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The Canadian Research Institute  
for the Advancement  
of Women

***Feminist Research Ethics:  
A Process***

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CRIAW-ICREF acknowledges the financial assistance of the Women's Program, Status of Women Canada, in the production of this publication.

The ideas expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of CRIAW or the Women's Program, Status of Women Canada.

A Publication of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women

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Special thanks to Céline Bessette, Linda Clippingdale; assistance with translation: Pierre Petit, Yvonne Poulin, David Millar, Marthe Lépine, Toyi Soglo; Sandra Kirby and the participants of the Feminist Research Ethics workshop, 17th annual CRIAW conference, St. John's, NF November 1993.

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Revised, October 1996

Reprint 2003, 2004

Published by:

CRIAW/ICREF  
151 Slater Street, Suite 408  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1P 5H3

ISBN 0-919653-31-6

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# INTRODUCTION

## The Feminist Research Agenda

The aim of feminist research is to provide knowledge that will promote equality in society or a voice for those without one (Thompson, 1992). Power issues will inevitably influence every stage of the research: from the beginning when we first develop an idea to when we carry out the research, from interpreting and analyzing the **information**<sup>1</sup> collected to releasing the results. The question of power and control is one researchers must address in every research project. Good intentions are not enough. Research relationships often reflect the kinds of relationships we have in society, and issues of power and control will differ from one setting to another. For example, most research involves researchers who are in more powerful positions than those they are researching, but this is not always or inevitably the case. Each situation, therefore, needs systematic and responsible consideration.

## Team Research

These days it is much more common to see teams of researchers, instead of just one or two individuals, undertaking feminist research. In spite of a history of working collectively on feminist research in the women's movement, power imbalances can exist between members of research teams. Research teams, particularly those within academic institutions, sometimes exist within a rigid and **hierarchical** structure. This **structure**, and the impact it may have on its researchers, can be taken for granted and not acknowledged fully (Smith, 1987).

We are also more likely to see research partnerships developing along with research teams. Partnership is a term used to describe a particular kind of relationship. Being a partner may mean sharing equal responsibility for work; it may also mean being a **participant** in research with varying degrees of responsibility. Sometimes these partnerships exist between disciplines (that is, between psychology and history, or sociology and medicine). Sometimes they exist between institutions, such as two universities, or between a university and a government agency. In the last five years, we have seen funders, such as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, ask for partnerships between universities and community agencies, including service and advocacy groups. Again, members of a research team or a research partnership need to acknowledge that power imbalances may exist within these relationships. When researchers do not examine and process these imbalances before the research starts, conflicts often result. Based on feminist principles, an ethically responsible process suggests research partners will need to deal with power imbalances *before* research can go on.

We have a responsibility to recognize whatever power differentials exist and decide what it is we are going to do about them. This creates a number of problems: How can we, as feminists and as researchers, reconcile our principles with our multiple realities? How are we going to

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<sup>1</sup>Words in boldface have been defined in our glossary.

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avoid "power trips"? What will be the relationship between the researcher and the research *subject*? Who owns the **data**? What does partnership mean to us? Who has control? How will we recognize real differences in knowledge or experience in certain areas of our work?

## **The History and Philosophy Behind the CRIAW Feminist Research Ethics Process**

As researchers develop and carry out research across disciplines and in partnership with several communities, questions often arise about how to work together ethically. We need a different way of thinking, especially when the strict division between the researcher and the "subject" is blurred.

Many university-based researchers have access to codes of ethics, or guides to ethical behaviour for research. These codes can operate as institutional codes, reflecting a university perspective, or they may reflect a disciplinary approach to ethical behaviour. For example, medical researchers have to follow specific rules concerning the ethical use of human subjects in testing drugs. Other disciplines, such as sociology, history, psychology or political science, may have different concerns they want addressed in ensuring ethical behaviour. Many community-based researchers have their own codes of ethics they use to carry out research. These codes have most often focused on the fair treatment of research participants. Many community-based researchers are responsible only to themselves or to the agency sponsoring their research for ensuring their research is conducted ethically and respectfully. In this way, community-based researchers are different from university-based researchers, since the latter must present their research proposals to a committee for ethical review before they can begin their research.

The actual use of, and compliance with, these codes, particularly in university-based research, often focus on the legal protection of the researchers. This approach to thinking about research ethics issues is narrow and it does not reflect the changes we have seen in the practice of research, especially in a feminist context. Codes of ethics, whether formal or informal, do help us figure out our obligations to ourselves, to each other and to our communities. They can help us resolve ethical dilemmas by providing a process for developing our own solutions. They also help us develop our values and assumptions concerning ethical practices, research processes, and our working relationships.

In 1993, three researchers<sup>2</sup> presented a workshop on research ethics at the annual Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) conference. The discussion we had was exciting and challenging. Because of shifting demands and identities, participants did not see developing a new code of ethics as useful. Instead, we asked ourselves: what do we need to know? How do we ensure we are conducting our research ethically, respectfully, and safely?

