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Police Abuse and Sex Workers – The Two Wings of the Butterfly: Negotiating Ethical Dilemmas in Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Bogotá, Colombia.

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**Police Abuse and Sex Workers – The Two Wings of the Butterfly:
Negotiating Ethical Dilemmas in Participatory Action Research (PAR) in
Bogotá, Colombia**

María Inés Cubides Kovacsics¹

Alejandro Lanz Sánchez²

Abstract

Since September of 2012, we have been conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR) in the center of Bogotá with sex workers regarding their right to the public space known as 'La Mariposa' (The Butterfly), an open-air plaza where they often face discriminatory urban praxis and frequent abuse by police officers. While our PAR team has conducted research in 'The Butterfly' for over five years, the objectives, motivation and design of this PAR project were defined by community-based peer leaders and driven by their concerns and testimonies about the abuse and discrimination they have experienced from police in the plaza. Sex workers in the plaza have described these experiences in terms of unjustified detention, physical and verbal abuse, discrimination and abuse due to sexual orientation, and urban displacement. In this paper, we will discuss our PAR team's action research agenda and our collective work promoting sex worker's re-appropriation of their right to public space and the city. We will provide concrete examples of ethical dilemmas we have faced in the field and the corresponding praxis our PAR team developed to negotiate and overcome these dilemmas through our 'PARCES' (Translated Acronym: Peers in Action Reaction Against Social Exclusion) methodology. The principles of 'PARCES' and 'action-reaction' guide our decision-making process with research actors throughout the construction of the action research design, implementation and analysis in order to incorporate participatory relations and the consideration of research actors' safety, health, and rights within the ethical framework of the project.

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Image 1. ‘The Whores to the ‘Bitch Kennel’³/ ‘Las Putas a la Perrera’ (Source: Alejandro Lanz, April 25, 2013)

Butterflies are masters of survival and camouflage artists in the protection of their fragility. Behind their colors and their shapes they hide unsuspected talents to survive. Certainly, in some of the corners of the city butterflies dwell: sex workers, mothers, daughters, sons, sisters, brothers, friends, girlfriends, human beings exist within these wild geographies struggling for their rights in the boxing ring of the street (PARCES 2013).

³ ‘Bitch kennel’ is term used by the women in ‘The Butterfly’ to refer to the police truck in which they are held captive and transported to state-based correctional or child protection facilities. In Spanish, the term is ‘perrera’, which literally means a kennel. This is metaphorically significant for the women of ‘the Butterfly’ as they have named this space according to how it makes them feel: “like bitches rounded up in a dog kennel, deprived of freedom and agency”.

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Butterfly PAR Project*

Since September of 2012, we have been conducting participatory action research (PAR) in the center of Bogotá with sex workers regarding their right to the public space known as 'La Mariposa' (The Butterfly), an open-air plaza where they often face discriminatory urban praxis and frequent abuse by police officers. While our PAR team has conducted research in 'The Butterfly' for over five years, the objectives, motivation and design of this PAR project were defined by peer leaders and driven by their concerns and testimonies about the abuse and discrimination they have recently experienced from police in the plaza.

Even though sex work is legal in Colombia, and there are court proceedings about their legal protection, sex workers in the plaza have described these experiences in terms of unjustified detention, physical and verbal abuse, discrimination and abuse due to sexual orientation, and urban displacement. These dynamics are discussed in the following sections.

Specifically, sex workers are enclosed within fences around the Butterfly statue, being exposed to the gaze of everyone passing by in this public space; they are locked up in police stations or taken to the UPJ⁴; they are handcuffed as if they had just been arrested; they are insulted and verbally abused; they are sexually abused or they are asked for sexual favors in order to be let free; they are frequently threatened by the police; they are bitten, dragged, and/or forced to accept physical punishments; their citizen identification cards are confiscated or even broken by the police; they experience even greater physical and verbal abuse due to their sexual orientation; they are often object of police search and

⁴ The UPJ (Permanent Justice Unit) “functions as a center of transitory retention where citizens that break cohabitation norms prescribed by the National Code and District Police are taken to and where they remain for no more than 24 hours as a protective measure” (*La UPJ funciona como centro de retención transitoria a donde son conducidos los ciudadanos que infringen las normas de convivencia contempladas en los códigos Nacional y Distrital de Policía que como medida de protección permanecerán en un tiempo no mayor a 24 horas*)” (<http://www.gobiernobogota.gov.co/en/>).

identifications; and they are constantly expelled from the plaza.

Our PAR project is directed to eliminate this police abuse and to promote sex worker's re-appropriation of their right to public space and the city. In this paper, we will discuss our PAR team's action research agenda and our rituals of collective work (Cahill, 2007c) promoting sex worker's re-appropriation of their right to public space and the city. We will provide concrete examples of ethical dilemmas we have faced in the field and the corresponding praxis our PAR team developed to negotiate and overcome these dilemmas through our 'PARCES' (Translated Acronym: Peers in Action-Reaction Against Social Exclusion) methodology. The principles of 'PARCES' and 'action-reaction' guide our decision-making process with research actors throughout the construction of the action research design, implementation and analysis in order to incorporate participatory relations and the consideration of research actors' safety, health, and rights within the ethical framework of the project.

