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EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY ADVOCATES FOLLOWING ECOLOGICAL DISASTER

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EXPERIENCES OF COMMUNITY ADVOCATES FOLLOWING ECOLOGICAL
DISASTER

(Spine Title: Experiences of Community Advocates)

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by

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Abstract

The experiences of community members who engaged in an advocacy role following the May 2000 water contamination in Walkerton, Ontario are described. Thirteen non-professional community members who stepped into an advocate role following this community crisis were interviewed about their experiences of advocacy. Results of the interviews were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis procedure. Five themes emerged from the data including: impetus for involvement, response from higher up, implications of advocacy, advocate characteristics and where to go from here. The results can be used to educate mental health professionals, disaster relief teams and researchers alike.

Key words: advocacy; community; Walkerton, Ontario; disaster; empowerment

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"I always said that it was like a tornado or a storm went through here. All the buildings were still standing, but the people were knocked down. If it had of been the other way around it would have been a totally different situation. We would have had tons and tons of help right off the bat, which is unfortunate". (Participant 10)

Galper (1975) defines advocacy as 'a deliberate attempt to bring about some change on behalf of an individual or group of people', (p. 46). The need for change, efforts engaged in to make change and the results of those efforts take various forms depending on the unique realities of each community. In the community of Walkerton Ontario, several local residents responded to the contamination of their local water supply and high rates of physical illness by organizing a grassroots advocacy group. Members of this group advocated on behalf of the community to address needs that were not being attended to by other stakeholders. Their experiences of advocacy are the subject of this research.

A review of the literature on grassroots advocacy following human-made disaster revealed factors associated with the development of citizen-led efforts for social change including degree of threat of harm following disaster, adequacy of systemic (e.g. government-led) disaster response and availability of local resources to mobilize.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals knowledgeable about the grassroots advocacy group and its efforts in response to the water contamination in May 2000. Participants were asked about their experiences of advocacy. Consistent with the principles of community-based research, members of the group were actively involved in the development of research questions and study design as well as participant recruitment.

Results of the interviews were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis procedure. Five themes emerged from the data including: impetus for involvement, response from higher up, implications of advocacy, advocate characteristics and where to go from here. The themes were compared and contrasted with the available literature.

Organization of the Thesis

The literature review in Chapter 2 includes a brief history of the Walkerton community and crisis as well as an overview of factors associated with the development of grassroots advocacy following human-made disaster and a review of the concept of empowerment. In Chapter 3, the methodology is detailed, and in Chapter 4 the results of thematic analysis of semi-structured interview transcripts is presented. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings, a comparison between the results of interviews and available literature as well as a description of implications of the findings for research and counselling applications.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter includes an overview of the community of Walkerton and a review of published case studies of community activism following local crisis. In the first section, a description of the community of Walkerton, Ontario at the time of water contamination is presented to provide context for the study results and parameters for the search of published literature. A search of peer-reviewed literature on grassroots-led activism following community disaster yielded studies with several similar features to the Walkerton context. Based on the case studies, factors associated with the development of grassroots activism following community crisis are identified and presented. The concept of empowerment is described and offered as a possible lens through which to view the experiences of Walkerton advocates interviewed in the present study.

Water Contamination in Walkerton

Walkerton is a quintessential town in southern Ontario. It is a picturesque community along the banks of the Saugeen River about two hours northeast of London. Despite a municipal amalgamation in 1999, Walkerton has kept its small town feel. In fact, many residents continue to make their living as sole proprietors in businesses in the downtown area and in farm-related industries (Walkerton Chamber of Commerce, 2007). What happened in May 2000 had a direct impact on the health of many members of this community as well as an indirect impact on the well being of all residents.

In May 2000 Walkerton's drinking water system was contaminated with many pathogens, including *Escherichia coli* O157:H7 (E.coli) from one of the three wells that serviced the town. As a result seven people died and approximately fifty percent of the population became ill (O'Connor, 2002). Many who were from out of town at the time of

the contamination also became ill. The community was devastated. In addition to those directly affected more were indirectly affected through the resulting illnesses experienced by neighbors, friends and family members. The local hockey arena substituted as storage for cases of bottled water for the residents to use because they were banned from using tap water for several weeks (Davidson, 2007).

An inquiry into the nature of the water contamination revealed several disturbing facts. It appeared that the operator at the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) who was in charge of monitoring the water quality was intoxicated while on the job and failed to notify proper authorities that the water was contaminated (O'Connor, 2002).

Additionally, because the operations staff did not properly treat the water with adequate doses of chlorine as required, there was consumption of contaminated water for many days before the problem was made public (O'Connor, 2002).

It was found that inadequate water monitoring and water treatment practices had gone on for several years, undetected by the Ministry of the Environment's inspection program (O'Connor, 2002). It was suggested that the provincial government's budget reductions led to the discontinuation of water testing for municipalities which resulted in inconsistencies in water testing of water and infrequent inspection visits from the Ministry (O'Connor, 2002).

Several years later, residents of Walkerton are still affected by the contamination. A longitudinal study by the London Health Sciences Center recently reported that individuals exposed to the bacteria face a greater risk for high blood pressure and suffer irritable bowel syndrome as well as kidney dysfunction (London Health Sciences Center update letter, 2007). Following the announcement that the community of Walkerton

was tainted by contaminated water, a small group of community members emerged to act as advocates for the community. This group liaised between the community and outside parties which included the media, researchers and government officials.

The group held several meetings with community members to determine local needs and priorities. The group also met with representatives of outside organizations regarding their intentions and actions within the community. The group was able to secure local funding for a grassroots research project, and through that work voice concerns regarding the impact of water contamination with the primary cause associated with government cutbacks. Justice Dennis O'Connor, the judge presiding over the Walkerton inquiry, met with the group members to hear about their experiences and took their suggestions into account during the inquiry. In the end the group members' suggestions led to extending the formal inquiry beyond the E.coli contamination in Walkerton to an examination of the practices and procedures of water treatment throughout the province.

Justice O'Connor's overarching goal from the Walkerton Inquiry was recommending the monitoring and implementation of safe drinking water using a "multi-barrier approach". This multiple-barrier approach was set in place to ensure safe drinking water by incorporating monitoring and treatment of the following levels: source protection to help keep the raw water as clean as possible, to employ more than one method of water treatment, to secure the distribution system against contaminants, using monitoring programs that use automatic warning devices to alert public utility employees of a problem, and finally employing well thought out and practiced responses to adverse conditions (O'Connor, 2002).

Justice O'Connor stressed that because each barrier is not perfect it is important for constant and transparent monitoring systems by employees who have been properly trained and certified in water testing and monitoring. Part of his recommendations led to the development of the Safe Drinking Water Act (2002). This act requires any laboratory that performs drinking water testing to obtain a licence effective October, 1, 2003. In addition, the SDWA requires owners and operating authorities of drinking water systems regulated under the Drinking Water Systems Regulation (O. Reg. 170/03) to use a licensed laboratory for drinking water testing (http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/html/regs/english/elaws_regs_030248_e.htm).

Case Studies

A thorough literature search was conducted to locate case studies of a similar nature to Walkerton's situation using the academic databases PSYCInfo and ProQuest, as well as the Internet using Google Scholar. The following descriptive terms were used: disaster; trauma; advocates; nonprofessional helpers; community helpers; and case studies. The search yielded four case studies that specifically documented community *building practices of community advocates following a local disaster*. These case studies were the basis for identification of factors associated with the presence of local advocacy efforts in response to a disaster. The case studies ranged from technological disasters to disasters classified as human-made. However, all fit McFarlane and Norris' definition of disaster as a "potentially traumatic event that is collectively experienced, has an acute onset, and is time-delimited; disasters may be attributed to natural, technological, or human causes" (2006, p.4). The cases were from the United States and Spain. Affected

communities ranged in size, and outcomes varied in degree of success and local or systemic change. A brief overview of each case study follows.

