

**“I’m finally there”:
An examination of a feminist program working to change the dynamics of
women’s poverty**

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be electronically available to the public.

Abstract

One in seven Canadian women lives in poverty. There is a considerable body of research on the factors that cause women's poverty in Canada and on how poverty affects women's lives. There are also a number of programs and organizations that help women living in poverty. However, there is a lack of research that examines the meanings and experiences women have with these programs and the role these programs may play in their lives. This study has attempted to fill this gap by examining an innovative training and employment program for women living in poverty.

A qualitative approach was taken, which included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight women who had recently completed the program, as well as an informal interview with the program director. The interviews explored the women's experiences with the program, the meanings they associated with the program, and the ways in which participation in the program had influenced their lives. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interview data, and socialist feminist theory provided a lens to guide the study as a whole. The analysis led to the development of a number of themes and sub-themes. Safety, stability and connections with others were found to be particularly meaningful and important components of the program. These features enabled the participants to discover a new sense of self through the development of skills, confidence and empowerment. These findings suggest the importance of providing a holistic program, and one that addresses the broad range of challenges and concerns that affect the lives of women in poverty. Programs that focus narrowly on employment and job training may be insufficient. The implications of this research are discussed in terms of the diverse needs of women living in poverty and the range of barriers that they face. Community programs such as the one studied can help women make significant

gains in their lives, which can, in turn, contribute to overcoming poverty and achieving economic independence.

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Chapter I: Introduction

*I do not wish [women] to have power over men; but over themselves.
Mary Wollstonecraft*

Poverty in Canada

Poverty has many different causes and has the power to affect all areas of a person's life. It is a problem in Canada and countries across the globe. In 2002, 16.2 percent of all Canadians lived in poverty (National Council of Welfare, 2006b). The National Council of Welfare (2006b) outlines how poverty affects individuals, communities, and our country as a whole:

At the individual level, those who live in poverty are more likely to experience poor health and well-being. At the community level, poverty brings economic, social, political and cultural exclusion and disintegration. At a country level, poverty creates decreased productive capacity that in turn limits Canada's economic performance (p.143).

Considering Canada's economic status on the global scale, it is shocking that the poorest twenty percent of our population only acquires five percent of the country's after-tax income (National Council of Welfare, 2006a). Comparatively, the richest twenty percent of our population acquires 43.7 percent of our country's wealth (National Council of Welfare, 2006a). There continues to be a large gap between Canada's rich and poor. The National Anti Poverty Association states that, "To live in poverty in Canada is to live with insufficient and often poor quality food. It is to sleep in poor quality housing, in homeless shelters, or on city streets. It is to be at much greater risk of poor health. It is to be unable to participate fully in one's community and greater society. And it is to suffer great depths of anxiety and emotional pain, borne by young and old alike" ([NAPO], 2007).

Distribution of Poverty

Although 16.2 percent of Canadians lived in poverty in 2002, this rate is much higher for some specific population groups. Traditionally, more women live in poverty than men (National Council of Welfare, 2006c). In 2003, 17.1 percent of Canadian women lived in poverty, compared to 14.7 percent of men (National Council of Welfare, 2006c). However, these rates are higher for particular groups of women. In 2003, 42.1 percent of unattached or single-income women lived in poverty (National Council of Welfare, 2006c). Perhaps the most shocking of all statistics is that 48.9 percent of single mothers live in poverty, compared to twenty percent of single fathers (National Council of Welfare, 2006c). Also, rates of poverty are much higher for women who are Aboriginal or visible minorities compared to other women. The rate of poverty for Aboriginal women, at 36 percent, is much higher and more than double Canada's overall poverty rate (Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action [FAFIA], 2008). Further, the FAFIA states that, "29% of women of colour are poor. African-Canadian women are the poorest racialized group in Canada, with a poverty rate of 57%" (p.10). Twenty three percent of foreign born women who have immigrated to Canada live in poverty (FAFIA, 2008). Finally, 26 percent of women with disabilities live below the poverty line in Canada (FAFIA, 2008). Therefore, if poverty is to be reduced, it is important to pay attention to the specific needs of women, and those women who are at the highest risk of poverty, in order to be able to help them to overcome barriers to economic stability.

Canadian Discourse on Poverty

Traditionally, Canada has been a strong supporter of social welfare services. According to Burman (1996), the creation of the Canadian welfare state was intended to make Canada a "just society, building - out of transfers from rich to poor - a net of security and social

development for all” (p.11). However, since that time dozens of Canadian reports, including government and non-governmental organization reports, have shown that both the breadth and depth of poverty continues to be a problem (for example, Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2004; Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2008; Lochhead & Scott, 2000; National Anti Poverty Association, 2007; National Council of Welfare, 2006b; Neal, 2004). These reports seek to explain the causes, trends and implications of poverty in Canada. They also provide several suggestions to fight poverty in Canada.

Most Canadians are proud of their country’s social and economic achievements and the continued dedication to supporting those in need. Nevertheless, Lochhead and Scott (2000) state that within our communities, people, “remain suspicious of the poor, believing that poor men and women are the authors of their own misfortune, that a little effort and initiative stand between impoverished individuals and the economic mainstream” (p.1). According to Crowe (2007), people living in poverty are becoming increasingly marginalized and stigmatized and Stapleton (2007) claims that, “Welfare programs are extremely unpopular with the public at large” (p.7). This suggests that people living in poverty may be excluded from their own communities due to the negative discourse surrounding their circumstances. Further, Burman (1996) states that, “Slogans about the passive or fraudulent nature of ‘those people on welfare’ are the anaesthetic which dulls our capacity to feel and know the sufferings of those people” (p.15). If people living in poverty are seen as lazy, worthless, or undeserving, communities are unable to act compassionately, thus increasing the suffering of those who most need help and support. Thinking about societal attitudes towards Canadians living in poverty, I am always reminded of Paul Crutch, a homeless man who was beaten to death by three soldiers while

sleeping on a park bench in Toronto. There seemed to be no reason to attack this man except for a growing feeling of public resentment towards such people.

Also, the negative public discourse surrounding poverty has the potential to decrease the self-esteem and self-worth of people living in poverty. Burman (1996) suggests that many people living in poverty come to internalize blame for their circumstances and ultimately lose their self-respect and self-worth. Further, many people living in poverty lose their sense of power and control over their lives. Lewis (1963) notes that people living in poverty can come to feel marginalized and helpless. He states that: “They are like aliens in their own country, convinced that the existing institutions do not serve their interests and needs. Along with this feeling of powerlessness is a widespread feeling of inferiority, of personal unworthiness” (Lewis, 1963, p.7). This can have a devastating impact on a person’s well-being. Also, many people living in poverty do not feel that they benefit from, or that their needs are met by the existing social welfare system. Indeed women in Mosher, Evans and Little’s (2004) study talked about their experiences with the welfare system as a form of abusive relationship which weakened their already tarnished self-worth. Further, Stapleton (2007) discusses how public policies add to rather than alleviate the hardship for people living in poverty, and that there are disincentives for living on social assistance. Talking about welfare recipients he states that, “[t]he more they earn, the more they lose in benefits; when they tell the truth, they are penalized” (Stapleton, 2007, p.6).

These problems indicate a need for Canadians to be educated and sensitized to the issues of poverty. Further, communities need to be created that nurture those in need and do not place blame on individuals for larger systemic problems. The Canadian welfare system has become unpopular with both people living in poverty and the greater community, although for

very different reasons. This suggests the importance of finding a way to increase communication and understanding about poverty and about the lives of people who struggle with poverty. Community based programs may be significant in this regard since they can help to change attitudes. For example, people could gain knowledge and a sense of responsibility through positive community interactions. Community programs can work with local organizations to decrease unemployment as well as increase social integration and inclusion for people with few economic resources.

The issues of poverty are often associated with other challenges, including the loss of a personal, safe space (Neal, 2004), a lack of choice and freedom (Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women [CRIA], 2005), and constraints to economic self-sufficiency. These problems are often interrelated and cannot be looked at as separate from one another. Community based programs could raise awareness of these complications, helping people to understand that the problems of poverty are not simply ones of unemployment and economics. Poverty is associated with a range of other personal problems and barriers as well. For example, poverty can be caused by a number of integrated personal issues such as mental or physical illness, a lack of transportation or childcare, language and cultural barriers, a history of violence or substance abuse, and lack of education or training. Simply increasing a person's access to financial and employment opportunities is not likely to alleviate or solve these complex problems. On the other hand, community programs can focus on increasing a person's employment and social skills and interests, as well as improving the quality of their family and social relationships. They can also focus on improving a person's health and well-being in general, while decreasing barriers to economic stability, which may be beneficial.

Such approaches may, in fact, be more effective than a welfare system that focuses rigidly on education, training and employment.

The Work Opportunities for Women Program

Due to the large number of women living in poverty, community programs have been developed across the country to support these women in a variety of ways. One example is The Townsville Anti-Poverty Organization's (TAPO) Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) program¹, which was developed by women, for women, to address the employment and holistic (i.e., physical, psychological/emotional, spiritual) needs of women living in poverty in Townsville, Ontario. The twelve week program is run by Joyelle Rousseau², a woman who is passionate about feminism and is dedicated to helping women living in poverty to achieve their full potential. Every six months, twelve women embark on a personal journey where they are encouraged to tackle issues and previously learned behaviours that are barriers to their success. The WOW program strives to teach holistic balance. Joyelle tries to cater to each woman's spiritual side. The women practice physical and mental balance through yoga classes. They are encouraged to take care of themselves and their personal interests and not 'lose themselves' as women often do in their relationships and as mothers. The program focuses on specific issues that women in poverty face within their home and family environment, workplace, community and leisure lives. Little information exists, though, about the outcomes of initiatives like TAPO and the WOW program. Thus, research is needed to better understand these programs and the ways in which they have (or have not) been able to assist and support women living in poverty.

¹ The names of the city, organization and program have been changed in order to further protect the women involved in this study.

² The Executive Director has also been given a pseudonym.

I have been volunteering with the WOW program since July, 2008. I became interested in the program because of its strong focus on women and its use of a feminist approach. Previously, I had volunteered at a federal women's institution, and this sparked my interest in poverty and gender. At the federal institution I learned about the pervasiveness of women's poverty and some of the extremely negative outcomes of an impoverished lifestyle: violence, substance abuse, no self-esteem, homelessness, and crime. Since then I have dedicated myself to feminist studies. Mary Wollstonecraft's quote at the beginning of this chapter is indicative of my dreams for women in the future. I want women to truly feel a sense of control over their lives, and for society to provide opportunities to better nurture this self-control. It is my hope that this study will illuminate approaches that benefit women living in poverty, with the goal of improving WOW and other programs, as well as creating new programs in the future.

I also believe that the voices of women living in poverty are often overlooked in our society. I agree with Connolly (2000) that, "to refuse to give voice to marginalized women is to render the complexity of their lives invisible" (p.192). This study will bring the women's voices to the forefront of the inquiry. It is my hope that this study will benefit women living in poverty by demonstrating how particular programs can potentially improve their lives.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the meanings and experiences of the Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) program in Townsville, Ontario from the perspectives of the participants. Particular attention is paid to the women's perceptions of the role the program plays with regard to the problems they face in their everyday lives. Through open ended interviews, the study focuses on the way the program addresses the multiple issues that women face related to their homes and families, workplaces, communities and leisure. Further, the

study investigates the extent to which the women feel that the program provides them with benefits such as self-esteem, confidence, empowerment and health. The study uses a socialist feminist theoretical framework as well as a grounded theory approach to understand the women's experiences and meanings associated with the program and program outcomes.

Central Research Question

The central question guiding the research is, what are the meanings, experiences, and outcomes of the WOW program from the perspectives of the participants? Specifically, how does the program address the multiple issues that women living in poverty face?

Aim and Significance

This study aims towards the development of a theoretical understanding of the role of the WOW program for women living in poverty. It is hoped that this theoretical understanding will contribute to the overall literature related to women living in poverty and the outcomes of programs focusing on personal and skill development. There is currently no literature exploring the outcomes of similar programs for women living in poverty. This study helps to fill an important gap and suggests further research opportunities for the future.

This study focuses on issues related to employment, which is often seen as the main problem facing women living in poverty. Conversely, this study also takes on a more holistic perspective by validating issues related to leisure and to community as well. In fact, leisure researchers have often contributed to the literature on marginalized groups. For example, some leisure researchers have studied holistic health and well-being, aspects that are emphasized in the WOW program (for example, Caldwell, 2005; Iso-Ahola & Mannell, 2004). Other leisure researchers have contributed to discussions on community exclusion and integration, particularly for marginalized groups (for example, Arai & Pedlar, 2003; Johnson, 2008; Reid,

Frisby & Ponic, 2002). Further, the study of leisure has been shown to be important for women because it plays a significant role in issues such as self-esteem, confidence and empowerment (for example, Green, 1998; Shaw, 2001). It is my hope that this research study also contributes to the literature on working with marginalized groups through studying a community based program for women living in poverty.

Furthermore, this study has several practical implications. The research set out to understand what the WOW program means for the participants and to document potential outcomes and benefits for the women involved. It was hoped that by reviewing the outcomes of the WOW program, a case could be made for increasing funding and support to the program, or creating similar programs based on an understanding of the value and effectiveness of this type of community-based program. Also, it is hoped that this study will benefit the WOW program by providing suggestions for program development.

The intended audience for this study is diverse. However, the main intended audience is the women who were involved in the program. It is my hope that they felt empowered by their participation in the study and, as a result feel optimistic about their own and other women's futures. This study also provides enhanced understanding of the complex lives of women experiencing poverty for the public, professionals and policy makers. Other members of the intended audience include the staff and volunteers at TAPO, other women's organizations, local city and government officials, and other researchers.

Chapter II: Literature Review

'Independence'... middle-class blasphemy. We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.

George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to introduce some of the theoretical, empirical and statistical literature related to women's poverty. This review helps to locate my research within the existing literature and to highlight sensitizing concepts which were explored further as the study developed. These sensitizing concepts also provided direction regarding what to ask during data collection (Charmaz, 2006). The first section of the literature review introduces socialist feminist theory as the framework for the research and analysis of the research. The second section focuses on defining the parameters and exploring the depth and breadth of women's poverty in Canada. The complexities surrounding definitions of poverty are explored. Further, the current literature on women living in poverty in Canada is examined. The wage gap and employment labelled as 'women's work' is discussed. A discussion on the role of intersectionality in women's poverty is also included. The effect of motherhood on poverty and Canadian statistics on mothers living in poverty are highlighted. The third section of the literature review introduces some of the issues associated with living in poverty and the effects of an impoverished lifestyle. These issues should not be conceptualized as distinct categories. Also, their ordering follows no specific order other than readability. Some women may experience different issues at different times during their lives. Women may be affected by all these areas, some, or none at all. Experiences of unemployment are addressed, centering on how these experiences affect women's lives in particular. Poverty's effect on the experience of motherhood is examined. Women's issues with employment and childcare are explored. Also,

the welfare system is discussed in relation to women's lives and in the context of violence against women. Poverty's effects on personal issues such as health, illness and disability, psychological and emotional well-being, community and social exclusion, and leisure, are also emphasized. Finally, the last section introduces employment programs that have been developed to assist women living in poverty. This section focuses on the importance of pre-employment training and bridging support to address both the employment-related, as well as the broader, more holistic needs of women living in poverty. This section underlines the importance of researching employment programs and program outcomes for women living in poverty.

1. Feminist Framework

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory was a valuable framework for this study during all stages of the research. Feminist research focuses on giving voice to women's experiences and situations. A simple definition of feminism is found in Baumgardner and Richards' book (2000), which describes feminism as a movement towards the social, political, and economic equality of men and women, with the goal of liberating all individuals. There are many different feminist theories. Despite this, Kourany, Sterba and Tong (1992) state that feminists share, "a firm commitment to gender equality, a painful awareness that such equality is far from achieved, and a continuing desire to work toward such equality" (p.1). In addition, Daly (2007) states that: "At the root, feminist inquiry is built on the common cause of highlighting women's voices in the name of challenging patriarchy and eradicating women's oppression in the home and beyond" (p.119).

Seeking to understand women's inequities, feminist research challenges patriarchal norms and can lead to positive change in women's lives. Patriarchy, at the forefront of feminist critiques, is defined by Walby (1989) as, "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (p.214). Walby (1989) goes on to discuss the six structures of patriarchy: "the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions, such as religion, the media and education" (p.214). Also, many socialist feminists view the family as another structure of patriarchy (Tuana & Tong, 1995). These structures play a strong role in women's oppression, and some may play a role in the extent of women's poverty as well.

Oppression is also a central concept in feminist theory and feminist research. Oppression can be viewed as both a state and a process (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996). As the former, oppression is a, "state of domination where the oppressed suffer the consequences of deprivation, exclusion, discrimination, and exploitation" (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p.129). As a process, Mar'i states (as cited in Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996): "Oppression involves institutionalized collective and individual modes of behaviour through which one group attempts to dominate and control another in order to secure political, economic, and/or social-psychological advantage" (p.129). Oppression is defined as,

a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subordinated persons or groups fear or self-deprecating views about themselves (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996, p.129)

These power relations can occur between individuals, classes, genders, communities, nations, and states (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1996).