1.2 Study Site Description: 'The Butterfly' Plaza/ 'La Mariposa'



Image 2. The Butterfly Plaza (Source: Adriana Lloreda, team member, August 28, 2014).

The study site is 'La Plaza San Victorino', known as 'The Butterfly' due to a butterfly sculpture located in the plaza center by Edgar Negret. This space contains a diverse informal and formal economic activities and cultural praxis including street vendors of

food, stands of cellphone minutes and cigarettes vendors (known as *chazas*)⁵, coffee, books, music CD's, clothing, tourist photograph services, sex services, entertainment shows as people singing, pharmacy, stores, bootblacks, *jaladores*⁶, and so on. In this open air market and public space there are, simultaneously, children playing around the statue, shoppers frantically making their purchase, homeless youth and adults circulating, consumption of drugs and alcohol, gamblers on the machines in local stores and casinos, police circulating and rounding up cases, mass transit of different city dwellers due to the public transportation station at northern border of the plaza.



Image 3. Chaza Participatory Drawing (Source: Luz Marina, Participatory drawing, November 7, 2013).

1.3 Sex Work and Legal Ambiguities in the Plaza: The Two Wings of the Butterfly

San Victorino Plaza is a public space full of cultural, political, economic, historical, and socio – spatial contradictions, and movement of multiple actors and identities in the city. Although a public space, the police and military authorities are a constant presence as a means of maintaining order and eliminating deviant and delinquent actors from society.

⁵ *Chaza* is the slang name for an improvised stand street vendors construct to sell multiple kind of products such as cigarettes, candies, chips, cellphone minutes and others (see participatory drawing image 3).

⁶ *Jalador* is the slang name for the person who promotes products in the plaza to passersby.

This leads to police abuse against those actors that are conceptualized and seen as deviant and delinquent. In terms of the sex work economy within this public space, prostitution is not permitted; however, the legal system indicates that sex work is not illegal and it is not a crime. On the one hand, the official land-use plan (*Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial - POT*) for Bogotá⁷ establishes specific areas where sex work can take place. These are called high-impact zones, indicating that people who work in the sex industry should partake in their professional activities inside this area, also called, ‘the zone of tolerance’ or the space where prostitution is ‘tolerated’ in the city.

‘The Butterfly’ is very close to one of these ‘permitted’ spaces but it is technically outside of this ‘zone of tolerance’. The sex work dynamic works in the following way in ‘The Butterfly’: the client ‘chooses’ a sex worker in ‘The Butterfly’ plaza, negotiates the price and, if (s)he agrees, they go to get a room (*pieza*) in one of the cheap, pay-per-hour motels that are located near, but outside, the limits of the ‘tolerated’ zone. One wing of this ‘Butterfly’ problem is that sex workers experience expulsion, exclusion, and unjustified detainment from the plaza for being perceived as ‘whores/(*putas*)’ by the police. However, how do the police know that the person standing by the statue will offer sex work services? Usually, sex workers walk around the *plaza* or spend time by the statue and the police officers automatically label them as sex workers in the sector. However, even if they *are* sex workers, can legal technicalities within the city restrict the free circulation of someone who is *perceived* as a sex worker? How do police officers determine that these people are sex workers? Is it because of their clothing? Or is it because of the way they walk or the way they talk or use makeup? Or is it because they are simply ‘whores’ (to them), that policemen have the given right to harass them?

If we look carefully at the legal aspects of this issue, we will find there is not a sanction in the ‘District Police Code’ for providing sex services outside of these spaces (or receiving them): “Individuals who exercise prostitution must be respected. This activity, in itself, is not subject to corrective measures”⁸. Therefore, the other wing of this ‘Butterfly’ problem

⁷ This is the Government land-use plan that stipulates the uses and regulations of spaces in the city (Decreto 619 de 2000, Alcaldía de Bogotá).

⁸ “*Las personas que ejercen prostitución deben ser respetadas. El ejercicio de esta actividad, en sí misma, no*

is that police officers have the power of discretion and decision-making about what happens to sex workers outside of the ‘tolerated’ zone. But when does the sex work transaction start? From the moment she has contact with a client? From the moment the appointment is scheduled? From the moment she enters the room? From the moment the sexual exchange begins? At what point is she actually practicing prostitution, for legal purposes in determining what can be done and where it can be done? In Colombia, there is no legal pathway for making this determination. There is no instruction manual or legal guidelines to follow. There is no law that guides police officer’s processes of ‘knowing’. Since the parameters of the law are not clear, police officers are able to take decisions based on their own personal and moral discretion, rather than the actual written law. Furthermore, in 2010, the Colombian Constitutional Court ruled that prostitution is a kind of work and that it should be respected and treated within equal conditions to other types of work⁹. Nonetheless, in this ruling, the Constitutional Court also stated that all relevant institutional regulations and programs must promote all necessary measures to prevent prostitution and rehabilitate those engaged in prostitution”¹⁰.

