

## **Public Good and the Nexus of Social Justice, Feminism, and Rock 'n' Roll**

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### **Abstract**

This essay was developed from a talk delivered during the Public Good Conference at the University of Denver (October 2008). The theme of the conference was “Making Public Good Work.” Conference speakers were asked to address questions about how we make public good work in both teaching and research. In particular, what inspires us to do this work, and what are the challenges and benefits of engaged scholarship? Drawing on both personal and professional experiences, this practice story addresses benefits of doing (and costs of *not* doing) public good work.

### **Introduction**

**L**et me start off by telling you a little bit about why I’m writing about public good work. The short answer is: because I never became a rock ‘n’ roll star.

Now for the longer answer.

### **What Is This Public Good Business All About?**

I think I actually first learned about public good in my basement as a kid listening to songwriters like Bruce Springsteen and John Cougar Mellencamp. They taught me—a kid from Jersey who lived in a commuter town to New York City—to think outside my basement. Growing up where asphalt and suburbs abounded, I actually started to wonder about U.S. farm policies singing along with Mellencamp. In “Rain on the Scarecrow” (1985), he described a family whose farm faced foreclosure. This foreclosure wasn’t going to happen in some abstracted way; rather, an old friend was going to auction off the family’s land. From songs such as this one, I learned that we’re all connected in some way. Suburbs and farms. One person’s failure and another’s future.

From character explorations on a little album called *Nebraska* that Springsteen (1982) wrote at his house in Jersey, I came to wonder how life circumstances, such as poverty, could push people to make terrible choices. In the face of poverty and isolation that left so few options, Springsteen’s characters took action; often these actions were corrupt, even illegal. And so I found myself wondering what

it was like to choose between action and inaction, life and death, mobility and immobility. I wondered, which is the worse fate: to act, but badly, or not to act at all?

Singing with these guys for hours on end, I also came to wonder what stories *women* would tell if they got as many big rock 'n' roll record deals back then . . . what stories would *I* tell?

But, as we know, life happens and off to college I went with my guitar and a growing acceptance that I would never be a rock 'n' roll star.

After college, I found my way to Washington, D.C., where I worked for a nonprofit dedicated to public education about child abuse. As part of my job, I ran a telephone resource line where I

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listened to call after call from people trying to find resources for children and women dealing with violence. Callers—mostly women—didn't have access to resources or information they so desperately needed. Armed with a terrific undergraduate education, I thought: if you need resources and information, of course you turn to research. However, working for a nonprofit, I couldn't access research back then. There was no Google Scholar.

Academics didn't post full-text articles on Web sites for those of us outside the academy. Like some sort of guerrilla nonprofit warrior, I found myself having to sneak access to research and knowledge from what seemed like a very tightly controlled ivory tower.

After one particularly long day on the phone with people looking for resources that weren't there and information that wasn't accessible, I walked down to the Mall to clear my head—not the clothing store mall, but that other Mall with all of the monuments. I used to treasure the gentle solitude of the Mall at dusk on a Washington workday when the city bustled around it—those intimate moments when history welcomed you to walk with the men and women who gave their ideas, their courage, and even their lives to something bigger than themselves.

At that time in my life, I particularly loved walking from the Lincoln Monument to the Vietnam Wall. At the Wall, the air seems to hold its breath, embracing and ushering you up the gently sloped hill. From the shadow of the Wall, you emerge into the light, greeted

by the etched faces of women who served in Vietnam as they confront and beckon to you.

Instead of quieting me on this particular day, though, the Mall invoked anger and frustration. That sense of solitude from previous visits was replaced with swirls of questions that echoed loudly. Their echoes were emboldened by the profound absence of monuments to the women and children whose stories I listened to all day. Where were the monuments to quiet wars waged in U.S. homes? They weren't on that Mall. And I guessed they never would be.

That's when I realized that what I loved about Springsteen and Mellencamp and artists like Ani DiFranco is their ability to build monuments through their music to people who were silent or silenced.

