

*Journal of Research Practice*

## Volume 12, Issue 1, Article M2, 2016

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INFORMATION

[For Readers](#)[For Authors](#)[For Librarians](#)*Main Article:***Sensitive Research and the Collision of Advocacy and Research: Consequences for the Researcher****Mary White Stewart**

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[mwstewart@unr.edu](mailto:mwstewart@unr.edu)**Abstract**

Doing sensitive research presents particular problems over and above other social science research because of the nature of the issues being asked about and their potential impact on both the participant and the researcher. In some instances, the factors that engage the researcher in the project may also be of interest to advocates who are working for the benefit of the participants in the research. In the current instance, the researcher was interested in understanding the impact of “life without” the possibility of parole on the lives of women convicted of killing their abusers, as well as the impact of their imprisonment and clemency on their families. At the same time, a powerful advocacy group was devoted to gaining clemency for the women. The resulting clash between the goals and purposes of these two entities resulted in a significant impasse and unanticipated consequences for the research agenda as well as the researcher. Analysis of one specific research project and the problems resulting from the clash between researcher and advocates can contribute to the literature on sensitive research as well as on the clashes between advocacy and social science research.

**Index Terms:** battered women; sensitive research; advocacy; research ethics; imposter syndrome; researcher vulnerabilities; second-order narrative

**Suggested Citation:** Stewart, M. W. (2016). Sensitive research and the collision of advocacy and research: Consequences for the researcher. *Journal of Research Practice*, 12(1), Article M2. Retrieved from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/540/451>

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My research began when I first encountered Lucille Sloan (pseudonyms used throughout the article) a convicted murderer, on a fine, clear day in a small Midwestern city in the United States, where she was speaking to a sympathetic audience of advocates, friends, and others interested in hearing her story: the story of the oldest woman in that state's prison system who had just been released from prison after an arduous struggle by an advocacy group. This group was also working to free other women who, they believed, were wrongly incarcerated. A sweet, comfortable-looking woman of 74 with faded hair and a friendly face, Lucille told the audience her gripping story. According to her, and the advocates who had petitioned the governor for her release, her husband, Mike Sloan, had brutally and persistently abused and humiliated her, burning her with cigarettes, forcing her to wear a dog collar and bark to get food, locking her in a freezing basement, brutally kicking her, isolating her from friends and family, and sexually assaulting her. She had tried to escape, one time crawling through a field of corn stubble and fording a near-frozen stream, only to be met on the other side by Mike, smugly waiting in his truck to take her back home. She had contacted a divorce lawyer but was afraid to follow through with divorce proceedings. She was trapped, scared, and hopeless.

This abuse had not been highlighted in court although there was mention by both Lucille and her son, Raymond, of Mike's violence. Her defense during both of her jury trials was that Raymond had killed Mike in order to get his insurance money and that she had absolutely nothing to do with the murder. Almost thirty years later, she maintained that position as her defense, insisting that her son, who was "always a bad kid," had murdered his stepfather for drug money. In 1978, based largely on her son's confession that she had promised to pay him for murdering Mike, Lucille was convicted of capital murder. The jury was also influenced by an incriminating letter Lucille had written to Raymond, telling him that he "had promised" to do it and that if "something happened to Mike, he'd have the best defense going."

When I first heard Lucille's story, I was a visiting professor, teaching women's studies classes at a university near her hometown. Lucille Sloan's case provided an opportunity to expand the research on violence against women beyond consideration of the narrow legal issues about battered women's syndrome and beyond the descriptive research characterizing abused women. It would highlight the wider impact of the legal issues related to the battered women's defense. Calling my research, "Life Without," I had hoped to interview women like Lucille who had recently been granted clemency, but who had spent decades in prison for the murder of their husbands. I wanted to interview their families as well, since they too had experienced decades of "life without"—life without one another, life without a family, life without sharing births and graduations and weddings and everyday scrapes and scratches and mundane events like shopping or swimming or going to movies, sharing dinners, bedtime stories, and chores. How were the lives of these women and their children affected, torn apart, and patched back together by decades of imprisonment? And what would happen now that they were finally able to be together? As I sat in the audience that day and listened to the horrors Lucille had experienced, I thought about the decades of incarceration, the irretrievable losses she had experienced, the wrongful conviction, and the failure of justice because she had not been able to introduce the "battered women's syndrome" as a defense during her trial all those years ago. I didn't think about the fact that nowhere in Lucille's story did she admit to any role in Mike's murder, nowhere did she link the abuse she said she suffered with any plans or efforts to kill her abuser, and nowhere did she straightforwardly claim that the abuse led her to ask her oldest son to

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finally ease her pain by killing her husband.