Considering the two wings of the ‘Butterfly’ problem and its contradictions and social control mechanisms that affect urban exclusion and expulsion from public space, our PAR team has developed strategies to defend and reclaim sex workers' rights to public space and the city by fighting against police abuse, which is the principal cause of their constant expulsion and exclusion from the plaza (see image 4). In the context of this two-tiered socio-spatial problem, “...the *right to the city* [...] can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*” (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 158). Additionally, this *right to occupy and ‘be’* in public space can only be exercised by the “full and complete usage” of this urban space in the daily lives and practices of all those connected to ‘The Butterfly’ (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 179).

da lugar a la aplicación de medidas correctivas”. (District Police Code of Bogotá: Acuerdo 79 DE 2003, por el cual se expide el Código de Policía de Bogotá D.C.)

⁹ Colombian Constitutional Court: Corte Constitucional, Sentencia T-629/10, Magistrado ponente, Juan Carlos Henao Pérez, 22 de enero de 2010.

¹⁰ “*Los poderes públicos deben adelantar todas las medidas que sean necesarias para prevenir la prostitución, rehabilitar a las personas dedicadas a ella y ampliarles eficazmente sus opciones de mejoramiento económico*” Ibid.



Image 4. Police Occupation of Urban Space: Dynamics of Expulsion from Public Space (Source: Alejandro Lanz, March 16, 2013)

2. The Butterfly Action Research Project Design: Denaturalizing Police Abuse

“Have you ever had problems with the police?... Ufff, 24 hours a day. We definitely don’t get along... at all...”

(¿Alguna vez has tenido problemas con la Policía?...Uyyy, las 24 horas del día. No nos la llevamos nada, nada...)” (Candela, Semi-Structured Interview -‘The Butterfly’ Project, November 7, 2013).

Our first step in the construction of the ‘Butterfly Action Research Project’ was to identify whether or not sex workers wanted to take action regarding these police abuses, to identify what kind of police abuses they were experiencing and also how they had confronted or avoided these abuses while working in the plaza. We started with informal conversations with sex workers in the plaza, spending time with them in their everyday routine, drinking coffee, playing with their children, sharing a cigarette and talking with their close friends in the plaza in order to collect testimonies about police abuses. What first came out was that they did not conceptualize some practices as abuse. When we asked them whether or not they had experienced police abuse the typical answer was no, but then they started to say things like “But once a police officer beat me, once I had a fight with one of them because he called me a whore and daughter of a bitch...” (Candela, Semi-Structured Interview, ‘The Butterfly’ Project, November 7, 2013) And when we asked them if the police had taken them to the UPJ or detained them, they all said yes.

While collecting cases about police abuse we also saw they had adapted different strategies to avoid abuse. In order to understand these different adaptive strategies of resistance, we designed a phase within the project employing theater of the ‘oppressed’¹¹ (see image 7). Some examples of these strategies include not showing their ID cards (claiming they are not carrying them in order to avoid having them broken or thrown away) and the way some transgender sex workers use HIV stigma in their favor by cutting their own arm and threatening to transmit the virus to the police officer.



¹¹ Theater of the “Oppressed” is a theoretical and practical methodology first developed in Brazil by Augusto Boal. The principal objective of this methodology is to use theater and dramatic techniques as an instrument to understand social realities and to establish possible solutions to social problems using a participatory approach (Boal 1998; Boal 2001; Baraúna & Motos, 2009). We used this methodology to access and understand the dynamics sex workers live in relation to police abuse.



Image 5. Exploring Praxis through Theater of the ‘Oppressed’ (Source: Alejandro Lanz, Top Row: October 21, 2013; Bottom Row: November 17, 2013).

This phase was very important within the co-construction of the project because it allowed us to dismiss several strategies we had considered that would have placed them in danger. We also found that “[t]hrough a process of investigating their own everyday lives and collective reflection, research participants identify their individual experiences as shared, as social, and then in turn as political” (Cahill, 2007a, p. 268). After this phase we started meeting in order to identify the next steps of the project and to co-construct better ways of developing and implementing these strategies.

In order to change this reality, our team needed to prove police abuse was actually happening and therefore it was necessary to collect a significant number of cases in order to file a lawsuit. To do so, each case had to be provable so we needed to train all sex workers in the plaza to collect the required information including the police badge number, the police car or the ‘bitch kennel’ license plate number, the exact time, place and description of the behavior of all actors involved, and the specific kind of abuse the women experienced. Despite the importance of this training process for the systematic documentation of police abuse, it was also necessary to create a strategy to collect this information and ensure all the individuals involved in the project were safe and were not exposed to additional violence or abuse. The PAR team created three strategies and then we talked about them with other sex workers in the plaza to discuss their efficacy.