Kim (2007) discusses a 'triple oppression' in which women of colour face gender, class and racial discrimination. This concept has been criticized because it assumes that women who face these oppressions experience and internalize them in similar ways, while situations and experiences differ greatly even for women who may belong to the same class or race (Kim, 2007). I believe that there are commonalities between women who share similar circumstances. However, I agree with many feminist scholars that it is important to look at the individual and situated experiences of women, and not reduce them to categories and universal experiences.

Feminist thinking has been a subject of academic scrutiny since its beginnings (Pillow & Mayo, 2007). Its relevance in today's global world has been questioned by some, and whether it can address the complexities of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability and gender has been debated (Pillow & Mayo, 2007). However, Pillow and Mayo (2007) feel that as long as gender oppression exists and unless gender, "ceases to matter," feminist research is still essential (p.155). Oriented towards action, and through a focus on both individual and shared experiences, feminist research has the power to transform individuals, communities and entire societies.

Socialist Feminism

The specific feminist stance that I have chosen to guide my research is socialist feminism. I have chosen this framework for its focus on the intersectionality of class, race, and sexual oppression. Brah and Phoenix (2004) discuss intersectionality,

as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple [axes] of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands (p.76).

Elaborating on the overarching principles of feminist thought, socialist feminists' focus on intersectionality is a way to deal with the issues of diversity among women, while also retaining the idea that women share a certain degree of experience and oppression. Socialist feminism builds on Marxism and also introduces areas that Marxist theory had previously overlooked (Tuana & Tong, 1995). Sometimes socialist feminists are called Marxists, and vice versa, but there are differences between the stances. While Marxists focus largely on class analyses of power, socialist feminists argue that racial and sexual oppression also interact with class exploitation (Tuana & Tong, 1995). Thus, socialist feminists believe that, "power and oppression are the results of the material and ideological conditions of patriarchy and racism as well as capitalism" (Tuana & Tong, 1995, p.261). Socialist feminism was developed to better analyze the relationships between class, race and gender within the context of capitalism and patriarchy (Tuana & Tong, 1995). Kim's (2007) concept of 'triple oppression', previously discussed, is very similar to socialist feminist's focus on intersectionality.

Socialist feminists also recognize women's oppression in reproductive as well as productive labour (Tuana & Tong, 1995). Jaggar (1983) states that: "Women have more than one workplace" (p.324). Women's oppression in the household is seen to result in their responsibilities for the family and their lack of sexual freedom, both of which affect their options for production in the workplace (Tuana & Tong, 1995). Women are often oppressed at home and in the workplace through societal ideologies and the resulting expectations related to motherhood. For this reason, I believe the family could be added to Walby's (1989) structures of patriarchy. Mothers, and in particular single mothers who live in poverty, may feel stronger effects of oppression within the family due to their limited options. In particular, childcare can pose many problems, especially for low-income, employed mothers. Mothers who are looking

for employment or who are employed in irregular working hours may also face many childcare difficulties. Further, childcare can be problematic for women who would like to update their training or education. Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) call for a national daycare program to alleviate some of the pressures women face. A national daycare program could provide available, accessible and affordable childcare to all parents who are in need. Thus far, the prospect of a Canadian national daycare system is bleak, especially in light of cancelled federal and provincial agreements, but there continues to be discussion and pressure towards developing a program in the future.

Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) state that when examining women's poverty, the synthesis of socialism and feminism is appropriate for analysis since: "It demonstrates that a social issue - the eradication of poverty - requires a feminist analysis and solution. It suggests that a feminist issue- economic self-sufficiency for all women- requires a socialist rethinking of the class and race nature of American society" (p.91). Socialist feminism is also appropriate for the analysis of poverty because poverty affects men and women in very different ways (Sarvasy & Van Allen, 1984). The 'triple oppressions', discussed by Kim (2007), also influence women's poverty. The 'feminization of poverty' movement of the 1980's was a main focus for many feminist groups. For socialist feminists, the feminization of poverty movement was important as it recognized that any socialist-economic analysis or program for women living in poverty needed to be explicitly feminist in nature (Sarvasy & Van Allen, 1984).

However, there have been critiques of the feminization of poverty movement. One of the main criticisms in the 1980's was related to women's dependence on men. There was a belief that government controlled programs could help women become self-sufficient, and many feminists were calling for increased child support during this time (Sarvasy & Van

Allen, 1984). However, increasing child support does not necessarily reduce women's dependence on men. Rather, as Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) explain, inherent in this solution is the belief that women are unable to provide financial sustenance for their families alone. This issue continues to be a problem. For example, Mosher et al. (2004) explain that before receiving welfare assistance in Ontario, women must explore all other financial support options, including seeking child support from fathers. This rule of practice serves to ensure that women continue to be dependent on men for financial support.

Socialist feminists also focus attention on issues related to women's work and wages. These issues are important in terms of women and poverty. Jaggar (1983) reminds us that in the past, women's wages were seen as a supplement to men's income in the family. However, currently, "millions of women are the sole support for their households" (Jaggar, 1983, p.326). Thus, women who are mothers, but have no financial support from men, may find themselves among the almost half of Canadian single mothers living in poverty (National Council of Welfare, 2006c).

In their analysis of the feminization of poverty movement, Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) discuss women's dual working roles. The term 'dual role' is used to connote women's labour within the structures of the family and labour market. Though recognizing that dual roles do not make all women poor, Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) believe it makes women more vulnerable to poverty. Further, Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) distinguish between dual roles and unjust dual roles, where, "many women combine unpaid domestic labour with underpaid wage labour" (p.92). Whether in paid or unpaid labour, Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) and many other feminists believe that women's work is undervalued and subsequently,

underpaid. This devaluation of women's work remains a feminist issue that has perpetuated the wage gap, and contributes to the disproportionate number of women living in poverty.

2. Poverty in Canada

Defining Poverty in Canada

Statistics Canada recognizes people as living in poverty based on the Low Income Cut-Off (LICO), a measure that was developed to take into account the percentage of income that people must spend on necessities. Statistics Canada developed this arbitrary line based on a formula that they developed. Statistics Canada (2006b) states that the LICO is,

an income threshold below which a family will likely devote a larger share of its income on the necessities of food, shelter and clothing than the average family... to estimate an income threshold at which families are expected to spend 20 percentage points more than the average family on food, shelter and clothing (p.7).

To decide who is living below the poverty line, the LICO also considers the size of a family and the community in which they live (Statistics Canada, 2006b). Statistics Canada uses the most recent Family Expenditure Survey to determine how much an average family spends on food, shelter, and clothing after tax (Statistics Canada, 2006b). In 2005, based on this specific calculation, the, "after-tax LICO for a family of four living in an urban community with a population between 30,000 and 99,999 [was] \$27,190" (p.9). In 2005, twenty percent of Canadian families with the lowest incomes made an average income of \$22,800 after-tax, \$4,390 lower than the LICO for that year (Statistics Canada, 2007). Comparatively, twenty percent of Canadian families with the highest incomes made an average income of \$128,200 after-tax (Statistics Canada, 2007). It is clear that there is a large gap between the rich and the poor. Statistics Canada (2007) states that: "An estimated 655,000 Canadian families were living on low income in 2005, 7.4% of all families". Further, welfare eligibility rates in Canada are considerably lower than the poverty line, ranging from twenty to seventy-six percent below

the LICO (CRIAW, 2005). Thus, only the poorest of Canada's poor get to take advantage of our social support system.

Many people are critical of the use of the LICO as an indication of the extent of poverty. A report by the CRIAW (2005) states that the LICO may under-represent the actual extent of poverty in Canada, since, "Aboriginal reserves, homes for the aged, prisons, and the Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut are excluded from the [statistical] data" (p.3). It is in these places that poverty is the most rampant. Thus, the calculation of the LICO cut-off point underestimates the rate and depth of poverty in Canada by excluding these people in statistical data collection.

Discussion on poverty is often separate from discussion on homelessness, yet these two issues are closely connected. Poverty is the leading cause of homelessness in Canada (Laird, 2007). The Government of Canada (2007) has identified two categories of homelessness, both of which are related to poverty. The first, "absolute, literal or visible homelessness applies to people living 'on the street' with no physical shelter of their own, e.g., sleeping in temporary shelters or in locations not meant for human habitation (also known as 'sleeping rough')" (The Government of Canada, 2007, p.1). The second category,

Relative, hidden or concealed homelessness applies to people living in spaces that do not meet minimum standards. That is, they lack adequate protection from the elements, access to safe water and sanitation, secure tenure, *personal safety*, affordability and access to employment, education, and health care (The Government of Canada, 2007, p.1).

The Kappel Ramji Consulting Group (2002) found that more women live in relative or hidden homelessness than men. Also, Canada appears to be witnessing a new type of homeless person who struggles to pay for shelter and is left with little for other necessities (Laird, 2007). These people are typically classified as 'at risk' of becoming homeless (Laird, 2007).

It is extremely difficult to count how many Canadians are homeless. Murphy (2000) states that counting the homeless,

is a process full of pitfalls. If the focus is on the number who are literally homeless, that is, people who sleep in shelters provided for homeless people or in other places most of us do not consider dwellings, the task is next to impossible. Census counts in most countries assume that everyone has an address (p.10).

In 2006, the National Homelessness Initiative estimated that 150,000 Canadians were homeless, though the true number could be up to 300,000 people (Laird, 2007). The Common Occurrence project (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002), which included a large scale survey of Toronto women who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, states that, “[t]he full extent of women’s homelessness is severely underestimated because of a failure to understand the continuum of women’s homelessness” (p.4). Thus, the extent of both women’s poverty and homelessness is not always recognized. This lack of recognition may in turn limit program and assistance choices for these particularly disadvantaged groups of women.

As noted previously, women are more likely to live in poverty than men. However, further analysis of the statistics on poverty show that women are also more likely to experience deep poverty. As the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2004) states, “women continue to be among the poorest of the poor” (p.12). Further, according to the FAFIA (2008), “even when women’s poverty rate is at its lowest, one woman in eight is living below the poverty line in one of the wealthiest countries in the world” (p.10). Unattached women and single mothers account for a large amount of the discrepancy between women and men’s poverty (National Council of Welfare, 2006c). Canada ranked number four on the United Nation’s Human Development Index in 2007/2008 (United Nations Development Program, 2008). However, it is astonishing that approximately one in seven, or 2.4 million Canadian women still live in poverty (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2008).

Not only are women more likely to live in poverty, but the causes of female poverty are different from the causes of male poverty. Specifically, women's poverty is closely associated with the gendered wage gap, issues of intersectionality, and issues associated with motherhood. Sarvasy and Van Allen (1984) discuss poverty as an issue of gender because men and women live in poverty for very different reasons.

The Wage Gap and Women's Work

As mentioned earlier, the wage gap between men and women has been studied as a contributor to women's poverty. Patriarchal structures in production, paid work, and the state (Walby, 1989) affect the wage gap and deliberate or not, contribute to women's poverty. The gendered wage gap is not only a Canadian phenomenon. The International Trade Union Confederation (2008) found that women across sixty-three countries made an average of sixteen percent less than men. This gap is even larger in Canada. In 2005, "women working full-time for the full year earned an average of \$39,200, or 70.5% as much as comparable men who earned an average of \$55,700" (Canadian Labour Congress, 2008, p.1). The Canadian Labour Congress (2008) states that: "The gender gap in Canada is the fifth greatest in the advanced industrial (OECD) countries and even bigger than in the US" (p.1)

According to a report by Canadian Association of Social Workers (2004), women continue to live in poverty because they are either paid low wages or no wages for their work. The report states that: "The expectation that women will quit paid work or work part-time to provide care for children or others in the family has a direct impact on lifelong earnings as well as women's eligibility for government transfer payments including pensions and employment insurance" (p.18). Also, the type of work that women are employed in affects their low wages. Henderson et al. (1996) state that: "In every country in every region of the world, some jobs

are specifically defined as 'women's work'. They add that, "[a]lthough varied, jobs generally defined as women's work carry low pay, low status, and little security" (p.7). Raheim and Bolden (1995) refer to traditional women's jobs as 'pink collar' jobs. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (2004) states that: "Seventy percent of women are concentrated in female dominated sectors such as health, teaching, sales and services which pay less than sectors in which men are concentrated" (p.18). Mosher et al. (2004) found that workfare, or working for pay assisted by the welfare system, did little to help the women's financial status because of the types of employment offered. According to these researchers, there is a pressing need for well paying, real jobs for women, which are not provided through workfare programs.

Walby's (1989) conceptualization of patriarchal relations in paid work is evident in the wage gap and has become normalized in Canadian society over time. 'Women's work' is undervalued and consequently underpaid, and functions to keep women in a submissive economic position. This is not to suggest that women's work is deliberately and intentionally undervalued (i.e., that a group of men sitting around a table decide that women should be oppressed by their work). However, dominant discourses reflect and normalize the expectation that women will have lower wages than men, thereby devaluing women's work in Canadian society.

Poverty and Intersectionality

When examining women's poverty, it is important to recognize the multiple oppressions that women may face in their lives. As previously discussed, socialist feminists argue that gender oppression can be enhanced by other oppressions such as those associated with race, ethnicity, and class. Race plays a strong role in determining a woman's risk for poverty. For example, the poverty rate for Canadian Aboriginal women is particularly high

(FAFIA, 2008). The poor housing, lack of access to health care, violence, and substandard living conditions that Canadian Aboriginal women face are shocking given our standard of living in this country. Also, as previously noted, there are a disproportionate number of women of colour and foreign-born Canadian women living in poverty (FAFIA, 2008). The FAFIA states that: “Canada often seems unwilling to admit that there is a problem of racism, and has made no aggressive efforts to counteract it” (p.12). Further, age can affect gender oppression. For example, the poverty gap between men and women is greater for seniors than any other age group (National Council of Welfare, 2006b). In 2003, 19.1 percent of women 65 years of age and older lived in poverty, compared to 10.2 percent of senior men (National Council of Welfare, 2006b).

Mosher et al. (2004) found that many immigrant and refugee women experience multiple oppressions through the intersection of language, the risk of deportation, the additional costs of immigration, a lack of recognition for their qualifications, and extreme isolation. A large number of immigrant women do not have any employment income (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2004). Further, thirty-eight percent of visible minority women are without employment income (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2004). Aboriginal women, women with disabilities, and rural women also deal with several oppressions related to factors such as gender, race and ethnicity, class, and geography (Mosher et al., 2004). Statistically, these women are at an increased risk of living in poverty. Thus, it is important for research on women’s poverty to be conducted with sensitivity towards issues of multiple oppressions that women may face.

Immigrant women often have few opportunities for employment in their field, even though eighteen percent have a university degree (Statistics Canada, 2006c). In fact, three out

of five immigrant women must work in a different field after moving to Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006a). Transferability of foreign education and work experience is a major problem for many immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2006a). Man's (2004) study of Chinese immigrant women highlights the 'deskilling' of women with strong educational and employment backgrounds by Canadian employers. This 'deskilling' results from a lack of recognition for foreign accreditation, racialized policies and practices and a perpetual demand for Canadian work experience (Man, 2004). Further, many immigrant women can only find part-time work (Statistics Canada, 2006c). Six months after their arrival, only 32 percent of immigrant women (sponsored to come here by family members who are employed) had found employment, compared to 54 percent of men (Statistics Canada, 2006a). Many of these women (and their families) must initially receive welfare to survive and settle in their new country. Further, their income is astonishingly low. In 2000, women who had immigrated to Canada over the previous ten years made an average annual income of \$16,700 (Statistics Canada, 2006c), well below the poverty line.

Poverty and Motherhood

Perhaps the most saddening facts about women's poverty are those related to single mothers. Christopher, England, Smeeding and Phillips (2002) found that single-mother families have higher poverty rates than other families across seven Western nations. Their results show that being a single mother increases one's likelihood of living in poverty (Christopher et al., 2002).

Further, as statistics have shown, over fifty percent of lone-parent families headed by mothers are poor (CRIAOW, 2005). Thus, not only are women suffering from poverty, but their children are suffering as well. Statistics Canada (2007) states that,

In 2005, 320,000 children, just under one-half of all the children in low-income families, lived in female lone-parent families. The low-income rate of children in female lone-parent families was more than four times higher than that of children living in two-parent families.

In 2001, as a result of poverty, sixty percent of single mothers relied on welfare at some point during the year (CRIAW, 2005). This suggests a larger systemic problem that needs to be addressed in Canadian society. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (2004) found that the average income of single mothers was seventy-one percent of the income of single fathers. Further, the median market income of single mothers in 2005 was \$22,200, unchanged from 2004 (Statistics Canada, 2007). This may reflect discrimination towards mothers in the workplace. It may also be indicative of societal expectations of mothers (i.e., that they should be in the home) and the devaluation of women's household labour. As previously suggested, this points to the family as another structure of oppression.