Case Study #1: Toxic flood in Donana, Spain

On April 25th, 1998 a toxic spill from a dam holding wastewater from mining operations flooded water systems of the Donana National Park with heavy metals. As a result flora, fauna, crops and pastures were destroyed. Local fishermen were prohibited from shellfish harvesting due to the threat of contamination. Surrounding communities did not trust any produce from the affected area, regardless of whether the particular farmer was impacted by the toxic spill. Tourism in the Park decreased by twenty percent (Sauri, Domingo & Romero, 2003). Although the local agriculture industry was devastated, small business owners in the town of 3300 people noticed an increase of economic activity due to the number of relief crews needing food, shelter and supplies.

Within the first few hours of the spill, the Director of Donana National Park had an emergency dam built to redirect the contaminated water. Two more dams were *constructed in the following days*. A water treatment plant was later added to clean the water that remained in the area. Contaminated soil was removed and replaced with fertile soil. Government agencies provided financial compensation to farmers for produce lost and/or damaged land.

Public concern was raised about the health and well being of community members. Farmers were angry at the modest compensation offered by the government that was not enough to cover their losses. There was distrust of the government and the media which had flooded the town. A local citizens group including farmers as well as other local residents came together to organize a rally in protest of inadequate

government financial response and negative media attention. The attendance at the rally was small and membership of the group declined sharply. Within a year the group had disbanded altogether.

In hindsight, it was suggested that the limited response to efforts of local advocates was due to the absence of widespread and severe impacts on human health, modest economic impact and a small but timely response by local government (Sauri, Domingo & Romero, 2003). A broader human and economic impact of the disaster may have led to the development of a more sustained response to grassroots advocacy efforts.

Case Study #2: The Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans

The effects of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were devastating and long-lasting. On August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina bombarded New Orleans causing flooding primarily due to the failure of the federally built levee system. By August 31, 2005, eighty percent of New Orleans was flooded, with some parts buried under 4.5 m (15 feet) of water. Though many people evacuated the city, some people remained. Many who remained in their homes had to swim for their lives, wade through deep water, or remain trapped in their attics or on their rooftops. Close to 2,000 people lost their lives during the hurricane and in the subsequent floods. As the city started to rebuild, people started to move back to their homes. However, there were many who lived in public housing who were not able to return to their homes, despite the United Nations declaration that people have the 'human right to return' to their residences once they are deemed safe (Pyles and Lewis, 2007).

After the hurricane, many organizations and advocacy groups formed in response to the delayed response of government officials, FEMA (Federal Response Management

Agency), and to represent minority groups who were overlooked by other agencies. Pyles and Lewis (2007) highlight three social justice advocacy groups formed by women in post-disaster New Orleans. The first group, Women of the Storm, lobbied Congress to heighten awareness and gain support for rebuilding New Orleans. Another group, the New Orleans Regional Alliance Against Abuse (NORAA), was formed to bring similar resources together for serving survivors of sexual and domestic violence. The last group was formed by public housing residents and advocates who are trying to expedite the return of public housing residents back to New Orleans.

These groups used similar tactics to garner the attention of their target audiences including media, political lobbying, networking, and collaborating with other local agencies.

All three of these groups were formed by local women who were victims of the storm. These women recognized the need for change and took action. Pyles and Lewis (2007) state in their conclusions that,

because formal organizational networks may ignore the important assets that indigenous volunteers bring, the inclusion of grassroots and informal organizations, which are often led by and/or composed of women, can result in increased participation, particularly by those in isolated or marginalized communities, in disaster response and recovery (p. 389).

Case Study #3: Dioxin Contamination in Rhode Island

Following the closure of a chemical manufacturing plant along the Woonasquatucket River in Providence, Rhode Island, water samples revealed high levels of dioxins and volatile organic compounds. The discovery of contamination in 1999 occurred during an application by the local municipality for the area to be designated as a historical site. The achievement of the designation provided funding for revitalization.

With the resources, local community members were hired to assist with the clean up. During the clean up new evidence was obtained by the EPA about increasing levels of toxins as well as the presence of new toxic chemicals. Efforts for public awareness were undertaken by the Rhode Island Clean Water Association (RICWA).

Despite the reaction and publicity by the RICWA based on its fears for the safety of residents who lived or recreated near the river, there was no evidence of community concern or desire for additional action. It was concluded that community mobilization did not occur in response to the new concerns about contamination because residents did not personally experience changes to their health or sense of safety (Zavestoski, Mignano, Agnello, Darroch, & Abrams, 2002). In short they did not feel there was a disruption to their daily life because of the water contamination.

Case Study #4: Three Mile Island Radiation Release Accident

This release of an undetermined amount of radiation into the local community in Middleton, Pennsylvania on March 28, 1979, has been touted the worst commercial nuclear disaster in United States history. More than 150,000 area residents were evacuated from their Middletown homes. Shortly after the time of exposure elevated anxiety, stress and depression levels were reported. Physical symptoms included reddening and blistering of the skin, nausea and vomiting and hair loss. Longer-term epidemiological studies have revealed increased cancer rates among those who were exposed.

Local residents organized in response to the stated intentions of the local plant, which had the support of the General Public Utilities (GPU) and the NRC (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) to resume operations. Several citizen's groups led by women in

the local community held information sessions and rallies to protest the reopening. While they were not successful in their attempts to convince the GPU and the NRC to keep one of the units shut down, they did have success promoting enhanced safety standards and monitoring that have remained in place over the past twenty years.

In their review of advocacy efforts led by local women it was noted that major barriers were encountered by grassroots leaders because of their limited knowledge of the technology and inherent risks of nuclear power (Culley & Angelique, 2003). Personal efforts to obtain that education allowed the advocates to remain involved in their dialogue with the GPU and NRC over the longer term and gave them political power. Their knowledge of the issues from both a technology and community perspective gave them unique understanding and ability to influence state and business sectors.

Factors Associated with Grassroots Advocacy

Based on these case studies three factors associated with the presence of grassroots advocacy in response to local disaster were identified. These include level of perceived threat, successful government intervention and appropriate steps taken towards resolution.

Level of Perceived Threat

One factor associated with the presence of grassroots advocacy following disaster is extent to which residents felt threatened (Borg, 2004; Sauri, Domingo, & Romero, 2003; Zavestoski, Mignano, Agnello, Darroch & Abrams, 2002). It was noted that level of real or perceived threat contributed to the decision to take a more active and advocate role. In two of the case studies perceived threat was low, thus community action was not taken.

Government Intervention

A second factor associated with the presence of community advocacy following a disaster is residents' perceptions of how well government handled the situation. The extent to which there was unmet need or representation of local interests contributed to the emergence of grassroots individuals and groups to address those issues. Government – including local, state or national – was seen as a major player in the resolution of problems following disaster. The role of government varied from mediator of different interests (e.g. business and local residents) or as a resource provider (e.g. funding or personnel to assist). If it was seen that government officials were handling the situation adequately, the emergence of grassroots advocates was less likely.

It should be noted that in some cases, government institutions can make it seem as though appropriate action is being implemented, when in fact it is not. The case study of the dioxin seepage in Woonasquatucket River, Providence, Rhode Island is such an example. Community members felt government officials had issues under control and felt activism was not needed. Later on it was revealed that the Environmental Protection Agency failed to report certain water testing results which led to the emergence of an active citizen's group.

