents' homes. All respondents were eager to be interviewed. Many expressed interest in the project and hoped that the information would be used to bring about change in their life situations. Researchers were able to share information with respondents about services that were available in the area. For most respondents, this was the first time someone had suggested that their opinions were valuable. They expressed interest in reading the final report. Several offered their time to help set up babysitting services or support groups. Hence, the interviewing was not only a method of gathering data but also a way to sow the first seeds wherein women might change their lives.

Data analysis was exhaustive, exhausting and collective. We went through answers to each question to summarize and list the comments. At that point, it was obvious that certain responses were recurring and these formed the basis for emerging themes. To ensure the continuity of the project, the researcher/respondents worked daily until this phase was completed. They discussed themes and strategized on how they fit together into an overall picture of the lives of low income women in Cape Breton. Web-like diagrams were drawn up to explain the interconnections. The group immersed itself in the collective process of data analysis. Once they had specified the themes, they returned to the data once more; this time searching for quotes that effectively expressed the themes.

The same procedure was followed using the data recorded from the twenty agency representative interviews. However, it was the definition of the situation as articulated by low income women which organized the analysis. Agency respondents' perspectives were contrasted with those of the women. Given the focus of this article, it is not possible to present a detailed comparative analysis of the findings from agency respondents. However, there are some crucial points which may be raised. It is important to note that very few agency respondents were also categorized as advocates. These are persons who identify with and work for the self-articulated interests of those who live on the system. Agency advocates are of two types: there are those who work within social services agencies and seek to transcend the bureaucratic relevances in clients' interests, and there are those who work in organizations which explicitly constitute themselves as advocates for women.

However, most agency respondents saw themselves as 'guiding lights'. Ng (1988:89) argues that this posture is "not a conscious or deliberate move; rather, agency personnel respond to their organizations' mandate that they manage or control, as opposed to advocate for their clients". Thus, the

suggestions of agency personnel, though well-intentioned, tended to echo with notions that the women could neither think of self-help groups, nor activate them, without the direction and inspiration of agency personnel. One agency advocate, conscious of this problem among agency personnel, shifted the focus of the problem in an interesting way:

> There is such an attitude that it is their own fault. They should be able to make it. Sometimes I think we should be working with the middle class to make them realize their obligations rather than working with the poor.

The paternalism of agency personnel also gets expressed in most social service training with its emphasis on the directing, problem-solving intervention of social service workers. Further, it appears that most of the agency personnel were not sensitive to the class differences between themselves and their clients. Class differences manifest themselves in lifestyle and problem-solving strategies, as well as in the more familiar socio-economic disparities (Veltmeyer, 1985).

The point is that group formation and organization does derive from class-specific ideas about problem-solving and also entails resources which low income women usually do not have but could acquire with assistance (for example, self-esteem, group dynamic skills, skills at self-expression, transportation to group, child care while attending groups, etc.). Actually, as the interview data clearly indicated, low income women have highly developed and very sophisticated coping strategies. They could not survive otherwise. Unfortunately, as we found, welfarism has also instilled in them a [contradictory] kind of individualized learned-helplessness. We concur with Ng (1988) that it is the characteristics of welfarism which seriously impede the possibilities for interested self-action by low income women.

Data analysis by the researcher/respondents also clarified that group dynamics and group decision making were crucial components in this research. This approach ensured that all of the researcher/respondents had an impact upon the analysis. It must be remembered that some of these women had come into the project with little or no research skills. For some, it had been the first "real job" in a long time. It was especially rewarding to see their self-confidence grow as they acquired more systematic knowledge and honed their skills in research and analysis. The cohesiveness of the group also enhanced their efficiency.

We witnessed their mobilization to work towards social action. The researcher/respondents compiled a list of agencies in the area and the corresponding services they provided to low income women. They brainstormed ideas for a newsletter which could be produced specifically for low income women. They participated in a housing conference addressing the needs of those on low incomes. They planned for a future conference that could result in the for-

mation of a poverty rights group. That weekend residential conference was held for the study's participants and others in November, 1991 and resulted in the formation of PROUD [Poverty Rights Organization, United and Determined].