Domestic Violence

Male violence is one of the six structures of patriarchy discussed by Walby (1989) that serve to dominate, oppress, and exploit women. Henderson et al. (1996) state that, "domestic violence stems from the fact that in most countries women are considered to be men's property, and girls are less valued than boys" (p.7). The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics (2005) estimates that 653,000, or seven percent of Canadian women, experienced spousal abuse by a current or former partner between 1999 and 2004. Some women who experience ongoing spousal abuse are able to leave their relationship. A Statistics Canada (2005) one-day snapshot taken on April 14, 2004 revealed 6,109 women and children staying at 332 shelters across Canada. Of this, about 5,000, or three-quarters of the women, had fled an abusive relationship (Statistics Canada, 2005).

When women are living in poverty as a result of leaving abusive homes in a desperate act of self-protection, they often face additional problems. Many abused women do not have the financial and emotional support needed to start over right away. Some abused women become so isolated that they have no employment opportunities or social network. For some of these women, leaving their abuser can lead to homelessness (Neal, 2004). The FAFIA (2008) states that, “[m]inimum wage and social assistance are so low that women often have to choose between poverty and remaining in a violent relationship” (p.29). The Government of Canada (2007) recognizes these women as living in a state of relative, concealed or hidden homelessness, as they do not have access to a safe living environment.

3. Living with Poverty

In this section, some of the issues and barriers of living with poverty are discussed to help understand the kinds of problems that women living in poverty face in their everyday lives. This section demonstrates the importance of understanding the kinds of supports that women living in poverty need in all areas of their lives, and not just in issues related to employment.

(un)Employment Issues

Lack of employment is often seen to be the primary cause of poverty. Also, finding paid work is one of the main issues facing women living in poverty, particularly for women who have one or more barriers to employment. Unemployment rates are higher for some groups of women. Though seven percent of all Canadian women are unemployed, the rate for Aboriginal women is seventeen percent (FAFIA, 2008). In addition, many immigrant women are unemployed (Statistics Canada, 2006a). Women with disabilities also have higher rates of unemployment than non-disabled women (FAFIA, 2008). Further, Raheim and Bolden (1995)

state that: “The economic status of these women is eroded not only by the high unemployment rates they experience but by the likelihood that if they find work, it will probably be part-time and for low wages” (p.139).

Women’s unemployment can be caused by many factors, such as a lack of child care and transportation, lack of experience and training, or health issues. In addition, many women living in poverty face problems when looking for employment. Some women, particularly young women, may not possess the necessary educational qualifications to obtain employment (Burman, 1988). Burman (1988) points out that even to wash dishes in a restaurant, many employers require a grade twelve education. As more people are attending university in Canada than in the past, we can assume that more employers are demanding additional education requirements.

The Common Occurrence Project (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002) found that many women who were experiencing homelessness desired some kind of employment or pre-employment training, but faced barriers to success. Some barriers discussed in this report were a lack of education or training, language, mental health concerns or addictions, a lack of safe housing and lack of childcare (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002). Also, Burman (1988) found that many young people lack the necessary experience to obtain well-paying, secure jobs. Employers look for experienced candidates, so it can seem an almost impossible task to find an employer who is willing to take a risk on someone with little or no experience. Further, a youthful appearance can be another barrier to young people’s employment (Burman, 1988), perhaps particularly for young women living in poverty, who may not be able to afford the professional clothing required to obtain a job. Many women living in poverty suffer from low self-esteem (CRIAW, 2005) and may not even realize that their appearance is a detriment to

finding employment. These barriers to employment add to the stress of daily living on a low income. Given the high significance and need for employment, the barriers to finding a job that women living in poverty face (i.e., a lack of education, experience or professional appearance) may seem daunting. These problems may affect women in all areas of their lives, for example, by leading to feelings of helplessness and a lack of power and control.

Poverty and Motherhood

As discussed, a disproportionate number of single mothers live in poverty. Mosher et al. (2004) acknowledge that mothers who receive welfare spend a lot of their time negotiating their children's needs on a limited budget. Mothers may feel they are unable to meet all the responsibilities of caring for their children. Living on a limited budget with children is a "7-day-a-week job from which there is no vacation or relief" (CRIAW, 2005, p. 4). The damaging effect that this stress can have on women is not fully known, though the CRIAW (2005) states that, "it hurts them deeply not to be able to provide a safe, quiet, stable home, nutritious food and at least a small fraction of what their kids' classmates take for granted" (p.4). Providing the necessities for children to attend school and have adequate nutrition on a low income is a very stressful job. On top of this though, it is also difficult for mothers to explain to their children why they cannot go to birthday parties, participate in school lunches or class trips, and why they wear second hand clothes (CRIAW, 2005). To accommodate their children's needs, many mothers will sacrifice their own needs (Short, 2005; Mosher et al., 2004).

Society often blames poor people for their circumstances, and mothers are no exception. Connolly (2000) outlines how discourse dichotomizes good and bad mothers. Motherhood is associated with nurture, care and sacrifice but mothers experiencing poverty

struggle to provide for their children, and may be seen as unworthy or abnormal (Connolly, 2000). Connolly (2000) states that,

The romanticization of the 'good mother' is so pervasive that it impacts women in all social strata- for example, women who work and leave their children in the care of others; or women who cannot afford or find adequate housing for their children; or women whose lives are so full of pain, violence, sickness, and/or poverty that their children are not at its center (p.41).

This romanticization of motherhood has been termed 'intensive motherhood', and affects all women in different ways (Hays, 1996). Intensive motherhood is an ideology that stresses the importance of mothers putting all their time, energy and resources into child rearing and that women's natural qualities make this process flawless (Hays, 1996). Any mother who deviates from this ideology risks being seen as a bad mother. Connolly (2000) explains that when mothers differ from the norm, these deviations are seen as individual failures, without taking into account the greater dynamics contributing to the situation (i.e., race, class and gender). The CRIAW (2005) explains that many people internalize this blame, and in particular, single mothers may come to see themselves as 'bad' or 'unfit'. Connolly (2000) found that romantic notions of motherhood (i.e., an endless supply of nurture and sacrifice) bind women who simply cannot conform. Further, mothers who experience periods of homelessness face the constant worry of their children being taken away (Scott, 2007). Societal models of what constitutes a 'good mother' often work against mothers living in poverty.

Poverty has many effects on motherhood. However, motherhood also has a powerful effect on how poverty is experienced, by greatly multiplying the difficulties and barriers that these women face in their lives. This perhaps makes it much more difficult to find a way out of poverty.

Employment and Childcare

Many single mothers face the decision of whether to stay home to care for their children or seek employment. However, when single mothers choose to stay home to care for their children, their labour is not recognized and they do not receive any income. On the other hand, if single mothers choose to seek employment, they must find childcare for their children. Even when mothers can afford childcare, daycare centres often do not cater to people who are employed in “precarious work” such as part-time, temporary positions, self-employment or more than one job (CRIAW, 2005). Further, childcare centres do not help women who work on-call, evenings or weekends. More women than men are involved in precarious work (CRIAW, 2005). Statistics Canada (2002) found that 26 percent of Canadian women aged 18 to 54 were employed in non-regular shift work in 2000-2001. Government childcare support that meets women’s needs is required to help low income, single mothers out of poverty. Lochhead and Scott (2000) state that: “Providing child care subsidies to low-income mothers... acknowledges the real barriers women face stemming from their caring responsibilities” (p.47). Without accessible, affordable and accommodating childcare support, many single-parent Canadian women will continue to live in poverty. Thus, a lack of childcare exacerbates many of the difficulties associated with employment and motherhood for women living in poverty.

Domestic Violence and the Welfare System

As previously noted, many women who leave abusive relationships live in poverty or become homeless. Being abused not only increases the chances of poverty, though, but also affects women’s experiences with poverty. Many women are required to pursue their abusive partners for child support as a pre-condition for welfare eligibility, even though this puts them physical danger (Mosher et al., 2004). Temporary waivers are available so women are not

required to pursue their abuser, but often women do not know about this waiver or about waiver extensions (Mosher et al., 2004). Also, there is no accepted definition of domestic violence used by the welfare system (Mosher et al., 2004). Thus, arbitrary factors may be used to decide which women are exempt from pursuing their former partner. This puts the women in a very vulnerable situation. Mosher et al. (2004) state that, “without change [to the welfare system], women will continue to return to abusive relationships, women will not be safe, and women will not be equal citizens” (p.10). This is one of the systemic problems that beset the current welfare system, and may perpetuate abuse and dependency on abusive partners.

Women who experience domestic violence often face mental health challenges. Cascardi and O’Leary (1992) found that many women who had sought therapeutic assistance for domestic abuse were also experiencing severe depression. Most of the women in Mosher et al.’s (2004) study were also experiencing depression as well as low self-esteem as a result of being abused. These psychological issues can make it even more difficult for abused women to get out of poverty.

There are two social assistance programs in Ontario. They are the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) and Ontario Works (OW). In Mosher et al.’s (2004) study examining the Ontario welfare system, “[w]omen spoke powerfully and repeatedly about their struggles on welfare to be excellent mothers, good workers, and honest women” (p.31). As previously discussed, much of the mother’s time is spent making sure their children are well cared for, as welfare support cannot provide enough financial security to make ends meet (Mosher et al., 2004). The welfare system limits mother’s choices. As a result, many mothers feel the quality of their parenting is always under suspicion (Mosher et al., 2004). The welfare system creates

'bad mothers' from women who struggle to provide for themselves and their children on a limited income.

Having a 'spouse in the house' may mean that some women are ineligible for welfare support (Mosher et al., 2004). Here again we can draw links to a social system that perpetuates patriarchy, as the man is expected to financially support the woman. Mosher et al. (2004) discuss how welfare system reforms over the past decade have given men more power and left some women feeling helpless. These reforms have increased rather than reduced women's financial independence, and thus have perpetuated the cycle of poverty for women.

As a result of being a welfare recipient, many women feel a loss of control over their lives and feel that others see them as untrustworthy, adding to the amount of stress they already face (Mosher et al., 2004). Mosher et al. (2004) demonstrate how the Ontario welfare system exacerbates women's problems, rather than offering a helping hand to aid them out of poverty.

Health, Illness and Disability

Poor health can lead to poverty for some women. Also, living in poverty can negatively affect women's health. The CRIAW (2005) report that some of the health impacts of poverty on women are, "acute and chronic ill health, susceptibility to infectious and other disease, increased risk of heart disease, arthritis, stomach ulcers, migraines, clinical depression, stress, breakdown, vulnerability to mental illness, and self destructive coping behaviours" (p.5). Forty percent of the respondents of the Street Health Report rated their health as fair or poor (Khandor & Mason, 2007). The National Council of Welfare (2006b) states that: "There is ample evidence that poverty... results in human misery... those who live in poverty are more likely to experience poor health and well-being" (p.137).

An impoverished lifestyle is often accompanied by high levels of stress, which degrade a person's emotional, psychological and physical self. The Street Health Report (Khandor & Mason, 2007) found that 44 percent of participants felt quite a bit or extremely stressed on most days. As previously indicated, this may be a particularly significant problem for single mothers. Also, women's living conditions may contribute to their stress. One woman from the Common Occurrence project (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002) stated: "I switched around because the house before was not warm, leaking roof, mice and not big. It was very hard because I never knew if I would find something better" (p.4). Often, women internalize blame for their circumstances and may turn to self-destructive behaviours including smoking or alcohol abuse (CRIAW, 2005), which can lead to further health concerns. Women living in poverty face many health issues which are further exacerbated by stress, and this makes everyday life and dealing with employment issues an even more difficult task.

Psychological and Emotional Well-Being

The experience of poverty effects people's livelihood in different ways. The CRIAW report (2005) states that: "Being poor erodes the spirit... It lowers self-esteem, so it becomes even more difficult to get out of poverty" (p.4). Ninety-three percent of the participants of the Common Occurrence project reported emotional and mental health problems as a result of their living situations (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group. 2002).

In Burman's (1988) study, it was found that many people become disconnected from themselves as a result of unemployment. One person stated: "I feel like I no longer have a life... I'm a participant in a script that someone else has taken over" (Burman, 1988, p.5). This sense of losing control of one's life is similar to the way women felt in Mosher et al.'s (2004) study. Further, in Burman's (1988) study, it was found that unemployed women, in particular,

denied themselves the things they had previously enjoyed, and many neglected their needs. Specifically, women who had children sacrificed their own well-being for their children's (Burman, 1988; see also Short, 2005). One woman commented, "I had to come down a lot, the way I dress, the way I spend money on... stupid things like perfume... which also in turn makes you feel better about yourself" (Burman, 1988, p.132). Through this self-denial, some women also noticed that they had come to blame themselves for their unemployment and resulting poverty; they saw themselves unworthy of care (Burman, 1988). Burman (1996) found that, "[t]he poor suffer from low group self-respect, deriving from internalized stigma" (p.21). This finding was echoed in Mosher et al.'s (2004) study, in which women came to blame themselves for their poverty and lost their self-worth. Thus, it is not only physical health, but also emotional well-being and psychological health which are negatively affected by poverty.

Community, Social Exclusion, and Social Support

The definition of community has been widely debated in many different academic departments. What factors, as well as who constitutes a community, are not generally agreed upon. Haworth's (1963) definition of community states that,

In any genuine community there are shared values: the members are united through the fact that they fix on some object as pre-eminently valuable. And there is a joint effort, involving all members of community, by which they give overt expression to their mutual regard for that object (p.86).

Additionally, communities can be viewed as physical spaces or as communities of purpose, which share an appreciation for a person, place or thing (Pedlar & Haworth, 2006). While this definition of community focuses on inclusion, it is also important to consider the people who are excluded from communities as well. The effects of being excluded from a community can be very harmful to a person's psychological well-being. Poverty often limits a person's choices

and may lead to social exclusion from a community. The Public Health Agency of Canada (2004) states that social exclusion,

describes the structures and dynamic processes of inequality among groups in society. Social exclusion refers to the inability of certain groups or individuals to participate fully in Canadian life due to structural inequalities in access to social, economic, political and cultural resources. These inequalities arise out of oppression related to race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, immigrant status and religion (p.1).

According to the Public Health Agency of Canada (2004), there are four aspects of social exclusion: exclusion from civil society, exclusion from social goods, exclusion from social production, and economic exclusion. Women living in poverty may face exclusion in all four of these areas. For example, many women living in poverty are denied opportunities to meaningfully contribute to social production because they have barriers to employment. Further, women living in poverty face economic exclusion and lack a 'normal' livelihood since they need to function on a limited budget. Kleinman (2000) states that social exclusion is, "about prospects and networks and life-chances. It's a very modern problem, and more harmful to the individual, more damaging to self-esteem for society as a whole, more likely to be passed down from generation to generation, than material poverty" (p.6). Many people living in poverty experience social isolation, as our communities marginalize those who are deemed undesirable.

Social exclusion also involves a lack of access to resources that are known to enhance health, e.g., adequate income, social supports, educational attainment, employment supports, housing, safe living environments, food and nutrition (Arai & Burke, 2007). The more access an individual has to these resources, the healthier they are (Arai & Burke, 2007). When people are denied access to health resources, both individuals and communities are impacted (Arai & Burke, 2007). This argument supports the National Council of Welfare's (2006b) statement on

the individual, community and societal consequences of poverty, included in the introduction of this paper.

People living in poverty may also experience isolation from their families. Mitchell's (2008) study found that men using the services of an emergency shelter in Ottawa had little or no contact with family members. Also, many of these men were never married, or had gone through a separation or divorce (Mitchell, 2008). Pippert's (2007) study with homeless men produced similar results. There is no literature which specifically looks at women's contact with family, but they, too, may be isolated from their relatives.

Many people living in poverty, whether or not they are emotionally isolated, may also become physically isolated because they lack transportation or money to fully participate in society (Burman, 1996). Burman (1988) found that most of the unemployed people in his study were socializing less with others than when they were employed, and that this was particularly true for those who were living in poverty. Further, 37 percent of respondents in Toronto's Street Health Report (Khandor & Mason, 2007) said they had no one to help them during an emotional crisis, and 39 percent reported feeling very lonely or remote from others. Women in Reid, Frisby and Ponick's (2002) study expressed that social isolation was their greatest health concern. Burman (1996) argues that in our highly commoditized society, a person living in poverty may feel alienated and insignificant. He states that: "She may not feel fully visible, or feel that she belongs" (Burman, 1996, p.17). However, Downing-Orr (1996) found that there was a clear sense of community and support formed among youth living in poverty. She states: "A shared sense of belonging and acceptance developed based on empathy and a 'we're all in the same boat' philosophy" (Downing-Orr, 1996, p.42). Thus it is possible that a sense of

community may also occur for groups of women living in poverty, and perhaps this sense of community can be fostered through programming.