Participants thought a series of questions examining different aspects of research practice would be helpful. Through a process by which these questions could be discussed, researchers

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<sup>2</sup>Sandra Kirby, University of Winnipeg; Martha Muzychka, Provincial Advisory Council on the Status of Women, Newfoundland and Labrador; and Carmen Poulin, University of New Brunswick. Research Ethics Workshop. Expanding the Healing Circle: 17th Annual CRIAW Conference, St. John's, NF. November 1993.

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could think through issues and problems which may arise in their research project, and decide how they would deal with them.

CRIAW had also faced some ethical dilemmas in its own research and publications. As noted earlier, individuals associated with a university have access to ethical review committees and ethical codes. But sometimes questions arose which were not dealt with by institutional committees because these committees did not consider new issues in ethical behaviour. Most importantly, because of research activities within CRIAW, we also needed to have our own ethical review process since we could not be, nor did we want to be, reviewed through another institution's ethics committee. As a result, in November 1994, CRIAW created a research ethics committee<sup>3</sup> which would:

- document research policy decisions;
- develop CRIAW's policy on feminist research ethics, intellectual property, and collaborative research practices;
- develop policy on research partnerships with organizations and/or individuals; and
- produce a research ethics tool.

The present document is a result of our work over the past two years. CRIAW has developed this feminist research ethics process for feminist researchers within the academy and the community. The purpose for ethical guidelines is to provide a framework in which we can conduct research that is respectful. More specifically, when we speak about feminist research, dealing with ethical concerns translates into research which is sensitive to all women, and concerned with ability, age, class, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, income, language, location, race and sexual orientation.

We think it is important for researchers to be aware of the assumptions and expectations that exist when conducting research. We also have to think about what this means in terms of doing research which is ethical. Researchers often assume they share similar views with their colleagues, and yet universal rules or guidelines do not exist. Our own experiences suggest we should name and discuss as many assumptions as possible, including definitions of terms, ethical considerations, project goals and outcomes, and working process.

It is not our intention, however, to provide or create a set of sacred rules about feminist research. Our intent is to facilitate the process and reflection we believe must take place for ethically responsible feminist research to be carried out. In addition, we have included a short annotated bibliography of useful and interesting works on feminist research theory and practice. We hope it will serve as an introduction to some of the excellent work available to us today.

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<sup>3</sup>The members of the CRIAW Ethics committee are: Martha Muzychka, Chair; Barbara Cottrell, Baukje Miedema, Carmen Poulin, and Barbara Roberts. Linda Clippingdale acted as the ex officio staff representative.

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## How Can Researchers Use This Document? What Can Researchers Expect When using This Approach to Research Ethics?

In the following pages, you will find a list of questions organized under several themes. As a group undertakes a research project, it may be important for members to answer several questions listed within those various themes. To illustrate these themes, we have also added vignettes describing some issues we and other researchers have faced in the past. We hope these vignettes will help spark discussion and focus your efforts in developing an ethical process for your work. A research team which is just beginning its work may find it useful to use the questions and the vignettes as a possible design for a weekend workshop. Finally, we have added a glossary to help you understand what we mean when we use certain terms. It is important to clarify your own meanings of the terms you use to describe your research process.

Although we have spoken about research teams and partners throughout this document, sometimes researchers do work alone, or with an advisory committee. We have written this document as a team, and we have developed our questions using a team approach. This does not mean the questions may only be used by research teams. Individual researchers can also clarify and expand their own knowledge of ethical research practices by answering the questions in this book. At this point, we wish to mention three important assumptions we hold which influence our approach to using this document:

- the reflection required to answer many of the questions which follow must take place as early as possible in the research process;
- decisions and circumstances change along the way, perhaps rendering these initial decisions as inappropriate; and
- revisiting these questions along the way may be an essential part of creating an ethically responsible feminist research project.

One of the implications for following this process is a reorganization of the work required in research. In particular, we need to consider "when" time is spent on various discussions about research issues. To be precise, this means making a commitment to spend time addressing the various issues raised in this document. It is important to realize that taking time to examine these questions and assumptions before starting a research project may mean a delay in the start of a research project. Questions of authorship, ownership of data, fairness of **representation**, and assumptions about what Sandra Harding (1991) calls the "*ways of creating knowledge*" or "*ways of knowing*" often cause conflicts and lead to delays. Reflecting on ethical process and practice has the potential to lead to clearer and more honest communication, and to research which is more ethical and sound. In the end, engaging in the process presented here will benefit, rather than add time to, the research.

Clearly, providing answers to all questions posed in this document may be unsuitable or impossible for a specific research team. We assume carrying out ethical research is the goal of all researchers. It is our hope that by examining and discussing these questions, we will, in the



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end, have an increased awareness of ethical considerations and their effects on our research practices. Ethical concerns are an integral part of the feminist research agenda, and feminist writers have produced many important works on research ethics. The purpose of this document is to enhance the responsible creation of knowledge which empowers and transforms.