The first strategy was to leave someone in charge of a 'message box' and the completion of a form filled out by the person who experienced police abuse or by a witness. This idea was proposed by a member of the PAR team. We thought this strategy would be well received by the community because it enabled everyone, not only sex workers, to report police abuses and it also demonstrated that, in addition to the immediate emergency, there was a need to propose concrete solutions to the structural problem of police abuse. We also believed that the 'message box' strategy would generate teamwork and social consciousness about the problem. Another advantage of this strategy was that the community could also report past abuses even if they did not have all the information required. After consulting with the community, this strategy was dismissed because it was not safe and could generate further power struggles and violence. The 'message box' would have been very visible to the police and the case information, if it were to land in the wrong hands, could have been used against them. Additionally, the person in charge of the 'message box' would probably be in more danger than others within the community. We thought about rotating the 'message box' and rotating the person in charge; however, there would have been no way to ensure the reduction of risk to all actors involved.

The second strategy involved the creation of a webpage containing the same form as the 'message box' strategy in order to describe and detail the experience of police abuse. The information would have been private and it would have allowed us to manage and organize it more efficiently. However, this strategy was dismissed as well because the majority of the population does not have access to the internet and do not have money to pay for time in an internet café. Moreover, they said they probably would not have had the time to go to the internet café. This strategy did not involve the same risks as the first strategy, it would have given them more privacy and protection; however, only the most interested, motivated and financially stable research actors would have been able to use this system.

The third and selected strategy was to launch a cell phone line where all information could be recorded on the voicemail. This strategy was selected by all members of the PAR team and supported by the population in the plaza because it was the easiest and safest method

for reporting police abuse. If they do not have money to make the call, they could ring and hang up and we would return the call. They could make the phone call right within the plaza and they could speak with a PAR team member who would explain to them what information was needed. This would be a private way of reporting abuse and there would be no risk for the information to end in the hands of the police. In order to spread the word about the phone line, we designed a butterfly key chain with the number engraved on it (see image 8). The idea was to enable them to always have the number on hand. We originally were going to design a simple information card including the number and basic information; however, it would have been easily lost. The keychain was attractive, symbolic (because of the Butterfly) and useful both in the daily lives and in order to keep the number within reach.



Image 6. The Butterfly Key Chain (Source: Alejandro Lanz, November 2013)

During a roving outreach session, our PAR team started to pass out the key chains and to discuss the project and the strategy in order to defend the rights of sex workers in the plaza. Multiple actors within the plaza received them with excitement and all noted that the keychain was an effective strategy. However, time passed and we had not received any calls. We continued going to the plaza several times per week and some of them told us

they had experienced police abuses. When we asked why they did not call to report the abuse they said, “I don’t know” or “I prefer to tell you in person”, or “I don’t have all the information you need” or they simply did not conceptualize what happened to them as police abuse. So we designed a complementary strategy through the creation of cards with the kind of abuse they told us they experienced (see image 9). This strategy was designed to generate consciousness about the importance of reporting abuse in order to be able to file a lawsuit.





Image 7. Informative Cards for the Campaign ‘Putiar no es un delito, es un trabajo – Whoring is not crime, it’s just work’ (Source: P.A.R.C.E.S., www.parces.org & www.facebook.com/parces.org)

3. Negotiating Ethical Dilemmas in ‘The Butterfly’: The Ethical Motivations of our PAR Project

Before and during this project we experienced a series of difficult situations regarding our interaction with the communities, some of which led and motivated us to develop our PAR methodology in ‘The Butterfly’. This very idea illustrates the manner in which “...participatory action research (PAR) practice starts with personal concerns as a basis for social theorizing” (Cahill, 2007a, p. 268).

The following cases are written in first person as reflexive accounts for the ethical dilemmas experienced in the field.

3.1 Ethical Dilemma 1: Employing Privilege and Positionalities in the PAR Process

“They take them [to the UPJ] now and then and they let them go like at 9 at night. I don’t know why they take them there... She [referring to one of the women in the picture taken at the moment, image 1] is the one who has a 4 month old baby girl and she was crying. I felt sorry for her because she was saying ‘I want to go to see my daughter’...”

(Eso se las llevan [a la UPJ] ahorita y por ahí a las nueve ya las sueltan, a las nueve, ocho de la noche ya las sueltan. Yo no sé pa qué se las llevan para allá. ... Esta [referring to the picture taken at the moment] es la que tiene la niña de 4 meses y estaba llorando... A mí me da pesar con ella porque ella decía 'yo me quiero ir a ver a mi hija'...)" ('La Bonny', Semi-Structured Interview – 'The Butterfly' Project, 25 April 2013).

