

Wither(ed) Activism: Sociologist Misconnecting with Communities in Need

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Introduction

This paper reports on two case studies involving ongoing research undertaken by DiChiara and Brents.¹ All three authors are graduates of the University of Missouri-Columbia's Ph.D. program in sociology. As such, their research is emblematic of the "Missouri school" approach to sociological investigation. The "Missouri school" argues that the conduct of research is, by its very nature, embedded in both a moral and political environment. This creates dilemmas for the researcher in the context of the research endeavor, not least of which is the need to be critically evaluating the researcher's role vis-à-vis the object of study *throughout* the research process. Put simply, when sociologists do research, they are always (or, more properly, *should be*) engaged in a continual process of reflection on the research act itself.

The research reported here can be seen against a number of theoretical and methodological issues currently being debated within the discipline. Obviously, one issue – and a classic one – is related to the *role* of the researcher in the research process. To what extent is the researcher accepted by those whom s/he studies? What's "in it" for the subjects of the research? What's "in it" for the researcher her/himself? A corollary of this is the question of to what ends the research will be used and by whom? To what extent is the researcher in control of her/his research? What happens when the research reveals findings that are at odds with current public policy? Put succinctly, these kinds of questions mirror the fundamental questions that have animated sociology for almost two hundred years, from Comte to Marx, and from Weber to Habermas: "Can social science ever be totally objective? Can social science be separated from social policy – or, inevitably, from politics" (2002 *The Women of Hull House*)? The research reported here

will touch on such questions, albeit in a speculative manner. Indeed, one of the purposes that the three of us see for this paper is to solicit input from our peers as to where exactly our research is theoretically situated.

In addition to the preceding, our paper can be viewed in the context of the contemporary debate regarding so-called *public sociology* (cf. “Save Sociology”; Deflem 2007).² Though the term is value-laden, depending on the ideology of those who employ it, public sociology “should challenge the world as we know it, exposing the gap between what is and what could be...” While Deflem is unabashedly critical of the term and sees public sociology as “neither public nor sociology,” we see this commitment to “exposing the gap between what is and what could be” as inherent to the “Missouri school” approach to sociology.³ The task of the discipline has always been to explain *what is*. And, as you will see, that is why we believe that good public, or activist, sociology makes use of the case study approach in attempting to provide the most thorough description of “what is.” But sociologists have, as well, been equally interested in “what could be,” seen in the works of its early theorists (Comte and Marx, for example), as well as more contemporary sociologists (Habermas or Giddens, for example). As we see it, utopias – depictions of alternative worlds, visions of “what could be” – provide much of the impetus and motivation to do activist sociology. It certainly has done so with respect to our own research.

Case Study 1 – Hartford, CT

This section reports on three instances of involvement with the community. The projects took place in Hartford, CT, a city characterized by high levels of poverty, high levels of

crime in isolated neighborhoods (which are the neighborhoods where the projects took place) and a vocal and agitated core of residents, generally property owners in the neighborhoods (many of whom are older individuals who became politically aware in the 1960s and 1970s and who maintain close associations with city politicians). To complicate matters, it is widely accepted that there are high levels of personal animosity among the key stakeholders in some neighborhoods (particularly for the Weed and Seed project). This is a function of Hartford's "at large" system of city election to the city council, whereby there is no "organic" representation of neighborhoods, so that each of Hartford's 17 neighborhoods must compete for resources based on making the strongest case to the city council, usually by being confrontational.

GANGS

Initial contacts with the Los Solidos gang were made through local priests who had established personal relationships with some key gang members. After some testing of my sincerity and independence from the police, entry into the gang proceeded and DiChiara was able to attend the gang's monthly meetings, attend their parties, hang out on the streets with them and to assist some members in finding jobs and enrolling in classes at local colleges. This gang was based in Hartford's South End, which is mostly Latino. The South End is where most of the heroin in Hartford is to be found, and the heroin trade was the source of conflict between Los Solidos and the Hartford branch of the Almighty Latin King and Queen Nation, but Los Solidos always dominated the drug trade in the South End.