Women and Leisure

Leisure is another aspect of everyday life that is largely neglected in programs for women living in poverty. Women living in poverty face greatly reduced choices in many areas of their lives. Leisure may be one area of their lives that they can control and that has the potential to give them a sense of freedom and meaningfulness. Also, being in control of leisure may give women the opportunity to resist oppression (Shaw, 2001). Henderson et al. (1996) discuss how women can gain satisfaction and enjoyment from leisure activities, but that a sense of control in at least one part of their lives may be the most important benefit of leisure.

Addressing women's leisure from a feminist perspective is, "a means for addressing social change that may result in greater opportunities for women to experience leisure" (Henderson et al., 1996, p.94). Henderson et al. (1996) discuss several parallels between feminism and Western society's concept of leisure. Freedom and choice are concepts that are central to both feminism and leisure (Henderson et al., 1996). Further, the goals of both feminism and leisure are to encourage, not limit, choice (Henderson et al., 1996). Another parallel is that,

Leisure has been largely an androcentric concept just as society has been largely patriarchal. Both feminism and leisure focus on a revolt against domination. Both are devalued by people in power. Both offer a transformational perspective with new goals for social change (Henderson et al, 1996, p.94).

Finally, leisure and feminism both involve resistance that can lead to empowerment (Shaw, 2001). Both feminist and leisure activities can be linked to social change related to gender and women's oppression (Henderson et al., 1996).

Research suggests that many unemployed people stop pursuing activities they once enjoyed as a consequence of lost self-worth and entitlement (Burman, 1988). In lieu of healthy activity, many of the unemployed people in Burman's (1988) study simply "killed time" by sleeping, watching television, drinking alcohol or doing nothing because they could not afford or felt too guilty to pursue meaningful activities. Further, these time killing activities were not described as freely chosen, but as activities that 'happened' without control. One participant stated, "It's kind of a break from reality" (Burman, 1988, p.159).

Women living in poverty may face similar barriers to leisure. The lack of freedom that they feel may reflect a, "freedom gap that may result in a leisure gap" (Henderson et al., 1996, p.106). Many women give up their personal leisure to care for others when they have children. This is likely a result of traditional family ideology and the belief that women are primarily responsible for housework and childcare (Henderson et al., 1996). In particular, single mothers who are living in poverty may not have any personal leisure time as they need to spend so much time managing the family and income. Further, unemployed mothers may feel guilty for taking personal time, and thus, they give up activities they enjoy to care for their family. Thus, a person's financial situation can greatly affect not only their access to leisure opportunities, but also their sense of entitlement to leisure.

On the other hand, there are ways in which leisure can be a positive experience for women living in poverty, through taking time for the self, for connections, and for autonomous action (Henderson et al., 1996). Taking time for the self may be extremely important when looking at women's leisure lives. Similarly, many women value social connections and may also value leisure time with others.

Further, women's health may improve through leisure (Henderson et al., 1996). Physical activity can play a role in preventing cardiovascular disease, cancer, respiratory and circulatory diseases, and helps women maintain strength and flexibility (Henderson et al., 1996). Given what we know about the health problems that women living in poverty face, physically active leisure could help in the prevention of health problems and lead to a higher level of overall health. Also, leisure participation can contribute to improving mental and emotional health (Henderson et al, 1996). It may also help to provide a sense of personal identity, self-control and satisfaction.

Klitzing's (2003; 2004) studies have examined the role of leisure for women living in homeless shelters. Her research suggests that the concept of 'coping' may be particularly relevant when looking at leisure in the lives of women experiencing poverty. Coping implies the, "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of a person" (Hood & Carruthers, 2002, p.139). It is also associated with health, energy, a positive belief system (including hope and self-esteem), problem solving, social skills, social support, and material resources (Hood & Carruthers, 2002). In Klitzing's (2003) study, some of the ways the women coped were through religion, positive thinking, and being alone, and leisure activities were revealed to be particularly important. Further, Browne, Byrne, Roberts, Gafni and Whittaker's (2001) work argues that providing health and recreation opportunities to mothers living in poverty (and their children) has significant health and social benefits, and results in more exits from social assistance services. Apart from these few studies, few researchers have examined the importance of leisure for women living in poverty. However, leisure may be significant in a

number of ways, and may have the potential to enhance health, well-being and the ability to cope with the many stresses and strains of everyday life.

4. Employment Programs for Women Living in Poverty

As noted, women living in poverty face a range of very difficult issues in their everyday lives. They may face many barriers to obtaining employment. For single mothers, it is difficult to negotiate employment and childcare. The welfare system seems to only offer “handouts” and never a “hand up” to help women overcome their situations. Issues with poverty and the welfare system are exacerbated for women who have experienced domestic abuse. Further, many women living in poverty deal with physical, physiological and emotional health problems. They may lack opportunities to participate in leisure, and many feel excluded from their communities. Examining the issues that women living in poverty face, it is clear that they require a range of options and that they need to have choice over their lives in order to become financially and personally healthy.

Community programs cannot solve all the problems that women living in poverty face. However, service providers need to be aware of the range of issues that women face in order to offer successful programs.

The Common Occurrence Project report (Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002) indicates that, “[s]ervice providers and women report that the ‘system’ places a strong emphasis on women’s problems and deficits. Programs are funded based on gaps or needs, not on building women’s skills and capacities” (p.11). However, the literature review suggests that focusing on enhancing positive aspects of women’s lives (e.g., leisure and a sense of control) may also be beneficial.

Poverty and unemployment can affect all areas of a woman's life: physical, psychological, emotional, social and spiritual. It is nearly impossible to get out of poverty while remaining unemployed. Thus, it is essential to have programs in place that help people who have barriers to employment. However, it may also be important for programs to go beyond the issue of employment and take a more holistic approach to women's issues.

Stapleton (2007) suggests that programs for people living in poverty need, "to truly support the transition to self reliance at a realistic, client-centred pace" (p.7). This is particularly necessary when the welfare system does not always support the transition to self-reliance. However, this does not mean that such programs should focus only on employment skills. Rather, community programs can help women transition into employment by focusing on their holistic needs and on coping with their everyday life stresses and challenges. Lochhead and Scott (2000) state that many, "anti-poverty initiatives assume that women's needs and interests are the same as men's" (p.47). However, the causes and effects of women's poverty differ greatly from men's, and thus poverty initiatives need to be catered towards women's specific experiences.

Many women may need pre-employment support before entering the workforce due to their past experiences. The Scarborough Women's Centre provides an Economic Self-Sufficiency program for women who have left abusive relationships, and focuses on overcoming emotional barriers to employment and financial independence before the women enter into job placements (Scarborough Women's Centre, 2008). Similarly, the Toronto organization, Opportunity for Advancement (OFA, 2009), provides bridging support for women living in poverty to gain knowledge and skills for employment. However, the reviewed literature seems to suggest that 'pre-employment' may be a narrow conceptualization for

women living in poverty, and that addressing women's everyday life experiences and challenges, and the potential for leisure and positive life experiences may be helpful as well.

This literature review highlighted the current trends in women's poverty in Canada. The staggering number of women living in poverty, especially unattached women, single mothers, and immigrant women, requires action. Connolly (2000) says that we cannot think of women's experiences with poverty through narrow categories such as unemployment, childcare, the welfare system and health. Rather, these, "diverse and interconnected factors enter, with variable intensity, timing, and effect" into women's lives (Connolly, 2000, p.79). Women living in poverty face many barriers and the effectiveness of such programs to increase their economic opportunities will depend on the extent to which they meet women's many and diverse needs.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Site

The Townsville Anti-Poverty Organization (TAPO) was created in 1998 as a volunteer project to assist children living in public housing. TAPO's first project was started in March 1998, funded by the Federal Government's Youth Services Canada program. TAPO receives computer donations from the community and refurbishes them to be sent to community access centres and to individuals who are in need. They also facilitate computer training sessions with various organizations and individuals. Currently, TAPO runs over 50 community access centres in the City of Townsville. TAPO's mission statement is:

To provide the disadvantaged (low-income men and women, Aboriginals, single parents, at-risk youth, the unemployed, recent immigrants) with the means to realize their potential and escape poverty through access to technology, personal-development and job-preparation programs and assistance to non-profit organizations working to help them fulfill their needs. TAPO is also committed to serving the francophone population by providing bilingual programs and services. By working in partnership with other community groups, all levels of government and the business community, TAPO is an organization dedicated to helping disadvantaged members of the community help themselves.

TAPO has been running programs specifically for women since 2001. Their website states, "We are a feminist organization from our staff to our board to our participants!"

The Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) program was started by Joyelle Rousseau in 2001. It is funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada (HRSDC), also referred to as Service Canada, through the Skills Link program. This government support allows participants to be paid minimum wage over the course of the six month program. Since the program is funded by the government, the women must meet specific criteria to be considered eligible. They must be eligible to work in Canada, not be working or in school, and they must not have received Employment Insurance (EI) benefits within the previous three

years (or five years for EI Maternity Leave benefits). Women aged eighteen to thirty are recruited to apply through various community partners. The program is bilingual and often switches between English and French. The program is in high demand. On average, about 40-50 women are interviewed for each group, but only twelve are selected to participate. The women are selected on a number of indicators, but most importantly on their level of commitment to the program and their need to overcome barriers to employment. All of the women selected for the WOW program have experienced poverty, though in many different ways. The women are encouraged to treat the program as a personal journey of self-discovery and growth. Some of the women the program supports are single mothers, recent immigrants to Canada, Aboriginals, and women who have overcome homelessness, addictions, or abusive relationships. The program is built on foundations of trust and respect for all participants. The objective of the WOW program is,

to provide twelve (12) female youth with an opportunity to develop marketable work skills. The program will assist 12 youth with barriers to employment to acquire basic and advanced employment skills through program support and work experience with community-based and the private sphere.

The program purposely uses the term ‘youth’ when referring to the participants. The rationale for this is that the women are still young and able to change the direction of their lives.

During the first four weeks of the program, the women prepare for employment by boosting their personal, professional and social skills. They meet each week, Monday to Friday, in a classroom at the Community Centre where TAPO is located. TAPO (2008) states that during this time, “WOW participants will be engaging in skill development assessments for primary office skills, customer service skills, computer skills, social skills, focusing on self confidence, taking instructions, promptness and application to tasks”. Also, the women work on personal issues and barriers holding them back from employment, such as self-care and

recovery from abuse, as discussed in the literature review. Joyelle, as the program leader, caters the program to women's holistic needs: mental, emotional, spiritual and physical. On Friday mornings the women take yoga classes and meditate. Also, program participants have the opportunity to build their confidence and self-esteem through public speaking and sharing with the group. The women have many opportunities to share presentations on topics that they find personally meaningful. Due to the bilingual demands in Townsville, the women take French or English classes depending on their needs. During the pre-employment training, the women explore various employment directions through personal and group exercises. Joyelle searches TAPO's current partnerships for placement opportunities or will create new partnerships to match each woman's desires.

After the women are placed with an employer, they gain direct work experience for the remaining twenty weeks of the program. During this time the women will also return to TAPO once a week for further career and personal development workshops.

Unfortunately, some women find that they are not able to commit to such intense personal development or feel that their barriers are too difficult to overcome. For these reasons, on average, one woman drops out of each group. This usually happens within the first few months of the program.

Participants

Eight women were interviewed who had successfully completed the WOW program. All eleven women who graduated from the program in March, 2009 were recruited. This can be seen as a form of purposive sampling, which "uses the judgement of an expert in selecting cases" and includes participants who are unique and knowledgeable on the area of study (Neuman, 2004, p.138). Further, theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used,

where additional participants were selected in order to fill-out the sample and developing theory. Charmaz (2006) states that: “The purpose of theoretical sampling is to obtain data to help you explicate your categories” (p.100). Mothers, immigrant women and a woman whose first language is French were recruited to add diversity to the sample and to add further richness to the developing categories and themes.

Joyelle was provided with an information letter about the study, which outlined her role as Executive Director of the organization (see Appendix A). This letter also included a signed consent form to use the name of TAPO and the WOW program at any meetings of conferences resulting from the study. Joyelle contacted the eleven women by phone and provided them with some initial information on the study. She sent the women an information letter by email with my contact information if they wished to participate in the study (see Appendix B). I already knew all of the women through my volunteer work, and Joyelle made the initial contact to avoid them feeling any pressure to participate. The women who wished to participate contacted me and I further explained the study and answered any questions they had (see Initial Contact Script, Appendix C). This also ensured that the women who chose to participate did not feel any pressure and remained completely anonymous to the organization. It was not possible to interview all of the women who graduated from the group, as many were new mothers or were going through important transitions in their lives. To complete the sample, women from another group who were just graduating were asked if they wished to participate. Women who expressed interest were sent an information letter and contacted me to set up an interview time.

Many of the women from these two groups knew that I planned to conduct interviews regarding the WOW program for my graduate studies. However, I was still very specific when

discussing the procedures and requirements of the study. The women who contacted me to participate in the interviews were told about the purpose of the study. It was explained that the study would focus on their experiences in the program and the meanings they attached to these experiences. Further, the women were told that they were only being asked to participate in one interview (lasting approximately one hour), but that I would send them the transcripts for clarification before starting any analysis. The women who were willing to participate were sent consent forms, and I collected the signed forms at the time of the interview (see Appendix D). The women were sent a feedback letter thanking them for their participation after the interview was completed (see Appendix E).

Data Collection

In qualitative research, researchers assume that others' perspectives are, "meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit" (Patton, 2002, p.341). Qualitative research usually takes place in a natural setting (Cresswell, 2003). Multiple creative methods of research can be employed by the qualitative researcher (Cresswell, 2003). Little is known about the aspects to be studied, as these aspects emerge in the data collection (Cresswell, 2003). Finally, since qualitative research is interpretive, reflexivity is important so the researcher understands their position in the process (Cresswell, 2003).

Joyelle was also used as a resource to collect information and stories about the history of the WOW program. A personal, recorded interview was conducted with Joyelle. The interview was unstructured to allow her to discuss her ideas, experiences and meanings of the program. A signed consent form to record and use the interview transcript was collected. Other meetings were unplanned and informally held throughout the research process.

The other eight women participated in personal, recorded interviews. The interviews were held in a private room at the Community Centre where TAPO is located or in coffee shops. Feminist interviewers pay close attention to power dynamics during interactions (Daly, 2007). Accordingly, I tried to create an interview environment that was comfortable and flowed like normal conversation.

A semi-structured interview guide was used (see Appendix A). Interview guides are more flexible than structured interviews and allow for building on important subjects as they arise (Patton, 2002). The conversation was able to flow in a natural way; however, I also made sure that specific domains were addressed (Daly, 2007). The questions asked explored the meanings, experiences and outcomes of the WOW program in relation to the women's lives. To begin, I asked the women to tell me some basic information about their lives. Then, more specifically, I inquired about how they came to be involved with the WOW program. We discussed their feelings and perceptions on the activities they participated in. I also asked about the role of the group for the women and the group dynamics. Moreover, the women told me about the experiences they had while in the program and how they felt about these experiences. Further, I was interested in learning about how the program had affected the women's lives as well as how the program could better serve other women in the future. Finally, the women talked about any endeavours they were currently undertaking. All of these domains were reflected in the interview guide (see Appendix F). Other topics that were brought up during the interviews (e.g., issues with partners, experiences with the welfare system, difficulties with transportation) were probed as relevant. These interviews were an important tool used to explore the role of the WOW program in the participants' lives.

During the interviews I listened for insights into how the women's feelings and experiences may have been shaped through the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity and class. I needed to be particularly sensitive to how the women's unique backgrounds affected their answers. Reflective journaling was important in this stage to record my thoughts on the interviews and any insights into emerging concepts and explanations. Reflective journaling was used as a way to demonstrate reflexivity and work through my emotions during the research process. Further, reflective journaling was used as a way to document my experiences and insights as a volunteer with the WOW program.

My personal relationship with the women may have influenced the interview experience; however, I took every precaution to make sure the women felt completely comfortable with my role as the researcher. I made sure the women knew there were no right or wrong answers, and that I was looking for reflections on their true experiences with the program, good or bad.

After each interview was completed, the interview was transcribed verbatim. The women received a copy of their transcribed interviews and got a chance to add any additional comments or clarify ideas, adding to the reliability of the study. This added confidence in the data (Cresswell, 2003).

Data Analysis

This study used a grounded theory approach related to the role of the WOW program for women living in poverty. Patterns and themes were developed based on analysis of the interview transcripts and were supplemented by my own experience and knowledge. The use of a grounded theory approach was relevant for this study because so little is known about the outcomes of community employment programs for women or about women's responses to

different components of these programs. Also, a grounded theory approach was appropriate in this study as the aim was to explore how and why the women's experiences and meanings were associated with different types of reported outcomes. In developing patterns and themes, the researcher goes through multiple stages of data collection and focuses on refining categories and looking into the interrelationships between them (Cresswell, 2003). Constant comparison was used to reveal similarities and differences within and between the categories (Cresswell, 2003). It was hoped that the analyses would lead to a working hypothesis about the experiences, meanings and outcomes of the program that could be theorized, expanded upon, changed, or refuted as the research process progressed. This is important to note because grounded theories are inherently contradictory: they are neither tangible nor concrete (Daly, 2007). Rather, they provide a snapshot into the participant's meanings and experiences at one point in time.