Take DiFranco (2007), for example. She gives a voice to middle-class women who watch guns come into their communities, as they learn the painful lessons about community violence that poor women have known for too long. She poignantly describes the costs of hierarchies, greed, and fear; and the courage required to face down these forces. Her stories of women challenge the status quo simply by being told: stories of finding and claiming and losing and (hopefully) reclaiming one's own power.

Springsteen, Mellencamp, DiFranco—these artists seemed to understand that the power they held as public figures came with a responsibility to hold a light to people, issues, and places that for whatever reason were cloaked in shadows. They understood that their access to our basements and living rooms went hand-in-hand with a responsibility to tell and retell those stories. In some songs, you can hear what sounds like an urgency to tell you, to have you bear witness, to shift your perspective as they give voice to otherwise silent people and places. And I've come to think . . . isn't that, in a way, what this public good business is all about?

## **A Different Sort of Monument**

I learned in the coming years that research—and not rock 'n' roll—was the way that I could leave my mark on monuments. Not of marble or bronze, but the same idea. As a scholar, I have the opportunity—if not the responsibility—to engage in work that has the same function as those marble monuments: to inspire reflection, to shift perspective, to tug at us quietly *and* urgently to notice something bigger—or maybe just something different—than ourselves.

Today I research violence against women and children. In study after study, I and my students have listened to and been changed by participants' stories. I've been moved by the women who have gotten up time and time again when life and their lovers and the system have all beaten them down, quite literally in the case of intimate partner violence. I've felt chills down my spine every time a woman tells me that this research study that pays \$25 is the first time—the *first* time—that she has told anyone what happened to her as a child. What an honor and what a responsibility to be the recipient of those first-time- and hundredth-time-told stories.

In 2007, we received funding from the National Institute of Justice for a collaboration with the Denver Police Department, the Denver District and City Attorneys' Offices, and several community-based agencies that serve survivors of domestic violence. The collaboration began as a request for a fairly straight-up evaluation of an interdisciplinary outreach program following incidents of domestic violence reported to the police. What has developed is a rich, detailed examination of the program as well as socioemotional, geospatial, and contextual factors in domestic violence. The project extends my program of research in incredibly exciting ways and brings to the table the strengths of all of our partners to meet a community research need.

I believe we ultimately got the opportunity to do this project because my students and I walked the walk from the start. Too often, academics are perceived—sometimes fairly, sometimes not—as doing research that resembles a special ops mission: we're in and we're out, never connecting with, providing benefit to, or intellectually benefiting from our community partners.

That just doesn't make sense.

I met my now-partners as I cold-called around town, showed up at meetings time and again (even if no one technically invited me back), and baked an awful lot of chocolate chip cookies to say thank you for any glimmer of collaborative hope they gave me. In fact, the roots of our 2007 study go at least back to 2003, when my students and I scrimped together funds and poster boards to hold an event we called "Returning Research to the Community."

New to the University of Denver and Denver itself, my students and I sent out invitations to anyone in town we could find who seemed to do something, anything, related to trauma and violence. We held our event at the University of Denver's beautiful Phipps Mansion, hoping the venue and promises of wine and cheese, at least, would attract people. We showcased our work on foam poster

boards and said to potential partners: “We believe research can make a difference to your organizations and your clients. We know that partnership is a two-way street. We want to get to know you. We invite you to get to know us.”

It turns out that that phrase, *Returning Research to the Community*, reflects a core value that I’ve been learning to articulate in my scholarship. I have come to believe that research belongs to the people who lent me their stories, reaction times, survey answers, physiological responses, and so on. Our ethics principles capture this quite literally, requiring that if a participant says “delete my data” at the end of a study, we do so. This legalistic view illustrates that the data are theirs, but there is a more important and less-well-articulated commitment that we make to the woman who says, “I told you all of this because I hope it will make a difference.” Her statement gives voice to a social contract that reminds and requires us to use those data to make a difference. The more complicated question is: How do we define making a difference—does it have to do with publishing work in disciplinary journals, changing the world, changing students, or something else altogether?

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I’m not sure of the answer. But one thing I am sure of: for me, that social contract means research always begins with and goes back to the community—whether it’s the university community, or the community of this city we live in, or the community of citizens who care about our little planet. After all, we are never divorced of some community context.