## **1. Impact of Emotions: Conducting Sensitive Research**

The research on which I hoped to embark was what McCosker, Barnard, and Gerber (2001) and others refer to as “sensitive research,” research that includes interrogating areas that are “private, sacred or stressful, and [in which] discussion tends to generate an emotional response” (p. 1). This might include studying parents whose children have died or who have incurable diseases, couples going through a divorce, people suffering loss and deprivation in war, women who have been raped, or people whose partner or child has been murdered. This sort of research presents particular problems (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007; Lee, 1993) as the researcher attempts to uncover the complex and emotionally painful experiences of the person being interviewed and to do justice to the subject’s experiences without losing track of the overarching purpose of the research.

One real difficulty is to empathetically hear the experiences of someone whose life the researcher can hardly imagine. I could not imagine what it would be like to be locked up for almost thirty years, to miss all the important moments in my children’s lives, to not walk free from the time I was a relatively young woman until I was a grandmother. I could not truly imagine the pain of Lucille’s five children who had spent most of their lives in foster care or detention centers, not having their mother there as they grew up, nor could I know what it felt like for Mike’s children to have a father die a violent and terrible death and to be without him for the rest of their lives. Listening, really hearing across this divide between my experience and theirs, was almost impossible and my signals to them that I understood sometimes seemed to me to be inauthentic or even transparently false as I murmured “um-hum” and nodded my head at the appropriate times. Further, there was guilt tied to the research process itself—the guilt of asking someone to recount such difficult experiences as death of a parent or a life behind bars, to talk about the impact, to revisit their loss and re-experience their pain.

There is a responsibility when doing “sensitive research,” as Melrose (2002), drawing on her research on adolescents engaged in street prostitution, points out, to guard against the emotional harm that might come to the participant. Even the researcher’s emotional response to the difficult information or painful feelings may cause problems. James (1989) suggests that the emotional labor demanded by sensitive research, similar to what Hochschild (1983) has called “emotion work,” can be a stumbling block in the research process requiring the researcher’s vigilance to maintain the validity of the findings despite the intellectual and emotional demands of this work (Gilbert, 2001). I certainly experienced the emotional downturns tied to having access to the painful experiences of Lucille and her family and members of Mike’s family, recognizing that none of what was causing the pain could be mitigated or meaningfully addressed. Nothing could be undone, maybe not even understood, but only accepted. My way of addressing the potential emotional toll was to not be alone with the respondents or to spend much time alone during the interview trips but to include another person (videographer, colleague)—someone who had heard the same terrible things so that we could talk about the experience, reviewing and questioning.

In addition, as more interviews were conducted with people who were more distant from the consequences of the murder and the subsequent impact incarceration had on the family, the context broadened and lightened the impact of the earlier interviews. As I moved away from the

discussion of loss and hurt and focused instead on less sensitive legal questions, questions of decision-making, evidence, and reasoning, the scales began to rebalance toward more neutral or academic concerns and away from the raw emotion of the families' experiences. Interviewing other principals involved in the trial and the effort to free Lucille, including the governor, the judge, the jurors, the advocates, neighbors and others, allowed me to step away from the events of that terrible night and the decades of incarceration, the deep and devastating losses experienced by those who were most affected by the murder and its consequences, and to enjoy the soothing balm of distance.

Recognition of the potential power or the unavoidable intrusion of emotions in ethnographic research may, some fear, leave the researcher open to judgment about the scientific value of this research (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). Researchers engaged in narrative research, ethnographic research, or other more qualitative and "intimate" research projects, may sometimes resist acknowledging the impact of emotions in the research process because of their well-grounded conclusion that they will reinforce the reservations already held about qualitative research as a legitimate scholarly enterprise (see Kleinman, 1991). On the other hand, some researchers tout the value of taking into account the emotions of both researcher and respondents in the entire process (Harris & Huntington, 2001) viewing these emotions as a resource in the development of the project, the design, data gathering and interpretation of the findings. They view the researcher's involvement as providing a unique opportunity to understand someone or an experience (Bourne, 1998; van Heugten, 2004). On the other hand, some authors do express concern about the potential negative impact of research on sensitive topics, not only on the researcher, but even on transcribers and data entry personnel (Wray, Markovic, & Manderson, 2007). Rager (2005) stresses the importance of "self-care" by researchers who engage in qualitative research on sensitive topics, recognizing the deep emotional impact collecting such data can have. Whether viewed as a resource or an impediment, the researcher's emotional involvement has become an area of legitimate methodological inquiry during the past two decades (Bourne, 1998; Rager, 2005).

