Handle With Care? and Standing Ovation: Performing Social Science Research About Cancer

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Handle With Care? Video/2000/40 min. Producer/Director: Laura Sky. A Project of the Psychosocial & Behavioural Research Unit at the Toronto-Sunnybrook

Standing Ovation: Performing Social Science Research About Cancer, by Christina Sinding and Ross Gray, chronicles the creation of Handle With Care?, a play based on qualitative interviews with women with metastatic breast cancer in Canada. The book comes with a video of the general audience version of Handle With Care?, which was also performed for audiences of medical professionals across Canada.

The Video

Handle With Care? is a collage of vignettes addressing (a) the emotional challenges and needless cultural isolation of women with metastatic breast cancer and (b) the views of family members and doctors involved in their care. The goal of the play is clearly to inform and forge emotional connections with the audience. The production quality is simple: most of the actors are members of Act II Studio, a theater school and creative drama center for adults over age 50 at Ryerson Polytechnic University in Toronto. They wear black costumes, and there are only a few set pieces for props, including chairs, tables, and a large wooden crate with the words “Handle With Care?” stenciled on the side. The play is professionally directed by Vrenia Ivonoffski, who also participated in the creation of the piece. Several scenes are very moving, and the book tells a compelling story of the evolution of those scenes. One woman living with cancer, for example, told the group she wanted to tell the story of the moment she was diagnosed. The play depicts a doctor telling the woman about her diagnosis, while the other performers form a chorus voicing panic, suspicion, fear, and comfort. In another scene, a woman living with cancer is bombarded with information from well-meaning friends who thrust papers upon papers into her arms. The video is high in production value. It is shot with at least two cameras and dynamically edited to show many views of the performance. The sound is clear and consistent.

The Book

If Handle With Care? was designed for general and medical audiences, Standing Ovation is designed for an audience of social science researchers and their students. By recounting both the value of the play’s developmental process and the power of its reception, Gray and Sinding encourage researchers to take innovative approaches toward making their work more accessible and deepening its impact. The overarching story of the book portrays the coming together of three disparate groups—the researchers, the actors, and the women with cancer—all of whom break through their various biases to find common ground. Ross and Christina, as we come to know them, begin the story as “objective” researchers who observe the process but don’t fully participate in it. By becoming fully involved in the play as actors, Ross and Christina shatter their distanced “objective” scientific outlook. The theatrical team (actors and director) begin the process with considerable fear of cancer, which manifests itself in an almost total inability to acknowledge that the women with cancer could very well die during the play’s creation or performance. Over the course of the play development and performance, the team members learn to laugh and cry with the women with cancer and gradually release their denial of mortality. The women with cancer are baffled by the process of creating a play and fear that it will never “gel” into a product worthy of their deepest emotions. Gradually, they, along with the researchers, learn to trust the play development process and emerge with strong and clear performing voices.

To capture these battling factions, Gray and Sinding construct multiple perspectives from which to tell their tale. They divide the text into a straightforward narrative with a joint voice—a section for their self-doubts and concerns as researchers called “research rants,” and a section for personal, nonresearch-based reflections called “memory bank drama.” While the concept for these divisions is clear, they make the book choppier than necessary and don’t always make sense, especially as the story unfolds and the distinctions between researcher and performer dissolve.

The theoretical underpinnings of the play are also elucidated in the book. The authors conclude that Western culture promotes “survivor” narratives and stigmatizes the dying process; that the “consumer” model of health care overwhelms patients with too many choices; and that doctors are too rarely in tune with the emotional needs of their patients and their families. Gray and Sinding aren’t sure if they succeed in providing a space for the discussion of mortality in the play. In the latter part of the book, which chronicles the reception of the play, they tell the story of an audience member who is angry that the play didn’t address death. They respond that they decided to focus the play on hope. And with this admission, they seem to realize that the seduction of the “survivor” narrative is tremendously difficult to resist.

The Impact

Gray and Sinding are clear about the value of Handle With Care? to audiences and participants alike. They tell several stories of the play’s positive reception by audiences of doctors and people living with cancer. The climax for Gray’s own narrative is the play’s
performance for his supervisor, who had previously expressed serious doubts about the usefulness of Gray’s unorthodox research techniques. The play was a hit, and in the post-show discussion his supervisor made a special point to praise the performance as “a wonderful use of research” (96). The authors seem less sure, however, about the usefulness of Standing Ovation: “And while it seemed important to review people’s concerns and convictions about how the project unfolded, it’s difficult to imagine what we might offer to others out of this process” (134). While it’s true that the unique context of Handle With Care? is not likely to be repeated (the second play mentioned in the book, No Big Deal?, addresses prostate cancer and had a completely different evolution), readers will clearly benefit from reading about its creation and reception. The book and accompanying video would be a perfect classroom tool to emphasize (a) the power of narrative in the healing process; (b) the need for empathy in medical training; and (c) the power of theater as a dissemination tool to engage audience and actors emotionally and intellectually simultaneously. Finally, Standing Ovation and Handle With Care? can be used to inspire social scientists to be creative in thinking about how to make their research accessible to professionals and the general public. Standing Ovation would have been stronger with a longer section on the history and effectiveness of community-based theater, the parallel to “ethnographic performance” in the discipline of theater. While these theatrical scholars and artists do not call their interviews “qualitative research,” the long history of this approach could have yielded countless lessons to Gray and Sinding’s work. Perhaps the collaborative narrative of Standing Ovation could have included more of the theater director’s voice in the writing process of the book as well. Readers of Standing Ovation attempting their own performance of social science research would also have benefited from more information about how post-show discussions are best staged. Creating the right environment to ensure candid and focused feedback to a play is as important as the quality of the research and of the performance itself.

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