

Review:

Mary Gergen

**Ross Gray & Christina Sinding (2002). *Standing Ovation: Performing Social Science Research about Cancer*.** Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 195 pages [plus Video], ISBN 0-7591-0145-0 (cloth), \$ 90,00, ISBN 0-7591-0146-9 (paper), \$ 34,95

**Key words:** breast cancer, oncology, performance art, collaborative learning, community theater, health practitioners, Canadian health system

**Abstract:** *Standing Ovation* describes the development of a theatrical performance about people with metastasized breast cancer, which was developed for hospital personnel, cancer patients, their family members, and the public. The authors, members of a research team based at Toronto Sunnybrook Regional Cancer Centre, were joined by actors who either came from an actor's studio or who were patients or activists in the breast cancer community. The goal was to create a drama based on focus group material collected around the question of what information should be given to metastasized breast cancer patients, and from interviews with oncologists. The book is accompanied by a video-tape of the performance. Thus, one is able to see the outcome of the ethnographic studies and artistic endeavors that are described in the book. The book and videotape are unique contributions to the literature on relations with patients who have very serious diseases. The hopeful, yet reasonable, perspective on this difficult situation is very well presented in the book and videotape.

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### 1. Originators of the Work

This book is a collaborative effort of authors Ross GRAY and Christina SINDING, and many others who served as co-creators of the dramatic vehicle, of which this book is a significant part, actors, resources, and sponsors. GRAY is the co-director of the Psychosocial and Behavioral Research Unit at Toronto Sunnybrook Regional Cancer Centre and assistant professor, Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Toronto. SINDING is a social scientist with the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation Community Research Initiative and was a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Public Health Sciences, University of Toronto. The Forward by Arthur FRANK, author of *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, serves to enhance the book. [1]

## **2. Somewhere between Fear and Avoidance, Finding the Possibility for Connection**

I was looking forward to reviewing a book on research-based, dramatic ethnographic performance, which this is, but when I saw that the subtitle contained the word cancer, I was reluctant to continue with this project. Despite my own history as a breast cancer survivor, I resonated with the words of one author who said that many people were afraid to come to a performance on such a scary topic. Yet, I had to agree with those who left the performance feeling more hopeful than they expected. It is a compelling, informative, and uplifting experience to witness this performance and to read how it was constructed. As one viewer expressed it, the performance taught her that a cancer patient might be described as "Not hoping for miracle cures, but for the possibility of living fully, the possibility of humor, of connection, and of grace, in the face of enormous difficulties and limited time" (p.180). [2]

Given the early reluctance of people to confront this topic, the success of the performances was quite astonishing, especially to its creators. From its first performance in October, 1998, "Handle With Care? Living with Metastatic Breast Cancer" grew in popularity; performances were given at Oncology Grand Rounds at eight hospitals, and later to the public in dozens of Ontario towns. By the time the show ended in June 2000, it had been performed in all the major Canadian cities and in the U.S., as well as broadcast on radio; in addition, a videotape of the performance was produced. [3]

## **3. Placing the Book in the Context of Performance Studies**

*Standing Ovation* tells the story of how the performance was created, as well as how it relates to the intellectual context of performance ethnography. One of the connections these researchers made was to Norman DENZIN's (1997) notions of performance texts. From this perspective, "The researcher's goal is not to put forth something that 'looks like the truth' but rather to contrast multiple verisimilitudes, multiple truths" (p.20). It is also designed to morally move readers and viewers. Similar to Patti LATHER and Chris SMITHIES' approach in *Troubling the Angels*, (1997, their work in a support group with women diagnosed as HIV+), the experiences and reactions of the authors are included within the chapters as they describe how the script was composed and transformed through the history of its performances. These passages, called "Memorybank Dramas," allow authors ROSS and SINDING to react personally to the project. Sometimes the sections are called "Researcher Rant" to permit the author space to think aloud about their project in a freewheeling manner. ROSS, for example, writes in August 2000, after the performances have ended,

"No previous research project plunged me so far into the intimacies of social relationships ... At first, I resisted ... By their behavior, this group rejected all conventions of distance that are constructed for and by researchers. They insisted on reciprocity, and they challenged and sometimes even manipulated me to embrace their assumptions. I now believe this approach was integral to our project's success.