A related methodological concern is the importance of maintaining rapport with those being studied. Methodologists have long recognized the potential to have their research thwarted as a result of rejection by the respondents. Rejection can occur for any number of reasons and researchers are aware of their dependent and often tentative relationship with their "subjects." Such concerns drove Leon Festinger and his colleagues' (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956) decisions about how to approach the group they wrote about in their book, *When Prophecy Fails*, early on and led to the discomfort suffered by Dick Anthony when asked to leave the Christian World Liberation Front sect he was studying because he questioned their belief system (Robbins, Anthony, & Curtis, 1973). The tentativeness of the relationship between the researcher and their respondents extends to others related to the subjects and rejection by them can also have severe consequences for the researcher. But there has been less interest in the emotional impact on the researcher, at a very personal level, when their research is challenged or condemned by others involved with the same people but who have different goals.

## **2. Encountering Roadblocks**

Although Lucille was the first person I interviewed and her story was gripping, I had originally intended to build my work around the experiences of all the women for whom the advocacy

group sought clemency and their families. For a number of reasons, it was difficult to get the other women to cooperate with my research although I was still hopeful that a change in my approach or a particular contact might open more doors. Some of the women were too fragile to want to be interviewed, some wanted to just forget about their years of incarceration, others were willing to talk to me but didn't want to involve their children. While I hoped to find a way to access those women, in the meantime, I tried to gather a more complete picture of Lucille and her family and the work of the advocates. The attorneys involved in Lucille's clemency were very helpful, providing access to valuable material and transcripts and providing background about the establishment of the Clemency Coalition, its organizational structure, major players and goals. They also put me in touch with the person who had initiated the establishment of the group. His interest grew from his own concerns about a former classmate, who had been imprisoned for killing her abuser. We talked often by phone about the cases and the history of the coalition and planned to meet. In the meantime, I continued reading the scholarly articles on related topics and all of the documents related to the murders and the trials to gain insight into the women's experiences, remaining hopeful the other women would agree to talk to me in order to fill in the background and expand my research. I continued trying to set up and conduct interviews.

However, after months of effort, I was forced to narrow my focus from the wider picture to one that included only Lucille, her family, and the family of the man she killed. This change in emphasis resulted from the powerful clash between the goals of the advocates and my goals as a researcher, something I stumbled into accidentally. This clash shutdown all interaction with the advocates and those for whom they were advocating. While it was true that I was having difficulty gaining access to the other women and their children as a practical matter, in part due to the very sensitive nature of the research I was conducting, the abrupt refusal of the advocates to continue to cooperate with me and their efforts to prevent my further involvement with their clients demonstrated the consequences of the clash between the goals of a researcher and the goals of an advocacy group. Perhaps a more widely conceived notion of "sensitive research" is necessary here, meaning not only that the topic under investigation may be "private, sacred or stressful" (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001) to the participants and, in turn, to the researcher, but that the topic itself is politically sensitive, leading advocates to protect their clients from a researcher and to protect their advocacy work which they fear might be derailed by the intrusion of a researcher. Streib (1988) addresses the difficulty of being both advocate and researcher when involved in legal cases, suggesting that academic research is aimed at "discovering truth and expanding knowledge," while advocacy research is aimed at mounting an argument "to achieve victory for a client" (p. 253). The academic researcher is encouraged to report everything discovered during the process, while the advocate is encouraged to report only those findings that bolster the advocate's primary argument (p. 253). There is no motivation to "expand knowledge or produce insightful critiques unless this would serve to gain the desired results for the client" (p. 256). Basically, the advocate sees two oppositional sides to an issue and mounts an argument for one of those, ignoring the complex, intertwined and sometimes muddy factors at play.