Following a grounded theory approach, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously (Charmaz, 2001). The program NVivo was used to assist with the coding of categories. Throughout the analysis, analytic memoing was used to document any insights into the coding and comparison processes and the data in general (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist grounded theorists are interpretive in their memoing, and look for their own assumptions and meanings, as well as those of the participants contained within their writing (Charmaz, 2001). During all stages of analysis, consideration was given to how the women's experiences were affected by the intersection of gender, race/ethnicity and class, and within their experiences as mothers, immigrants, and so on, as appropriate. Following a social constructivist paradigm, a grounded theory approach is nonlinear. Constant comparison was used to go back and forth between data and memos as categories emerged (Strauss, 1987). Statements and incidences

were compared within interviews as well as between different interviews during all stages of data analysis as part of the constant comparison process (Charmaz, 2006).

Themes were explored that captured the women's experiences and perspectives. Initial coding was used to reveal descriptions of experiences, activities, situations, and issues, known as 'codes', used by the participants in their interviews (Charmaz, 2006). These codes closely mirrored the language used in the interviews and focused on actions rather than topics (Charmaz, 2006). Codes were created through line by line analysis (Charmaz, 2006). After this, focused coding was used to, "synthesize and explain larger segments of data" than line-by-line analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p.57). Using the transcripts in this stage of coding, my analysis and creation of central categories focused on not just what was said, but how it was said and underlying implications and meanings (Daly, 2007). Constant comparison was useful during focused coding to search across interviews for information related to that category (Charmaz, 2006). If support for the category was not found, reasons why this support was not found were explored.

Through the process of axial coding, properties of categories were developed (Charmaz, 2006). In this stage, data that had been broken down in initial and focused coding were reassembled to provide further direction for the analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The analytic memos taken throughout the analysis also assisted in the process of developing categories. Whether axial coding is helpful in the development of grounded theory has been debated (Charmaz, 2006). However, axial coding was especially useful in this study to examine the greater contexts within which the women talked about their feelings and experiences and also *how* they talked about their feelings and experiences. Finally, theoretical coding was the final step to reveal the main themes in the data, to integrate and refine the main themes, and to

explicate relationships between core categories (Charmaz, 2006). It was hoped that the main themes would help to explain the role that the WOW program plays in the lives of the participants. It was also my hope that the relationships explicated between the main themes and core categories demonstrated *how* the program came to play certain roles for the women. Confidence in the results was further enhanced by carefully reviewing negative data or cases that seemed inconsistent (Cresswell, 2003). These cases were particularly valuable for pointing to program improvements in the future. They were also incorporated into the theme development and the final writing, rather than ignored as anomalies.

This study, though emphasizing similarities in the outcomes of the WOW program, does not ignore the complexity and variation in the lives of the participants and women who experience poverty in general. The sensitizing concepts guiding this study, discussed in the literature review, were particularly important in terms of accounting for issues of diversity among the women who participated in my study.

Researcher's Role

I have been volunteering with the WOW program since July, 2008. Since then, I have been working closely with Joyelle to advertise, interview and select participants, help the women find placements, and plan the graduations. I have listened to touching speeches about how WOW has helped the participants in many ways and have witnessed how the program is in high demand among women in the community. I believe that the program has tremendous potential to help women living in poverty to overcome barriers in their lives. Thus, I was interested in learning more about how the experiences within the program help women, and the various ways in which it has affected the women's lives. I accomplished this objective by interviewing women that had recently completed the program. These are women whom I had

worked with through my volunteer position. Though I am invested in the program, I was still interested in learning about the limitations of the program and providing suggestions to better both the WOW program and other programs in the future.

I believe that knowledge is subjective. Daly (2007) states that, “According to this position, there can be no separation between the knower and the known because all knowledge is constructed through a meaning making process in the mind of the knower” (p.23). Further, I accept the knowledge claims of social constructivism; that is, that the researchers’ meanings are formed through group interaction and norms and that researchers position themselves to acknowledge their own meanings in presenting findings (Cresswell, 2003). The researcher’s role is a facilitator or orchestrator of the inquiry, and close, personal interactions must occur between the participants and researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher can also be looked at as a ‘passionate participant’ in the research process (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Thus, I saw my role as a volunteer as an opportunity to develop close relationships with the women as I learned about their experiences and lives.

During data analysis, the social constructivist researcher makes sense of and interprets the data to inductively develop grounded theory or patterns of meanings (Cresswell, 2003). The researcher reconstructs the many voices of the participants as well as their own thought constructions in the process (Palys, 1997). As a volunteer, I was able to analyze the participants’ as well as my own experiences with the WOW program. My experiences and reflections were brought in throughout the analysis as appropriate.

There were some ethical issues that arose during this study that were associated with my position as a volunteer and interviewer/researcher. Daly (2007) reminds us that we need to be reflexive in our relationships with research participants. When I am volunteering, I am

required to support the women in a compassionate and caring manner. I also used these same qualities during the interviews to make the women feel comfortable with the research process. However, as an interviewer, I needed to actively listen and probe for further information while maintaining a supportive and comforting stance. This was a delicate balance but one that I believe I achieved through constant reflexivity and scrutinizing the research process.

My exit as a researcher and volunteer was also an important ethical consideration in this study. With the development of trust and rapport, it was important that the participants of the WOW program did not feel abandoned after my research was finished. My contact with the women who participated has continued, as appropriate, after the research was completed to maintain a level of trust and rapport. Further, recognizing both TAPO and the participants' investment in my research, participants will be encouraged to attend any meetings or conferences held as a result of the research and take ownership of the research at such events. If they wish, they can obtain a copy of the final report and use it for their own purposes. I am grateful for the support and opportunities provided to me by the WOW program. Thus, I am dedicated to using the research to benefit the program in any way I can.

In qualitative research, and perhaps even more so in studies where the researcher becomes deeply involved with the participants, exercising reflexivity throughout the research process is absolutely essential. This position is consistent with many of the principles supporting a social constructivist framework. Dupuis (1999) argues that we are personally involved in our research from the moment we pick a topic that we are passionate about. Being reflexive stresses the importance of self-awareness, having a political and cultural consciousness, and ownership of perspective (Patton, 2002). These highly personal aspects played a big role in my research. Patton (2002) defines reflexivity as, "a willingness to

consider how who one is affects what one is able to observe, hear, and understand in the field as an observer” (p.299). My own feelings and perceptions played a strong role throughout the research process. Thus, the final product that I have created is unique, and another researcher may come up with a completely different end product.

Reflexivity is built into qualitative research through scrutinizing both the research process and the ways in which knowledge is constructed (Charmaz, 2001). Reflexivity was especially important in this study to account for the relationships that grew between me and the women. I have not dissociated myself from the participants of this study. As a volunteer, I have shared laughter and tears with these women. Dupuis (1999) explains that emotions are embedded in qualitative research, particularly when the researcher spends a great deal of time with the participants. She goes on to describe how the emotions she dealt with during her research were very similar to those of her participants (Dupuis, 1999). For this reason, reflective journaling was particularly important to account for my emotions during the study. These emotions and journal entries were used as appropriate during the theory development stage as they provided valuable insight into the overall experience of the WOW program.

Ethical Considerations

There were several ethical considerations that needed to be taken into account for this study. Informed consent was one consideration. Consent forms outlined the voluntary nature of participation, allowing participants to withdraw from the research at any time. The purpose and procedures of the study were also outlined. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions at any time. The participants also had a chance to read over their transcripts. Some participants wished to have information removed from their transcript, which was done. The contact information of the University of Waterloo Ethics Office was also provided on the

consent form. Strict confidentiality was ensured and outlined in the consent form. Also, pseudonyms were used in the transcribed interviews to further protect the participants' confidentiality. Finally, the consent forms required the women's signatures to indicate their understanding of the process.

Another ethical issue pertaining to research with sensitive populations is the potential to disempower an already marginalized group (Cresswell, 2003). A researcher must be sensitive to power relations when studying marginalized groups (Neuman, 2004). This research study intended to empower and not disempower the participants through their inclusion in the research process and through the trust and rapport developed with the researcher. Also, in order to avoid any unnecessary stress, participants were able to request turning off the recorder during certain moments of the interview. Participants were also able to opt out of a recorded interview, though none requested to do so. Every effort was made to ensure the women were comfortable with the research. Further, a reflexive researcher working with marginalized groups needs to consider their own characteristics such as gender, race/ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and disability (Daly, 2007). During the interviews, I needed to be highly sensitive to my own power and privileges, and paid close attention to how this may have affected the data collection. Daly (2007) recommends reflecting on moments where we have become highly aware of our positioning in the social world (i.e., perhaps for myself as a young woman who has recently been diagnosed with a disability) to develop a greater understanding of how these forces affect our perspectives.

The research that I undertook with the WOW program was discussed in this section. Through interviews, it was my intention to develop core themes related to the meanings, experiences and outcomes of the WOW program. Socialist feminism's focus on

intersectionality was used to guide data collection and analysis. From the beginning, I hoped that this research would fill an important gap in the literature on women's employment programs and more broadly, programs for women living in poverty. If we are better able to understand the outcomes of programs such as WOW, we will be able to meet women's needs in a more effective manner as well as implement similar programs in Canada based on knowledge of what works. Women's poverty is not a new phenomenon and can only be dealt with through an understanding of women's needs and women-centered program implementation.

Chapter IV: Findings

Introduction

The first section of this chapter introduces the participants' journeys through the program. Their demographics and personal circumstances are highlighted. Next, the beginnings of their journeys through the program are described. Then, the ways in which they engaged with the program are discussed.

As a result of the analysis described in chapter three, two sets of themes were created from the data and are described in the second section of this chapter. These themes and each of their subthemes were constructed and co-constructed by the women and myself through discussion during the interviews and through subsequent analysis of these discussions. The findings were also supplemented by my own experiences and knowledge about the program. During the interviews, all of the participants were asked if they had any recommendations to improve the program for other women in the future. Some women also offered suggestions at other points during the interviews when they talked about some of the difficulties they had experienced, and these were incorporated into the findings. The way these findings are presented is not meant to sound like a simple, linear process. Nor is this analysis meant to unify the women's experiences within the program, as they are very individual. In particular, the benefits perceived by the women were very much shaped by their feelings and experiences with motherhood, gender, race, ethnicity, addictions, immigration, and so on. Thus, the social context of the women's lives is important to understand too, and is brought into the discussion as necessary.

The Participants' Journeys

Description of Participants

Eight women who had completed the WOW program were interviewed. The Executive Director was also interviewed. These interviews took place between September and November, 2009. Most of the women interviewed had completed the program about six months prior to the interview. However, to fill the sample, women who had completed the program in the Fall of 2009 were also recruited. Some of the women interviewed knew each other. I knew all of the interview participants fairly well, as I had spent a lot of time with the two different groups. The youngest woman interviewed was 22 years old, and the oldest woman interviewed was 30 years old. The average age of the women interviewed was 25. Of the women interviewed, six were born in Canada. One of these women identified as a Native Canadian. Also, one was a French Canadian. Two women had immigrated to Canada, one from Africa and one from South America.

Five of the women had children. Four of these women had one child, while only one woman had two children. All of these mothers had custody of their children, although one had shared custody with a former partner. Two of these women were single mothers; one was not receiving any child support from the father. All of their children were under the age of five. Two of the mothers were pregnant during the program, and had their children shortly after the program was completed.

Only one of the women interviewed was married. At the beginning of the program, five of the other women were in long-term relationships, though not all of these women were sure about the future of their relationships. Of these women, one of them broke up with her partner shortly after the program ended. Another was a survivor of an abusive relationship.

The women interviewed had faced a variety of challenges in their lives. For the women who had immigrated to Canada, coming to a new country posed many difficulties. One of these women immigrated with her husband and new baby, while the other came as a teenager with some of her family members. These new immigrants were expected to learn a new language and make new social connections. Further, they needed Canadian education and work experience to be accepted into the workforce. On top of all these challenges, they were removed from most of their family and friends. Both of these women were unsure of the direction of their lives in their new country. One of these women had to receive economic and housing assistance from the Ontario welfare system to support her family, but found it was not enough to support her family. She obtained a business administration diploma from a local institution but had no work experience or references to back up her education. Before the program, she was living in a motel and on a waiting list for social housing.

Another one of the women interviewed described how she had been on welfare all of her life. Born into a family surviving off of welfare, she found herself doing the same as an adult. Her family had struggled to make ends meet and often did not have enough money to buy necessities. She was the first in her family to graduate from high school. She had little self-worth and was struggling to find a job. Another one of the women was raised in the foster care system. Finding herself in another province as an adult, she also had to receive welfare support and live in social housing to make ends meet. She worked in the fast food industry but did not want to make a career out of this type of work. She was unsure of what path she wanted to take in her life. Additionally, one of the women interviewed moved to Townsville from a small city in her early twenties. She took a program at the local college, but was unsure of what to do with her diploma and had no work experience or references on her résumé. She also had to

receive welfare to support herself and her boyfriend, with whom she was experiencing difficulties. When she got pregnant, she knew she needed support and work experience, but was unsure of where to go.

Another one of the women was tired of doing shift work. She had two children and did not want to work evening, overnight, and weekend shifts anymore. She wanted a job that allowed her to be with her family but was not sure exactly what she was looking for. Further, she found it impossible to support her family with the money provided by the welfare system. Despite her 'penny pinching', she still struggled to take care of herself and her children.

One of the women had a history of abuse. She left her partner and temporarily stayed in a women's shelter. After she left the shelter, she and her child lived with her parents for a short period of time until she had enough money to get her own apartment. Trying to re-gain her independence, she also started receiving welfare support. She found it very difficult to cope with her new life. She had little traditional work experience and needed to work through her past before moving on with her future.

Finally, the last woman interviewed had quite a bit of work experience. As an Aboriginal Canadian, she felt like she could secure employment with an Aboriginal organization, but was unsure that this was the direction she wanted to take. She wanted to see what other jobs were available to find what she really wanted to do. She had previously lived in Townsville but moved back to her hometown for a short period of time. When she applied to the program, she had only been back living in the city for a few weeks. She was living with her boyfriend in an apartment she described as 'disgusting'.

Each interview participant was assigned a pseudonym. These pseudonyms are used sporadically throughout the next sections when appropriate. It is not possible to use the

pseudonyms throughout this entire chapter in order to maintain strict confidentiality. This is the reason why pseudonyms were not used when describing the interview participants.

Starting out on the Journey

The participants' first contact with TAPO was when they sent their résumé to the program. Most of the women were referred to the program by their welfare worker. TAPO frequently works with the City of Townsville on different projects and the City's case workers are the main source of referral for the WOW program. Other women were referred by Northern Lights, an organization that provides employment and vocational services, or a youth centre which is supported by the City of Townsville. The participants knew little about the program when they applied. For example, Julia said, "I had no idea what I was getting into. And I had no expectations. I was kind of just going through the motions". Renee also said, "I didn't expect anything. I expected it was just another group that would talk about work placements, set you up in a placement and just leave you there". The participants simply did not know what to expect. However, when they went to the intake interview, they learned that the program pays minimum wage (at the present time this is \$9.50/hour) for 37.5 hours a week for the six month duration. Thus the program can be seen as a Monday to Friday, nine to five job. The monetary benefit was a big incentive for the women to take the program.

Typical of women who apply to the WOW program, most of the participants were living in uncertainty. Many of the women were unsure of what direction they wanted to take in their lives. Emma talked about trying to 'find something to do with her life' when she saw the advertisement and decided to apply. Most of the women felt they had restricted or limited options in their lives at the time, as was evident from the earlier brief descriptions of the participants. Some women felt that the program was their only option. Julia discussed this in

her interview, “I was so worried I wasn’t going to get in. It was my only chance at something”. Maria mentioned that after her intake interview, “I was so excited, I purposely called [the program director] and said thank you. I was like, I want to stand out and I want her to remember me. I was so happy that like I got [accepted], I was so happy”. Many of the women were desperately trying to overcome a difficult time or crisis and start a new life. I have noticed a sense of urgency in many of the women at the time of the intake interviews for the program.

Another similarity among the women interviewed was that they were looking for a stable, ‘nine to five’ job. They did not want to work in the fast food industry or do shift work. This was especially prominent for women who had or were about to have children:

I was looking but not for something I was doing before. It was shift work, overnight shifts, evenings and weekends and I didn’t want that you know? Like 12 hours on weekends. You don’t see anyone, especially the kids and I had a new baby. So you know, I wanted to be with them and have a normal nine to five job.

