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We All Got a Story Creating space for empathy through participatory action research

Amber Adams, Nichelle Barton, Hanna Hochstetler, Maresi Starzmann, and
Claudia Vallejo-Torres, together with local community members

ABSTRACT | This paper introduces the stories of individuals impacted by the criminal legal system, revealing a pattern amongst diverse voices. Our findings are based on research aimed to document the experiences of an urban midwestern community with over-prosecution and to identify potential prosecutorial reforms. Relying on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, community researchers worked together to collect data first-hand among system-impacted individuals while respecting existing community relations. Although PAR allowed us to avoid some of the pitfalls of traditional research, we experienced much of our work as a balancing act between engaging the community on the one hand and respecting their boundaries and vulnerabilities on the other. As we reflect on these challenges of our work, we offer a story-poem that combines different narratives into a cohesive statement about systemic oppression and societal neglect, thus both humanizing and empowering marginalized voices.

Keywords: participatory action research; community-engaged research; criminal justice; prosecution; social change.

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C. Vallejo-Torres et al.

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We all got a story out here. We all got a story. But, you know, my story is real...

Nobody came to get me.

He just said, 'Take the plea.'

He was a public pretender. A pretender, not a defender.

And sometimes that white lie turns into a big fib.

After being arrested and placed in jail for quite a time, it's like I lost everything.

Sitting in jail, I'm not able to help myself. 'Cause they say innocent until proven guilty, but when you go to jail, you know, you're guilty.

23 and one. 23 hours locked down, one hour out. Disgrace.

It might have got me through the system quicker. Money, money, money. It's called money.

I tried to tell the man what's going on out there, he didn't want to hear it.

I was just trying to make it. That's all I was doing, trying to make it. And I got caught up.

You're saying I'm innocent, yet you're treating me as if I'm already convicted.

Maybe 'cause I'm Black, really.

Racism involves everything, so we usually get the blame for everything. Not just because we're poor, but because of our race.

They really don't care about us.

Like you're not human.

Society ain't doing nothing for you.

They ain't doing no safety. No, not for real.

When different voices flow together and connect, we see that people's stories are not random narratives but that they follow a pattern. The individual experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and neglect by the system that people undergo are structured in similar ways. When speaking to people during our research, who are disproportionately impacted by the criminal legal system, they shared intimate details about their lives with us, each story vulnerable and 'real.'¹ ('We all got a story out here. We all got a story. But, you know, my story is real ...')

Our research was initiated by a national non-profit headquartered in New York that focuses on criminal justice reform. The objective of our work was to document the experiences of a local community in the Midwestern United States with the criminal legal system and specifically with prosecution, and to solicit community feedback on the issues we studied. To come up with policy solutions for prosecutorial reform that are community-driven and -centered, we adopted a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework. This framework allowed staff researcher Maresi Starzmann to conduct the research collaboratively by training and hiring eight local community members, including Amber Adams, Nichelle Barton, Hanna Hochstetler, and Claudia Vallejo-Torres as co-researchers, also referred to as community researchers. This ensured that we were able to gather

data from people closest to the issues at hand while demonstrating respect for existing community relations.

Despite this collaborative approach, we struggled with the question of how to hold the stories that people shared with us in a way that was truly accountable. While we could take on roles as ‘researcher-facilitators’ (Payne and Bryant 2018: 458), who can bring community members into conversation with the prosecutor of their jurisdiction to demand change, we were not able to promise that people’s pain, anger, and trauma would really be seen by those who have the power to initiate change. Narrating difficult or even traumatic experiences (e.g., about police violence, incarceration, poverty, racism, etc.) always places more burden on the storyteller than the listener (e.g., Nako 2016). We did not simply want to ‘mine’ people for their knowledge but humanize those we worked with.

Writing a Story-Poem

If as researchers, whether we are members of the local community or not, we are invited to listen and to share that special, vulnerable moment with someone, we have a responsibility to hold the stories we receive with great gentleness and care. Many of the stories we heard were about how people who are caught up in the criminal legal system are dehumanized, how they are treated as ‘less than [others],’ made to feel ‘like you’re not human,’ and reduced to ‘criminals.’ One of the main ethical drivers behind our work was to recognize such harmful practices, to confront them, and to prevent future harm.

It is undeniable that stories have the potential to humanize and to create empathy. Yet, while it may at times be crucial to put a face and a name to people’s stories to show how systemic issues negatively impact individual lives, this also bears the risk of exposing people in ways that may make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe (even if informed consent has been provided at the start of a research project). Therefore, rather than publishing one person’s experience as a substitute for everyone else’s, we have chosen to open this paper with a story-poem that is a blend of many narratives that participants shared with us during our research.

The composite text at the beginning of this paper is based on excerpts from different conversations with system-impacted people. We worked with transcripts from focus groups and interviews we had conducted, and we reviewed the write-in responses from a community survey we had administered, to select direct quotes that spoke to us on an emotional level. We were specifically interested in the issue of how the criminal legal system dehumanizes people and in how people expressed a desire to be recognized in their full humanity, as complex human beings. In a Google Jamboard document, we shared the quotes each of us had selected, then arranged them line by line, with each line being the contribution of one or two individuals. This way, a story-poem began to unfold that connected the experiences of different research participants, thus highlighting what we found to be common themes in our work: People had spoken to us about their difficulties navigating the criminal legal system, their harrowing experiences of arrest and incarceration, the role that racial discrimination and poverty play in getting caught up in the system to begin with, and a general sense of neglect and abandonment by the state and/or society. The fact that these themes were recurring across our

focus groups, interviews, and survey makes clear that what people had been sharing with us is more than anecdotal evidence. Within an overall oppressive system, the individual experiences – of mostly BIPOC people who are more likely to be affected by the criminal legal system – are very similarly structured.