With this commitment to returning research to the community, we did two more conferences for Denver-area agencies. In 2005, with generous support from the University of Denver’s Public Good Fund and partnership with the Denver Victim Services Network, our conference reached 130 registrants from 57 agencies and 7 private practices. Attendees paid \$10 to offset the cost of food and coffee to participate in a full day of research presentations and dialogue. We had a working lunch during which community partners described their research needs to my research team.

The conference evaluations spoke to the importance of such partnership-building events. One person noted that the conference

was “an exemplary way of bringing practitioners and researchers together.” Several people indicated that events like this one would increase the likelihood of collaborations and partnerships between researchers and community agencies. Reflecting common themes in the conference evaluations, one person noted, “[This event presents] a great source and service to our communities to collaborate more frequently on research relevant to our participants. Research is rarely advertised to those who need to apply it. Agencies rarely have time to search for correct research. Let alone researchers! This event is an excellent place to begin.” Another person observed, “. . . I intend to not only utilize the information available on the website pertaining to my population, but I intend to spread the word [about this research and event].” Another person wrote, “It appears that this conference has achieved this goal already . . . this conference has allowed me to see the community agencies that I was not aware of and which I can use as referral sites for my clients. Additionally, this encouraged me to think about how research could be incorporated in the work I do (e.g., utilizing data that I could be collecting or how I could collaborate w/others who are doing research).”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the terrific success of the 2005 conference, we simply haven’t had the people power or financial resources to run conferences yearly. Therefore, I turned to the Internet to find ways to sustain these efforts to return research to the community. My research group now launches quarterly electronic newsletters that describe our research to the community and maintains a Web site that links the community with trauma-related research resources.

I’d like to tell you that my students and I are always excited to make newsletters and update Web pages. But like everyone else, we get busy, priorities shift, excitement wanes. After some stumbles, I’ve learned that engaged work must be rooted in a philosophy that gives rise to structures, procedures, and protocols—just like the structures, procedures, and protocols that make other necessary tasks happen in a research group.

Most importantly, I had to learn as a mentor how to create a training environment where engaged practice is what we *all* do. With the best of intentions, I made several false starts to quarterly newsletters in previous years, but never got further than one issue per year. I finally started realizing the problem—I was trying to do the newsletter without the support of my research group. What other task in my lab did I ever try to do entirely solo? In fact, when it came to other tasks, being a good mentor meant involving my students. Why did a junior colleague model push me

to involve students in decisions about research design issues, but not a newsletter?

I came to realize that I had yet to figure out how to articulate why or how writing a newsletter fit with my graduate training pedagogy. The newsletter initially felt like *my* thing, *my* commitment to the community. Why tap graduate students for *my* thing that may or may not relate to what they have to get done in the service of getting their degrees?

Our 2005 conference helped me articulate—for myself and my students—that the newsletter wasn't a bell or whistle or even an option—and it certainly wasn't *mine*. Rather, the newsletter was the embodiment of a philosophy of engagement that benefited our research group, the quality of our science, *and* the quality of graduate student training. When I separated the newsletter from the larger research tasks to which everyone contributed to make our research successful, I inadvertently lessened the engagement. And so this little electronic newsletter became a sort of vehicle for me to realize that what I wanted was a research group where the engagement was so seamless in all of our research tasks that you might not notice it . . . I wanted engagement to be in the water. But if I kept separating the tasks that embodied that engagement from the other parts of my research . . . well, that was like trying to swim without getting one foot wet.

So I eventually put the newsletter at the top of a lab meeting agenda. At that meeting, I talked about the ways that our research group benefited from the community and our community partnerships. Heads nodded, particularly after the success of the 2005 conference, where my graduate students presented data, talked to community members, and got excited about how their work could matter. With the spirit of engagement in the air, I then laid out our new plan for the newsletter. To this day, each lab member contributes at least one article per year to the newsletter because the newsletter is part of our social contract with our partners, and working with community partners is good science for our research questions. When a student finishes a study, she or he must write up a newsletter article that describes those findings for our partner, because returning research to the community is good practice.