One of the first tasks DiChiara was given was to read an essay that was written by the “Speaker” of Los Solidos. In this essay he explained the reasons why the gang formed, its interest in being accepted as a part of the community and its future plans. DiChiara used some contacts in the media to set up a radio interview of the Speaker, which proved to be a great success. News outlets, including CNN, *The New York Times* and other papers on the east coast began to contact the working group to set up interviews with the Speaker.

Generally, DiChiara’s status as a college professor and a criminologist was viewed by several key members as something that would help the gang to present its message to the community. A working group was formed to engage the gang. The group consisted of several local priests who had befriended some of the gang members, a Dean in a university’s College of Social Work, an employee of the city, and one employed by the state, among others. The first challenge of the working group was to begin a dialogue with some of the other gangs who were in a years old war with each other.⁴ Weekly meetings were arranged on college campuses, food was provided, and some funds were found to employ two gang members as “research assistants” whose job was to bring more gangs to the table. These meetings resulted in an end to the war, but not the ancillary violence and drug crimes of the gangs.

Next, two conferences, one local and one regional, were organized. Planning for the conferences involved prepping the gang members on how to respond to questions, what issues to avoid, and ways to frame their perspective on their behavior and the community’s response to gangs. One key consequence of these conferences was that some gang members found jobs, including one woman who now works on gang issues in

Washington, DC at the Center for Neighborhood Enterprise. More significantly, a grant proposal was written to the US Department of Education (DOE) and was funded. The working group and its fiduciary agent (a local private education council) was awarded \$275,000 to create “neighborhood learning centers” to provide alternative education to gang members wanting to complete middle or high school requirements. This resulted in more jobs, more opportunities and some members leaving the gang.

In October 1995 a federal, state and local task force began an operation to decapitate the leadership of the gang, which led to over 100 arrests. The working group now found itself supporting gang members as they were processed from trial to sentencing. Letters of support, attendance at trials, and efforts to redirect the energies and activities of those gang members not arrested were now the order of the day. The arrests ended most of the gang’s activities and drove the remaining gang members underground effectively ending the criminal operation of the gang.

The academics in this association with the gangs were accepted, their expertise was valued and, in general, we became known as friends of the gang who deserved respect. As these gang members began to be released from prison, there were attempts to reengage the academics, most notably to find jobs and to help create a nonprofit, tax exempt organization to do what the working group did ten years earlier.

CHAPPELLE GARDENS

Chappelle Gardens is a federally subsidized community in a high crime section of Hartford. It received a grant from the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) for an omnibus crime control and prevention project. The grant included funds for

surveillance cameras, educational and community services, block watch creation, and police overtime. DiChiara was involved in the project as the evaluator, but also coordinated the interns who worked on the project. The grant provided funds to hire residents to work on the evaluation, and to serve as community organizers. The project ran from 1999 to 2002.

The evaluation process brought DiChiara into contact with the community on nearly a daily basis, and he came to be identified as the *personification* of “the grant.” For example, due to a shortage of police and a crime wave in another part of the city, the police presence in Chappelle Gardens was reduced. While observing a block watch group meeting, a resident complained about the lack of police presence and, pointing at the evaluator, said, “Since you got here, I never see the police on the street.” There was at this time a shooting of a young girl in the neighborhood by feuding drug dealers which increased tension with the police. This tragedy was followed by a dramatic “last stand” of a single parent who stood up to the drug dealers in front of her house, which was later shot at. Records show that there was no greater increase in crime in the neighborhood compared to other neighborhoods at that time. However, the attitudes of residents reflected concern about the safety in their neighborhood.

DiChiara never lost his outsider status. There was no direct contact between him and the CEO of Chappelle Gardens. Part of the grant provided funds for a surveillance camera system to displace drug dealing in the area and to provide video of crimes and disorder – this in spite of the fact that DiChiara was opposed to the camera system, in large measure because the research literature revealed that the use of surveillance cameras as a crime prevention strategy is generally ineffective. The cameras were staffed

by interns under the supervision of the evaluator with training provided by the police. The evaluator was not allowed to have a key to the camera. Interns were not able to get into the camera room either, and were sent to do other jobs in Chappelle Gardens; many interns simply dropped out. Because of this, the room was hardly ever staffed and eventually was not used.