When the participants discovered the WOW program, they were looking for meaningful work opportunities, and careers that could provide stability over time.

The women who committed to the program shared one common thread: they were all dedicated to improving their lives. This was the case for every woman who I interviewed. On average, one woman drops out of every group. One of the women interviewed said that initially she was not ready for the program as she had too many challenges in her life. However, she returned and completed the program with another group.

Engaging in the Program

The first six weeks of the program were dedicated to training the participants. During this time, the women came to a classroom at the Centre Monday through Friday. For two weeks, the participants engaged in various personal development and exploration activities,

such as personality testing and skill discovery. Each woman was given a binder with seven modules that were to be covered during the training phase of the program. These were: career change (personal reactions to change, recalling a meaningful change), discovering your career type (personality characteristics, goals/values, learning style), transferable skills (what you know, what you are good at), résumés and interviews (résumé, cover letter, interviews), attitude (positive versus negative, relationship skills, repairing relationships, decreasing tension), personal development (achieving personal success), and people skills (coping with different types of people). The participants were encouraged to be introspective about how their past experiences had shaped their current situations. They accomplished this through many self-discovery exercises. They took personality tests, looked at their strengths and weaknesses, and assessed how to take control of their lives. A few of the women discussed the various activities during the training:

They were really fun actually. At the beginning 'cause we had kind of different questions to fill out, just kind of self-discovery stuff. Like we would talk about some experiences and we really got to reflect on ourselves... like we'd fill in the circle to see patterns and stuff in it, and not just straight questions.

A lot related to the workforce but a lot related to working on yourself as well, like how to have a good, healthy lifestyle and stuff like that.

The women worked together as a group, in smaller groups, and individually, depending on the exercise or lesson. Many of the women interviewed enjoyed working in small groups. For example, one woman commented, "You got to see different ways of how other people perceived you and how that was different than how you perceived yourself".

A number of different people from various organizations were brought in to help with the training. The program director believes in engaging many people from the community in the training phase of the program. She stated that, "it takes a village to help a woman help

herself". For one week of the training period, the women went to the local youth centre for computer instruction (word processing, email/internet, spreadsheets, and databases). They also learned about résumé and cover letter writing and practiced interviewing for jobs. All of the women interviewed enjoyed this part of the training. One woman disclosed that she had never written a cover letter in the past. Some of the women commented that they had a lot of these skills prior to the program, but that it was good to refresh them before starting their placement. Further, the women also spent a week attending 'New Beginnings' workshops facilitated by another local non-profit organization. These workshops particularly helped people who had been affected by addictions or co-dependency, but they also addressed families, relationships and other issues that the women may have been dealing with. In one of the interviews, a woman commented that,

To me the [New Beginnings], okay, like I was a bit apprehensive about it, I was like I don't need this stuff. It's not for me; I'm not a drug addict. Because that's what I thought it was you know? But then I'm in it and I'm like okay, I see where you're going with this. It kind of opened me up you know? I wasn't so closed off and negative and you know, putting up barriers.

The week that the participants spent at New Beginnings furthered the personal development and introspection encouraged throughout the WOW program. After this, the participants returned to the classroom for the last two weeks of the training phase. The main focus at this time was finding each woman a placement. During this time, the program director posted available job placements from the program's extensive list of partners (both in the private and community spheres). Essentially, the placement partners gained an 'unpaid' employee for the placement period, since the women were paid through the government funding that the program received. The placements were extremely diverse. The women were placed in community centers, non-governmental organizations, libraries, child care centers, retail stores,

law offices, banks, and so on. They were given a wide range of placement options to choose from. The participants were able to set up interviews for the placements they are interested in. Some of the participants were looking for very specific placements, and the program director sought new placement partners to accommodate each woman's wishes. The goal is to have each woman placed at the end of the six week training phase though occasionally, it will take longer to find the perfect placement. Further, some placements do not work out for many different reasons and the participant, with support, is required to look for another placement.

For the remaining eighteen weeks of the program, the participants went to their placements from Monday to Thursday (thirty hours a week). All but one of the women interviewed really enjoyed their placements. Three of the women interviewed continued to work in their placements after the program had finished. Throughout the eighteen weeks, the participants returned to the classroom for further training every Friday. There was a check-in every Friday morning. The women attended hour-long English or French lessons, depending on their primary language. They also attended hour-long yoga, meditation or fitness classes. Further, each participant was expected to give a presentation on a topic of her choice, which were delivered on Friday afternoons. In the interviews, many women expressed that they really enjoyed giving their presentation and listening to the other women present. Also, many guest speakers were brought in for the Friday sessions. In the past, guest speakers have presented on adult high schools, budgeting, employment programs and wage subsidies, nutrition, positive thinking, and so on.

Attendance is an on-going issue for women enrolled in the program. Mothers whose children are sick often need to stay home. Women who are dealing with crises need time to attend to their problems. Also, some women are not healthy and are frequently sick

themselves. The program director is very strict about attendance and demands that the women are on-time during the training and placement phases of the program. However, she also realizes the need to be sensitive to the women's lives. Women who need time off are often given it, but they are still held accountable. For example, the need to communicate with an employer is emphasized, and absences are not tolerated without notice. This seems to be a flexible way to allow women the leniency they require, but to also serve as a lesson for women of the need to always be in touch with their employer.

Transportation is another ongoing issue for many of the women in the program. Most women in the program rely on public transportation. In December, 2008, the Townsville transit services went on strike – a strike which lasted fifty-one days, making it difficult for many of the women to get to work. Taxi vouchers were given to the program by the City, but it could take up to three hours for taxi pick-up. Some of the women interviewed for this study were working in their placements during the strike and they were affected in various ways. For example, one woman had to find another placement that allowed her to work from home, as she had no other mode of transportation. Some of the others had to take days off when they could not find a ride to work and could not get a taxi. Normally, the program director has a designated budget to provide bus tickets to women who need them.

Some women in the program have required extra support (such as counselling and childcare), and the program director has helped them access the services that they needed. A few women mentioned how much they appreciated the individual support they received from the program director. Maria said, “like she definitely would have private meetings if we needed it. And I loved that about her. She wanted us to be taken care of as like a whole being”. The

program is highly tailored to each woman's individual needs, which is the main reason why the program can only accept twelve women at a time.

At the time of the interviews, three of the women were continuing to work through their placement employers, others had found temporary or seasonal work, one had started working towards a university degree, and others had recently had children and were staying home to care for them.

Themes

Women's Experiences with the Program

Two sets of themes were developed. The first revolved around the women's experiences with the program while the second explains how these experiences led to a 'new sense of self' for the women involved. The three themes that shaped the women's experiences within the WOW program related to having a safe environment, experiencing stability within the program and making connections with others. The meaning of these themes will be conveyed through the use of sub-themes, which demonstrate the different ways in which the theme was relevant for the participants.

A Safe Environment

Safety was shown to be very significant for the women interviewed. In particular, safety was conveyed as a very important component of the program by women who needed to talk about and work through issues from their past. Some of the participants had issues with trust due to experiences with past relationships, and feeling safe in the program environment and with the other women was very meaningful to them. The two subthemes that were constructed to show the meaning of a safe environment are the opportunity to 'open up' to others in the program, and a non-judgmental atmosphere.

1. The opportunity to 'open up' to others

Creating a place of trust was central to the participants opening up and sharing their lives and feelings with each other. When asked whether the group trusted each other, one woman answered, "Yah... [we could] just let it go and talk about our feelings". This is something that the WOW program strives to do from the moment of contact. I have often been shocked at women's openness to share their lives during the intake interviews, but this speaks to the comfort that they feel from the program and organization. Most of the participants talked about going to the WOW program on Fridays during their placement and crying with the other group members. Being able to cry with the group was meaningful for many of the women interviewed. This type of environment was unique for the women, who described their experiences in the following ways:

Sometimes I wake up and I just want to cry but there's no one there. And people are like, why are you crying? But when I go to the WOW program, when I used to go to the WOW program, if I cried it was ok, to cry with them you know?

I couldn't help myself a lot of times, I'd just start crying. Like if something happened the night before. Like you know, I'd be crying a lot, there was a lot of crying.

And it's very hard to vent or cry because a lot of people are just like, oh she's crying, whatever. But in this case everyone was comforting.

It was a powerful experience for the women to come together to support someone dealing with difficulties. The women expressed how important it was for them to talk about their personal lives and their pasts in order to overcome their barriers. One woman said,

I needed to talk. I needed to hear those problems and get those perspectives. I needed to, that was really important to talk... people that know a little bit about me and I feel safe around, I can just open up. Not to anyone obviously.

This 'opening up' within the group is encouraged by the program director as a way to get support, information and resources to help the women through their problems. Many of the

women found that others in the group had faced similar difficulties, and felt as though their problems and emotions were validated through talking with the group.

2. A non-judgmental atmosphere

Having the understanding and support of the other women was very important for women who needed to talk. Most of the women enjoyed and appreciated being able to talk to the group about their problems. In order for a safe environment to be created, there could be no judgments or attacks on others. Some of the participants discussed the understanding they felt from the other women,

... if I had a bad day or a bad week, if I went there upset I know I had people there to listen to me and just hear me out and I wouldn't feel ashamed at all. So I think it was a good feeling.

It's a safe environment. Everyone is there to support you. No one is there to judge you and make you feel bad, oh my god, like you're a drug user. No one was like that... it's awesome.

If the participants sensed that others were judging them in the group, it hindered them from talking about their feelings. Julia had conflict with one woman in particular. She said that,

She was just pushy and argumentative. Like if you say black she'll say white... I don't want to have weirdness with her either because I have to see her every Friday. So I was like, I'm not going on Fridays... But it's not like I have to see her every day for forever. So I don't really have to mend things with her because I'm choosing not to hang out with someone like that. I've done that my whole life, attract those kind of bullies and I'm not interested in that.

She did come to the program on Fridays for the last month as she could no longer trust a member of the group. Since she did not feel safe from judgment within the group, it hindered her overall experience within the program.

Stability

The notion of stability was constructed in different ways by the women interviewed. The subthemes show the importance of different types of stability and how stability

contributed to a feeling a sense of control. Stability was discussed in three main ways. Economic stability gave the women the ability to provide for themselves and their families and was very meaningful. Second, economic stability gave the women freedom from partners and family, or the welfare system. The women also found stability within the scheduling of the program, which also gave them something to look forward to each week.

1. Economic stability – Providing for self/family

Many women felt financially stable during the program because they received a pay cheque every two weeks. This gave them a lot of freedom to buy necessities for themselves and/or their families. They could also buy non-necessities that they could not have afforded before, which made them very happy. They felt free from pressing economic worries. Financial stability seemed to be a springboard for the women to improve other areas of their lives. For example, when asked about her quality of life, Emma responded,

[It has] gotten better, very. Up. Now I can pay my bills on time, I can go wherever I want with money. Before, I didn't have financial stability and I can do so many things because I've got that now. I have money to do that, to do things... I feel proud of myself, happy. I feel strong. I feel I am capable. I feel I am happy... because I can earn money, I can work and have my pay and I could help [my family].

When asked if she felt more financially stable, a woman who had been supported by the welfare system since she was a child answered,

Yes. The whole time that I was getting the money here it worked a lot. I was able to get the clothes... that I needed. I was able to get my jacket eventually instead of getting sick all winter long. I'm sick of being sick all winter long.

Women with children felt as though they were able to take care of their children and themselves with their income, whereas in the past, it had been difficult to provide for their children alone. Some women commented that welfare support could not provide enough for them to make ends meet, and they much preferred the financial stability they received from

working. Halona discussed how, for her and her family, a steady income allowed them to live without constant worry:

Now that I have a job I know how much I'm making. Yah, like I have a pay cheque coming in. I can provide. I don't have to worry about, oh, I don't know when I'm going to have money. Do I have enough money? Like welfare you have money once a month. But one pay cheque of this, I get twice what I make here than I did on welfare. No you cannot [live off Ontario Works]. You cannot, I am sorry but I tried and I was scrimping every frickin' penny I could... Like 628 a month for three people. Like diapers and formula alone are almost a quarter of that.

In this sense, having a steady income helped to liberate the women from the stresses of welfare. This was especially liberating for women with children, such as Halona, who went on to say that,

I buy [my children] things all the time. They're going to have diapers, they're going to have formula. They're going to have what they need. So now it's just what I need. I want a new pair of shoes and I want a new coat and I got that.

Thus, not only were children benefitting from their mother's financial stability, but the mothers were able to take care of themselves in ways that were not possible before the program.

2. Economic stability- Freedom from dependence on others

For some of the women interviewed, being economically stable gave them freedom from financial ties to partners and family. This provided them a sense of independence that they had not had before. It also gave them freedom to take control of their own lives. A woman who lives with her family said that, "like it gave me food, my own food in the house. It kind of made me feel like my own person". For a woman coming out of an abusive relationship, being financially independent taught her that she could take care of her family on her own. She discussed that her ex-partner was, "Just scaring me into thinking I can't cope out there. This program definitely taught me that I can cope just fine without him for 6 months". After leaving her partner, she was unsure how she would financially take care of herself and her child. She

did not feel strong enough to take on a traditional job, nor did she feel she had enough experience be hired. Further, she despised receiving Ontario Works and living with her parents. She had never received welfare before and felt shameful when it was her only choice, so gaining back her financial freedom was very important to her. She mentioned that without the financial stability of program for six months, she would not have found the strength within herself to live as a single mom. She said,

I don't have to live with my parents or [my ex-partner], go back to him, which is very tempting. I don't know why. But you trick your mind into thinking it will be fine again. It's really hard when the person's told you you're not going to make it... I don't think I actually would have left him without this program.

For women who had been receiving welfare, being financially independent was a liberating experience. In particular, the woman born into a family receiving welfare was filled with emotion when describing the feeling of financial freedom. When asked if she was still able to receive welfare support after the program, she replied,

I'm not sure if I really want to... It's kind of one of those things at the bottom of my list now, I don't want to go back on. It kind of feels free being independent. And with welfare you only get like 600 a month or something like that. It's like, well that's going to do nothing. If you get 600 dollars a month and make 300 a month you only get 300 and that goes to your rent. It's like, well you guys aren't really helping us if you really think about it.

3. Scheduling Stability

Some women noted that they felt happier because they enjoyed having a routine. One woman commented, "You know, it got me out of my shitty current situation that I was in. It gave me purpose". Maria said, "I mean that's why I got out of bed". Many of the women enjoyed having a regular work schedule. They knew what to expect every week, which gave them more flexibility to deal with other issues in their lives.

Many of the women talked about how they looked forward to meeting with the group on Fridays during their placement. They knew that they could share their feelings and problems with the group, but also have fun there. They had fun participating in the different activities. Halona mentioned that, “we did yoga every week which was super fun”. The participants also had fun socializing and sharing with the other women:

... getting to know all the girls and chatting with them and stuff like that, it was fun, I liked it.

... they were fun. I got to know the other girls through the activities that we had.

Sharing with everyone else was fun. Cause I like hearing about everyone else and sharing my answers too.

This sense of fun gave them something to look forward to during the week. It became a stable aspect of their lives. They were getting paid to be at the program, but it did not seem like a burden. One woman even commented that, “It’s kind of like school but you get paid to do it. It was fun”. The time they spent in the classroom was viewed more as leisure time than work:

I felt it was a good distraction from my problems so I was happier.

[Fridays were] Like a break. You know it’s like time off. It was an extra day off for me. It was like yah, I’m going to TAPO, I’m going to see the girls, I’m going to have lunch. It was fun.

We’d usually get together every Friday just to see each other and talk about our week and everything... I liked [the activities].

[Interviewer: Did you have fun there?] I did. I definitely looked forward to it.

Fridays were pretty fun. I always looked forward to Fridays, definitely during the placement I always looked forward to Fridays.

Many women said that they looked forward to Fridays, and that they used it as a break from the stresses of their daily lives. It was viewed more as leisure than work. However, this sense of stability only lasted for the 6 months of the program, and many of the women interviewed

wished that the program was a full year instead of just six months. The program director also mentioned this in her interview. She said, “how can you change people every 6 months? You can’t. All you can do is plant a seed and say there’s a better way”. At the end of each group, the women are asked if they have any suggestions for the program and a longer program is always mentioned. The women seemed to thrive within the stability of the program and they wanted more of it.

Connections

The participants talked a lot about the support they had received from each other during the program. This aspect was connected to the previous theme of a safe environment; if they felt that they were in a safe environment, they were able to express themselves freely, and were able to garner a lot of support from the other women. Some of the women, especially those who had recently moved to Townsville, said that meeting new people was one of their main reasons for applying to WOW. When asked why she joined the program, Emma responded, “Because I am from another country and that’s my first time to work with Canadians”. Another one of the women who had been living in Townsville for only a short period of time said that she really enjoyed meeting new people in the program,

There was a lot of friendship and I was really welcomed and, cause usually I’m a very shy person at first. But I think it was really nice to, like I said I had at the beginning, when the program had started I had only been here for one to two weeks. I had moved back to Townsville and I was living with my friend and my boyfriend and the group was really good [for me].