Between conferences, newsletters, and meetings with our partners—all of which my students now participate in because it's what we all do—I've seen engagement become a source of pride for students. Not an entitled sort of pride, but pride because my students care that their work connects with the community and

matters outside the academy. I hear their engaged values now in informal conversations in the lab, in classes, and in the halls. These are no longer conversations that I prompt. They are conversations, questions, and observations that percolate up from doing research grounded in core, engaged values.

### ***Finding a Common Language***

That may be now in my research group, but I still remember when it seemed I spoke some other language from that of my students, partners, and even colleagues.

After the 2005 conference, our partner from the Denver District Attorney's Office called and said we should talk—it turned out to be a talk about what would become our 2007 NIJ grant. The talks were

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hard work as we learned to negotiate priorities across vastly different disciplines. I didn't really get the difference between a city and state charge (I do now); my partner didn't really get why we needed to interview women as close to the incident as possible instead of after the court case closed months later (he does now). I found myself rewriting huge sections of a grant in the hours

before it was due because my partner pulled the plug on one of our design decisions. We had failed to bridge our research and system perspectives on a very important design issue at the eleventh hour. Having trained in mindfulness- and acceptance-based therapy interventions, I found myself hunched over my laptop murmuring, “Practice acceptance; it will be okay,” as I frantically rewrote huge swaths of the methods section.

It wasn't okay in one sense: we didn't get the funding, in part because of the last-minute method messiness. It was okay in another sense: we both learned an awful lot about each other's perspectives in terms of both disciplinary and practical requirements. We went back to the drawing board with open minds and reviews in hand. We received the funding the second time around.

Just like negotiating with my community partners across paradigms and disciplines, I've found myself negotiating worldviews in the academy as well. My colleagues who do disciplinary work wondered what in the world I was doing years ago at Phipps Mansion with wine and foam poster boards. My students used to look at me like I was nuts when they would come to meetings and say,

“Recruiting is not going well,” and I would respond with “Did you bake cookies?”

Yes, people need cookies—and please and thank you—and a clearly laid-out framework for why *your* addition to *their* to-do pile matters in *their* world. I fundamentally believe that you can be a great scholar *and* follow a Toll House cookie recipe; that you can say please *and* thank you; and that you can articulate the relevance of your work to disciplinary *and* public outlets.

Now, as much as I have come to conceptualize my work in a public good frame, I still find myself confused at times. For example, just who am I supposed to be engaged with in engaged scholarship? Who is the relevant community? We collect data from women. They get some money for their time, and some coffee and snacks while they are with us. Most tell us that they felt valued, that they felt respected. And that’s good.

But really, my primary engagement is with the service providers and system folks who have more power than the women we interview. I hope that our work affects services and, in turn, gets back to the women we interviewed. But I still have nagging questions about who benefits at which levels of power, even in engaged scholarship.

And I also find myself wondering how much public good is enough public good to make public good work? I have to admit my approach doesn’t fit some of the hallmarks of engaged work. For example, I don’t usually do data collection *in* the community (we usually do interviews here on campus) or publish with my community partners. I submitted a grant proposal recently in response to a call for community-based research, only to learn from a reviewer that I don’t seem to do community-based research because I haven’t published things that sound like community-based research.

You see, my *vita* looks largely like that of a disciplinary scholar. This might be, in part, because aspects of my research don’t lend themselves well to some of the hallmarks of community-based work. Take the example of interviewing participants on campus rather than in the community. From a community-based research perspective, wouldn’t it be best to interview them in the community or their homes rather than in the ivory tower? But for many of the women in our studies, their homes and communities are where the violence occurred and often is still occurring. In many of their homes, speaking of violence is a crime for which their intimate partners act as judge and jury. The ivory tower is actually a safer place for the interviews.

Research topic aside, I also probably look like a disciplinary scholar because I have done disciplinary research. I've even found disciplinary research to be intellectually and professionally valuable. And for some of my research questions, disciplinary approaches have been the best approaches to use.

But where do disciplinary efforts fit in engaged work (and vice versa) within a single scholar's program of research? Do we water down our identities as both engaged and disciplinary scholars when we have footholds in both worlds, as many of us do?