A similar problem emerged in the outcome evaluation. The pre-test and post-test used the National Opinion Survey of Crime and Justice (1995) to measure attitudes about crime, safety and the police. The pre-test was administered by interns and some residents at church meetings, at restaurants, places of business, door-to-door canvassing, and at block watch meetings. The post-test proved to be more difficult because it was believed that the evaluator was only interested in data to write a book and did not care about the community. The responses to the post-test were much lower than the pre-test. In some cases, pastors refused to allow the survey to be administered in church, many of which had been used as sites for the pre-test.

WEED AND SEED

Since 2000 neighborhoods in Hartford's North End have qualified for official recognition as a Weed and Seed site. Official recognition makes the neighborhood eligible for federal funds to weed out crime and plant the seeds of community development. Previously, Hartford's Northeast neighborhood, home of one of its largest and most dangerous housing projects, qualified, and DiChiara did the evaluation of its final year of funding. In 2005 two other neighborhoods applied for official recognition, and DiChiara was asked to serve on the Strategic Planning Committee, and joined the

Steering Committee when the Upper Albany and Clay Arsenal neighborhoods were officially recognized.

Like the Northeast neighborhood, Upper Albany and Clay Arsenal have very high crime rates, and most violent crime and gangs in the city are concentrated in Upper Albany. Unlike the Northeast neighborhood, Upper Albany and Clay Arsenal have very active civic associations and more property owners. In addition, there are a number of factors, structural and personal, that create a significant challenge in merging these two neighborhoods into one crime prevention unit.

Early in the creation of the Strategic Plan there were problems with the contribution of the sociologist. First, the university that employs DiChiara was actively involved in the community; this generated some criticism that it was operating like the “plantation on the hill” in its efforts there. The president of a local Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ) told DiChiara that he was told not to be supportive of university involvement in local crime issues. He specifically recounted to DiChiara the charge of being “in it only for the data.” This individual responded to a request for proposals from the Weed and Seed Steering Committee with a proposal for a prisoner reintegration project. The NRZ president became even more disenchanted with DiChiara’s involvement when his proposal was rejected, with DiChiara offering a major criticism.

The Strategic Planning Committee was composed of a number of residents who were concerned about cultural sensitivity, particularly in terms of the evaluation. Again, there was concern, later expressed by the Steering Committee, that a fair evaluation demanded some awareness of the unique situation in the neighborhoods. The evaluators,

two sociologists from a local university, met with the Steering Committee and presented their evaluation plan. When time came for questions, one of the first was a comment that “the evaluation team looks too white.”

Finally, DiChiara suggested that he would prepare a document of evaluations of other Weed and Seed sites, and some chapters from *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising*. This was rejected first as “too much to read,” but other events suggest a different reason. DiChiara, who did the evaluation of the previous Weed and Seed project, noticed that the same organizations from the previous award were proposed for the new award. He later learned that certain organizations expect to be supported in their work with any new funds the city may receive. In other words, the key players in the community lined up to get their expected share –no need to waste time reading evaluation reports and doing what is shown to work. This was politics as usual, and there was no need for a sociologist messing up a good thing.

Brents' Interactions with Sex Work Communities

Introduction

This section reports on Brents' efforts over the past 10 years to make my work speak to policy debates on prostitution, both by doing empirical, academic research on the sex industry in and around Las Vegas, and then by trying to be active in translating that into something policy activists can use. Despite my desires for social justice, I leave this wondering – ironically – if the cause of justice is best served by staying away from activism!

Both research and activism surrounding sex work is a minefield of very strong

competing cultural ideologies, moral proscriptions about sex, debates about how far the commodification of intimacy can go and feminist critiques of male control of women's sexuality. There is almost no way one can approach the issue from a dispassionate, objective perspective. The players involved, be they academic or activists, won't let you.

My interest in the sex industry has evolved from having students working in and around the sex industry in my classes. We first realized while Las Vegas was "sin city," representing an entire economy based on selling sex and sexuality, there were very few scholars in the 1990s taking this seriously. Our first act was to organize a series of evening talks on the Sex Industry, including a panel of workers, a panel of owners, and a panel of regulators. The committee consisted of two academics, a free speech attorney, and an employee of the Clark County Parks and Recreation who thought including it in the counties' cultural events series would bring an audience. That first panel series successfully skirted much of the ideological minefield just in its approach of spurring public discussion. Our roles as academics helped define it as seeking "understanding," rather than taking a moral stance one way or another. However, that was the last of those events we were able to do. County government "noticed" and never sponsored any talks remotely skirting controversial issues again. The event's loose purpose did serve to alert the sex industry community that we were "okay" – meaning we were interested in taking them seriously and not just as an excuse to do exposes or stir moral outrage. When we began to seek entrée into the legal brothel industry in Las Vegas, subsequent efforts to "get in" to understand the industry were certainly helped by that event.