Local Action Taken

A third factor was whether or not efforts were being made to resolve the situation quickly and fairly. The extent to which the situation was seen to be under control by other groups, residents were less likely to feel the need to intervene. Smaller communities with fewer emergency resources had a lower threshold to be disrupted by a disaster, whereas larger communities with more access to emergency relief resources had more local

capacity to manage and organize an effective response (McFarlane & Norris, 2006). The level of knowledge held by local residents regarding technical or procedural aspects of the crisis and its management is also related to the emergence of grassroots advocacy as well as impact of those efforts.

Empowerment

The concept of empowerment is offered as a lens through which to examine the experiences of community advocates in Walkerton. Zimmermann (1995) quotes Rappaport's definition of empowerment as 'a process by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over issues of concern to them'. At an individual level the construct of empowerment includes perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical climate. At the community level of analysis, empowerment refers to individuals working together in an organized fashion to improve their collective lives and connections among community organizations that help to maintain the improved quality of life (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

Zimmermann (1995) sees both individual and community levels of analysis as occurring simultaneously and therefore not separately. Empowerment is not stable, global or unrelated to political power. Individuals feel empowered in some settings and oppressed in others (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005).

It is also important to acknowledge the presence of power and its relationship to empowerment, especially with regard to community-based research (Prilleltensky, 2003). Culley and Hughey (2008) discuss how citizen influence can be manipulated via various dimensions of power including control of resources, barriers to participation, agenda setting and shaping conceptions about availability of participation. It was suggested that

increased awareness the various dimensions of power might augment citizen participation and encourage increased discussion about the power-empowerment relationship.

Summary

In this chapter, background on the Walkerton community was presented, relevant case studies from the literature profiled and themes associated with emergence of grassroots advocacy following local disaster described. The circumstances surrounding local water contamination in Walkerton and emergence of organized grassroots advocacy in response to the contamination, through the development and efforts of a grassroots advocacy group had positive results. While the efforts of grassroots advocates in the other communities described in case studies had mixed outcomes, the factors which were connected to advocates' emergence and prominence included level of perceived threat to health and well being of the local population, degree of government involvement and extent of local resource base and response to the crisis. The concept of empowerment is offered as lens through which to view the experiences of grassroots advocates in Walkerton, Ontario.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Community-based research is a grassroots approach in which local residents identify the need for research (Hall & Kidd, 1978). The questions and methods follow from the intended use of the information, and therefore various approaches to data collection and analysis are supported. The researcher takes a collaborative stance, works within the community to share expertise and provide information that can be used by the community (Petras & Porpora, 1993).

The researcher had direct experience with the effects of the water contamination as well as prior knowledge of the advocacy efforts of those involved in the local grassroots advocacy group. Members of group were approached and asked about their information needs as well as interest in a research partnership. They expressed a willingness to work with the researcher on a study of experiences of grassroots community advocates for the purpose of documenting the expertise of individuals who participated in the group during its formative months. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. Creswell's (2003) qualitative content analysis procedures were employed for the analysis.

In the sections that follow, the methods of participant recruitment, data collection and analysis are described.

Participant Recruitment

Potential participants were informed about the study via a key informant. The key informant is a well-respected member in the community of Walkerton and was involved with the grassroots advocacy group. This key informant knew the researcher prior to the present study. He is well networked and has a great deal of community organizing experience. He was and continues to be affected by the water contamination.

The role of the key informant was to spread the word about the study. This was done through convenience sampling. He shared the letter of information with many individuals, who were highly involved in the advocacy group during the time of the outbreak. These individuals were also asked to share the information with their networks. All interested participants were asked to contact the researcher directly by telephone regarding participation. When contacted by an interested participant, the researcher explained the nature of the study and what participation would involve. If the individual remained interested in participating, a time and place for the interview was scheduled.

Data Collection

A total of thirteen community advocates contacted the researcher, and all agreed to participate in the study. Between interviews 10 to 13, no novel information was reported and it was judged that saturation of the data had occurred. While office space in Walkerton was secured for interviews, participants expressed a preference to be interviewed in their homes. This preference was respected. Interview length ranged from twenty minutes to one hour.

With participant consent, each interview was recorded on a digital data recorder. The audio files were downloaded onto the researcher's computer and access was password protected. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher and saved onto the researcher's computer with a password.

Instruments employed

Prior to ethics approval being sought, the key informant and others were consulted about the kinds of questions that should be included in the research. The key informant and others indicated a need for advocates to share their experiences of

advocacy to others. Based on these discussions, the interviews focused on a single broad question: "What has your experience been like as a community advocate during the E.col contamination?"

Several additional probes were used as necessary to add detail and depth to the interview. These included: a) describe any feelings of empowerment during the time you took on this advocacy role, b) what personal value, if any, has been derived from this experience?, c) did you or your family members experience any physical symptoms that you feel may be related to the water contamination?, d) what negative experiences did you have as an advocate, if any?, e) what positive experiences did you have as an advocate, if any?, f) do you consider yourself as an advocate?, g) what prompted you to be an advocate?, h) what lessons do you feel could be learned from this whole experience?, i) how do you feel this information would best be shared with others?, j) what role do you feel an advocate has/should have in the community?, and k) what role do you feel an advocate has/should have outside the community?

Analysis Procedures

Content analysis is defined as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969, p.14). This qualitative system is used when attempting to analyze the central content of the message the participant is trying to communicate. The fundamental analytic principle is that central themes are produced from interview data through reducing and analyzing text by coding it into categories to which combine into the emergence of themes that reflect the depth and detail of all responses (Priest, Roberts & Woods, 2002). It has been found to be appropriate for many questions, and used within

many disciplines. Priest et al, additionally proposed “content analysis is a particularly reliable means of analyzing qualitative data in that reliability of coding decisions can be confirmed by revisiting previously coded data periodically to check the stability over time.” (2002, p.37)

In the first and second steps of qualitative content analysis, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher and then reviewed to generate foundational impressions (Creswell, 2003). Each interview took between two and four hours to transcribe depending on the length of the interview.

The third step of this form of content analysis was to code the data (Creswell, 2003). Coding the data required the researcher to read through each interview and highlight passages that offered rich description of the participants’ experiences. Each of these passages was assigned a code word, or phrase that reflected its content (Creswell, 2003). For example, the code assigned to this passage was “burnout”:

But you know a part of my thinking is there's been a couple of things that we've seen come up and I found myself reacting - it's kind of like it's somebody else's turn now because we've been through the mill on this already and we went to the wall. And now I think we've been through this and I think it's taken a certain toll and it's not just something I do every day. I think it's somebody else's turn to do it for a change. (Participant 4)

In step four of data analysis the codes were reviewed by the researcher to ensure consistency as well as to begin to identify patterns (Creswell, 2003). This procedure involved reviewing each of the highlighted passages within the assigned codes to check for consistency, and grouping passages together by code.

Step five consisted of organizing the passages into themes based on the codes (Creswell, 2003). Five themes emerged from the data, and included: impetus for

involvement, response from higher up, implications of advocacy, advocate characteristics and where to go from here. For example, for the theme “impetus for involvement” the codes “motivated by need for answers”, “need to find out what was happening”, “initially overwhelmed”, “concern for kids’ safety and health”, “feeling helpless” and “anger” were used. The list of codes used for each theme can be found in Appendix B. The themes are described in detail in the results chapter.

Step six of the analysis was the interpretation of data (Creswell, 2003). The themes are compared to current literature in the discussion section of this thesis.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter begins with a brief description of the participants in the study before detailing the results of content analysis described in Chapter 3. In addition, reflections of the researcher regarding the research experience are offered.