The day following our stunningly successful Toronto debut ... several members of the group called me. They all said how happy they were for me, to have taken such an enormous risk with the project and that it paid off. I was taken aback, not expecting such warmth, such personal attention. I am grateful." (p.121) [4]

The book is also visually rewarding. Photographs of the participants in the creation of the show, scripted portions of the dialogue, boxes of special texts, and conversational segments that allow for multiple voices to be included in the presentation of the materials are all included. [5]

#### **4. Guidelines for Embarking on a Research-based Drama**

The book also contains guidelines for others who might want to embark on a research-based drama. One recommendation is that during the script building the voices of all the stakeholders are represented. Otherwise, one dominating voice can tilt a production in unfortunate ways. It is also important to be alert to the world external to the dramatists, so as to bring recent medical developments into the writing. They also recommend a far-reaching feedback process so that reactions can be assembled from various fields of interest. [6]

As the videotaped performance is imbued with dramatic flair, the shows are compelling to watch. Much of the dialogue is gleaned from actual conversations and interviews with oncologists, patients and researchers. Because "real people" spoke the lines of the dialogue in the performance, there is a freshness and an emotional appeal, as well as a cross-cutting grain of humor and pathos. It has been assembled in an aesthetically pleasing way. This is not an amateurish construction of intellectual ideas pretending to be drama, pushed through the lips of unwilling actors. In addition, the actors themselves are highly accomplished; they are either professional actors or very competent amateurs. Among the actors are the researchers. The magic of performance is clear. The book's coda describes Jan, one of the patient-actresses, who felt that the play kept her alive. Others felt that she kept the play alive as well. Sadly, if not surprisingly, she died shortly after its conclusion. [7]

#### **5. Recommendations for Future Use**

The book and videotape are valuable additions to the small but lively performance ethnography scene. As such, they would be useful in courses on ethnography, health, methods of social science, doctor-patient relations, oncology, and gerontology. In addition to bringing forth very helpful ideas about how to do performative/research work, they also are very provocative in terms of helping people live with disease and relate to others who are afflicted. It is clear from the performance that there is a delicate balance between being thought of as strong and needing to be accepted as weak, between bravery and vulnerability, between hopes and fears, all within a context of uncertainty and an overabundance of impersonal information. The only unambiguous messages that I could take away were that friends should not abandon friends, no matter how difficult it is to relate, and that the disease is not the person. I also learned that nothing is always

serious, no matter how deadly it may seem. As one man, who was in the audience for the recently produced show featuring prostate cancer said, to rounds of laughter, "I've had prostate cancer for five years and this is the first time I've enjoyed it." Perhaps I could say that about breast cancer as well. [8]

## References

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## Author

[Mary GERGEN](#) is Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at Penn State Delaware County in Media, PA, USA. Her academic interests are often found at the intersection of feminist and social constructionist theories. Her most recent book is *Feminist Reconstructions in Psychology: Narrative, Gender* (2001, Sage). She is also the editor of *Toward a New Feminist Psychology: A Reader*, with Sara N. DAVIS (1999, Routledge), and is co-editor with Kenneth J. GERGEN of *Social Constructionism: A Reader* (2003, Sage). She is co-founder of the Taos Institute, a non-profit organization dedicated to the expansion of social constructionist ideas in various professional practices, including therapy and organizational development. In a previous issue of FQS Mary GERGEN reviewed [The Qualitative Inquiry Reader](#), edited by Norman K. DENZIN and Yvonna S. LINCOLN.

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## Citation

Gergen, Mary (2003). Review: Ross Gray & Christina Sinding (2002). Standing Ovation. Performing Social Science Research about Cancer [8 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 4(3), Art. 12, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0303127>.