However, there were some conflicts in the group which negatively affected relationships. Some of these conflicts were able to be resolved, but others lingered.

1. Receiving and giving advice

Within the group, there was a lot of advice shared between the women. This was shown to be even more important for the women who did not have a strong support system (family or friends) within the city. One woman who had recently moved to the city said, “they were very sensitive to what was going on with me and just being aware of that at different times. So it was nice to sort of have people to back me up and give me advice. Sort of how to approach things a different way and stuff like that”. A few women also talked about how they gave advice and helped other women in the group:

I help them, they ask me for my experience, I share my experience... I've been here, and I help them to be strong like me, give them courage

I think I helped explain some stuff sometimes to people, especially people who really didn't understand English as well. I kind of clarified things and I would ask questions. I don't know, I think I was very involved and gave some good advice to some of the women and stuff.

Receiving advice was shown to be particularly important for mothers in the program. Since many of the women in the program had children, the mothers were able to share information on parenting. When asked how the program affected her as a new mother, Grace answered that,

Like they have great advice... I think [a woman with four kids- not part of the study] was probably the biggest inspiration because she has so many kids and it's like, how do you keep your cool? And every time I've had problems with my boyfriend, [her] and I have always been really close so it was nice, her and I could talk about it and she knows what's up... It's like, you know, that's just how it is and it's like that sometimes and whatever. And if anybody gave me good advice it would be her, just good advice where I don't have to jump and attack somebody and freak out, you know? Other than that she's been really good for advice with children too.

In particular, the new mothers looked up to the mothers with older children because they had 'been there, done that'. Some of the women expressed how they could see their futures in the other mothers:

Like especially with [that woman] because she has so many kids, it was kind of showing me what's gonna happen to me and stuff.

These mothers felt more sure and optimistic about their futures through their connections with other mothers in the group.

2. Feelings of community and family

When asked what the most valuable part of the program was, most women answered that it was their relationship with the group. In general the women spoke very lovingly about each other. Almost all of the women interviewed talked about the other women in the program as family. They frequently referred to each other as 'sisters':

Like family, family... They are like my sisters.

I think the people around you have to do a lot with this, the way you feel and the way you act too. And like those girls from the WOW program, I don't know, like they were like my sisters. They were very supportive.

The program director talked about this sense of family and community in her interview as well. She designed the program in such a way to facilitate these kinds of relationships, based on her own past experiences. She mentioned that,

... because the addicts and people on the street... you know there's a family thing going on. You live on the street and it's like, well there's my father, my mother, my sister, my brother. They protect each other. And I thought of that here, if they have that on the street, why not here? And get that family support. That's what I'm trying to instil in them right off the bat, is whatever you need, you need to say, you say it here. And put everything on the table, get rid of it and leave it here. Rather than carry this burden around with you... you need that community feeling. You need a support system.

This sense of family was demonstrated to be even more significant when a woman's actual family was not involved in her life. When talking about going through a difficult period in her life, Grace said,

... having some you know strong women in the picture was really good because my family wasn't in the picture either, it was nice to kind of feel like a sense of community and sort of in a sense like family, it was really good for me to work on myself.

Some women also discussed how they felt a sense of belonging in the group; there was a certain sense of ‘woman power’ among them. One woman commented that,

And I’m mixed so it kind of puts me in sort of a floating group. So it was nice to just be a woman for a change and have that united. It feels really good to sort of be a part of something.

The women felt close and connected to each other because they felt as though they were on the same level as one another. Being able to share their problems deepened the sense of family and community that they felt. Amaya talked about this connection:

When I entered the program I had problems with relationships before. But when I went to the program I met like all these girls that had the same problems that I had so we kind of shared the same you know, feelings.

Similarly, another woman said about her problems, “it makes it seem less dramatic when I’m talking to [one of the group members]”, because they were dealing with similar issues. They were able to understand each other’s difficulties and offered different perspectives. They felt like they knew one another deeply. Julia expressed that,

But that’s like AA or something, people who are all going through the same things. I don’t know what it is. They want to just be there for you and you know that you’re not alone. Like you always hear that but then it’s like, oh it’s true. It’s not like you’re the only one who’s going through that, it’s happening to many people. No, that was really good.

This notion of a family attests to the amount of support and trust the participants found in each other throughout the program. When asked about her relationship with the group, Emma answered,

I played with them. We shared a lot, our secrets, like family, work, stuff like that. And we do everything together... [They treated me] with love, respect and always listen to me. We respect each other. It was so fun. We’d joke together. We’d talk together and we’d share our stuff together... I miss them so much, so much.

Many other women commented how much they missed the women in their group, though many of these connections continued after the program had ended.

3. Conflict

Though every group of women is different, there is always some sort of conflict. Some of the women interviewed were able to deal with conflicts in the group, either by working them out or by choosing to ignore them:

The group, they were nice women, I don't know, they were okay but I guess it felt like high school again in some ways... it was still a good group dynamic... I don't think anyone hated each other which is really good... there was one time with one of the girls, I thought she really just didn't like me... actually it turned out there was nothing wrong between us, it was just all in my head, which is really good. But one girl kind of made it seem like there was something- like people kind of had issues with me. She kind of made it seem way worse than it was, like no one really cared. So like, I'm glad, like I was scared of confrontation but I still did it anyway and it kind of ended up working out better so I felt happier about the group in general after that.

... there was one woman who was just annoying me and talking to me about marriage and religion. I'm spiritual but I'm not a religious person. It wasn't done in a way, I can see people's opinions and listen to their point of views but I don't want to be attacked in a religious sort of manner... I came home crying and had a break down and everything because she was screaming at me saying I should be married, I should be this, I should be that. It was just like, uh. But that was it. That was the only problem I had... I just let it slide off because I mean, I saw flaws in that individual too. They thought they were higher than everybody. I mean, I'm going to have to deal with difficult people, I just keep my distance.

... stuff happens and there's conflict sometimes. But it wasn't you know arguing or fighting. It was just people talking about someone behind their back or something.

Other participants felt as though their conflicts were too big to overcome. If they could not fully trust or felt threatened by another group member, they often felt like they lost a lot of support from the group. Some women also experienced interpersonal conflicts with the program director. If these problems could not be overcome, the women developed negative feelings. For example, one woman discussed how she did not feel a strong sense of support

from the group and wanted to drop out of the program, but did not because of the overwhelming amount of support she received from the program director.

One of the suggestions that came out of the interviews was to find a better way to facilitate conflict resolution among the women. One woman stated that, “It depends on the individuals, I guess, but I know there were a couple people who just wanted to leave at times cause of the problems they had with other people”. Conflict resolution has to be done on a case-by-case basis, but based on the interviews, women who are overly aggressive towards other participants in the program probably need to be told in private conversation with the director that their behaviour is unacceptable. The women who discussed this felt that private conversations would be best to deal with conflict to not put women ‘on the spot’. If someone is intimidating the other women, or consistently imposing their views on others in a harmful way, they could be removed from the group for a period of time. Since the program provides an environment of personal development and self-improvement, zero tolerance for women who put down others’ views and lifestyles would be helpful. Another suggestion to deal with conflict, perhaps even before it begins is to encourage women who do not seem to connect well with each other to work together during the training phase. These ‘facilitated’ interactions may be enough to increase understanding among women with different personalities.

Discovering a New Sense of Self

The second set of themes related to the values associated with the program and benefits as perceived by the participants. These values or benefits can best be described as the development of a new sense of self: one that is skilled (in both work and general life), confident, and empowered. These strengths helped the women deal with many of the issues in their lives. These themes and their associated sub-themes help to demonstrate the ways in

which the women described the benefits they received. Some women, for various reasons, struggled more than others in the program, and these differences and explanations for these differences are discussed as well. The quote used in the title of the thesis reflects this notion of a ‘new sense of self’. The quote was taken from one of the interviews in which the participant stated, “It took me forever to get to where I want to be but I’m finally there,” when describing her personal journey and development through the program.

Learning New Skills

1. Learning work skills

The participants learned important skills in the program to help them in their careers. This was shown to be extremely valuable for many of the women interviewed. They learned computer skills, job search skills and about being a good employee. Many of the women discussed how the skills they learned during the training phase of the program gave them the tools they need to succeed in the workforce:

... it kind of just made me feel more confident so when my employer was like, “can you do this?” I wouldn’t have to be acting like I knew and come up with my own way, I could be like ok, I know this.

I guess the impact would be, in that sense of learning about my skills, more so skills that will actually help me in the workforce.

... it just helped me dig up old skills that I forgot I even had anymore... I’m less oh, I knew I couldn’t do it, you know? So that helped a lot.

For women whose first language was not English, speaking English everyday was also extremely valuable in their work lives.

In addition, many of the women valued the computer training they received in the program. When asked what kind of skills she learned in the program, Amaya answered,

“computer skills first of all”. Other women also mentioned the importance of the computer training:

It was good. Excel... I’m using Excel at work now. I never knew about Excel but now I do, which is really great.

I already knew a lot about computers but definitely a lot of what she taught I didn’t necessarily know, or I knew but didn’t know how to do effectively, like you know what I mean? Like I could make it work but it would take a long time.

I had never used Excel and stuff like that. So it was really nice that I could, you know, figure out how to do a budget and stuff like that.

Some women also discussed learning skills that would help with job searching in the future. They learned how to act during interviews. Further, all of the women recognized that they finished the program with a strong résumé, which they felt would help them secure employment in the future.

I know how you have to dress to go to interview. I know you can’t be late. I know you have to know the company before, stuff like that.

I hadn’t done job interviews in so long so that helped a lot.

I’d probably say a little on the résumé writing and cover letter. I’ve never done a cover letter before.

In addition, women who excelled in their work placements gained excellent references to add to their résumés. They felt as though this would help them with job searching in the future:

I loved the experience that I had at my work placement... I got to know people, very nice people and they helped me a lot in my job search too. And I have like, the manager is one of my references... like now that I’m doing job interviews, when people call he always gives good references about me.

[My placement manager] speaks well of me so that’s another great reference to use which is something I really needed is more references in Townsville and stuff. I needed more recent references.

Some of the women suggested that the program include the creation of an employment portfolio, which could include different types of résumés and cover letters, reference letters,

presentations, and different tasks they had worked on throughout the training and their placements.

Finally, other women talked about the importance of learning skills to help them as employees. A lot of women mentioned that they enjoyed presenting in front of the group and felt as though this was a good skill to help them in their careers. Some comments included:

I improved in public speaking... I just have those memories of me trying to do that, attempting and everything. I liked those things.

I wasn't as nervous as I thought I was going to be. I got a lot of good feedback on it.

The women felt comfortable practicing speaking in front the group because of the non-judgmental environment that the program provided. Further, for one of the women who had immigrated to Canada, learning how to behave in the Canadian work environment was very important:

Because it helped how to talk with people at work, how to behave, how to, yes how to work. You have to be on time. Good attitude. You have to mind your business. You don't have to blame other people. You have to do whatever it is they ask you to do. You don't have to ask about personal life, personal stuff like that. You are not there to make friends, you are there to work, to work.

As previously suggested, many women indicated they would have liked the program to be longer. When asked how they would like the program to be structured if it were longer, many women said they would like more training. In particular, a lot of the women wanted more computer training and more practice with typing. Label making, more practice with spreadsheets, and letter writing were also discussed. Additionally, the women seemed to really enjoy the career exploration part of the program, but would have liked more of it. During this time, the women used lots of different personality and career inventories to figure out what jobs they may do well in. It was mentioned that more individual, one-on-one career coaching and planning would be helpful in this area as well. Further, some of the women talked about

getting more hands-on practice during the training. For example, one woman talked about how she would have liked to practice answering phones and sending emails before starting her placement.

Also regarding work skills, the women desired to have more time within their placements. Many of them recommended that if the program were a year long, eight months of this could be spent within their placements. Some women suggested that the opportunity to work in two placements would be helpful, with the possibility of staying in the first placement if it was a good match. The possibility of job shadowing before taking on a placement was suggested as well, to ensure that the women have a strong idea of what their day-to-day jobs would entail.

2. Learning life skills

Another experience discussed in many of the interviews was the learning of 'life skills' throughout the program. In some ways, work skills and life works overlap, and may be relevant to both aspects of people's lives. Life skills were talked about very broadly in the contexts of personal development, family and home life. Specific examples of life skills were budgeting skills, how to forgive others, patience, having boundaries in personal relationships, and finding balance in your life. For example,

I wasn't recklessly spending money but it made me look at, you know, how much money I should put away to save and stuff like that.

... the program just gave us like life skills which you don't learn in high school and you don't really learn in school and your parents don't tell you about it, you kind of have to learn by experience.

[Interviewer: Did the things you learned help in your life, at home or work?] At home definitely. I feel like I now have a lot more patience for my brother, my little brother. And I've got more confidence in things that I do at home and when I'm out and about with my friends doing whatever.

Well definitely learning about boundaries and learning about how to like let people treat you and how you should treat other people. I mean I've always pretty much known how to treat other people it's more just knowing how I let people treat me and stuff and you know. You pretty much are the one to teach people how to treat you, and it's like in a sense you're at fault if you do let someone treat you bad.

These skills made the women feel more successful in their daily lives. They knew that they could use these skills to benefit their lives in a positive way.

A few of the women wanted something tangible to take away at the end of the program to help them with any difficulties in the future. Some suggested that creating a book of resources to take away with them at the end of the program would be helpful. The program does provide the women with a lot of resources related to employment, but it would be helpful to provide a booklet of information on housing (and legal assistance related to housing), emergency shelters, free counselling in the community, adult high schools, recreation centers, subsidies for low income families, child care, food banks, and so on. This would ensure that if the women come across difficulties in the future, they would more easily be able to access the resources needed.

Confidence

Seven of the eight women interviewed strongly expressed how they had gained a lot of confidence during the program. This confidence stemmed from the skill development, as previously discussed, and also other aspects of the program. Confidence was described as feeling proud, strong and capable. Further, women described changes in their self-esteem as a result of feeling good about themselves.

1. Feeling proud, strong and capable

Many of the women interviewed said that they had become stronger women through the WOW program. Succeeding in the program made them feel stronger in their lives. Some of the women expressed the change they felt as a result of the program:

... it did make me feel stronger as a woman, as a person, in every area of my life.

When I started, no confidence, I always felt low on myself. And now I can walk around with my head high, not cocky about it but, you know, proud of myself.

I feel strong. I feel I am capable.

Confidence was also discussed in terms of the future. The strength that the women felt made them confident that they could achieve their future goals:

And more encouraged, like my dreams can [come true], yah like I believed in myself more, for sure.

It actually made [my future] brighter. When I first started this course, well before I started this course, it was just like a black tunnel. Now I have a light to go to. That's metaphorically speaking but I guess that's the best way I can explain it.

Further, the women felt more confident about applying for other jobs in the future. When asked if she felt more prepared for her future career, Emma answered, "I'm not scared for nothing no more, no, no. If you interview me I will tell you exactly what it is and I know what kind of questions you will be asking me. I didn't know that before".

The participants also gained strength and confidence in themselves through self-knowledge. They learned a lot about themselves during the program by participating in personal development activities. By the end of the program, all of the women had a strong idea of who they were as an individual and they were proud of that. Maria said that when in the classroom, "we really got to reflect on ourselves". Further, the women spent a full week of

their training at New Beginnings, where they got to examine different aspects of their lives. These types of introspective activities gave the women confidence in themselves. Grace noted,

You got to see different ways of how other people perceived you and how that was different than how you perceived yourself. I think that kind of strengthened a lot of people's confidence in themselves and stuff like that. There were a lot of things I didn't even know about myself.

Only one woman felt that she did not gain any confidence. She felt awkward around many of the women and had a rough relationship with the program director. Further, she often felt as though she could not express herself without judgment from the other group members. However, the main reason problem she had was related to issues within her placement, which she thought could have stemmed from her negative feelings towards the program in general. She said, "I think I would have done really well at that placement if I would have been more comfortable with the program". For this woman, many issues were brought up in her placement evaluation that she was completely unaware of: "I was just a little shocked because why would nobody say anything... I'm not doing it on purpose and I've never had a problem with that before. Why would you wait to tell me?" Due to this experience, she could not use the employer as a reference and could not continue working in her placement as a volunteer, as she had hoped. After this, she lost all interest in the program, and had no desire to try to resolve the conflict with her employer. She questioned her future career goals because of her bad experience; she did not feel capable in these types of positions anymore. She actually felt less rather than more confident after completing the program.