Sex worker conference

Over the years, through news stories on our research and attendance at

conferences, we have gotten “in” to the sex industry simply because we have advocated taking the industry seriously as an object of study. That has meant that anti-prostitution feminist organizations don’t talk much to us. And I think we just befriended sex worker activists at first because they were the most interesting group at any conference. Because they are such a stigmatized group, at the center of the culture wars, anyone who would simply talk to them respectfully were allies. And they were very eager to have allies who were academics. I remember Carol Leigh (aka Scarlott Harlot, a sustaining member of COYOTE and who claims to have coined the term “sex work”) told us, after we organized a lecture at UNLV for her, now we had “whore stigma, too!” This has resulted in almost automatic admission into sex worker circles.

I will illustrate this “automatic admission” into sex worker circles by discussing my participation in the founding of the Desiree Alliance, a coalition of sex worker activist organizations across the globe, and its organizing of the first major sex worker conference in several years. In the spring of 2005 I received a phone call from Carol Leigh asking me if I would at all be interested in helping to organize a sex worker/activist conference in Las Vegas for the summer of 2006. After years of spending too much time on activism and not enough time on research, I warily informed her that I would help her to organize the event. I joined a group of long time sex worker activists, such as: Carol Leigh and Penelope Saunders, BAYSWAN, SWOP-USA, COYOTE, Best Practices Policy Project, and a group of newly mobilized sex worker activists, myself, and a few former sex workers who were working on graduate degrees.

The sex worker rights movement had just received a big boost from an initiative on the ballot in the city of Berkeley, California essentially arguing for decriminalizing

prostitution. The initiative failed, but it infused new life into a waning sex worker activist community. This conference was designed to build the movement off of this kind of success. Beyond that, of course, there was loose agreement on the purposes.

Just one example, was the purpose of the conference. It was my opinion that one of the reasons the sex worker movement had not made many inroads into changing the U.S.' long history of criminalizing prostitution was that the movement sought only decriminalization. That is, they sought the elimination of all laws restricting the sale of sexual acts, and coverage of those activities under existing business laws. The movement had a long history of being critical of Nevada's legalized prostitution as it imposed too many restrictions on working women, and placed power in the hands of brothel owners and managers. While I agreed that decriminalization is an important end goal, I felt the way that issue gets framed was too big a jump for the public. The Nevada system, which, based on my own research was a far superior system to criminalized prostitution, might be a model for changing laws elsewhere and we could gain allies in the state. There had been a strong history of rancor between the brothel industry in Nevada and sex worker activists, especially Coyote. In any case, I managed to use my political capital with the group to get a title that did not include the word decriminalization "Re-visioning Prostitution Policy: Creating Space for Sex Worker Rights and Challenging Criminalization." The conference was to be held July 9-12, 2006 in Las Vegas, Nevada.

The debates on the format of the conference were long and intense, and I fairly quickly saw my role as speaking only for academics and letting the sex workers take the lead on the organization. There was a contingent that definitely wanted academic presentations, and so I was in charge of that call for papers. We also were able to get two

students to volunteer to do the local arrangements and oversee submissions. However, there were two important caveats that developed. The call for papers made it clear that only academics whose research would help the cause were to be allowed. They had good reason for this. The anti-prostitution feminist organizations were often disruptive, and inflammatory. There was a long history of anti-prostitution activists in the guise of academics disrupting conferences and showing great disrespect for sex workers. The sex workers were fairly adamant about keep “these folks” (i.e., anti-prostitution activists) out. Along the same lines, the sex workers stressed the need to have training sessions for just sex workers, and even debated closing that part of the conference to academics. Because prostitution was such a stigmatized industry, the organizers were very concerned for the safety and protection of sex workers.