### **CRIAW's Ethics Process: A Dialogue**

In closing, being researchers ourselves, we have brought our own experiences to the making of this document; but of course, our experiences are limited. We hope further editions of this document will be produced and improved by a dialogue which may begin if you decide to write to us. We have included an evaluation form on page 44 which we hope you will fill in, tear out, and send to us. Please let us know what you found useful and what you disliked about the ethics process. Your comments will help us in refining and expanding future editions.

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## QUESTIONS AND VIGNETTES

### I. Process

#### 1.1 Working together

*The research team had worked hard for almost a year to develop guidelines for how they would work together. It had been a difficult process, and some members resented the time it had taken away from the research, but they were proud finally to achieve agreement. The guidelines were working well, until midway through the project, one member had to leave the research team. Her replacement kept objecting to the way things were done. Some team members thought they should spend some time listening to her objections and perhaps try to rethink some of their practices. Others felt they'd all be better off if they just asked her to leave.*

- 1 How do we plan to work together?
- 2 How will we share **information**?
- 3 How will we make decisions?
- 4 What do we mean by working collaboratively?
- 5 Can we work as equals (that is, non-hierarchically)?
- 6 Is every member of our research team satisfied with the way we intend to work together?
- 7 How will we ensure we continue working this way throughout the project?
- 8 If one of us leaves the project will we redefine how we work together?
- 9 If new members join the project will we redefine how we work together?

#### 1.2 Consulting with others

- 10 What do we mean by **consultation**?
- 11 Who will we consult outside the research team?
- 12 Have we clearly decided how we will consult with people who are not on our research team?
- 13 If research team members leave the project will we redefine the consultation process we have decided on?

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- 14 If new members join the project will we redefine the consultation process?

### **1.3 Reaching agreement**

- 15 How will we deal with competing interests and pressures among ourselves?
- 16 How will we reach agreement about our basic beliefs?
- 17 Have we carefully established guidelines/agreements between ourselves (the researchers/team members) to ensure ongoing communication?

### **1.4 Resolving conflict**

*A group of women active in an immigrant women's resource centre has managed to get a small amount of money to study violence against women. One of the major topics they want to study is the role of arranged marriages in violence against women. They discuss the project with various women's groups that use the centre. Some members of South-Asian communities say they fear that their culture will be stereotyped. Others, second generation Canadian women of South Asian origin, feel a strong need to explore the issue. Some group members want to eliminate this topic and focus on the other areas. Other group members insist on going ahead as planned. The conflict is so upsetting that they have difficulty discussing it. How can they sort this out?*

- 18 How will we increase our awareness of possible disagreements?
- 19 How will we deal with **conflicts** or misunderstandings if they occur? What process do we want to put in place to deal with this?
- 20 What do we do if the participation of one of the research team members impedes the work of the team?
- 21 What process will we develop to deal with disagreements leading to the team wishing that one member be excluded from further team activities?
- 22 What process will we develop to deal with disagreements that result in one member feeling silenced or excluded?
- 23 How will we deal with disagreements and conflicts about our basic beliefs and practices?

### **1.5 Personal needs**

*At the end of the project, just for fun, the women had made a video recording their thoughts about the research. The day after one of the women had left on vacation, the women were invited to show the video at a conference. Everyone was excited about having an audience for their work, but as they had never discussed what they could and could not do with the*

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*video, permission to show it publicly had not been discussed in the group. No one knew how to contact the vacationing group member, but the women were sure she wouldn't object. Should they show the video?*

- 24 Will our personal/individual needs, as researchers and **participants**, be addressed openly throughout the process of the research? How will this be done?
- 25 Have we built these needs into the design of the project?
- 26 How will we keep honesty, respect, integrity, and trust in our relationships throughout the research process?

## **II. Structure(s)**

### **2.1 Funding**

*Funding is available for research on anger **management** for abusive men. Your group wants to research how abusers' groups can be made accountable to the women they have abused, and to feminist front line services. You know you can write a proposal that would appear to meet the funders' guidelines, but some members fear you could not maintain your own perspectives, given the difference in conceptual framework. One suggestion is that your group can take the money, do the research, and write two reports; one for the funder, one for your real audience. How do you decide if it is worth pursuing?*

- 27 How is funding going to limit and/or shape our project?
- 28 Who will be our funder(s)?
- 29 Are we competing with other groups for small pots of money?
- 30 Are there limits imposed by the structure, organization and/or affiliation under which we work?
- 31 Do these limits influence our research activities?
- 32 Do these limits influence our relationships?