A seemingly innocuous step on my part precipitated this dramatic shift from full cooperation to rejection of all contact on the part of the advocates. One day, after months of research and a number of interviews with Lucille and two of the other women the Clemency Coalition was working to free, I happened upon an article in *Mother Jones* magazine focusing on the efforts of the Clemency Coalition's efforts, particularly as they applied to one of the incarcerated women

(Gonnerman, 2005). The article was followed by a series of comments, one from the convicted woman's daughter, who expressed anger at people for judging her father as an abuser. Unlike most of the responses to the article, which were sympathetic to the convicted woman, the daughter insisted that her father was not an abuser and that her mother should remain in prison to serve her entire sentence. The very emotional back and forth commentary ranged from agreeing with the daughter to pleas for her to forgive her mother. I saw an opportunity to talk to one of the adult children of the imprisoned women and wrote her a note in the comments section of the article:

. . . you were the oldest daughter, right? Your perspective reflects your experiences with your mother and father. I am working on a book about this topic and really want to talk to the children of the women—see what their experience is like. So much has focused on the women but little on the children. Will you please talk to me? It might clarify the picture.

I didn't hear back from the daughter, but I did hear from the leader of the advocacy group. I was floored by his call. He told me that because I had written to the daughter, neither he nor anyone associated with the Clemency Coalition, attorneys and others with whom I had spoken over the period of the research, would speak any further with me. And he would do what he could to discourage other women or anyone else tied to the clemency effort from responding to me. I was astounded by his reaction to what I saw as a simple innocuous inquiry. I actually pleaded with him to understand my position, trying to convince him that I had no intention of sabotaging the efforts of the coalition, but that I was a researcher, not an advocate and was conducting research rather than representing a position. I had never entertained the idea that he or the others would be opposed to what Streib (1988) discusses as a "neutral, objective exploration" of all the issues (p. 258). I reiterated my scholarly and academic history of thirty years teaching and writing in the area of violence against women during which, in fact, I sometimes saw a blurring of academic findings and advocacy positions in my own work, since my research was so firmly grounded in a feminist theoretical perspective. But rather than convincing him I was not trying to hamper his efforts, he viewed this history as groundwork I had laid for "using" the women I wanted to interview.

### **3. Dealing With Rejection and the Obstruction of Research**

As I indicated earlier, one is aware of the potential benefit and difficulty introduced by emotion in the research process, particularly when doing research in sensitive areas. There is, to be sure, recognition of the impact of emotions on the researcher during the process (McCosker, Barnard, & Gerber, 2001; see also Johnson, 2009). I had anticipated the impact of emotions on me—the guilt for raising the painful past and the self-doubt tied to gathering information that was useful to my project but that promised little benefit to the respondents. But I had seen little in the literature on "sensitive research" that addressed two major areas of emotional response I experienced. First, I did not anticipate the pain I would feel being misunderstood, accused and rejected by people who I viewed as colleagues or peers—central figures who had been cooperative and accessible but who had suddenly closed the door to further contact. My emotional response to their view of me was deep and painful and personal. In part, it was the rejection—the obstruction or denial of future contact—but more important, it was that their reaction to me was based on a definition of me that I found unpalatable—I was defined as unprofessional by people I viewed as colleagues, and then outcast by them as members of my

reference group (Merton, 1957); so their judgments, even if not made publically, affected me deeply.

Would I have felt less offended had the rejection come from the women I wanted to interview? Absolutely. I have always understood the dependence of a researcher—it comes with the role, particularly in ethnographic research. Respondents can cooperate but they can just as easily refuse, demand that you leave, turn you away. A researcher learns to anticipate this and develops a method for gaining entry to a group and maintaining rapport, and sustaining their interest and cooperation. A large and well-established literature, both sociological and anthropological, has focused on the importance of, as well as the problems tied to, gaining and maintaining rapport (see the classic works of Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Lofland, 1984; McCall & Simmons, 1969). This was very clear to me when I did my dissertation research, interviewing members of Shiloh House, a Jesus Movement group, about their conversion experiences (see Richardson, Stewart, & Simmonds, 1979), and I had been cautioned by the experience of Robbins et al., who wrote revealingly about the difficulty faced by the researcher in a religious sect when the researcher would not commit to a religious belief consistent with that of the group being studied. Although they were speaking about an extreme religious sect rather than an advocacy coalition, their assessment translates perfectly:

However, an approach which is empathic without being totally sympathetic encounters special difficulties when applied to field observation of extreme sects such as the “Jesus Freaks,” which define their own meanings as exclusively true and thus assume to know the truth is necessarily to “believe.” A participant observer who is perceived as empathic but who resists conversion thus implicitly threatens the sectarian meaning system and may disorient and demoralize subjects. (Robbins, Anthony, & Curtis, 1973, p. 259)

Translating this observation into the reaction of the advocates provided me with an understanding of their rejection. Just as Jesus Movement sects or other ideologically rigid sects cannot tolerate challenge from within, especially from those they define as empathic, the advocates could not tolerate a challenge or contrasting interpretation of the “facts” from someone who shared their perspective on violence against women and battery so fully. But, at the time, nothing had prepared me for the rejection by the advocates that had led to the sudden shutdown of my research.