Participants

Thirteen people participated in an interview, of them seven were male and six were female. Participants ranged in age from 44-70 years old. All participants were involved with local grassroots activism at the time of the water contamination in May 2000. Two of the participants founded a group, while another participant acted as the Chair of the group. Other participants were involved in different facets including attending meetings, speaking to media outlets, and educating the community. After the group’s mandate was successfully executed, members of the group disbanded. Five of the thirteen continue to be involved with committees and projects that advocate for environmental change within communities.

The participants had diverse occupations including jobs in education, retail, politics and construction. Four participants were retired. One changed professions in response to the water contamination in May 2000 from retail to politics. All but two lived in the town-proper of Walkerton when the water was contaminated. The other two lived within twenty-five kilometres of Walkerton, but worked in Walkerton. One of the rural participant's children attended school in Walkerton. At the time of the interviews, all but one participant lived in Walkerton.

Of the thirteen participants nine reported becoming physically sick from the water contamination. Six reported that immediate family members were also ill at that time. These individuals continued to have health challenges including irritable bowel syndrome, diabetes and kidney disease.

Eight of the participants have been in the process of receiving compensation since the development of a compensation plan by the government after the public inquiry in Walkerton. One person has received compensation; the others are still waiting.

Qualitative content analysis of the data revealed five overlapping themes, which described the experiences of grassroots advocacy in response to the Walkerton water contamination in May 2000.

Impetus for Involvement

Many participants spoke of the feelings they had at the time of the water contamination. They felt like the situation was out of control and no one with power was doing anything to help. These individuals feared for their lives, the lives of their families and of the community. Participants voiced feeling overwhelmed and anxious not knowing what to do.

I think when I take my mind back to that time, the first thing was being faced with an overwhelming situation and feeling extremely threatened and feeling that there were things that were not being done to really to protect my family. I guess that was the base of it and then out to the wider community. So from that saying about necessity being the mother of invention, we felt that if you didn't start to advocate on some level that the outcome would be far worse and that steps wouldn't be taken and starting from the earliest stages where the response to the tragedy seemed to be disjointed and far more. (Participant 9)

Fear also played a big part in motivating these participants to take action. Many questions swam through participants' minds to which they were unable to receive answers.

I think the first concern was well what is the impact going to be on our children, and it was the whole idea of I think more than anything else, the initial feeling, that a lot of people had too, was just the helplessness and I guess also a bit of shock of 'what is this that's happening and how can it be happening in little Walkerton' and as a result how can we deal with something like this because of course in a community this size nothing happens. (Participant 6)

I felt that we really needed to do something. There was a real fear that if citizens didn't start speaking out that it was going to be swept under the carpet. So I felt that we needed to be vocal about this and 'raise a little hell' as they say so that it would not be swept under the carpet, but instead that something would be done to find out what happened and who was responsible and I guess the other thing was there would be some assistance for victims that they wouldn't be left stranded. (Participant 3)

Anger was also expressed by participants, particularly because they felt that the community and government leaders were not receptive to the community's concerns. Participants stated that they felt estranged by their own community representatives and by government officials in their inability to answer questions regarding what happened and why it happened.

*I was very angry at what had happened - at what was allowed to happen and very angry that the leadership was non-existent.
(Participant 1)*

*Well I was pissed off basically. I went - the Premier came here to speak at the municipal office and so I went down there to hear what he had to say. I couldn't hear him because he wasn't talking to us; he was talking to the media. And I thought that's not right. That's crap. This is just a dog and pony show - he doesn't really care and that was - people were just starting to die and I was sick at the time. So I got quite angry about what I had seen.
(Participant 10)*

Other participants echoed these thoughts with regard to feeling helpless at the beginning and feeling initially overwhelmed. Participants expressed their motivation to become politically involved in order to get answers to their questions.

Response from Higher Up

During a community disaster, residents tended to look to higher powers desperately seeking answers and solutions. As mentioned in the previous theme, participants were angered and overwhelmed by the lack of government involvement. They felt the situation was poorly handled right from the beginning. This has led participants to not trust government officials at all levels: municipal, provincial and federal.

If it wasn't for our son we still wouldn't know about the water crisis because there was no public notification. There were no speakers going up and down the road or on the radio or anything. Our son heard and came and - our parents would have died. They were very ill. That for me, the effect on the family, was the most profound and closer to me. But then you can scope it out to the community and everyone. It was awful really. And if we hadn't been diligent and heard - the things you heard in the community that happened were not as a result of anyone's good planning council wise. It was up to individuals. (Participant 2)

You know the only thing the municipality did was hand out bottled water. [A former local doctor in Walkerton] would have said the government should have people going door to door asking, 'how many people were sick?' His answer will be, 'nobody knows'. So nobody will ever know how many people were sick. See the mayor never called for a state of emergency. Once they declare a state of emergency then these other resources would come in ... It was like the Calgary Stampede came to town, but all we were equipped for was a local horse show. (Participant 12)

Not only did participants feel that the government was negligent in providing an appropriate response to the water contamination, they also felt that the government minimized the widespread impact of the disaster. Participants felt the government was more concerned with managing their own image towards the media than deal with the issues at hand.

Do you want to know what happened at the town meetings? We had an enormous frustration with those. What they would do is bring in a panel of speakers for these meetings. And they [meeting officials] would say 'no questions until everyone is finished'. And you'd have to sit through speaker after speaker after speaker. It was obvious what they were doing - they were wearing people down because they didn't want people giving them static and asking them some tough questions. They didn't want that. They were saying that there was an opportunity for questions, but there weren't. (Participant 3)

I think that the first feeling was the exact opposite [of empowerment] - of being disenfranchised. There was this sense that you know, 'we'll investigate it, we'll figure it out, if you have any problems, call' but you're not really the one that people will be looking to for that leadership. Very quickly you realized that there's times that you look at it and say 'what's the biggest ministry in the government' and you come back and say the biggest ministry is the ministry of denial and I think when you move from the point where you have an idea and you start to realize that you're not the only one thinking that thought - that there's a communal wish to see something happen. (Participant 9)

It just seemed like at the time too that there were a lot of political opportunities that were being given. It just seemed like this is a good opportunity for the politicians to get in front of the media

and placate the public at large instead of dealing with the citizens of Walkerton and what they were going through. (Participant 6)

This lack of initiative by all levels of government led to participants searching for the answers to their queries without government support. Answers to participants' questions were not easy to find in the immediate area, especially from the medical community. Not only did participants note that the medical community did not have answers, but there was also minimal support to find answers and solutions to the horrific impact of the water contamination.

Well as a health practitioner it became obvious that there's very minimal, if little, support from the local medical community. And because it was the first of its kind, and as it came out in the Inquiry there were bad things going on for 20 years, there's the lack of acknowledgement of that [by the medical community]. The effects of that type being brought to the primary health contact people, like things to watch out for, were missed. So you had the massive clinical problems and things even myself in hindsight looking back you could see people had problems if you were tuned into that and said 'oh yeah you better get different things done or get that checked out'. But still the medical/family doctor who was then the portal of entry or the referral source still didn't pick up on what was going on. (Participant 12)

When the medical community didn't have the answers, and doctors couldn't use narcotics for the pain - people were doubled over in pain with bloody diarrhea - or they couldn't use antibiotics because that would set off the toxin and create further kidney problems...it was then that I had started seeking more. I thought, 'there has got to be more out there to help people in a situation like this.' (Participant 7)

Implications of Advocacy

Participants had an opportunity to voice positive and negative experiences of being involved in a grassroots citizenry group. Many of the positive experiences surrounded helping others and bringing together the support of the community. Though

each participant shared negative experiences, many shared that the positive experiences outweighed the negative.

It was nice to meet these people and to see them in action and to realize how civic minded they were. Like they weren't out there to build political empires for themselves. They were motivated by speaking up for people and doing something. That was a big positive experience for me. I'm impressed with their principles. (Participant 1)

Participants expressed that they valued the ability to help others as a positive experience. Two participants also stated that seeing results from their involvement with grassroots advocacy helped to keep the stress at bay.