### **2.2 Management**

*A community-based, grass-roots group wants to do research on the abuse of women by their teenage children. They know that funding is available to university-based researchers, but can't find a professor with time to work with them. One kind-hearted professor agrees to sign a proposal as "**principal investigator**" as long as they do all the work. This professor does not share their feminist analysis, but as she is not working on the*

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*project, they do not think this matters. When the research is complete, the professor feels that, as this is officially her research project, she has to write an academic paper on the findings. The women are concerned that they have no control over what she writes about their research.*

- 33 How will we manage our research?
- 34 Does the funding body require that a researcher be named the **principal investigator**, and does this have to be an academic?
- 35 If so, who will be our principal investigator(s)?
- 36 How will that affect how we share the work?
- 37 How will the naming of a principal investigator affect the research team's expectations of that member?
- 38 How will we deal with who gets the credit?
- 39 How will this requirement for a principal investigator affect the legal responsibility for the money?
- 40 How will we decide who will sign contracts, cheques and other documents?
- 41 Who will have actual control over the financial account and how we spend the money?
- 42 If applicable, how will we deal with having an official **hierarchy** to satisfy funders, and different individuals responsible for doing parts of the project or overseeing its overall direction?
- 43 What are the risks for team member(s) who is/are the principal investigators?
- 44 If the work isn't completed, what will be the consequences for the principal investigator(s) and for actual team leaders/coordinators/facilitators?

### **2.3 Sharing the work**

*Halfway through the project, one team member finds she is getting more and more resentful of the load she is expected to carry. She is lucky enough to be able to do the research as part of her job, while others have to do it outside of paid working hours. However, despite their initial agreement to share the work equally, the other team members seem to expect that she will do most of the work. Another team member, a single parent with two small children, has just announced she can't do any work on the project outside of the time she spends attending Advisory Committee meetings. A third team member is now unemployed, but is unwilling to do more than originally agreed. The general opinion seems to be that if*

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*someone gets paid for doing the research, she should do more than someone who does it for free.*

- 45 Have we shared the work fairly, taking into consideration each of our individual strengths?
- 46 Does our **distribution** of the work influence how much power individual group members have?
- 47 How will we deal responsibly with work sharing?
- 48 What commitment do we expect from team members who are not paid by the project or their employer to do this research?
- 49 What commitment do we expect from team members who become employees of the team (for example, researchers)?
- 50 What amount of work do we expect from research participants?

## **2.4 Accountability**

*As a staff researcher, you have been asked to research a particular group's (aboriginal, lesbian, elderly etc.) experience so your employer, an equality-seeking organization, can lobby the government for changes in policy. You are not a member of that group, but there is no money to hire a researcher who is. It's you or nobody. How do you represent the experiences of these women and ensure the research is uncompromised by your different perspective?*

- 51 To whom are we, the researchers, accountable?
- 52 What obligations do we have as researchers?
- 53 What information should we protect when our research is underway?
- 54 What are our goals for the research?
- 55 Have we identified the communities to which we are responsible?
- 56 What do we mean by "community"?
- 57 How will community representatives provide **feedback** to their communities about the research?

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## 2.5 Reporting

*a) A group of rural women came together to identify and address their health needs. They had worked hard and at the end of the project, no one had the time or energy to write a final report for the funders. The women knew the report would be shelved virtually unread, and decided they would rather put their precious time and energy into continuing to address the health needs they'd identified. Stress was the most common cause of ill health in the group, and as the writing of the report was stressful, they decided not to do it. Do they have the right to make that decision?*

*b) Since our team collected information about the abuse of women by their teenage children, we've had a number of calls asking us to speak on the issue. Some larger organizations like hospitals can offer substantial honoraria, others (usually women's and parent's groups) have no funding at all. As we are unemployed now and can't keep working for nothing, how do we decide where to speak? Do we only do public speaking for groups who can pay?*

58 When should we report progress on our research?

59 To whom should we, the researchers, report?

60 In what way shall we make our reports?

61 What will our report(s) include?

62 Who is responsible for reporting?

## III. Subjects/Objects/Sources

### 3.1 Choosing a research project

*We advertise in the newspaper and on bulletin boards around town for women to take part in our research on women who have had midwife assisted births. We also mail out letters to several of the larger women's organizations. Unfortunately, we are not able to offer any assistance with transportation or child care, nor do we have the money for translation or interpretation services. All the people who respond are white, anglo, middle class women. Do we assume that other women don't access that type of service? Do we go ahead with the respondents we have?*

63 Who is our research about?

64 Who does our research affect?

- 
- 65 Are we focusing on one group of women and excluding others?
- 66 Are we including women from diverse abilities, ages, classes, cultures, ethnicities, families, incomes, languages, locations, races, and sexualities?
- 67 What barriers are we erecting to exclude a **diversity** of women?
- 68 Have we checked with the communities about the questions we are asking?
- 69 Are we, in fact, the best people to be asking these questions?
- 70 Is our research building on the work of others?
- 71 Can our research serve all interests or must we set priorities and make choices?
- 72 Who will make these choices?

### 3.2 Privilege

*a) Student activist researcher A completes her master's thesis in an area which is not exactly that of her supervisor. To complete her project, she seeks and obtains the **collaboration** of five other community activists. After her thesis is completed, she writes up the findings for a wider distribution of the results. At the time of the final editing, the supervisor and community activists all want to share the credit for the work by being listed as co-authors. However, they do not recognize each other's input in the project. What should the student activist researcher do?*

*b) The university professors and some of the community women in the research group have been friends for a long time and respect each other's work. One woman notices that the other members of the group defer to the professor when research questions arise. When she points this out, the professor denies this is so.*

- 73 Who are the researchers? That is, who are we?
- 74 How do our abilities, ages, classes, cultures, ethnicity, family status, gender, incomes, languages, locations, races, and sexualities influence our research?
- 75 Have we named our positions of power and **privilege** with respect to ability, age, classes, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, income, language, location, race and sexuality, and with respect to our position in the research team?
- 76 Have we identified the ways in which each one of us uses our privilege?
- 77 Have we named how ability, age, class, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, income, language, location, race and sexuality are being addressed in this research?