On April 25, 2013 I (Alejandro) was scheduled to go down to 'The Butterfly' to meet Lisa Becerra 'La Bonny', as we had a roving fieldwork outing throughout the center of Bogotá. The meeting was at half past twelve in the afternoon. I left my things at Los Andes University, which is approximately 10 minutes walking distance from the Butterfly. I brought my phone, the recorder and I went to the bathroom. I remember the moment when my phone rang. It was 'La Bonny' frantically screaming and saying:

"Hurry up Alejito! The police caught me and they locked me up in the 'bitch kennel' because I was allegedly whoring... -How did they lock you up? What happened? You were walking down the street, and what did the police do? Why did they retain you? -I don't know, they are catching all of them [sex workers] because they say prostitution is not allowed here at the Butterfly -Ok. But why are they taking them away? How do they know if the girls are doing sex work? -They [the police] said they have seen them on camera. Please Alejo. Hurry up!!! I don't want to spend the night at the UPJ -Ok, chill. Calm down and don't be aggressive with the police. Just say you were waiting for a meeting with researchers from Los Andes University and explain to them you've been working as a community peer leader..." (Police Officer, Fieldnotes – Alejandro, 25 April 2013).

I hung up the phone and ran to 'The Butterfly' with Laura, a colleague from the multidisciplinary participatory action research group. We made our way quickly to 'The Butterfly'. There was a mobile CAI¹² the 'bitch kennel' containing six detained women at that moment who were 'allegedly whoring' in the plaza (see image 5). We tried to talk to

¹² Centro de Atención Inmediata (CAI) – Immediate Attention Center of the District Police

the police and find out why they were arresting them but they were very aggressive. We said we were looking for a woman who worked with us and that we had planned to meet her in the plaza around this time. They asked us to identify her and I said that she was the woman wearing yellow pants. They responded to me, "...ahhh...that belligerent nigger who is kicking the truck..." (Police Officer, Fieldnotes – Alejandro, April 25, 2013).

After discussing the situation for 15 minutes with different police officers, (each one called a superior officer to talk with us and we had to explain all over again that we knew La Bonny and that she was waiting for us to work on a project) they agreed to let her go. However, they warned us that "what happens to her from now on is your responsibility" (Police Officer, Fieldnotes – Alejandro, April 25, 2013).



Image 8. The 'Bitch Kennel' and the Mobile CAI (Alejandro Lanz, April 25, 2013)

While Laura was in the mobile CAI doing the necessary paperwork, I went to the 'bitch kennel' to talk with the other retained women. They first asked me to help them because

they saw how we were able to get ‘La Bonny’ out. With a terrible gut feeling of guilt and conflict, I said I was not able to help them at this very moment but that I could report the situation to the district attorney office and other institutions that defend public rights in order to take actions against these police abuses. Then they asked me to take a picture of them to show what was happening in ‘The Butterfly’ plaza (see image 1). I took some pictures and then posted them in social networks like Twitter and Facebook to start a social network-based movement (see image 6). ‘La Bonny’ was finally released, and we went to drink a beer and recorded our conversation talking about the experience.



Image 9. Becoming visible through social networks (Screenshot, April 25, 2013)

While talking about what had just happened to our team, we started discussing how sex workers in the plaza experienced police abuse in their daily lives. We reflected about how ‘La Bonny’ was in a privileged position because of her working relationship with two university students at Los Andes –an elite university in Bogotá-, and how the other women retained by the police that day were not as ‘lucky’ as she had been. While we were drinking a beer, celebrating that our team was ‘safe’, the women captured within the picture were most likely living some sort of human rights violation only 10 minutes away from us.

These distinct power relations, spatially and temporally speaking, made us feel quite uncomfortable about the privileges our PAR project created for our team within the research context. Even if one cannot necessarily be happy about having these feelings and emotions, it is important to enter into critical reflection upon them because, as Cahill, Sultana and Pain suggest, "...an ethical commitment to participation necessarily involves an explicit interrogation of power and privilege both within the research process itself and in terms of thinking through its intended impacts" (Cahill, Sultana & Pain, 2007, p. 311).

While reflecting upon these conflicting emotions and ethical dilemmas, we realized that as we were celebrating the victory of this single battle, these police abuses were the war we actually needed to fight against. Sex workers experience these abuses in their daily lives and even if we were happy because one of our team members was temporarily "safe" from them, the other women, because they did not have 'La Bonny's privilege, were still in the same 'vulnerable' situation. There was a contradiction in our feelings and a certain "something" within our hearts and minds that did not let us rest. Did we do enough by helping our team member break free of unjustified detention? Were we happy or concerned? Could we be satisfied with this 'altruistic' action? How can we make a difference and prevent future abuse of power and authority without needing to exercise our privilege? How can we, as researchers, recognize a situation of abuse and 'label' it as problematic within the research community and categorize this space as the proper context to develop a PAR project? How can we construct a PAR project when these abuses are part of their daily lives and they have managed to survive within them without any other intervention and without others' concerns in the past?

Participation for all those connected to the research process can represent more costs than benefits, and in this case, specially for sex workers (in terms of time, more abuse from the police, not earning enough money per day, or even losing clients; who wants to be with a whore who defends whores' rights?) In this sense, this ethical dilemma led us to question ourselves as to whether "...the topic being studied [was] truly one that the community wants investigated..." (Maiter, Simich, Jacobson & Wise, 2008, p. 310-311). How can we

develop a care-ethics-based participatory approach when the people we work with are constantly ‘disappearing’? This last question is related to the use we have given to the picture taken in this experience (see image 6). Even though the three protagonists of this picture gave us their consent to use it and publish it in a massive way to raise consciousness about these abuses, we have not heard any news about two of these women...we do not know where they are, if they are ‘safe’ or not, if they are alive or dead.