I feel that caring is what I'm called to do - to look out for people. So trying to help them (community members) through the crisis, to be a helping person was very positive. (Participant 11)

Yes. It definitely helped being involved with (grassroots advocacy). It gave you something to do and something to work towards. You knew you were getting somewhere. Otherwise it would have been really stressful. (Participant 4)

Negative experiences associated with being involved with grassroots advocacy included the time commitment involved and feelings of burnout. Participants were trying to balance full-time work, caring for themselves and their families through their illnesses while they were taking on large responsibilities with this grassroots citizenry group. Participant eleven shared the difficulties she endured trying to cope with her illness while still trying to help others.

But you know a part of my thinking is there's been a couple of things that we've seen come up and I found myself reacting - it's kind of like it's somebody else's turn now because we've been through the mill on this already and we went to the wall. And now I think we've been through this and I think it's taken a certain toll and it's not just something I do every day. I think it's somebody else's turn to do it for a change. (Participant 4)

Participants spent a large amount of time briefing the media with information and doing media interviews from regional, national and international media outlets. Time was also spent speaking with provincial politicians, especially members of the opposition parties, in order to gain information and to have questions asked during 'Question Period'.

I bet you it would probably go down in the Guinness Book of Records for having the most media written on one subject. We did hundreds and hundreds of interviews and it was very time consuming. (Participant 10)

I would have to say that the positive outweighed the negative, but what's important is that when you're taking on a role of advocacy is that you have to develop thick skin in the sense that you are going to get criticism - you take a role of being the voice for a community. And I think that was probably one of the things that was a little bit difficult. You are going to perhaps have your children taunted at times, you are going to have phone calls where you're going to get - whether it's local people, or whether it's people from a distance or politicians - you're going to get criticism. Especially when it comes from the higher levels and that becomes very hurtful in a way because all you're doing is trying to act and make things better for your community. (Participant 6)

Advocate Characteristics

Participants were able to identify many characteristics they felt an advocate needed to have in order to be successful. Honesty, integrity, passion and persistence, as well as the ability to communicate with media and politicians were all mentioned as qualities of advocates.

[Characteristics of an advocate would be] honesty, integrity. (Participant 3).

I suppose they're not seen as having an ax to grind in the situation. They're not out for retribution. I think what happened with our committee was because we had known - I don't think we got too much, but the founder was in the media - I guess you need

*a good media person. Someone who's articulate and can use the media effectively and that happened with the founder. So you need to do that, but then people would call him up, people who had been victimized by this would be calling him and then he would try and represent them and assist them. But I think the big thing is to rock the boat. I have a tendency to think that if-“
We hadn't been as effective as we were with there would have been no inquiry. (Participant 4)*

Participants stressed the importance of attaining and maintaining a strong relationship with media. They felt that the media helped to give the community a voice so long as the speakers came across as a reliable source of information.

*Well they have to know what they're talking about. They have to listen to everybody. They can't have knee jerk reactions to stuff. People come to them with problems and they expect and answer and a reaction right away. Sometimes it's not appropriate. Sometimes you gotta think - sometimes things are in the works it just takes a little longer so they have to be knowledgeable about that type of thing otherwise you'll lose credibility. You have to be credible if you want to get anywhere with people, if you want to do media interviews, or what the media to come to you - to be able to use the media and if you want to be able to talk to influential people your credibility is extremely important. So you sometimes have to tread lightly, but don't be intimidated.
(Participant 10)*

Other participants describe advocates as individuals who are doing their civic or moral duty. These participants felt that citizens had a duty to act on behalf of those who require assistance in times of need.

But I think it starts almost as a visceral response to some kind of situation that seems to be threatening. Then as you move maybe away from the acute period of your concern, or the time of your concern, it reaches to a much more broader thing, where you start to realize - wait a minute, this is not just a localized issue - this is something that effects everybody and the more you learn the more you realize that a broader response is required and that response is not going to happen because if you look at it, distance is the great inventor of apathy - or feeds apathy. (Participant 9)

Well I believe that's a duty we have if we have the ability to do that. To do what we can, so I'm doing what I can for my own clients and family and I do what I can for what it's worth for individuals that call me - which isn't much other than trying to treat them or provide some fleeting encouragement. (Participant 12)

Where to go from here

Because of the lack of government response to the water contamination disaster, many of the participants stressed the importance of sharing their lessons and experiences with others. Publication of books and research, along with community outreach in the form of presentations was suggested as ways best to communicate to others. The main goal participants stated to communicate these lessons to other communities was awareness and prevention.

*Some of the (grassroots advocates) members go and do speeches all over to try to get people involved in what's going on in the communities.
(Participant 1)*

*You hope that people don't get so indifferent that they lose interest in these kind of things. You want to make sure that what happened here won't happen to them. You try to make them aware of what happened and they can learn from that.
(Participant 1)*

Documentaries, research papers and presentations would be really helpful to others, I think (Participant 2)

You could do a couple of - you could do a 'how to' manual quite easily, or you could do a story of Walkerton. Really there hasn't been - there's been a couple of books written, but not by the right people. There is a book in this yet. Someone and I were just talking about that. We still need to do a book. Because there is a lot of lessons that need to be learned and a lot of things still need to be said that haven't been said before. But you could write a how to book. You know every situation is different but there's some basic things that need to be - you know it's part of emergency preparedness too really is what - it's probably a way

that could be sent to every municipality type of thing... If you're talking about the advocacy part it there's probably a model that could be made that you could use for anything - when you're advocating for any kind of a problem. Actually the issues that happened - a lot of the stuff could be from any type of disaster - fire, wind, whatever. It hasn't been done, but it probably should be done. (Participant 10)

You know I thought actually bout a couple of different things. I thought about writing a book, or the other thing I had thought about doing was just by myself taking a video camera and going and talking to different people, but again a lot of people don't want to. They just can't. But yeah, those options because that way you're in control of the information. It's nothing edited and clipped by something else. And you can tell the whole story. (Participant 5)

Participants mentioned the need for an outside agency or outside sources to be available to help communities in crisis and provide continuing support for community members. Participants felt that if they had more support from outside resources, then they would not have felt burnt out. If they did not feel burnt out, then they could have continued advocating for their community with outside resources acting as a bolster. As one participant mentioned, there were resources available, but the impetus had to come from the community.

I would also speak to the communal level, the worst thing you can do is nothing. You probably don't realize it but you don't have to reinvent the entire wheel. We felt that the help of other people was absolutely crucial and they would provide knowledge and services and empower us to do more by doing that. I couldn't even begin to name - you know there was political help, there was help from the media, there was help from parts of the medical community - tremendous help - but they had far more experience in looking at what can happen and I still consider that to be a relationship and a resource to this day. (Participant 9)

As another participant pointed out, there were not any resources that set up headquarters in Walkerton to provide a closer, more on-going support and advisory role for organized advocate groups and the rest of the community.

Just like the Ministry of Health has these teams - if there's an outbreak the ministry sends these teams to these outbreaks. We needed something like that - like environment SWAT teams and that's what we need in these support groups/agencies. Whether it's one body that keeps its eyes out on the province - and I believe they should. Just like the Victims Assistance Group. Every community has a victim's assistance group that works with police agencies but nothing was happening for us - and we were certainly victims. (Participant 12)

Reflections

I felt very privileged to have had the opportunity to meet with participants from this grassroots citizenry group. As a researcher, and as someone who has been personally impacted by the water contamination, I valued the time spent with each participant as they shared their experiences and wisdom regarding the events surrounding the water contamination in May 2000. The beauty of qualitative research is its ability to support connectedness between researcher and participant. I have been involved in community-based research in Walkerton in the past, so some of the participants knew me in that regard. Also, my family and I were impacted by the water contamination, thus I have kept abreast of the developments in Walkerton the past eight years.