- 
- 78 Have we avoided hierarchical classifications of oppressed groups?
- 79 Have we stated how we see diversity operating in this process and how we intend to respect diversity?

### 3.3 Participation

*We realize that our research usually focuses on urban women, so we design a project which will include rural women. We decide to try to find out how women in coastal communities are being affected by the crisis in the fishery. The women in these communities have little formal education and no experience doing research, and so are reluctant to help us develop the research design. We set up a list of questions and plan to hold open-ended kitchen-table interviews in three fishing villages. The first set of interviews goes badly; they are reluctant to talk to us, and don't answer the questions as fully as we expected.*

- 80 Who have we invited to take part in the research?
- 81 Who haven't we invited to take part?
- 82 Have women (the research team, the target group, other participants) been participating in every stage of planning the research?
- 83 Are costs for daycare, transportation, meals, and salary compensation part of the costs of developing our research projects?
- 84 Do we have an **equity** policy for women's participation?
- 85 How will we represent women's diverse experiences?
- 86 Can we identify other ways to ensure women's participation, **representation** and **empowerment**?
- 87 Should we include these alternative ways in our project?
- 88 How do we do this?

### 3.4 Impact on women

*The team is made up of sexual assault survivors, counsellors and therapists. One survivor doesn't like a question the professionals want to ask, but the other survivors have no problem with it. No one can quite understand the woman's objections; perhaps she's just being difficult?*

- 89 What is the impact of our research on women's lives?

- 
- 90 How are we ensuring our research is by women, about women, for women?
- 91 To which women are we referring?
- 92 Does our research attempt to facilitate empowerment? How?
- 93 Does our research recognize that women are the best experts on their own lives?
- 94 Are women speaking on their own behalf in our research?

### **3.5 Potential for harm**

*a) This is the first time the women who live in this small rural village have ever taken part in a focus group. Many of the women are related by blood or marriage. The researcher spends the first half hour creating a safe environment so the women will feel comfortable to talk, and then begins the discussion about the division of labour in their marriages.*

*b) A team of three researchers is planning to research lesbian rituals. They have agreed that anything said within the group is confidential. The sole lesbian researcher, who is the point of entry to the lesbian community, knows that she will have access to a lot of valuable information that the other two probably cannot get without her. She feels compelled not to withhold it, because of their confidentiality agreement, but worries that she may expose herself and her community to risk. She wants to trust the other two, but she has qualms about their agreement. She does not feel the agreement was made between equals, since the other two risk nothing. How does she resolve this situation?*

- 95 Will or could our research harm women?
- 96 Will or could our research benefit or harm some women more than others?
- 97 How will we deal with policies, research and information which help some groups of women but may harm others?
- 98 If we ask women to speak about their lives, will it be safe for them to do so?
- 99 In what environment would it be safe for women to speak about their realities?
- 100 How will we make sure that women are able to secure their safety?

### **3.6 Consent**

*a) University professor A is considering a research project on students' experience of learning. She plans to interview students taking professor B's course. Professor B holds a tenure track position but she is not yet tenured. Could this make the students vulnerable*

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*to poor marks from Professor B if they are negative about her teaching? Could this make Professor B vulnerable when she applies for tenure?*

*b) In a research methods class, a team of students wants to focus on the responses of passersby to the homeless and "skinheads" who panhandle on a street corner. How would they "get permission" from the three groups involved, or should they even try?*

- 101 Have we explained to everyone involved what the research is about, and who and what it is for?
- 102 Have we explained to everyone involved in the research (including participants, researchers and sponsor organizations) our understanding of their rights and responsibilities?
- 103 Are we clear what it means for people to give informed **consent**?
- 104 How will we know we've done everything we can to make sure everyone understands what it means to give consent?
- 105 What will we do to recheck that consent continues to be given as the research progresses?
- 106 Do people know that researchers must report certain information, such as potential damage to others and child abuse?
- 107 Have we made assumptions when we ask for consent that may exclude some people?
- 108 Do our research participants know how the information we collect will be stored? destroyed? used by other researchers?
- 109 How will the information be stored so that it can be used by other people?
- 110 If a new use for the information emerges, will we consult with participants to determine whether they are willing to have it used for a different purpose than was first intended?
- 111 If new uses for our information emerge, and if participants cannot be contacted to determine whether they consent to the new use, how will we decide if using the **data** is ethically acceptable?
- 112 Who will benefit by this decision?
- 113 Will we seek a second opinion?
- 114 Do the people we ask for a second opinion fairly represent our participants?