#### **4. Complexity of “Using” Participants in Ethnographic Research**

The second concern I had was more layered and complex and, although not as searing in its impact, it was one I found myself less able to successfully navigate. The assessment by the leadership of the coalition that I was “using” the women could really not be denied, even though the implication of the term “using” was at odds with my conception of what I was doing. From a certain perspective, all social science research involves “using” people, whether they are “subjects” in psychological or social psychological experimental research, or “respondents,” “participants,” or “informants” in sociological or anthropological research. Our research necessarily relies on people to provide information or material needed to answer the research questions being asked. I viewed this as a “taken for granted” (Garfinkel, 1967) part of the research process, whether the researcher is engaged in participant observation, survey research, experimental research, or other forms of data gathering. A researcher is dependent on the

subject of research, using their words and understandings to develop a second layer of understanding, not one that is more true, but one that is different and that has a different purpose than that of the speaker.

People do not have experiences in narrative form, but the social scientist relies on their experiences to develop a narrative that incorporates their words to address the research topic at hand. The researcher produces a “second-order narrative” constructed from the stories of the participants to “make sense of the social world, and of other people’s experiences” (Elliott, 2005, p. 13). The researcher’s narrative creates structure, context and linearity that are not present in the everyday events from which it is built (Carr, 1986). The researcher necessarily constructs the narrative from the information provided by those being studied and the participants’ meanings are not the same as the interpretation of those meanings by the researcher.

In my efforts to interview the women for this project, I felt this reliance on them to provide me with information as a heavy responsibility, one requiring enormous care and great loyalty to the meanings the women attached to their experience (as far as I could understand them) even as my purposes were different from theirs. During the interviews, the participants were telling a story in response to my questions, and while that story was foundational to the narrative created by the researcher, reflecting their experiences and constitutive of their identities, it was not the same as the narrative I as the researcher constructed from these stories (see Elliott, 2005).

The complaint that I was “using” the women was an accusation that I, myself, had considered as a factor in this and other qualitative projects (Richardson, Stewart, & Simmonds, 1979). I had struggled with this concern while writing about the dramatic shifts in women’s lives over the last century, drawing on the experiences of women in my own family (Stewart, 2012). The criticism of the advocates was consistent with my own view that while social science research often results in findings that are of great value to the profession and to our understandings of our social world and relationships, given the structure of the academy, it also benefits us as researchers in our professional life. Social science researchers may lose their sense of commitment to the “greater good” or to the advancement of knowledge as the requirements for survival and advancement in their profession shape their everyday activities. Clearly we sometimes withhold information, we obscure major goals, and we fine tune our efforts to get the most valuable information from those we are studying. But we do not view our efforts as evil or driven by malice. To use participants is at the base of social research—that is one of the reasons we have institutional review boards and ethics committees—to protect those people who participate in our research. The challenge to the foundational assumptions about social science research, assumptions that any thoughtful researcher has had to grapple with at some point, laid bare some of the doubts I already harbored. Culturally, we condemn using people. It is viewed as inherently evil, or unseemly at the very least, and the fact that we have carved out an area in which we can justify it does not cancel the fact that we are, indeed using them. The accusation that I was “using” Lucille and her family, and wanted to “use” other women for my own ends, was consistent, at some level with my own uneasy embrace of research, given my awareness of power differentials in the research process, and the differing motivations of the researcher and the participants (see Marshall & Batten, 2004).