It was very important, in my opinion, to acknowledge that I had both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' status during this study. As an 'insider', I had personal and familial experience of the physical effects of water contamination as I was there visiting during the time of the outbreak. However, I did not live in Walkerton at the time, nor did I participate in any form of advocacy, or media interviews. In these respects I am

considered an 'outsider'. In 2003 I was asked to coordinate a community health study by the advocacy group in this study. One of the reasons I was asked to participate was because of my exposure to participatory action research, but also because of my 'insider' status as a victim of the water contamination. The executives within the advocacy group felt that my experiences would help me to understand and empathize with the participants during the study.

During the present study, participants were very willing to share their experiences with me. I feel that because of my personal involvement I was able to understand the participants' experiences at the outset. This helped during the interviews as I could reflect and validate participants' stories more empathically. I also feel that the depth and breadth of the interviews were increased because of this. Not only did this help to gather more information, but it also helped the participants to trust me more. My key informant shared with me that many participants told him they would participate in the study because they were familiar with my research involvement in Walkerton and felt they could trust me based on that previous work. He also informed me that the participants would not have consented to participating in the study with any other researcher because they would not have been able to trust the researcher's intentions and approach. My key informant also helped to establish trust by spreading the word about the research. The participants knew the key informant and trusted him, so it is possible that they were more likely to trust me because of his recommendation.

Qualitative research gives participants a chance to speak as the expert and to balance the power differential between researcher and participant. The researcher is often seen as the expert in quantitative research, as such this approach would not have allowed

for participants to have the freedom to fully share their experiences and to allow their story to have meaning. Other studies have been conducted in Walkerton, including a quantitative study. Most participants shared with me their lack of trust and respect for the nature of this study. They mentioned that they felt slighted and not valued for the information they had to share. It was very interesting for me to observe the participants during the interviews and notice the pride they took in having the ability to share information in order to help others.

At the beginning of each interview I felt nervous. This was partly because I knew the interview could be emotionally charged for some of the participants and the last thing I wanted to do was to ask the participant to speak about something difficult. One of the things that struck me most in interviewing each participant was the level of resiliency of these participants, especially their willingness to help others despite all that they have been through, and were still enduring. I learned that there is therapeutic value for victims of an environmental disaster to share their story with others who may benefit from their information.

I also learned that inviting those involved to act as 'experts' in providing information about their experiences yielded incredibly rich experiences. Often when we are seeking answers to information we go to the most qualified experts in his or her field. I think as academics we forget to posit our questions to those who are living in the 'trenches' and experience first-hand the devastating and traumatic effects of such tragedies as environmental disasters.

Meeting with these grassroots advocates and having the opportunity to speak with them really reinforced the benefit of establishing relationships. I was hesitant to embark

upon this study because of my previous involvement with some of these participants, and because of the impact the water contamination had on myself and my family. In retrospect the fact that I had previous connections to the water tragedy and to some of the advocates was of benefit because it promoted an open and comforting relationship between researcher and participant. The participants did not feel as if they had to explain the specific details leading up to and following the tragedy, they could just speak about their involvement knowing that I understood the context in which it was being presented.

Because of my personal involvement in the water tragedy it was imperative that I continually engage in self-care activities. Throughout the data gathering and data analysis process I sought out regular consultation to make sure I was doing due diligence to the research participants and the data that they provided. Other helpful self-care activities included connecting with my family, and spending time outdoors appreciating nature.

In conclusion, I learned many lessons through this research experience about community-based research, working with grassroots advocates and the traumatic impact of a community disaster on its residents. Most importantly I learned the value of seeking out information from grassroots advocates and the significance of establishing an empathic, trusting relationship between researcher and participant.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of participants from a community citizenry group in response to the water contamination disaster in Walkerton, Ontario in May 2000. This study aimed to view the experiences of these participants through the lens of empowerment theory. Participants shared their positive and negative experiences,

feelings of empowerment, characteristics of an advocate and lessons learned from their experiences.

The results of this study suggest that community advocacy emerges when certain elements are not present, including successful government intervention and support from outside agencies and government officials. These elements seem to be congruent with the factors revealed in the literature search which included level of perceived threat, successful government intervention and appropriate steps taken toward resolution (Zavestoski, Mignano, Agnello, Darroch & Abrams, 2002).

Factors Associated with Advocacy Engagement

Grassroots advocates felt that the only way to get answers to their questions was to form a citizenry group to advocate for support and for answers to be given from the appropriate sources. The fact that some of the members were ill, and their families were ill, only propelled them further into the advocacy process as they felt that there were too many people who were sick and dying to be brushed under the carpet, as described by many of the participants. The participants perceived the level of threat to themselves, their family, and the rest of the community to be high, thus propelling them to action, akin to one of the associative factors in the literature (Zavetoski et al., 2002).

Participants felt that all levels of government were unreceptive to their pleas for help. The mayor of Walkerton did not declare a 'State of Emergency', which would have brought many more outside resources to the area providing immediate aid for the residents of Walkerton. When government officials came to Walkerton to have a town hall meeting, questions from the public were dismissed and ignored, while the officials spoke directly to the media instead. Participants stated this specific event as the catalyst

which led to their involvement. This 'dog and pony show' as described by one participant, led to feelings of anger and helplessness when government officials would not answer their questions, or even look in their direction when residents tried to speak up.

Because of a lack of response from the government in the form of intervention, local advocates took it upon themselves to find an appropriate resolution. In order to find out how the water became contaminated and the implications for the community, many reached out to other organizations and experts for answers. One of the main sources of advice and consultation came from the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA). When the advocates successfully brought the inquiry to Walkerton (instead of being discussed in the House of Commons by a majority government), CELA helped provide funding to have expert witnesses speak on the community's behalf. The advocates also had a strong relationship with the media. Participants provided information and called out inconsistencies of the government and other officials via the media in order to give the community a bigger, stronger voice. The media often approached advocates as media outlets considered them a reliable source of information and insight into the water contamination disaster.

These steps were taken by the advocates because they did not believe that anyone else of authority would take the initiative. Participants worked long hours each day in order to advocate for a public inquiry in Walkerton, many speaking to media outlets from sunrise to sunset. Some participants ended up taking unpaid time off from their full-time jobs to have more time to advocate for the public inquiry. It is important to note that

participants felt that had local government officials been competent and present for the community, their role would have been potentially been redundant.

After the inquiry was brought to Walkerton, participants felt that many more questions needed to be answered with regard to emergency preparedness and compensation, but they also felt that it was time for them to move on with their lives and their families. Participants shared their feelings of exhaustion towards the end of the public inquiry. They felt that it was time to put together their lives and try to deal with some of the losses (health, emotional, financial) they had incurred. Many shared that if outside support in the form of agencies, researchers and government assistance had come to their aid, they would have felt more energized to continue in their advocacy role in some capacity.

It is important to recognize that the impact of the May 2000 water contamination has been long-standing and ever present in the lives of Walkerton citizens. Although the public inquiry has been completed with Justice O'Connor's recommendations, many residents of Walkerton are still ill. Many of them are also battling with lawyers and insurance companies still trying to receive a settlement from the class action lawsuit. Advocates may have felt empowered and hopeful about the process at the time of their involvement, but the fact that they are still faced with issues relating back to eight years ago many struggle with moving on and healing from the trauma they experienced.

Other factors presented by Zavetoski et al (2002) helped to conceptualize the reasons for the development of grassroots advocacy, the response from community members wanting to be involved and the actions taken.