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## IV. Methodology

### 4.1 How we see the research

*We are a diverse group of feminist researchers working on the next-to-final draft of our proposal. We realize that no First Nations woman has ever been part of the team so we call the local Friendship Centre inviting a woman to join us. The woman who responds to our invitation attends two meetings and then doesn't return. We wanted to develop collaborative methods for our participants but we can't even seem to develop a representative team. We don't know what to do now. Should we go ahead and finish the proposal or go back to square one and rethink the whole project?*

- 115 Have we agreed on the description of the research?
- 116 Have we invited people who will be participating in our research to have input into the research design and method?
- 117 How will we co-create the research with the participants?
- 118 What are the possibilities and costs of the process of obtaining feedback from the participants?
- 119 Have we included input from representatives of the group we are researching?
- 120 What do we mean by representation?
- 121 How do we ensure representation in our research?
- 122 How do we ensure representation on our team?
- 123 How do we ensure representation in our participants?
- 124 Are our methods appropriate for people from diverse cultures?
- 125 How are we including the participants' perspectives?
- 126 How will we co-create the research with other researchers?
- 127 If **action research** is our focus, have we defined what is the action part of our research?
- 128 How will we make the action part of the research happen?
- 129 In our research are we applying the same concerns to qualitative and quantitative data?

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- 130 Have we taken into consideration the passing of time with respect to how we see the problem?
  - 131 Have we considered the passing of time with respect to how we collect the information?
  - 132 Have we considered the passing of time with respect to the use of the information?
  - 133 Have we considered the passing of time with respect to the greater good of the population as a whole?
  - 134 Have we considered the passing of time with respect to the safety of the individual participants?
  - 135 Have we considered the passing of time with respect to changes in the composition of the research team?

## **4.2 Deciding on the research questions**

*We are a group of university educated feminists. We write the research questions, then read them over carefully to make sure they are written in plain language. One member of the team suggests we take the questions over to the Single Parent Centre and ask the women for their opinion on whether they are in fact clear enough. Some people think this is a bit excessive.*

- 136 What are our assumptions in creating and developing this research project?
- 137 How do we check these assumptions?
- 138 Should it be one of us alone or the group that carries out this research?
- 139 Are there others better suited to ask these research questions?
- 140 Are our assumptions true for all women or just some groups of women?
- 141 To whom can we speak to ensure our assumptions apply to all women?
- 142 What data do we have, or do we need to get, to support our beliefs and assumptions about specific groups of women?
- 143 Are we applying double standards for different groups of women based on their identity (for example, ability, age, class, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, income, language, location, race and sexuality)?
- 144 Are we ignoring alternative viewpoints we may feel uncomfortable with or are afraid of, because these alternative viewpoints do not form part of our own life experience?

- 
- 145 Do we have members of the researched group on our team?
  - 146 Have we looked for their opinions as we develop the questions we need to ask?
  - 147 Are we genuinely respecting the opinions of the researched group with respect to what questions we will ask?
  - 148 Will the language we use be accessible to all?
  - 149 If the language we use is not accessible to all, who does it exclude?
  - 150 Do we use women as a general term or are we really referring to white, middle class urban women?

### **4.3 Limitations of the research**

*We suddenly realize that all the women at this meeting who are deciding on questions about poverty are in fact employed. One team member feels she can speak about poverty issues because she wrote her dissertation on the topic, another woman was extremely poor while going through university, and a third lived in poverty when she was a single parent, twenty years ago. Can we represent women on low incomes? How will our limited experience affect our research?*

- 151 Have we considered the limits to "representative experience"?
- 152 What are the limits represented in our research?
- 153 What are the limits of our research?
- 154 How will we acknowledge or deal with the limits of our research?

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## **V. Managing, analyzing and interpreting the information/data**

### **5.1 Our influence on the information/data**

*When the project is over we realize there were no lesbians or women with disabilities involved in our work. Although we now realize that this omission means that our research has gaps, we believe we achieved a lot with limited resources. We know we will be criticized for this omission. Two women from those communities agree to read over our report and add their perspective. Since they were not involved from the beginning, there are some misunderstandings and confusions. In the end, we only use one short paragraph written by them in our report. How will this situation limit the outcome and usefulness of our research?*

- 155 How will the information we gather help women?
- 156 Can we, the researchers, provide an accurate and respectful description of the information we gather?
- 157 As researchers, how do our beliefs, values and experiences limit how we respond to the research?
- 158 As researchers, how do our beliefs, values and assumptions limit our research?
- 159 As researchers, how do our beliefs, values and assumptions limit our interpretation of the research?
- 160 As researchers, are we seeing only what we want to see? Are we able to see information that contradicts our beliefs?

### **5.2 Future use of the information/data**

*A group of researchers is planning to work collaboratively to explore the impact of a specific program offered to a population of women inmates. One of them suggests that they should reanalyze some interviews she collected a year ago with a group of women inmates from the prison where the program in question was offered. Although the researcher had carried out the interviews for a totally different purpose, she knew that they contained information about the impact of the program. The information contained in the interviews is of a very sensitive nature. Gaining consent from the women inmates to use the interview transcripts for this new purpose is impossible. Money is tight, and not having to cover the cost of new interviews and transcription would mean an important saving in research dollars. Should they go ahead and reanalyse the data?*

- 161 In what way do we plan to use the information we collect in our research?