## **5. Researcher Vulnerabilities**



The women I wanted to interview had endured decades of loss and pain and their families had suffered collateral damage. Asking them to tell me, one who had not experienced their painful lives, about their experience, not for their benefit but for mine, was something I had to justify as valuable. I was, however, aware that this justification may have obscured the reality that my research, while dependent on the people I interviewed, was of little real value to them. This is not a fault of research, but rather a characteristic, and one of the things that distinguishes it from advocacy. While the understandings that come from research might benefit people in similar circumstances or advance our knowledge, the participants were, of course, not direct beneficiaries, which they would be if the advocates were successful. This, I believe, is why I was so vulnerable to the accusations that scuttled my research efforts. I was sensitive to the vulnerabilities of the women, clear about the potential pain they would suffer in talking to me, uncomfortable with the role of researcher and the possibility of “using” the women. These hesitations of mine paralleled the criticisms of the advocates, thereby reinforcing my already existing doubts about myself and my work. Not only did I feel wrongly judged and unfairly attacked, knowing my motives were sound and untainted by spite or malice, I felt disempowered by the accusations, and by the sense that this entire group of people, people I saw as “like me,” defined my sociological approach as unethical and manipulative. The condemnation was not just an abstract judgment of the methods but was a personal denunciation of the researcher using these methods.

I wasn't quite sure how to escape this conundrum—obviously the leadership was deaf to my entreaties. And I was convinced, correctly, that the well had been poisoned and that his position was shared by everyone in the coalition. Not only did I feel misunderstood and wronged, but I also didn't feel strong enough to confront the situation after it was made clear that I was now *persona non grata*. My response was to retreat, to feel stripped of my power and to feel invalidated. My status as a researcher and my training as a sociologist were inseparable from my personal and emotional response to the difficulties of this research. I was experiencing the rejection of me as a researcher as a personal rejection. I don't quite understand why I couldn't confront the accusations more successfully—perhaps it was the fact that I was so hurt by the hostile perception of me, but it was also related to the fact that I was relying on people who had experiences almost too terrible to bear, to tell me about their painful lives and their loss. At some level, I felt illegitimate in the research enterprise.

Lucille had gone to prison when she was an attractive, vital woman of 38, and had been released as an old woman, lost in a high-tech, fast paced world. Her daughter, whom I interviewed three times, had suffered mightily—being shunted from foster home to foster home with her sister, miserable, missing her mom, finally marrying and having children, only to have her husband kill himself, after which she sank into depression and addiction. Another woman I interviewed had spent half a lifetime in prison, lost her family, and devastated her children. Who was I to waltz into their lives, to interview them about all that pain and loss? I did feel that I was using them. They were my access into a world I wanted to understand. So, the advocates found me guilty just as, at some level, I found myself guilty, even though what I was doing was completely consistent with my purpose, my teaching and writing about violence against women and my identity as a sociologist. I couldn't let go of the dark feeling tugging at me, and I knew that I had no further opportunity to work with the coalition. I assumed that my name had been smeared but I was at the same time unable to confront those I thought were responsible—I identified the feelings as guilt and shame. Maybe this was a reflection of the “imposter syndrome,” maybe that is what this rejection had tapped into—deep feelings of being “found

out”—discovered to be a fraud (Clance & Imes, 1978).

After the advocates withdrew their support, and the few women I had hoped to maintain a relationship with were no longer willing to talk to me, I was not surprised to receive a letter from Lucille’s son, Raymond. He was nearing the end of his 35-year sentence, extended because of other offenses he had committed while in prison. I had written him in prison and conversations with his mother and sister had made me hopeful that he would agree to an interview with me, especially since his sister had initially encouraged him. But his letter was clear in its ultimate meaning even if a bit difficult to follow:

Mrs. Stewart, considering that you have led members that were impacted by this tragic act that affected so many lives into unfulfilled expectation. I must decline your request until such time as you prove good, you validate your pledge.  
(Unedited personal correspondence)

Since I had never talked to him about the advocates’ response to me, I knew that he had received information about me and my presumed motives from someone in the coalition.

After this and still desiring to clear my name, even if I were not allowed access to any of the women, I finally decided to write a letter to the leader of the coalition and to copy all of the members. I needed to try to explain myself and to express the difficulty I experienced through being so misunderstood and by having my research efforts thwarted. I wrote a long and detailed letter, justifying my response to the daughter who had written in response to the Mother Jones article, demanding, with no ability to really demand at all, that the coalition reverse their rejection that had jeopardized hundreds of hours of research and effort. I didn’t only want to explain myself, I wanted them to change their minds about me.

I received a response from the lead attorney in the coalition who not only rejected my position but who, in agreement with the coalition leader, condemned the research as using the women and me as unprofessional and destructive to the women and the process. Soon thereafter I received a letter from another attorney indicating that his client, one of the other women who had been granted clemency, wouldn’t speak to me, rather oddly assuring me that it had nothing to do with the coalition leadership.