Pyles and Lewis (2007) highlight three grassroots advocacy groups formed in post-Katrina New Orleans. One of the groups, 'Women of the Storm' formed due to the lack of response from members of Congress who did not understand the magnitude of devastation in New Orleans. These women decided to act because of the devastation they saw from their community members, and of their city. The Women of the Storm utilized the media and organized a trip to Washington to personally invite members of Congress to New Orleans.

Participants in the current study were moved to action for similar reasons. They saw the devastating impact of the water contamination on themselves, their family, friends, and community. They were afraid that their questions surrounding the events leading up to the water contamination would not get answered, rather would get diffused by the government, and chose to act to advocate for truthful answers and accountability from the government.

According to Zavetoski et al (2002) the fact that the government stepped in and responded appropriately to the riots and the needs of the community, citizenry action would not have taken place. Because the CHRI used an intervention approach that was collaborative and empowered residents of the neighbourhood, they were more likely to become involved and advocate for their needs through respectful collaboration with CHRI. This case study demonstrates the possibilities of multi-systemic collaboration being successful in addressing the immediate and chronic needs of the community.

Participants in the current study stressed the need for collaboration between outside agencies and the government, but found it difficult because the government bared some responsibility of the water contamination (O'Connor, 2002). Still, to this day, there

remains lack of external support of an agency or group that will advocate for the advocates and for the rest of the Walkerton community.

Empowerment

Participants shared that they felt empowered through coming together as a group and having the support of the community. They also felt more empowered when they were able to create positive change. Another aspect that increased feelings of empowerment is participants' trust and respect of grassroots leadership. This is consistent with the literature (Foster-Fishman, et al, 2007) where there is evidence that one of the strongest associations of an individual's involvement in active citizenry was their perceived strength of leadership. Many participants in the present study spoke highly of the founding members of a grassroots advocacy group. They felt that the group was being led by compassionate, articulate and resourceful individuals. Because of the type of leadership participants felt more empowered to become involved and become more active within the group. Participants in the study who were also leaders spoke of this relationship with Canadian Environmental Law Association. The leaders felt that CELA was a respectful and trustworthy source of information and support during the process of advocating for a public inquiry. Still, the external support from CELA, and the strength of grassroots leadership was not enough.

Empowerment does not seem to have lasting effects while oppressive forces continue to plague the Walkerton community through lack of support and interventions. Once the original mandate of obtaining a public inquiry was achieved, the citizenry group disbanded. There was still an outcry from the community for support and advocacy, but many of the advocates felt it was time for them to put the pieces of their lives back

together. Also, feelings of helplessness and oppression seemed to emerge. Participants spoke of success and empowerment when advocating for the public inquiry. Because of this they felt that the positive experiences of being involved with advocacy outweighed the negative experiences at the time, and immediately following the water contamination. However more than eight years later, they shared feelings of burnout and questioned whether they would take on a role as advocate if something like this ever happened again.

According to Culley and Hughey (2008), citizen influence can be manipulated via various dimensions of power including control of resources, barriers to participation, agenda setting, and shaping conceptions about availability of participation. They feel that increased awareness of the various dimensions of power can augment citizen participation and encourage increased discussion about the power-empowerment relationship. Based on the results from this study, and from the case studies presented in the literature review it appears that education regarding the power-empowerment relationship would benefit all communities as it would be a proactive measure in sharing tools to help citizens voice their concerns and their needs to higher authorities, including the government. For example as previously mentioned in the literature review, in Providence, Rhode Island, many residents believed that the EPA and other government organizations were taking appropriate action. As a result citizens did not feel the need to organize into an action group. However, it was revealed that the EPA withheld certain laboratory results from the community displaying to residents that appropriate action was not being taken. If communities had an opportunity to become educated about the power-empowerment relationship and be able to engage in discussion regarding the potential impact of community advocacy, then community members may be able to make more of

an informed decision as to their level of involvement during times of crisis, or oppression.

Implications for counsellors

This study sheds light on the need for increased support from external agencies and professionals. Empowerment and a drive to succeed cannot sustain a marathon-long active citizenry campaign alone. Counsellors have a moral and ethical obligation to help others in need. In this light, counsellors should try to assist directly with advocates by providing emotional support throughout their journey, not just at the outbreak of the disaster. Counsellors and other mental health professionals should also assist by advocating in support of citizens and collaborating with them to help them achieve their goals. This will help to possibly prevent burnout of advocates and help give them endurance to continue. This may also help to increase the power imbalance when going up against powerhouses like government, or corporations.

In addition, this study also provides a forum in which counsellors and other mental health professionals can engage in discussions about their role in the community. Ungar et al (2004) suggest that a helper, professional or nonprofessional, can be a catalyst for change but only when the helper is involved with the community. By being immersed in the community a counsellor can then consider strategies for change that are outside of his or her office. These strategies may, for example, include research and/or writing to professional associations and journals, and becoming involved in local organizations. Strategies can also include education about advocacy. Many residents may feel too intimidated to consider an active citizenry role in their community. Through education of

power, empowerment, available community supports and citizens' rights, community members may feel more able and willing to advocate for change.

In terms of counselling, it is important for counsellors and other mental health professionals to recognize the impact of a community's environment when working with individuals in that community. In order to be effective counsellors, one could argue that they need to see their individual clients in the context of their environment. This perspective may help to establish respect and empathy in the therapeutic relationship. If a client feels like his or her situation is understood fully by a counsellor, the therapeutic relationship will be strengthened.

Overall, it is important that counsellors think outside of their office and into the community as another necessary facet of connection in their profession.

Limitations

This qualitative community-based study, which emphasized depth of data versus breadth of data, allowed for the collection and analysis of rich interview data from participants' experiences. The semi-structured nature of the interview was employed to facilitate the inclusion of each participant's similar and unique experiences. As this was a study focused on describing experiences of a specific group of individuals within a specific context, generalization to other environmental disasters is limited.

Part of the interview with participants concentrated on events that happened eight years ago. The events post disaster have been complex and numerous. Currently many participants are going through the compensation process, one that is not without its onset of complexities. It is possible that some participants may not have remembered events as accurately as they would have closer to the date of water contamination. It is also

possible that opinions and perceptions of these events may have been altered due to the events that have transpired since the initial outbreak. However, it can be argued that this was, and continues to be a major event in these participants' lives, something they are not soon to forget with memories vividly playing in their minds. Discussion during the interviews tended to surround experiences and feelings surrounding particular events. Had participants needed to provide detailed dates and times of events, then perhaps it would be more concerning that eight years have passed since the water contamination.

Because Walkerton is a small town, it was imperative to conduct research and present the results in a confidential manner. Providing more depth surrounding the participants' experiences would have jeopardized their confidentiality as they would be at risk of being identifiable. These participants would not only have been easily identifiable to their community, but nationally, and internationally as many of the participants engaged in TV media interviews throughout the duration of the advocacy group's tenure.

Suggestions for future research

Future research about participation in citizenry groups after an environmental disaster would be well served by an exploration of the implications of power on citizenry groups, and within citizenry groups. It would also be beneficial to conduct a similar study with different community groups, especially those that had outside support, whether from government or other agencies. This would help to further understand the effect of power and burnout in citizenry groups.

Participants discussed the need for a model of advocacy, which could then be used to educate others in hopes of empowering them to become active citizens in their community. In addition to the development of a model, they feel that a teaching manual

about how to be an advocate and how to overcome challenges involved based on the lessons learned from experienced advocates could be helpful.

Conclusion

In conclusion the experiences of participants involved in grassroots advocacy yielded rich data which demonstrates that community advocates have much to teach researchers and other communities at large about advocacy.