Space for Empathy

Our choice to create a story-poem was informed by our belief that art can convey and elicit emotions. If we were to write about the data we collected in a typical analytical fashion, it would likely evoke different responses. Readers might arrive at an understanding of people’s experiences in a more abstract way and remain emotionally removed.

Participatory Action Research projects often rely on unconventional or innovative ways of data collection and presentation, such as walking interviews (e.g., Salmon 2007), photovoice (e.g., Falconer 2014), data walks (e.g., Falkenburger 2015; Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena 2015), street theater (e.g., Payne 2017), and the like. Embracing ‘methodological pluralism’ (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006: 854) is key to PAR because it allows different world views, identities, and positionalities to shape the outcomes of the research.

The importance of harnessing creative methods is also that they are more likely to encourage diverse participation by including voices that are usually ignored or silenced, and to attract a broader audience. The unique, creative perspective of a composite story-poem, for example, can catch readers’ attention in a different way than a traditionally written academic piece. It allows readers to be proximate and to become affected by others’ experiences of pain, trauma, hope, and learning. This creates space for empathy, for the desire to get involved and to bring about positive change in society.

Centering Community

By stitching together a diversity of voices, this story-poem also does something else that we consider crucial: it underscores that community is at the heart and center of our work. We mention this specifically, because most of us are not just researchers, we also live in the community where we conducted the research. In our double roles as community members/community researchers, we cannot easily divorce the work we do from who we are. In fact, we are by default positioned in close proximity to those who are the focus of our research, because they may also be our neighbors, friends, family members, fellow congregants, etc.

This, in turn, stirred up difficult feelings for some of us. When we spoke to people in the community who are impacted by the criminal legal system about their experiences, some of us had memories of living in fear. Fear of traveling at night and having a run-in with the law. Fear of getting caught up in the legal system ‘‘cause I’m Black, really.’ Fear of not being treated the same way as white people or wealthy people.

This, however, is precisely why the emphasis on community in our work is so important. It can counter the sense that people are struggling alone and that others ‘really don’t care about us.’ As researchers in a PAR project, we care. We are heartbroken to see people fall through the cracks. We find it difficult to hear

when participants in our research project constantly feel the need to remind people that they are human; or when they do not feel that they are valuable, simply because they are a minority, had encounters with the criminal legal system, or are poor.

With our story-poem we want to highlight the humanity of the people we have been working with during our research. Without assigning individual authorship, we want to give community members at least some sense of ownership over our work. This is in the spirit of PAR with its participatory mission, the goal of which is to democratize research and shift power (e.g., Fine and Torre 2006; Glass and Stoudt 2019).

Visions for Change

If power is ‘something that results from the interactions between people, from the practices of institutions, and from the exercise of different forms of knowledge’ (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006: 855), Participatory Action Research shifts power by radically opening space for those who have typically been excluded from practices of knowledge production; by disrupting established research formats; and by reorienting the goals of research toward taking action for change.

Due to its focus on action, PAR usually centers on issues affecting the communities where the research is conducted (see, e.g., the case study by Payne and Bryant 2018). The goal is to shed light on these issues with hopes of change. For us as researchers, many of whom are local and especially those who identify as BIPOC, it was truly meaningful to be part of a project that attempted for the first time to make a real difference in the criminal legal system in our jurisdiction. Making research about what matters to the community provided the safe space needed for people to get involved and to tell their stories without fear of judgment. We knew that this approach was working when one community member told us that talking to us about their experiences was a ‘healing’ moment.

While it is still unclear to what extent our research has made a real difference – in the sense of affecting policy or legislative change, now or in the future – our work has brought us closer to realizing some of the hopes and visions we hold as a community. Taking action is, after all, also about shifting narratives and coalition building. By working together closely as a team of both local and outside researchers, and by speaking with community members and sharing information about our work in public conversations, we were able to elevate those stories that otherwise often go unheard. We also drew nearer to the people in the community – and to each other (Figure 1).

Last but not least, actively listening to others’ perceptions and experiences allowed us to reflect on our own views, priorities, and dreams. In defiance of the despair and trauma that the final lines of our story-poem express – ‘They really don’t care about us. ... Society ain’t doing nothing for you’ – we envision a future where people of color and those who are poor are not bulldozed by the system. We would love for members of the community where we worked and where we established deep connections to not be automatically seen as ‘criminals’ or as ‘uneducated’ just because of their address. We want to see this community come back to life and for its people to prosper.



Figure 1: Our team of local and outside researchers sharing a meal to celebrate the conclusion of our project in May 2022.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all direct quotes in this paper are taken from original research we conducted between 2021-2022.

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Amber Adams

aadams0f25lk@gmail.com

Nichelle Barton

nichelle.l.barton@gmail.com

Hanna Hochstetler

hannakathleen.h@gmail.com

Maresi Starzmann

starzmann.maria@gmail.com

Claudia Vallejo-Torres

vallejoclaudiv@gmail.com