Towards the conclusion of the research project, the Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton received a Nova Scotia Department of Health and Fitness grant to establish a support group for low income women in the Sydney area. This was something that had been the dream of many of the respondents. One of the researcher/respondents became co-facilitator for PROUD.

Strategies emerging from the research had begun to be realities. PROUD has continued to advocate for poor people in community. PROUD's key spokesperson, Brenda MacDonald, has applied her artistic talents to song-writing and singing, using popular culture to define the realities of living poor and to reject pervasive and pejorative stereotypes. The song she crafted and performed for the report's public presentation, "Struggling and Juggling", has become the signature of PROUD activities and was included in the recent NFB-independent collaboration, "Voices from the Shadows" (see Appendix). At the directive of the Nova Scotia Director of Social Services, Ms. MacDonald has been travelling the province conducting training sessions with social service workers. PROUD has also organized two public events - their enthusiastic presence in the 1991 community March of Concern against the proposed closure of Sydney Steel and the 1992 "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" sensitivity exercise to educate people about the realities of living poor.

The "struggling and juggling" model has been integrated into curriculum and practice at the Maritime School of Social Work in Halifax. In February, 1992, the "struggling and juggling" team was invited to conduct seminars on methodology at the School and to conduct training workshops for a School-affiliated project in East Hants County, Nova Scotia.

We asked the researcher/respondents to reflect on the impact of the research process in their lives. We suggest that they can express this best in their own terms:

Wilma 'Billie' Borden

I became interested in this position for a number of reasons. I, myself, am a low income woman, divorced seven months after thirty-two years of marriage. My own life underwent such a drastic change at this time that I thought it would be an excellent opportunity for me to help myself and hopefully others at the same time.

Sandra Gouthro - co-facilitator

My main reason for becoming involved with this project is a burning desire to help other women. I have a responsibility to share what I have learned. If we can help low income women become more aware of their individual value and to impress the fact they are not to blame for their position in life, I would say we are making some progress towards change.

Women struggling on a low income need to unite and support each other to become strong, independent and productive members of our communities. Women need women who understand the problems. I am one of these women.

Sylvia MacAulay

PSA [Provincial Social Assistance] becomes a way of life, the sole means of supporting and providing for your children. Once you fall into it, its very hard to get out. PSA only buys the necessities and life becomes one constant struggle. Many times I worked forty hours a week for minimum wage to see those few extra dollars paid out in sitters and transportation. But working gives you a sense of worth. That is why I feel this project is so important; it initiates involvement.

Only women who life this life can truly understand it. That is why having low income women doing the actual interviews is so important or valuable. If it teaches us nothing more than to reach out for what we need it will be worth it.

Francine McCarthy

I heard about the project from a friend. I was very interested as I am a low income woman and have been one for all my life. I was curious to find out about other low income women and their problems and the solutions they came up with.

I had lots of problems myself but had no really good solutions besides borrowing money to solve them.

Mary Mellan

Getting this job is a good experience for me because I have never been in the work force off Native land.

Joyce Musgrave

After the interviews were completed, it was obvious that there were several common problems with all the respondents. I found there were a few solutions suggested. Hopefully, there will be a way that we'll be able to enforce some of them.

Shauna Walters

Someone told me that you never understand poverty until it affects you directly. I think this is probably true as is an understanding of most things. The feelings of isolation, stress and anxiety about not getting ahead, most often caused by financial pressures in the case of low income women, are similar feelings I experienced during the research process.

I felt isolated many times during the analysis of the study. I felt as if I was the only person in the world experiencing this particular solitude. I felt under a great deal of stress to produce a different piece of research because it seemed

as if everything to say about this topic had been said, in some way, somewhere before. At times, I felt anxious that it was not coming together.

Rose Marie Wood
I have really enjoyed doing this research and hopefully, something positive will come out of it for these women, including myself, because I sure could benefit from some good ideas.

Darlean Whiting - Director, Elizabeth Fry Society of Cape Breton
What we can't do is change the world over night. Unfortunately, there may always be poverty, violence, family instability, stress, and wrong choices to make. One of the things we can do is to improve the quality of lives of low income women in the community in which we live. We believe the recommendations in this report will begin that process.[7]

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7.   Struggling and Juggling presented recommendations that stress agency and community support for low income women in Cape Breton.