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- 162 In what way do we plan to distribute the information we collect in our research?
- 163 Who will make decisions about the distribution of our research?
- 164 Is our research accessible and open?
- 165 What are the ethics of accessibility of research in a changing environment?
- 166 How is our research going to be used by the funders?
- 167 How is our research going to be used by the participants?
- 168 How is our research going to be used by us, the researchers?
- 169 What is the impact of our research on women's lives?
- 170 What is our role, as researchers, with respect to the impact of our research on women's lives?
- 171 Who will decide when our research is finished?
- 172 Have we asked for and received feedback about our findings from the communities we are writing about?
- 173 What actions will result from the research we have carried out?

### 5.3 Who gets the credit?

*University researcher A has collected a socially important quantitative data set on a specific group of immigrant women, but not yet analysed or interpreted the data. Thinking that a **culturally sensitive** analysis is needed, researcher A seeks the collaboration of younger University researcher B, who identifies as a member of the cultural immigrant community in question. In turn, researcher B suggests the collaboration of Community researcher C, who is also a member of the same cultural immigrant community. The three researchers agree to share authorship; researcher A will complete the analysis, do the bulk of the writing, will not interpret the results, and will be the primary author. Researcher A completes the data analysis and a first draft of the report, including an interpretation of the results. Researchers B and C get the report, they are appalled by the product and do a complete rewrite. Researcher A agrees that the rewrite is a great improvement, but expects to remain the primary author.*

- 174 Who owns the research we have carried out: we the researchers, the participants, the funding agency, the agencies/organizations under which we work, others?
- 175 Whose name(s) will be associated with the research we have carried out?



- 
- 176 Does the authorship reflect the involvement of all those who participated in our project?
- 177 If someone is involved in our project for part of the time, how much involvement is necessary for acknowledgement to be made in written and spoken communication of the research results, and how, specifically, should this be done?
- 178 What do we consider the necessary kind of involvement in our project to grant authorship?
- 179 Does this apply to all types of publications we produce?
- 180 If this does not apply, what is our reason for this decision?
- 181 Does our reason reflect ableist, ageist, classist, homophobic, racist, and/or sexist assumptions?
- 182 Have we recognized women whose work has gone before ours?

#### **5.4 Evaluation**

*The goal of our action research project was to facilitate the empowerment of a group of doubly disadvantaged women. At the end of the project, we realize we didn't plan any evaluative work. We've run out of energy, time and money. We can see that the women have more self-confidence and are more knowledgeable about research and doing projects than they were before we started. We decide to evaluate the project by writing down our observations about how well the women did. One of the women thinks this is patronizing, and the evaluation should be done by the project participants. Against our better judgment, we agree. Two months later, we're still waiting for something to come from the group and decide to go ahead with our original plan.*

- 183 How will we decide if our research is empowering?
- 184 How will we decide if we have reached our goals and objective(s) for the research?
- 185 How will we determine if our research is reliable?
- 186 If our findings could not be repeated/replicated by another research team, is this an important consideration? What is our reason for this decision?
- 187 How will we determine if our research is valid?
- 188 How will we determine if our interpretation of the information is accurate, and not ableist, ageist, classist, homophobic, racist, and/or sexist?
- 189 How will we measure the impact of our research?

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## GLOSSARY OF WORDS AND PHRASES

We run into fewer problems when we speak the same language. Groups need to define the words they use. Here are some suggestions for defining terms we use when we do our research, bearing in mind that definitions are always arbitrary.

**Accountability:** Knowing what we are responsible for and who we answer to in fulfilling our responsibilities. For example, in a project on violence against women, the research team would obviously be accountable to the project funders, but we are also accountable to each other, and to the women who are experiencing violence. It is important to decide early in the project how accountability will be handled.

**Action Research:** Gathering and analyzing information which is conducted for the purpose of social change, usually with a specific action as the goal. The action research process itself may also contribute to social change. For example, a participatory research project on poverty which involves women on low incomes as researchers can help develop the women's skills and provide a basis for organizing.

**Archive:** Both the act of storing information/data and a place for keeping information/data for the purpose of future research.

**Collaboration/working collaboratively:** Working with others in a non-hierarchical way; seeking agreement in a way that recognizes group members as equals, and recognizes each member of the group's skills and worth. The activity of two or more individuals or organizations entering a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship to achieve or reach common goals. The relationship includes a commitment to communication, and an agreement about the ways of working.

**Conflict resolution/dispute resolution:** Using non-hierarchical ways to resolve problems and reach agreement or negotiate a mutually acceptable solution when there is disagreement.

**Consent (also known as "Informed Consent"):** The presentation of information to research participants, and potential participants, prior to their involvement in a research project, which explains the purposes of the research, procedures for ensuring privacy and confidentiality, and possible hazards. The information should be presented in a manner which will ensure participants understand the issues and will enable them to decide for themselves if they wish to participate.