It was difficult to make the case that the best research had to address all sides of the argument and no quality researcher would come if it was seen as not at least exploring a variety of alternatives. The organizers agreed, in principle. And granted when the abstracts came in, most academic submissions took the purpose of the conference to heart. There were few who were not accepted, but there were some who were. The academics needed to be known and trusted.

Overall I was quite pleased with the conference, and the way it played out. The sessions with academics were generally quite good, and sex workers got what they wanted.

However, I want to relate what happened at the one plenary session devoted to research. The session began with a performance by Carol Leigh mocking anti-prostitution academics. Kate and I were on the panel, on a stage in front of the audience

of about 200, and laughed heartily and obviously with the crowd. The rest of the session, however, was a slam session against academics. They rightly critiqued researchers who did not have IRB approval and did a good job of informing sex workers about that. But for the most part the session was a rant against academics who exploited them just for research. They were tired of being used as guinea pigs. I wanted to interrupt much of the discussion and explain how academia works, the norms of objectivity, the purpose of research. But I quickly realized I just needed to shut up. It wasn't my conference, I kept telling myself. They needed to vent. But in the end they agreed that their main desire was to have academics do marketing research for them, and do research that could help them in the drive toward decriminalization. I felt rather demoralized at that level.

On the other hand, I am certain that my credentials helping to organize that first conference keep me on the "A-list" among sex worker activists. I am actually currently working on a research project with one of the organizers.

Trafficking

My other example is based on this article (<http://www.lasvegassun.com/news/2008/jan/31/bevildered-academics-pore-over-sex-trade-hysteria/>). I'll outline the trafficking debates that have gained national attention, but then the Bush administration puts research money into the hands of the most wacko of the anti-porn feminists. A Justice Department funded "academic" came to Las Vegas touting 'research' she had done proving all women were exploited in Nevada, and the brothels were horrible places for women, which were basically a pack of lies. I found that the academic credentials on this issue gave her a lot of cache, and I was attacking her for her activist connections, realizing that my work could (and was) easily read as just coming

from the other “side.”

My points will be that academics can't be activists without losing something. Perhaps we shouldn't always be. Class differences, educational differences, different material existences make it hard. Our “public” research will always take place in a political context. Maybe like the global warming research, truth and science will win in the end. So maybe, given how institutionally unrewarded activist research is, our goal should always be to do good research.

The second example comes from a different kind of experience doing public sociology. For years activists and academics internationally have struggled with the problems of forced migration and slavery, disagreeing over strategy. In the last several years the Bush Administration has used the outrage against trafficking people across borders to work without pay to impose moral codes. They have imposed gag orders restricting U.S. funding for AIDS agencies that "support" prostitution through harm reduction strategies, such as handing out condoms. The Department of Justice (DOJ) is restricting research funds on the trafficking issue to only those who will sign a pledge that they oppose prostitution in all its forms. My co-author, Kate Hausbeck, had to withdraw from her efforts to get involved with a state-wide anti-trafficking task force. After attending a 2003 national conference in Tampa, Florida, and a few formative meetings of a statewide task-force on human trafficking, she was told (off the record) that, even her presence might hurt the agency's chance for funding because she did research on legal prostitution and was therefore sympathetic to prostitution. So, Kate Hausbeck resigned.

In September 2007 one of the key academic/activist spokespersons for the new

anti prostitution movement, Melissa Farley, disseminated a 300-page study titled "Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada, Making the Connections." Farley holds a Ph.D. in psychology and is a practicing psychologist and has co-authored a number of publications arguing that prostitution is inherently bad for women. Her report was funded by a DOJ grant. Her major message was that not only is legal prostitution inherently trafficking, but it creates a climate where all women are sexually abused. The study captured international media attention, thanks, among other things, to Bob Herbert's column in the *New York Times*. Farley came to Las Vegas to publicize the report. While there, she mobilized local organizations in Las Vegas to attend a series of press conferences and panels to disseminate the "research" report through Las Vegas' Metropolitan Police Department's Anti-Trafficking League Against Slavery.

A colleague of mine who was on the task force suggested that the group also, via e-mail, distribute research that Kate and I had done on the brothels published in a peer reviewed journal. Our article found little evidence of violence. Farley's report had cited the article, but only quoted the one incident of violence we had described, and *failed to mention* that our conclusions were different than hers. The task force refused to distribute the article. Their \$370,000 Justice Department grant, like all other government funded projects that combat or investigate human trafficking in the United States, cannot use grant money to "promote, support or advocate" the legalization or practice of prostitution.