And if we have footholds in both worlds, is there a strategy to when we should lean more toward one world or the other?

### ***Safety First: Duck, Cover, and Roll***

One prominent strain of advice for negotiating worlds is that you shouldn't do engaged work until you're tenured, safe, further along, \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank with your favorite bit of advice). As any person who has spent time as a junior scholar can probably tell you, this advice is part of a rich oral tradition by which a safety manual for the academy is passed down through the generations. Sort of a duck, cover, and roll for academics. Don't distract yourself: eyes on the tenure and/or promotion prize.

But herein lies a slippery slope: Can't we lull ourselves into thinking, "I'm not safe or far enough yet to take chances or distract myself" at just about any stage of our career? Certainly the challenges for junior folks are magnified, but just when are we safe or far enough? Just when is it a good time to talk about topics like, say, the sexual exploitation of children and women; the role of powerful media corporations in our democracy; polluted water and global warming; abuses of power in heterosexism, racism, and sexism; and on and on and on?

At least as far as raping and pillaging goes, I've found that you could wait forever for it to be a safe-enough topic.

And just whose assumptions are these, anyway, that public good work is "taking chances" or a "distraction" from otherwise valued endeavors, even for junior scholars? Instead of internalizing I-don't-know-whose ideas about how scholarship should look, what if we asked: Is this the right method for this question? Does this fit my personal and professional values so I can get up in the morning?

When September 2008 saw us enroll the 236th woman recently exposed to domestic violence in our study in less than nine months,

the conferences, the cookies, the meetings at the police department (so frequent that I considered turning myself in) . . . well, they all seemed a fine approach to answering questions about domestic violence. This approach wasn't a "distraction" from "real" questions or some chance I took naively.

In fact, I don't say any of this naively, having gone through my tenure review year with more stomachaches than I care to count. But there's a point, stomachaches aside, where I have to say: Whoa . . . wait to do this work? You're kidding, right?

### **To Do or Not to Do: The Dreaded Public Good Question**

Public good conversations often turn at some point to the dreaded to-do or not-to-do question, usually framed around the cost of *doing* this work before we're safe or have free time or whatever. But what happens if we ask: what is the cost of *not* doing this work?

I ran into this same issue recently in my research. I often get asked about the costs of *doing* research on trauma and violence for our participants. People generally assume that talking about violence will be harmful. So we started asking people about their perceptions of the costs and benefits of participating in our research. It turns out that people very consistently report to us that the costs of participating in research on trauma and violence are outweighed by the benefits (*DePrince and Chu 2008*).

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*"But what happens if we ask: What is the cost of not doing this work?"*

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I was at a conference recently where I had the chance to present some of these data on a research ethics panel. Following my presentation, the panel discussant, Dr. Jennifer Freyd, basically said, "While those are nice data, the *next* and *more problematic* question is: what is the cost of *not* asking about trauma and violence?"

Now, it's hard to study *not* doing something . . . but she was right. If you have a study where you ask women about all sorts of life experiences, symptoms, problems, stresses, health, relationships, children, and on and on for hours . . . and don't ask about violence, what does that communicate about violence, an all-too-common experience in women's lives? Probably something like: violence is taboo, it doesn't matter, your story about surviving is not valued here.

Well, let's ask the same question about public good work: What is the cost of *not* doing public good work? The cost of *not* inviting 236 women to tell their stories? The cost of *not* mobilizing the resources of the university in the service of legitimate and important community needs?

Of course, I can't tell you what happens in an alternate universe where we didn't do this work. I can, however, infer that *not* doing this work would cost us many valuable opportunities. The individual scholar would lose opportunities to push a program of research forward in richer ways than traditional approaches often allow or encourage. That scholar would also lose out on the perspectives and knowledge that our community partners have to share, as well as the richness that interdisciplinary collaborations bring to solving important problems. Our institutions would lose opportunities for external funding and partnerships at local, national, and international levels. Our community partners would lose much in the face of our failure to mobilize the resources of the university to meet time-sensitive and important community research needs.

