

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

**ROSS GRAY and CHRISTINA SINDING, *Standing Ovation: Performing Social Science Research About Cancer*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. 2002, xii + 188 p. \$55.95 Cdn., (Includes 80 minute VHS video with performance of 2 plays)**

*Standing Ovation* is a courageous book that takes its audience inside the process of transforming social science research into drama. The authors, both social science researchers from the Ontario Breast Cancer Community Research Initiative, studied the experiences of women living with metastatic breast cancer, their families and health care providers, through the use of focus groups and interviews. Their research exposes the expectations made of patients and families to think and act in particular ways in the face of terminal cancer yet it also bears witness to the resilience of women living with the disease.

Committed to finding innovative ways of sharing their research findings with the communities they studied, Gray and Sinding worked with a theatre troupe from Act II Studio in Toronto to co-construct and perform the play "Handle with Care: Women Living With Metastatic Breast Cancer." The play, based on Gray and Sinding's interview and focus group transcripts, was performed for over 200 audiences in Canada and the United States. The book, which describes the scripting and performing of "Handle With Care," is packaged with a video that includes performances of this, as well as a subsequent play, "No Big Deal," about men living with prostate cancer.

The strengths of the book are many. The subject matter is both gripping and grippingly portrayed. It testifies to the impact of doctor-patient as well as familial communication and questions the profound importance attached to information and choice. It problematizes individualized notions of informed consent and autonomous decision-making while at the same time surfacing a collective need for a more deeply contextualized form of moral and ethical knowledge. As Sinding suggests, there is a need to know "how to withstand the abandonment of what you have been able to trust, how to live with despair, how to encounter death" (72).

Although the play ("Handle With Care") is about living with cancer, the book delves deeply into the epistemology of what can and cannot be said, and what it means to articulate and/or interrogate a subject, especially death. The journey of the researcher/actors in relation with the emergent

drama chronicles the movement to accept, allow for, and represent "necessary suffering" (41). In getting "from there to here", there is, however, humour, sometimes raucous, at other times poignant. A pastiche of voices presented in various textual forms (e.g., researcher rants, memorybank entries, excerpts from the script and from other publications written by the authors) invites social scientists to consider how our methods of research presentation both shape and reflect the forms of knowledge that we are able to grasp and engage. For those interested in projects that facilitate social change, the book also directs attention to the pivotal issues of audience engagement and response.

These and other themes are recast in the dramas presented on the video. Readers are encouraged to watch the video early on in reading the book (i.e., once the stage has been set and we've been introduced to the actors), though there are innumerable possibilities for combined reading and viewing of selected vignettes from the video that would translate well as the basis for classroom or seminar discussions.

Together, the combination of book and video packs a powerful synergy. Though each create portals into much-needed dialogue about the most inarticulable aspects of human mortality, it is through the iterative act of reading *and* viewing that we can best appreciate the researchers' narrative in relation to the emergent dramas, the dramas in relation to the data, the actors in relation to each other and the audience in relation to all of the above. Social scientists who have struggled to locate themselves in their research will be struck by the candor of the authors in exposing their own vulnerabilities as researchers, actors, and human beings. Such candour does, however, belie the iceberg of hard emotional and intellectual labour that went into the production of the book and the play. If vulnerability does "act like an agency" (39), it is not an aspect of agency that social scientists are accustomed to enlisting or displaying, especially for colleagues.

The artistic director of "Handle With Care" repeatedly emphasized to the theatre troupe that it would be necessary to "internalize" the experience of the women in the focus groups on a very subjective level if they were to script and perform the play convincingly. Given that several of the actors were themselves women living with metastatic breast cancer, the group also had to work through their own personal fears. As Gray and Sinding write, "in addition to reaching 'backwards' to the data-gathering situation and 'forwards' to the audience, then, we also reached sideways to one another, and inside ourselves" (18).

The interwoven narratives of the book and video encourage researchers, health care professionals and others who wish to support persons living with serious illness to open their hearts as well as minds to the embodied experience of empathy and to attend more closely to the impact of words and silence on patients and families. The book, perhaps more than the video, also taps into the struggle that many health care providers experience in sustaining a sense of hope. The absence of hope and/or the inability to maintain some distance from despair are frightening topics for

many health care providers as well as patients to discuss. Though the authors do not linger as long as I would have liked on the significant ethical implications of this for researchers as well as clinicians, they indicate the need for a much more nuanced approach to ethics.

If it is not already obvious, I highly recommend this book and video, not only to medical sociologists, ethicists and health care providers but to arts-based researchers, ethnographers, communication theorists, and all who are willing to make the leap in abandoning traditional realist attempts to represent social life. I have never encountered a more potent antidote to disembodied Western science. I will definitely be making use of the book and video in my teaching on health and illness, ethics, and qualitative methods.

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