   •   Create a poverty rights group. This group of low income women and their supporters will become a vocal entity involved in decision-making, policy construction, advocacy, education of selves and of the public about the realities of living in poverty.

   •   Agencies self-educate. Agencies could learn from low income women about the dimensions of their lives and administer to them on the basis of these concerns. Agency personnel would, thus, become sensitized to poverty from the point of view of the poor.

   •   Provide an infrastructure of support. Agencies could offer information, skill-development, resources, self-concept enhancement, and facilitate self-help initiatives for low income women and their children.

   •   Establish women's resource centres in Cape Breton. Such centres could give women and their children a place to be, to come together for mutual support, strategizing and working for self-defined change.

   •   Develop consistent and humane policies and procedures in social welfare practice. The province and municipalities should work in consultation with low income women to reorganize social welfare practice in line with the real needs of women as articulated by them, not only by policy makers.

   •   Enhance government commitment to social welfare programs. As opposed to governments fighting inflation on the backs of the poor, the state in Canada should make good on its rhetoric about the high and desirable standard of living in Canada.

   •   Promote applied and practical research on the needs of low income women and children. Agencies, organizations and academics could apply their skills and energies to documenting, understanding and disseminating accurate information about the realities of living poor in Canada.

Conclusion

The question which remains is what has been the effect of the methodological approach taken in the "struggling and juggling" project? The answer is not simple. On one level, the paradigmatic preoccupations of the social sciences with systemic configurations and systemic transformations would perhaps lead one to posit that the project did not accomplish much. The effects were localized and there is the ongoing marginalization of those who live in poverty. On another level, when one plays the numbers game, it would be possible to conclude that a handful of women changing themselves and the way they think is also too limited to lay claims for social transformation. Further, the socialized results of hopelessness and grinding poverty have made PROUD's activities sporadic and its fate tenuous.

However, it is the feeling of those whose lives were touched by the project that much has happened and that playing the numbers game is a dangerous diversion. Project participants will always have the "struggling and juggling" experience on which to draw - it happened and it happened to them. Insensitive caseworkers, systemic circles of poverty and academic ivory towerism can never take that away. For project facilitators at Elizabeth Fry, there is the legacy of knowledge that women can transform themselves, if they are put in the way of structures of support to do so. The Report has made a tremendous impact on those who have engaged with it, causing them to rethink welfare strategies and effects and evoking from them more compassion and commitment to change.

Cape Breton continues to experience economic crisis and women's lives continue to be difficult. The "struggling and juggling" experience suggests to low income women, social service workers and social science researchers that there is another way.

Appendix

Struggling and Juggling

written by
Brenda MacDonald

Momma, what's welfare shoes?
Oh honey, who said that to you?
Momma, I feel so ashamed
All the kids are calling me that name
All the kids are calling me that name

I'll keep struggling and juggling
Trying to get along

Struggling and juggling
Trying to be strong

Sometimes, I feel so alone
Got no way to get out of my home
I wish that I could make people see
With just a little help, I could live in dignity
With just a little help, I could live in dignity

I'll keep struggling and juggling
Trying to get along
Struggling and juggling
Trying to be strong

Got a job, pays $4.75
It wasn't enough to keep me alive
So back again to the welfare line
Where you give me the money
But you won't give me the time
Where you give me the money
But you won't give me the time

I'll keep struggling and juggling
Trying to get along
Struggling and juggling
Trying to be strong

Don't want my kids to grow up this way
But no one seems to listen to what I have to say
I know poverty breeds poverty
Won't you help me break this cycle and set my children free
Won't you help me break this cycle and set my children free

I'll keep struggling and juggling
Trying to get along
Struggling and juggling
Trying to be strong

If we come together, we can find a way
To make people understand what we have to say
We have dreams, dreams to realize
But it's so hard to dream when no one will let you try
But it's so hard to dream when no one will let you try

We'll keep struggling and juggling
Trying to get along
Struggling and juggling, trying to be strong
Struggling and juggling, trying to get along
Struggling and juggling, won't you help us grow strong?

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