In fact, none of the national media covering the issue contacted either Kate or me, in spite of the fact that we have numerous publications on the issue. This was in stark contrast to local press coverage where we made appearances on local TV talk shows and were quoted many times in the press. The local press, in fact, used us as proof that

feminists could also like the sex industry. In fact, I was a bit uncomfortable with the way we were portrayed as staunch supporters of the industry, a stance that I worried hampered our ability to garner the attention of the national press, or politicians.

An Attempt at Theoretical/Methodological Synthesis?

Given what we have reported here, what threads do we see that hold our research activism together? And to what extent are the two examples unique and essentially different.

The first – and most obvious – point that we would make is that both examples of the activist research we discuss employ the *case study* approach to social phenomenon. This is no accident. This methodology has long been advocated by our intellectual mentor of the “Missouri school,” Ted R. Vaughan (cf., Vaughan et al. 1993). Case studies allow the researchers to delve deeply into the phenomenon under study, providing a more in-depth understanding than is the case with more traditional research methods (survey research, for example). Moreover, as our examples show, this approach allows the researcher to employ multiple methods in the conduct of the research. Both DiChiara and Brents made use of focused interviews, extensive field research, survey research, and evaluation research (especially the latter with respect to DiChiara’ work with gangs and community organizations in Hartford). However, while case study research allows for the researchers to be “closer” to the phenomenon under study, and also allows for the researcher’s activist leanings to be expressed, this approach has professional and career consequences. Such research, by its nature, is time-consuming, difficult, and inherently subjective. Oftentimes, it is a long time from the beginning of a case study to publication

in a research journal or monograph. Both Brents and DiChiara had the “luxury” of having tenure at their academic institutions (UNLV and the University of Hartford, respectively), and so, in a sense, they could engage in this type of research at their own pace. This is probably not the ideal methodology for junior faculty for whom tenure is an immediate and ongoing concern. Further, as Brents notes in this paper, such time-consuming research can clearly delay career advancement (i.e., from Associate Professor to Full Professor) and can lead to feelings of “burnout” – both academically and in terms of one’s political involvement.

Second, activist research unequivocally requires the researcher to constantly engage in the process of **active negotiation** *throughout the research process*. In addition, it requires the researcher to adopt different *roles* – often “on the fly.” In practice, this is a much more demanding, difficult, and problematic endeavor than any research methods text or qualitative research class would suggest. As this paper makes abundantly clear, Brents and DiChiara could never completely overcome characteristics that separated them from the objects of their study. To be explicit, social status/class, racial, and ideological differences were always “there” in the research process, irrespective of the authors’ expertise in downplaying or sublimating such differences. For DiChiara, there was no “getting past” the fact that he was white and an academic – a representative of the “plantation on the hill” and he was reminded of that *outsider status* numerous times during the course of his research. His status, moreover, caused numerous individuals to distrust him, something that was made abundantly clear to him in various contexts throughout his research. Brents, too, experienced this sense of being an “outsider.” While she was able to “get in” among the sex workers because of her sympathy to the cause of

decriminalizing prostitution, even she had a sense that she would never be totally accepted by sex workers because of her academic status (witness Brents' feeling "demoralized" as she sat on the stage during the plenary session on research at the 2006 "Re-visioning Prostitution Policy" conference in Las Vegas in July 2006).

With respect to ideology, both researchers were hamstrung to a large extent because their research takes place within a specific historical and political context. Irrespective of what either researcher wanted – or what the groups they studied wanted – with respect to policy outcomes, funding agencies (particularly the Department of Justice) set the parameters of "acceptable" research and policy recommendations. DiChiara had to tailor grant applications in terms specified by the Weed and Seed requirements and guidelines. In addition, as he came to see, certain neighborhood groups were just "expected" to reap the "grave train" of federal grant moneys because that's the way "it had always been," no matter that other neighborhood groups might be more deserving or more qualified for federal dollars. More pointedly, Brents was up against the federal government mandate that **no grant dollars** would be forthcoming to anyone doing research that was at odds with the DOJ established position that prostitution was inherently exploitive of women and, in no way, could it be viewed as a "victimless crime."