3.2 Ethical Dilemma 2: Issues of confidentiality when dealing with minors and/or populations involved in illicit activities

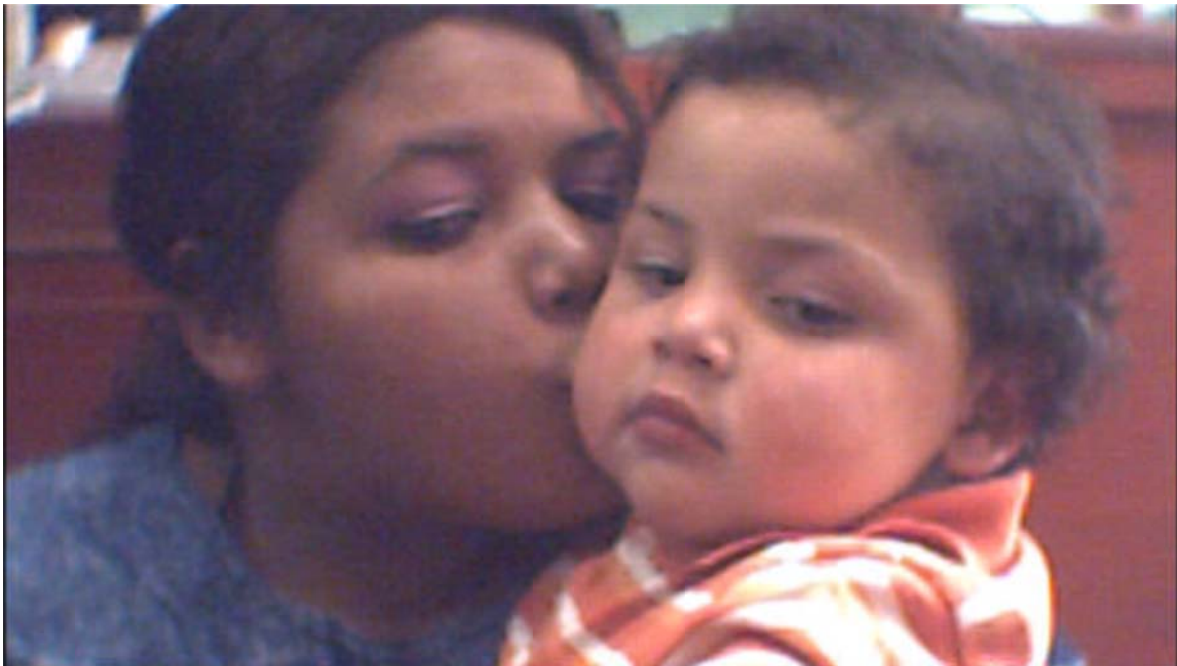


Image 10. Helena and Luna (Source: Helena’s Facebook Wall)

As we described above, ‘The Butterfly’s socio-spatial context integrates a wide range of dynamics and activities that are not “allowed”, and it is the place where some people make a living and construct networks of trust and care. In order to make this project possible, it was necessary to spend more time with the community to be able to construct relations of trust and care between our team and new members of the project. Sex workers in this space of the city have lived multiple experiences of violence, discrimination and exclusion and they do not trust anyone. Our team spent almost one year sharing experiences with the community, spending afternoons in ‘The Butterfly,’ understanding their daily dynamics and

relations, creating shared expectations and project objectives, and becoming intimately involved in their daily struggle to survive within a context in which they are able to 'make a living' (on 'good' days) but full of dangers too.

But this constant process of sharing and becoming closer with the community, this constructed trust, also inspires research actors to share some experiences and practices involving illicit activities and in these cases confidentiality becomes a difficult issue to manage.

One day I (María Inés) received a call from Angélica telling me a policeman was going to take Helena away to the UPJ. I was close to the plaza so I hurried to get there as soon as possible and see what was going on. I arrived, as usual, to the spot where Angélica works selling cigarettes and candies beside 'The Butterfly' sculpture. I asked her where Helena was and she pointed to where she and two policemen were standing. We went together and when we were close enough they stopped arguing and stared at me asking ¿who is she? ¿What does she want? I introduced myself and said I had known Helena for a long time. I asked what was happening. They said since Helena had been seen before stealing from people at the plaza, this time a policeman stopped her and asked her for her identification card. When she refused to give it to him they threatened to take her to the station. This situation is very common in 'The Butterfly' because police often ask for sex workers' identification cards and do not give them back. Sometimes they even break the identification cards in half in order to then take sex workers to the police station or to the UPJ for being an undocumented citizen. Because of these abuses, sex workers are used to saying that they don't have their identification cards with them or to refuse to give it to the police.