I felt worse than I had before writing the letter—not vindicated in the least, but even more ostracized and condemned. And I felt there were insurmountable obstacles to ever getting my point across and to pursuing the research I had intended. I was unaccustomed to being openly disliked and distrusted, particularly by the very people I would have aspired to have as colleagues and associates, people whose work I valued. I could not mesh their view of me with my view of myself. They were clearly committed to their position, harboring no doubts about my dark motives while I struggled with the pain and confusion of rejection. I could not help but think of the work of Lemert (1962) on paranoia and the dynamics of exclusion in which he writes about the cycle of rejection in which the desire to regain one’s credibility and good standing leads to escalating efforts to be understood, increasing rejection and isolation and ostracism.

## **6. Same Side, Different Goals: Lessons Learned and Moving on**

As with other injuries to the ego or to one’s sense of self, the demands of daily life and the

passage of time slowly blunted the pain. But this experience reveals that, in addition to the other considerations related to doing research in sensitive areas, such as the impact of emotions on respondents and researchers and others involved in the research (James, 1989), the concerns about emotions coloring findings or conclusions (Gilbert, 2001), we should add the potential emotional difficulty researchers might experience from being prohibited from completing their research by a third party on whom the researchers are dependent. The emotional impact can be profoundly disturbing, not only dramatically affecting one's research plans but also affecting the researcher's sense of self and identity and should be taken into account when addressing the potential problems associated with "sensitive research."

I doubt that the clash between research objectives and the objectives of the advocacy group would have existed if the issue in which I was interested was not so emotionally laden in the first place. Advocates must take a strong position if they are to be effective. These advocates were highly sensitized to the negative evaluations of the women who were in prison and were protective of them—as they should be. The women were vulnerable and powerless, having been imprisoned for most of their adult lives, and the advocates were single-mindedly committed to their release. Perhaps understandably, they viewed "objective" research as potentially damaging to their case. Their role, to find information that would support their client's case, could be derailed by research conducted by a neutral party, whose goal was to find information on all sides of an issue (see Streib, 1988). While the conflict was between advocates and researcher at its base, between our differing goals and purposes, it was experienced, at least by this researcher, as a destructive personal conflict.

Had I anticipated the problems I encountered, I may have been able to avoid some of them. For example, given that the researcher and the advocates came from the same background and shared many of the same views about battered women, I could have been clearer that these shared assumptions did not put me in their camp. Researchers engaged in ethnographic research can sometimes take advantage of the assumptions made about the participants, as we did in studying the Jesus Movement when the converts assumed that "the lord had sent us" (Richardson, Stewart, & Simmonds, 1979). But sometimes these can get in the way of a clear and purposeful distinction between the researcher, as a person, and the research in which she is involved. I could have clarified that my research could possibly contradict some of their views or that they might be disturbed by the findings. I could also have kept more distance from the advocates rather than establishing a collegial relationship with them. And, had I been more secure about the value of my research and not had so many concerns about the value of "opening old wounds" and violating privacy, I would not have been so vulnerable to the criticisms I received and could have handled them better. It might have been useful to work with a team when researching such a sensitive and emotionally laden topic. In this instance doubts or difficulties could have been discussed and resolved with others rather than being absorbed at a personal level. It also might have been possible to gather some of the documents and materials needed for the research through other means, such as relying on court records or public documents, thereby reducing the reliance on the advocates for access to these materials.

In the end, the research went forward, albeit in a very changed form. I narrowed the focus of the research and eventually completed a documentary which included interviews with the families, neighbors and friends, the governor, jurors, and the judge. The interviews illustrated the many conflicting perspectives on the crime Lucille Sloan had been accused and convicted of and on the clemency. It also portrayed the impact of both the murder and the clemency on the lives of

the other people involved. The completed project is far different from what I initially intended, but it stands as a useful consideration of the impact of murder and clemency on families as well as a thoughtful examination of the imperfections of our justice system. I imagine that had the research process not been so devastating for me, and if I had simply encountered the anticipated roadblocks and rejections, I might have turned my attention to another project rather than feeling compelled to salvage some part of it for my own well-being through the project I ultimately completed.

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*Received 16 May 2016 | Accepted 4 August 2016 | Published 12 August 2016*

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