Third, activist research almost always means that the researcher will be viewed in a way that is at complete odds with the way the researcher views her/himself. In the course of our work, DiChiara related that one of the neighborhood leaders in Hartford, a pastor, the Rev. "Pop" Lewis, continually asked him (DiChiara) to set up a "computer education curriculum" to keep gang members off the streets and to make them more

employable.⁵ DiChiara continually refused to do so, arguing that he was not qualified to undertake such an endeavor. From the point of the view of the pastor, however, DiChiara

- had a Ph.D.;
- was a college professor;
- does research – often using computers; and
- so he *must* be able to set up a computer curriculum for the gang members!

And try as she might, Brents was always mindful of the fact that she was an academic, and no matter what she did or ideological position she held that might be favorable to sex workers and their plight, the sex workers would always see her as an academic – one willing *to use* the sex workers as “guinea pigs” for her own benefits. But sex workers also saw another aspect of Brents’ academic status – her research expertise and credentials could be used by the sex workers to do “marketing research for them,” a role with which Brents was uncomfortable.

Finally, and we are only going to mention this, it seems that an important component of activist research involves *organizing conferences*. Both Brents and DiChiara organized numerous conferences involving the major stakeholders in their research domains (sex workers in the case of Brents and gangs/law enforcement personnel in the case of DiChiara). Was this a peculiarity of their particular research efforts or is this something that is endemic to activist research? Is it a way for the academic researcher to “justify” her/his expertise and leadership skills, to affect policy outcomes, to bring stakeholders to the table, or some combination of these attributes?

Where Do We Go from Here?

As we noted earlier in the paper, part of our reason for presenting this at the MSS is our desire to receive input from our peers in the profession. We hope this generates

some discussion among our audience and stimulates our own thinking with respect to the questions and comments that we anticipate will be raised. From our vantage point, two issues requiring further exploration and analysis are apparent. First, we believe that more systematic and empirical research must be done on activist research. Are some of the issues and questions we raised unique to the particular problems and groups that we studied, or can they be generalized to activist research in general? Are other methodological techniques appropriate to do activist research or is the case study approach that we took in our own research endeavors more promising? If so, in what ways?

Second, we believe that activist research needs to be treated more systematically within the confines of graduate education in sociology. As more graduate departments list a specialty in public sociology or activist sociology, it will be imperative that some sort of consensus be achieved as to just what is meant by these terms. Admittedly, this is easier said than done in a discipline characterized more by dissensus than consensus. In addition, the *multiple methods* needed to engage in this type of research will have take a prominent place in graduate students' methods training, something we are not optimistic about given the discipline's near-worship of the natural science model, survey research and quantitative analysis. Further, in the spirit of "truth in advertising," departments offering such specialty areas (public sociology or activist research) have an ethical obligation to inform students of the professional consequences, particularly in academia, of embarking on activist research. Clearly, there are easier ways to carve out a career in sociology than via activist research, but we are not convinced that there are better ways. For in spite of the potential negative impact on career advancement, burnout, juggling

multiple roles incessantly, and feeling powerless in the face of organizational structures (e.g., government bureaucracies and funding agencies), the three of us can't see ourselves doing any other type of research.

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¹ Because of time and space limitations we decided not to report on research conducted by Eckert on the controversy surrounding the efforts of the Illinois Department of Nuclear Safety (IDNS) to local a low-level radioactive waste facility (LLRW) in a small, rural community in east central Illinois, an effort that ultimately proved to be unsuccessful – in part because of the determined opposition of the Concerned Citizens of Clark County (CCCC).

² The research on this topic is voluminous, particularly given the relatively recent appearance of the term, and is beyond the scope of this paper. We direct the interested reader to Deflem (2007). While he is particularly critical of the idea of public sociology – and, indeed, the very term – his work nonetheless contains a fairly extensive bibliography regarding this topic.

³ In truth, Deflem's criticism of "public sociology" approaches a polemic in tone and substance.

⁴ This was referred to as getting "a red light," that is, getting the gangs to stop their ongoing war.

⁵ Rev. Lewis runs a startup nonprofit agency called Youth on Youth and DiChiara wrote several grant applications, garnering about \$29,000 in funds as Lewis' grant writer.