Even our students would lose. In not doing this work, we forfeit opportunities to train undergraduate and graduate students in engagement. We fail to give them roadmaps for how to link their work to the world around them and frameworks for articulating why such linking is valuable. We squander precious and important learning for our students when we pretend for the first six years of our faculty careers that scholarship necessarily proceeds best in a unidirectional fashion with a lone scholar generating knowledge from within the ivory tower. This unidirectional model fails to take into account the global community, scarce resources, and the scope of the important questions of our time—all of which invite (and perhaps even demand) us to engage. Thus, our students lose when we fail to equip them with the skills necessary to do engaged scholarship that, for many questions, will simply be good scholarship.

And though we don't talk about this as much in the academy, *not* doing public good work would cost many of us personally. Who would I be at the end of six or twelve years (or however long it takes to become safe enough) if I didn't pursue engaged work, especially if the engagement I valued happened to be good scholarship anyway? What is the personal cost of just holding up on that public good stuff until 2015 for a faculty member hired in 2009? Does silencing ourselves matter to our writing, our teaching and mentoring, our participation in the academy, our happiness? How could such silencing not matter?

Let's play a quick game. To get tenure, be promoted, and/or be safe, you must *not* think of a pink elephant. No matter what, don't think of a pink elephant.

Oh no, did you just think of a pink elephant? I mean, right now, are you actually thinking of a big, wrinkly pink elephant? Please don't think of that pink elephant—the future depends on it! Now, go teach, write, or do research while not thinking of the pink elephant that is taking up more and more space in your head.

Psychologists have long documented the personal costs of *not* thinking, feeling, or acknowledging aspects of our experience (e.g., *Oliver and Gross 2004*) or identities (e.g., *Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, and Visscher 1996*). Would we really expect there to be no personal costs for those who value engagement but do not engage as they watch the tenure and/or promotion clock tick by with a big pink elephant sitting between them and their professional world?

If there are personal costs, do they matter? One of my colleagues is fond of saying, "Happy colleagues are productive colleagues." If you subscribe to that viewpoint, the personal costs do matter . . . as do the scholarly, institutional, and community costs of *not* doing public good work.

Just as I can infer something about the costs of *not* doing this work, I can also infer that if engaged scholarship for many, many questions is just good science and good scholarship . . . and, if good science and good scholarship lead to good scholarly and public products . . . then *not* doing this work . . . well, that doesn't make such sense.

### ***It's Still Rock 'n' Roll to Me***

Somewhere at the nexus of social justice, feminism, and rock 'n' roll, I've found a framework for public good work—a hybrid of these movements that guides and inspires me. I'm fortunate to be at a university that provides faculty development opportunities around engaged research and teaching through a Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning. I'm at a place where colleagues have mentored and taught me much about the rich tradition of public good scholarship and have been patient with me as I figure out where my basement rock 'n' roll values fit and don't fit with both disciplinary and engaged approaches.

But, you know, some days, forget paradigms and pedagogy, disciplines and discourse—I remember being that kid in a basement in Jersey who wonders: if I get that record contract, what stories will I tell? I have thought about it a bit over the years, just to

be prepared because you never know what the future holds. Here's what I've come up with so far:

Part of the story I would tell would be about inequalities related to violence, such as who has enough power in society to assume that they are safe in their own bodies. Being safe in one's own body should be a right, but it is, unfortunately, a privilege of some and not all. As a researcher, I have a route open to me via scholarship to address these inequalities. To bring them out of the shadows because a scholar's voice is afforded more power than the voice of a poor woman who was raped.

I can—and believe I have the responsibility to—help build a monument to women and children's experiences of violence and of courage by returning their voices to the community louder and stronger, because the beauty of research is its ability to connect many voices that are otherwise silenced and isolated in our society.

And as this story unfolds, somewhere around the bridge perhaps, I would make my case that engaged research offers the right methods for these questions, is just good scholarship, and fits my personal and professional values. To have it all come together like that . . . well, short of playing Giants Stadium back in Jersey, I'm not sure it gets much better.

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### **Endnote**

1. Quotations are from conference participant survey responses on file with Anne P. DePrince, University of Denver.

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