Helena was very angry and started to say that she never stole from anyone and said to them they should search her and prove she possessed something that didn't belong to her. They said ok, they were going to search her, but I intervened and said it was only a woman police officer who could do that. They started to be suspicious of me and asked me again who I was. I said I worked at University of Los Andes and that I had been working with Helena

and Angélica for a long time in an action research project (I showed them my student ID). When I named the university they changed drastically towards me and said they were going to call a woman so she could do the body frisk.

When the woman police officer arrived, she asked who she had to search. When the policeman pointed to Helena, she stared at her and looked her up and down with disgust. Then she turned to her partner and said: “I don’t have gloves”. Her partner took his gloves out and gave them to her. She searched Helena for suspicious objects or drugs. But she did not find anything. They finally let us go. When we were walking to ‘The Butterfly’ sculpture Helena was grinning from ear to ear as if she had just won against them.

My mind was troubled. I knew Helena had stolen things before, but I wasn’t sure if she did it this time. Once she told me she needed to steal because she didn’t earn enough money for the day in sex work or because some days she did not want to do ‘it’. I knew she did drugs some times when she was in the plaza. But I also knew she had a daughter, Luna, (see image 10) and if she spent the night in a police station or at the ‘UPJ’, Luna (a three-year-old girl) would be alone all night. I was also familiar with the internal politics of police stations, how policemen ‘work’ with sex workers once they are in closed spaces (asking for sexual favors in order to let them go, asking for money, using violence, retaining their IDs, etc). I knew how none of these possible ‘solutions’ would change the reality that pushes Helena’s “illicit” activities.

In this situation, I faced several ethical dilemmas and internal conflicts, especially considering that I did not want the community to think I was going to ‘save’ them from the police even if they did something ‘wrong’. After this situation, I was with Helena hanging out in ‘The Butterfly’ and telling other research actors what just happened and one of them said: “Now I know who I need to solve my problems with that bitch” (María Inés, Fieldnotes, July 30, 2013). I said no; I was not there to help them do things that were not ‘legal’ and ‘save’ them from being arrested. I was there to fight against police abuses and to assure police do their work in the proper way, without taking advantage of their power and position in society in relation to sex workers. We then had a long talk about the project, its

limits and scopes, and team goals and expectations for project outcomes, which is aligned with PAR praxis including “...reflective dialogue with research participants that lies at the heart of participatory ethics, as we try to anticipate, understand, and respond together to the inevitable ethical quandaries, difficult decisions, and interpersonal struggles that are part of any research project” (Elwood, 2007, p. 330).

3.3 Ethical Dilemma 3: Being the Middle ‘Man’ - Negotiating Safety, Legality, Confidentiality and Trust in Research Team Relationships

“...Hmm the second I see that fucking dyke Jhoana [Jaime]¹³ I’ll end her. Seriously Alejandro she’s messing things up for me and my woman in la ‘L’...

“...Jum donde yo vea a la machorra esa de la Jhoana [Jaime in the following text] la quiebro. A lo bien Alejandro es que me está haciendo quedar mal a mí y a mi mujer allá en la ‘L’” (Valeria quoted by Alejandro, Fieldnotes, February 26, 2014).



Image 11. Valeria, Jaime, Alejandro and María Inés (Source: Workshops and Participatory Activities, ‘The Butterfly’ Project, top left: 26 March 2014, up right: December 17, 2013, bottom left: 17 December 2013)

¹³ Valeria refers to Jaime in his feminine name, purposely disregarding his gender identity.

We have experienced ethical dilemmas within our PAR project that are directly related to the topic, objectives and design of the project under construction with the community; however, we have also experienced dilemmas that are not directly related to the project but rather to the personal relations we have created with team member and with participants within the research population. One of these dilemmas involved two individuals that spend time in ‘The Butterfly,’ working or visiting friends, and that have been involved in this and in other PAR projects with us. Jaime and Valeria have worked with us for over a year in separate activities and both have been involved in this particular project in separate phases.

One day, Valeria called me (Alejandro) and while we were talking she told me someone offered her a lot of money to kill Jaime. She did not say the name, she said a “machorra” that is known as Jhoana (his feminine name – he is a transgender man) because he stole some money from dealers in la ‘L’ (a drug consumption zone where our PAR team also works). I started to ask her some questions to identify if it was the same person we know and he was indeed the very same person. I told her we knew him from a state institution program but I did not say to her we had been working with him or had seen him recently. I told María Inés about what Valeria just told me and we tried to figure out what to do about this dilemma. Should we tell Jaime? Should we try to stop Valeria? Should we keep seeing Jaime even if we know he was ‘wanted’ and that the situation could put us in danger? Should we stop seeing him? Should we stop seeing Valeria? Should we tell the authorities? Should we be worried about ourselves because people knew we knew Jaime? Should we do nothing? Should we pretend we did not know anything?