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Experiences of community advocates following the E.coli water contamination in Walkerton, Ontario

Letter of Information

You are invited to participate in a research project about the experiences of community advocates in Walkerton, Ontario.

This project is being done by Tina Shrigley and Dr. Jason Brown. Tina is currently working on her Master's in Education, Counselling Psychology at the University of Western Ontario. Jason is a professor at the University of Western Ontario. You can call or e-mail them at (519) xxx-xxxx, or (519) xxx-xxxx.

We would like to talk to you about your experiences as a community advocate and provide you with a chance to share your thoughts.

After we talk to you, we will write a report including your thoughts and experiences. We will use what we learn to make suggestions to organizations, counsellors, and other mental health professionals so that people might work together to improve services and support for community advocates, and their communities, in the event of another disaster in another community.

The time commitment of this interview depends on the length of answers given and what you have to contribute to the interview; however, it is estimated that the interview could take at minimum thirty minutes and at maximum two hours. Interviews will take place in Walkerton, Ontario in an office located on Xxxxx Street.

You may choose to participate, or not. The decision is up to you. You can change your mind at any time during the interview. You can refuse to answer any question or you can end your participation at any time. Your decision about participating will not affect you in any way.

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in an interview conducted by the researchers about your role as an advocate following the E.coli water contamination in Walkerton, Ontario.

If you agree, we will audiotape our discussion so that we can remember what we talked about. These recordings will be transcribed by the researcher and will be stored in a secure and confidential place. Information that could identify you will be removed from the transcripts. This information will be destroyed after five years.

Although the risks of participating in this study are low, there is a possibility of unpleasant memories of the event may arise. If so, you will be directed to local community resources.

Your name or any other information that discloses your identity will not be released or published in the report. Although you will not be specifically identified in publications or reports of this research, you should be aware that you may be identifiable to some because of your advocacy role in the community.

When the project is complete, we will send you a report of the findings and our suggestions if you like. Copies will be available through the researchers. Their contact information is on this page.

If you need any more information, or have any questions about anything, feel free to ask before, or during the interview.

If you have any questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant you may contact the Manager, Office of Research Ethics, The University of Western Ontario at 519-661-3026, or ethics@uwo.ca. If you have any questions about this study please contact Tina Shrigley at (519) xxx-xxxx, or Jason Brown at (519) xxx-xxxx.

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Interview Guide

Demographic Questions: Age, Gender, Current location, Location at time of water contamination

General Question:

What has your experience been like as a community advocate during the E.coli contamination?

Prompts:

- Describe any feelings of empowerment during the time you took on this advocacy role
- What personal value, if any, has been derived from this experience?
- Did you or your family members experience any physical symptoms that you feel may be related to the water contamination?
- What negative experiences did you have as an advocate, if any?
- What positive experiences did you have as an advocate, if any?
- Do you consider yourself as an advocate?
- What prompted you to be an advocate?
- What lessons do you feel could be learned from this whole experience?
- How do you feel this information would best be shared with others?
- What role do you feel an advocate has/should have in the community? Outside the community?

Themes and Codes Used for Qualitative Content Analysis

Theme: Impetus for Involvement

Feelings of anger
 Motivated by concern for kids safety and health
 Feelings of helplessness at start
 Took part to seek answers and help others
 Motivated by need for answers and to find out what was happening
 Initially overwhelmed
 Safety of family threatened
 No control over situation
 Impotent feeling
 Fear
 Fear
 Anger

Theme: Response from Higher Up

No public notification regarding initial contamination
 No emergency response
 No information from authorities at the time of the outbreak
 Government not willing to accept responsibility
 Lack of help from higher authorities
 Responsible government negates need for advocacy
 Disenfranchisement by all levels of government
 No follow-up from government
 Medical community did not have answers
 Minimal support from local medical community
 No follow-up from media or government
 Governmental and societal response inappropriate
 No state of emergency declared by municipal government
 Breakdown of communication between levels of government
 Acknowledgment from government
 Government minimized intensity of events
 Fear of government minimizing and ignoring situation
 Suspect government was trying to conceal evidence
 No help from government
 Honesty needed from politicians
 No support from all levels of government
 Government was negligent
 No trust for government at all levels to speak on behalf of community
 Authorities not listening or speaking to residents
 No trust for town council
 Government not dealing with Walkerton residents
 Lack of help from government
 Lack of trust of higher officials

Fear of government concealing information
Government incompetence

Theme: Implications of Advocacy

Must do research to find answers
Self-awareness came from experience
Advocacy gave a sense of control
Advocacy gave sense of direction
Timing important: get involved in the beginning
Important to get community involved
Value to do something for others
Helping others
Citizenry group helps take away intimidation in dealing with government
Response from community has to be created
Helping others
Appreciation from others
Need to have thick skin
Need to have community support
Brought people together
Trying to cope while still helping others
Too sick to advocate
Meeting like-minded people
Working long hours
Burn out from day to day realities (illness, etc.)
Burnout
Now burnt out from participating
Seeing results benefit of group
Having voices heard benefit of group
Gathering of likeminded people helpful
Helps to boost the morale of the community
Social support from community and citizenry group
Important to communicate with community members
Catharsis and helping others a benefit of group
Value of listening to others
Helping people talk about experiences
Helping others
Seeing results helped keep stress at bay
Ability to spread word

Theme: Advocate Characteristics

Keep self informed and educated of what's going on
Spread word to others and the media
Researching and learning
Communication to get the word out
Community advocates must be motivated by the good of the community, not individual retribution

Honesty and integrity – qualities of advocates
 Must question authority
 Advocates must have a willingness to learn
 Group of people help to gather steam
 Exercise right to ask questions
 Important to have a group goal
 Advocates must be able to deal with criticism
 Must have passion
 Persistence is the key
 Advocates lead by example
 Balance of finding answers vs. Everyday survival
 Liaison with media to give citizens' point of view
 Need to recognize self as a stakeholder
 Have a right to ask questions
 Criticism is inevitable
 Resonate with others for action to take place
 Goal must be finding answers, not retribution
 Must be organized
 Take things in steps
 Be open to discussions
 See the big picture
 Do something
 Insist on your rights
 Be knowledgeable
 Persistence to create change
 Responsibility to community
 Helping others
 Timing important
 Impact on citizens rough
 Be educated
 Be credible
 Be honest
 Changing stigma and stereotypes from others
 Advocacy is ongoing
 Advocates speak out and do public speaking
 Compassion
 Dedication
 Be positive without denying negatives
 Advocacy is a duty
 Important to think globally

Theme: Where to Go From Here

Communicate with others globally
 More information on prevention is needed
 Important to have community networks
 Realistic goals needed by politicians

Prevention for other communities needed
Education for outside communities
Relationships with others important
Relationship with media important
Technical reasons and personal reasons gets outside support
Education for others
Prevention – so that it doesn't happen to some other community
Awareness and education are important
Presentations to other communities important
Booklet, manual or book would be helpful
Model of advocacy needed
Need for outside support
Books, documentaries with unbiased editing good ways to get message across
Help needed from an outside agency
Outside support to help find answers was beneficial
Speeches, documentaries and articles are good ways to share information
Need for more streamlined communication between medical communities
More organized aid needed at time of outbreak
Need for centralization of ideas into some format
Books, research publications would also help
Must have relationships with others outside the community
Needed to have conduit of information from citizens to public
Emergency plan needed
Speak to groups outside community
Important to meet with politicians
Important to start a citizens group
Important to have a good relationship with the press
Important to have a good relationship with higher authorities
Important to have positive relationship with the media
Competent outside support needed
Outside body needed to represent public
Help from outside sources good (media, politicians)
Get outside support
Public meetings to help get word out