**Consultation:** The activity of seeking advice, opinions, feedback, or reactions from an individual or a group of individuals who are recognized for their expertise in an area or knowledge or experience of an issue and may provide this service for a fee or as a donation. For example, if we are conducting research on Caesarian sections, we could consult with a feminist health care provider, the Midwifery Coalition, and a group of women who have had Caesarian sections. The consultant does not have responsibility, authority, or power over how the information is used unless it is clearly specified before the consultation takes place.

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**Culturally appropriate/sensitive:** Conducting research in a way that is comfortable for the participants and is always sensitive to difference, such as ability, age, class, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, income, language, location, race, and sexuality. Ensuring we do not assume that everyone shares the same values, ideas and ways of being.

**Data, information:** The information we collect is often referred to as "data." In research projects, such information is usually collected in a systematic way.

**Diversity:** The recognition that women have different life experiences depending on such things as ability, age, class, culture, ethnicity, family status, gender, income, language, location, race and sexuality. Women experience inequality and oppression differently, and it is important to take these differences into account and include women from diverse backgrounds in research.

**Distribution:** Getting the word out. The circulation of the data analysis. Once the research is complete, reports are written and, too often, shelved. Figuring out how we will get the word out on the street or to the ears that should be hearing, is as important as deciding what questions to ask, who does the asking, and who they are asked of.

**Empowerment:** The state of feeling in control of one's self and being free to make choices as a result of sharing information, learning new skills, validating experiences, and reclaiming one's sense of self.

**Equity:** Treating people in a just and fair manner, taking account of their unequal situations. Equity is not necessarily the same as treating people as equals. It may involve treating people differently. Equity should ensure the participation of under- represented groups.

**Feedback:** The information which contains the data analysis is distributed to research participants with the intention of gathering the participants' views on the information. It is usually the practice in feminist research to invite people who have been involved in the research to give feedback on anything that is written about them. The practice of giving research participants the opportunity to respond to any analysis or research findings which is directly or indirectly related to their experience. This gives the researcher an opportunity to better understand the topic being researched. It does not necessarily mean the data will be changed based on the feedback.

**Hierarchy/hierarchical:** Vertically organizing people in groups according to social status, power, prestige or expertise. Feminist researchers have attempted to avoid hierarchy in research groups and instead have looked for more equitable ways of working. This usually means valuing each group member's contributions and viewing group members as equals, regardless of ability, education, or experience. This does not mean all group members are the same. Different life experiences, skills and contribution can be acknowledged, but not necessarily unequally valued. Rejecting hierarchy does not mean rejecting leadership. Feminist researchers attempt to share and encourage leadership in group members less likely to have had opportunities to develop those skills, rather than always assigning the leadership role (and credit) to the same people.

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**Management:** The directing, guiding and controlling of the project. Management usually includes administration, book-keeping and financial decision making. Most groups function better when one or more people are identified to take responsibility for certain tasks.

**Participant:** This term means different things to different people. In the university, it usually refers to informants or research respondents, that is, the people who provide information through interviews or respond to questionnaires. In community-based projects, it usually refers to anyone who takes part in the research. This may include those who collect information and those who provide it, those who design the project, those who analyze the data, management team members and hired staff.

**Principal investigator:** This term is used primarily in university-based research and refers to the person who leads or agrees to be responsible for the administration of a research project. Even when the university and community are partners, the funding agency may require a university professor named as principal investigator. This means the research will be primarily credited to that person.

**Privilege:** The unequal distribution of resources and status. The ability to access resources, and receive, acquire or assume benefits, on the basis of this status. It is helpful for every member of the research team to identify ways in which they have "privilege," and ways in which they gain status which may be limited or denied to others. Status can be based on things we as individuals have little or no control over, including sex, race, culture, ability, wealth and age. It is important we recognize and name our own privilege so we can better understand how we function in the group.

**Representation:** Speaking for, on behalf of others. In a research project, group members should be clear who they are representing, who they think others are representing, and whether the burden of representation is too great. For example, while one rural woman could represent a rural women's organization, and may feel her experience is representative of most rural women, it would be unreasonable to expect her to speak on behalf of all rural women. It is also important to recognize who is not represented, whose voice is not at the table.

**Structures:** the way in which groups, institutions or other agencies may organize themselves. Structures include rules, hierarchies and processes organizations use to carry out their work as well as dictate how they may relate to other groups, institutions or agencies.

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## EVALUATION FORM

The second edition of this booklet *Feminist Research Ethics: A Process* underwent revisions based on suggestion from various people. Several readers suggested the inclusion of an evaluation form to make it easier for you to provide CRIAW with comments concerning this edition. Your suggestions will be helpful to improve further editions of this publication.

As a researcher are you based in:

a community group       a university       independent researcher   
other \_\_\_\_\_

Was the booklet helpful?

yes       no       somewhat

What did you like about the booklet?

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How can the booklet be improved?

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Would you like to receive some more information about CRIAW's activities?

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Any other suggestions?

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