These kinds of conflicts between research actors in our project were common and we knew we could not stop working with either of them because of the situation. We knew we could not tell Valeria we were currently working with Jaime and we knew we could not see any of them in public places near the drug consumption zone. We decided to continue working with both of them separately but meeting with them in safe places for all of us (places where they would not see each other or where we would not be seen together by someone involved in the conflict).

But how could we sleep at night knowing that someone we know and care about is being looked for and has a price on his head? How could we talk with him and not tell him we knew someone is being paid to kill him? When we talked with Jaime on the phone, he told us that he could not go to the city center because he was in trouble. This made us think he already knew what was happening and was in some way a relief. However, we were still worried about him and on top of all this stress, it was difficult to communicate with him because he didn't have a cell phone. Instead of being able to check and see if he was ok, we had to wait for him to call.

One of our team members talked with Valeria daily after 'the call' and even though it was awkward to ask her about the situation, we always tried to present the topic in order to receive the latest 'update' on Jaime's situation. One day one of our team members received a call from Jaime saying that someone stabbed him. The wounds were not lethal. He was stabbed on two occasions, both of which had nothing to do with his problems in la 'L'. We continued working with both Jaime and Valeria and we tread very carefully within and between both relationships.

* * *

During our university careers, we were not trained to deal with these kinds of situations, with these ethical dilemmas, and we still have no way of preparing ourselves for the next, inevitable ethical dilemma we will confront. In our field encounters, we face distinct dilemmas on a daily basis and each team member processes and learns from each situation in a different way. Ethical research frameworks are traditionally based on natural science protocols, especially medical protocols (Cahill, 2007b). Social scientists currently reduce research ethics to the informed consent process and they do not always take into account the emotions involved in the participatory research process (Ritterbusch 2012).

The design and implementation of PAR projects requires deep involvement with participants and it is necessary to discuss the ethical dilemmas we face and suggest possible routes for resolution. The way we resolve and confront these ethical dilemmas in the PAR

process illustrates “...the contradictions between ethics that are embodied, engaged and negotiated collectively, and the imposition of one-size-fits-all standards” (Cahill, Sultana & Pain, 2007, p. 307).

4. Conclusion

Ethical dilemmas in participatory action research will always be present due to the relationships established with the actors involved in the research process. These relations are human relations of love and affection, but also of envy, discomfort, or even fear. Within this framework, each researcher faces these dilemmas in very different ways and it is impossible to homogenize the multiple feelings experienced within the team. Each of us has built a different relationship with each of the research actors so we cannot write an instruction manual as to how to resolve conflict as this depends on the nature of each relationship constructed in the field.

In the PAR process, we deal with many dilemmas that do not necessarily emerge directly from PAR project activities but rather from the human relations we build with other research actors. We, as university-based researchers, have to change roles and exercise distinct positionalities all the time. For example, in the very same day we can be in a research actor’s pay-per-hour motel room, in a state-based child protection program, in jail, in the classroom in the most prestigious and elitist university in the country, and in facebook talking about projects we have carried out as part of the Multidisciplinary Participatory Action Research Group within the School of Government. These constant transitions between spaces reminds us all the time that we are part of and represent a social space in society of power, privilege, and exclusion. In our research context, not more than 10 blocks from our university, we can eat a piece of pie in the street for a few cents of a dollar. In turn, in the spaces directly surrounding our university, we pay two dollars for the same piece of pie. We are sitting in a classroom discussing the symbolic impact of law and rights when only hours before we were having a confrontation with authorities in the streets because of police abuse against sex workers.

Moreover, we have also experienced how these dilemmas are crucial for the construction of

participatory projects that respond to research actor's life experiences of exclusion, violence and marginalization. We have seen that these ethical dilemmas permit us to reflect upon the power and privileged relations that constitute our encounters in the field and permit us to transform those very realities. The ethical dilemmas we face in the field make our projects go beyond the realms of traditional academic research and enable us to construct actual strategies for action-reaction; all of this has motivated us to reflect upon how the 'action' component in PAR is often underdeveloped and overshadowed by 'research' and our struggle to move beyond these hierarchies is driven by the feelings and contradictions revealed by these very dilemmas.

These experiences also make us reflect on the possible effects our actions can have, as to whether the project has transformed research actors' perceptions about abuse and their levels of empowerment in their daily lives. In this sense, it is important to learn from these experiences in the field in order to effect social change in the communities where we work and conduct research. All of this because we must never forget that "... [t]he goal in PAR is not only to describe reality but to change it..." (Pratt 2000, in Cahill, 2007a, p. 268).

How can we dream of transforming society from a distance while other research actor's lives (in the short term) remain the same? Living in an unequal society requires us to find ways to reduce the socio-spatial distance between the distinct actors of the research team...between university spaces and the streets...between the north and south of the city...reaching across socio-spatial boundaries of exclusion toward human relationships of caring, love, trust and closeness based on a common struggle for social justice.

In terms of our future research agenda, the Participatory Action Research team and associated NGO continue working through three current projects with the same research actors in order to catalyze social change at the district and in a national scale.

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