For mothers, feeling confident as a parent was shown to be especially important in their lives. The mothers interviewed expressed how they felt like better mothers because of their new level of confidence. For one woman in particular, this eased the pressures of motherhood. Halona said, "Sometimes it's like I have to be a certain way and my kids have to be a certain

way and they have to dress a certain way and stuff like that. If you don't, other people will judge you". However, as she gained confidence in her abilities as a woman and mother, she found that she did not care about society's judgment of her parenting as much as she had before. She went on to say that, "I let [my son] do stuff that I wouldn't normally let him do. Cause I'm too careful, but now it's like if you want to do it, go and do it". Emma, another mother, highlighted how, because she felt more confident in herself, she would be able to teach her daughter to feel good about herself as well. Feeling more confident was described as a powerful experience by both of these mothers.

2. Self-Esteem

Seven of the eight women interviewed noted that they gained a more positive and accepting view of themselves through the WOW program as well. Some of the women learned to feel happy with themselves, such as Maria, who thought that, "It took a while for me to get here but I'm a lot happier [with myself] than I used to be". Self-esteem was mainly discussed within the context of feeling good about oneself and, as a result, taking time to care for and pamper yourself.

Some of the women also talked about learning to treat themselves gently, and to not be hard on themselves as they had been in the past:

I'm nicer to myself now because I'm like my worst critic. I used to have a lot of problems with my self-esteem and I suffered from depression a lot when I was younger. So I've never really been good to myself and I've always been really hard on myself... So why should I beat myself up because if I do, I'm not going to get anywhere except lower... I find that I'm really blessed to have what I have and I should be nice to myself.

I used to take everything personally but now I leave it, I don't have to take it. If anything happens, it happens, I don't have to take it personally.

Throughout the program, the participants were encouraged to take time to care for themselves in ways that fit within their lives. For some women, this entailed painting their nails, taking a bath, getting a babysitter, or making time to look good on a daily basis. For Maria, it also meant learning to meditate to work out her feelings:

It's very important to meditate and they always say things like "find your center" and things like that. Like you can find answers to your questions if you sort of just give yourself time to relax and kind of put that above all else before you do something big, like with a huge task. It's always better to take time to sit back and think.

Some of the women learned to view themselves in a completely different way than they had prior to taking the program. They learned to see themselves as beautiful, and subsequently, wanted to take better care of themselves. Some of the women felt like they did not deserve to be pampered in the past, but had learned how important it is to take time for self-care:

...you think, this is for myself and to make myself feel prettier and stuff. It's a good investment I believe.

For Renee, this was a particularly significant outcome of the program:

I'm well-dressed now instead of just wearing baggy clothes and my hair all messed up and not care... [Interviewer: So you can, you just need the motivation to do it right?] Exactly. I need to feel good about myself to do it. I never really felt good about myself 'til I got to this course... The fact that I used to walk around with baggy jeans, baggy shirts and whatnot and now I'm walking around with nice pair of pants, nice shirt. I've actually worn make up more than twice.

Renee also talked about losing a lot of weight during the program, which also made her feel better about herself. Halona, a mother who found a career in the beauty industry, also started looking at herself in a much more positive way. She said that,

... now I want to dress up, I want to put on makeup, I want to look good, I want to feel good... If I feel better about myself, to me, I'll be a better person and I'll be a better mom, you know? If I feel like crap because I look like crap then I'm going to be crap you know? Like it's all mixed, so if I look good, I feel good. If I feel good, I do good.

Some of the women interviewed desired to have more speakers present on topics such as how to dress for work on a tight budget (specific to individual body types), and appropriate hair styles and make up application for the workplace. The findings showed that the women felt increased self-esteem, but their recommendations demonstrate that they wanted to continue to improve on the way that they looked and felt.

In one of the groups with whom I spent a lot of time, most of the women started out as smokers, and by the end, all but one woman had quit. To her credit, the one woman who did not quit smoking had quit doing drugs recreationally, about which she said,

... with being in this course, it gave me time away from the drugs. So, and the only time that I was actually exposed to it was Thursdays [when I went out with my friends]. But I still never touched it. I'm like, you know, I'm in this course for a reason, I'm taking care of myself.

Empowerment

The women talked about feeling capable of success and feeling even more capable and motivated through watching the other women in the program succeed. Although I did not specifically ask about empowerment during the interviews, it became evident during the analysis that some of the feelings the women described were closely linked to the idea of empowerment. For a few of the women, these feelings also motivated them to help, or empower, other women in the future.

1. Feeling capable of success

For the women interviewed, and again through my involvement in the interviews and interpretations, the notion of empowerment was implicit in the way in which the women talked about how they felt they could do anything they set their minds to and succeed. By completing the program, the participants proved to themselves that they were capable of changing their lives and achieving their dreams. Julia, a single mother, said that "I know that's one thing it

taught me, that I can do anything”, whereas she had previously thought, “I always thought that other people could do it, I just didn’t have it in me”. Comments from some of the other women included:

I felt like whatever I wanted was attainable.

I feel like I’m a better woman now. Every time I’m like, oh yah, I can do that better. It’s like empowering.

I’m achieving my goals. That’s why I feel strong, happy, is because of the program.

And I always kept talking about going back to school but I kept procrastinating. And I was afraid that I needed to be more ready for it and stuff like that. But other than that like it was just like, you know, that I shouldn’t be afraid. And I’m not going to sit here forever and just skim by life you know? It’s like “don’t be afraid just jump in and do it”.

Just go up, there’s nowhere to go but up. You know, like you can fall down, but you just pick yourself up and go. You know, that’s where I’m going, I’m going to the top and that’s it.

One of the women who had immigrated to Canada wanted to go to university, but never thought she could. Towards the end of the program, she changed her mind. She commented that, “I finally went back to school. I think it was one of the best things I got from the program”. Later in her interview, she also mentioned that, “I think I have another like, another vision in life now, than I had before”. Empowerment was evident when she realized she could go back to school and succeed instead of just wishing she could.

The woman who was an exception to many of these themes, and talked about losing confidence, also felt disempowered in some ways by her participation in the program. However, she mentioned that she was proud of herself for sticking it out despite the issues she had. In particular, she felt bombarded at her placement evaluation because her employer brought up distressing issues he had never addressed with her before. Some other participants had received poor scores on their performance evaluation, but positive comments from their

employer. In these cases, there needed to be a way of facilitating better communication between the employers and the participants. That is, the employers needed to be made aware of any problems. It would have been better to deal with these issues right away by talking to the participant, and not waiting for the performance evaluation. A short training seminar for all placement employers could help in this regard by ensuring that other women are not disempowered by negative evaluations in the future.

2. Watching others succeed

The program participants were also empowered by watching each other succeed. Many of the women in the program were young mothers, and by watching the other mothers succeed, they found strength in themselves to do the same. They learned that they were able to balance work and family and not need to get welfare help for the rest of their lives. This was especially important for Maria, who said that,

There are women that are a lot smarter than people take them for. Especially something like a single mom, they may think, “oh she must be pretty stupid to get herself into that situation”. They’re a lot stronger too because there are a lot of women, and I got to see firsthand who actually do, they don’t just lay down and die, or lay down and be poor and be stuck on social assistance forever. They’re actually trying to up their education and get better jobs for themselves.

Other women saw, through watching the other participants, that their own goals were actually attainable. Seeing the group succeed made them feel more capable and empowered:

I see other girls that were single mothers going back to school while they were working. And they were doing it, taking care of their kids, working and going to school... it motivated me and made me work extra hard. So I think it made me feel much better about who I am.

I mean I feel more able as a woman sort of. Because I’ve always felt like women can do anything. But I guess just meeting the other women made me feel really good to be a woman, because it showed me that there are a lot of opportunities out there and you know, we can do everything.

For some, seeing other women succeed, who had been through worst circumstances than their own made them feel more motivated and capable of success as well. Julia said that,

Someone saw her parents being slaughtered. My situation is not so bad. It put it into perspective I think. Like it's nothing, nothing compared to what she went through. So it was just really good. It gave me more, I felt like I can handle this. Like a strong woman, so strong.

This demonstrates that the women did not feel empowered just on their own, but within the context of the group as well.

3. Helping others

Further, two of the women who felt empowered wanted to pass this on to other women in the future. One of the women interviewed expressed a need to start a program like WOW in her home country in Africa. In her graduation speech she talked about her dream to start this kind of program in Africa, to help other women realize their potential and live out their dreams. Another woman said in her interview,

It means a lot to have this, its life changing almost, you know. Like I know I'm a good person but now I'm on a deeper level, you know what I mean, like now I want to do something to give back. You know, like I told [the director] if she wants me to come and talk, I'd love to. Just give it back, pay it forward.

On the topic of the program director, the same woman noted, "One day like I want to be like her, just teach other women". These women were extremely grateful for the benefits they had gained and the experiences they had, and they wanted to pass these values on to other women. In my interview with the program director, she mentioned that, "You educate women, they're going to educate 10 other women". This is also evident in the number of referrals the program receives from women who have graduated in the past. For some women who feel empowered, they want this to be experienced by other women too.

A creative suggestion to better the program was to teach the women to advocate for themselves. One woman thought it would be beneficial for women in the program to learn how to find and write to politicians and city councillors about the issues that women living in poverty face. She thought that learning to write letters as a group would be helpful as well. She felt that the strength and empowerment women gained in the program could be put to good use in this way. Often, the program director has advocated for participants' individual housing needs (for example, if a woman is going to be evicted from her home), but it may be beneficial for the women to learn how to do these things for themselves.

Summary of Themes

These themes are highly interrelated and the relationships among them are complex. However, in general, women who felt more safe, stable, and connected felt enhanced benefits as a result of the program. The women who learned more work and life skills gained more benefits as well. These linkages may play out in different ways for each woman, and thus the program needs to be flexible and creative in the approaches taken. As discussed throughout the themes, occasionally some women did not feel that all of their needs were met, and thus struggled in different areas. In particular, the situation of the woman who had negative experiences with the program serves as a reminder that what works for some women does not necessarily work for everyone. Some women require extra support and a different approach to tackling their personal issues. The program director, as well as myself, need to remain committed to helping each woman individually and paying close attention to areas where the women may develop negative feelings towards the program and themselves. Also, conflicts between the women need to be effectively addressed, as they can completely change a woman's outlook on the program. Some conflicts can be ignored and brushed off, but careful

attention needs to be paid to prevent women from feeling threatened or hurt by another woman's actions and words. This will ensure that each woman is receiving the maximum benefit from the program.

In sum, this chapter has introduced the main findings constructed from the interviews. The participants' journeys through the program, from beginning to ending, were discussed. The first set of themes highlighted women's experiences with the program, noting the importance of a safe environment, stability and connections in their lives. The second set of themes related to discovering a new sense of self in terms of learning skills, gaining confidence and self-esteem, and empowerment.

Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusion

This section discusses the conclusions and implications stemming from the research study. First, a brief summary of the research project and the central findings and conclusions are provided. Next, the findings regarding the women's experiences with the WOW program and its value are linked back to the literature and to the lives and needs of women living in poverty. The strengths and weaknesses of the research process are summarized. This dialogue leads to a discussion on the significance of the study and its contributions to the literature. Next, the implications of the study for practice are examined. Suggestions are also given for future research. Finally, my personal reflections on the research study as a whole are given.

Summary

This study involved interviews with eight women who had completed the six-month WOW program. It also included an interview with the program director. I have been volunteering with this program in different capacities since July, 2008.

The main purpose of this study was to examine the meanings, experiences and outcomes of the program from the participants' perspectives. The study was guided by a socialist feminist framework, which provided direction for the study as a whole, as well as an understanding that women's experiences are greatly influenced by gender, class, race/ethnicity, disability, and their role as mothers. A grounded theory approach was adopted to assist in the development of themes. Initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding was used to highlight and refine important aspects brought up by the women during the interviews. This process led to the development of two sets of themes and subthemes. One set of themes related to the women's experiences with the program. The experiences that were particularly important to the women were a safe environment, stability and connections to others. A safe environment

was associated with the opportunity to 'open up' to others within a non-judgmental atmosphere. Stability was linked to economic stability, both being able to provide for themselves and their families and freedom from financial dependence on others. Scheduling stability was also important, including the provision of enjoyable leisure activities to look forward to. Finally, strong social connections allowed the women to give and receive advice and to develop feelings of community and family, even though these connections were not always free of conflict. The second set of themes related to the how these experiences and involvement with the program led to a changing sense of self. This 'new sense of self' included the development of skills, heightened confidence and empowerment. Women gained both work and life skills. Confidence was discussed as feeling proud, capable and strong, and was also associated with gains in self-esteem. Finally, the women talked about empowerment as feeling capable of success, within the context of watching others succeed, and desiring to help other women in the future.

It was concluded that the program's success depended on the women having positive experiences with the program. These positive experiences had a tremendous impact on the women's lives. Further, the conclusions indicated the importance of programs which address the wide range of issues and challenges that women living in poverty face in their lives. The holistic nature of the WOW program benefitted women in all areas of their lives, including their relationships, families, communities, work and leisure. It was also evident that the women's individual needs differed. Thus, an awareness of intersectionality (gained from socialist feminism), and the multiple oppressions that women living in poverty face, was important in terms of enhancing understanding of the women's lives and needs as well as the importance of awareness of diversity in the design and implementation of programs.

The Importance of Safety, Stability and Connections

The first set of themes related to aspects of the program that shaped the women's experiences. The notion of a safe environment was very important for women who needed to open up and share their thoughts, feelings and past experiences with the group. For these women, having a safe place to talk was vital to moving on from their difficulties. A non-judgmental atmosphere was central to creating a safe environment. Women who felt sheltered from the judgment of others felt safe to talk openly with the group. However, women who felt judged by others in the group did not feel safe to talk about themselves. Stability, such as economic stability, was very significant as it allowed the women to provide for themselves and their families. Further, economic stability allowed the women to cut financial ties to family members and the welfare system. The women also found stability in the scheduling of the program. They enjoyed having a routine and purpose and something to look forward to. Finally, connecting with other women in the group was a key factor of the program for the participants. They were able to give and receive advice with the group. The women interviewed often described their connection to the group in terms of family and community. However, the women also discussed conflicts within the group. The way these conflicts were dealt with played a strong role in the women's experiences with the program.

The safe environment provided by the program gave the participants the opportunity to talk to others about their past experiences and any problems they were dealing with. Living in poverty is associated with many struggles, such as unemployment (Burman, 1988; Kappel Ramji Consulting Group, 2002), poor physical and emotional/mental health (CRIAOW, 2005; National Council of Welfare, 2006b), and isolation from community and family (Burman, 1996; Mitchell, 2008). Mothers also face additional stresses as a result of living in poverty

(CRIAW, 2005; Mosher et al., 2004; Short, 2005). Being able to talk about these struggles was particularly important for the women in this study because it was rare for them to be able to talk freely about these concerns. The program, though, encouraged them to talk about their stresses and to 'vent' about their problems in an empathetic environment. Further, the diverse backgrounds of women living in poverty (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2004; CRIAW, 2005; FAFIA, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2006c) mean that there are a wide range of different problems that they face. Immigrant women, for example, face a number of oppressions in their lives (Mosher et al., 2004), and the women in this study who had immigrated to Canada discussed the need to talk to the group about their experiences. This was particularly important for them because they did not have support systems in Canada. The program provided an outlet for them to talk about their feelings. A safe environment to talk about difficulties was also very important for single mothers. For women with children, managing to care for their children while living in poverty is a full-time job from which there is no relief (CRIAW, 2005). The program, though, provided relief for single mothers as it gave them a break from the strains of daily life and gave them a chance to discuss their struggles with others. Further, Cascardi and O'Leary (1992) found that many women leaving abusive relationships experience severe depression. In this study, the program created a safe environment that allowed one woman in particular to open up about her problems and experiences, which she found very meaningful. In general, the program environment provided a place for women to vent and cry, which they found to be extremely important. According to Coates (1996), opening up and letting go of personal issues can be therapeutic, providing validation for women who face extreme difficulties in their lives. Similarly, this study also

showed that most of the women who talked about their difficulties, feelings and experiences felt validated and comforted by the other women in the group.

A non-judgmental atmosphere was found to be significant in terms of contributing to a safe environment for women to talk about themselves. In Coates' (1996) study, one woman stated that: "I could come here and say, 'My life's fallen apart' and that would be fine" (p.23). This kind of non-judgmental support was also vital to the women in this study and allowed them to talk freely about their issues. Many people living in poverty are negatively affected by stigmatization from the greater community (Crowe, 2007; Stapleton, 2007). A non-judgmental atmosphere allowed these women to discuss the problems of living in poverty without the stigma. The emphasis placed on creating a non-threatening environment in the WOW program seemed to be unique and was shown to be particularly important for mothers, who were sheltered from societal expectations about what constitutes a "good mother" (Hays, 1996). Mosher et al. (2004) found that many mothers receiving welfare support felt their parenting qualities were always under suspicion. The non-judgmental atmosphere created in this program allowed these mothers to speak out about their issues without worrying about other people's judgements.

The stability provided by this program was also important to the women interviewed. Prior to the program, many of the women were living in uncertainty. The program gave them a sense of purpose and a more concrete way of life, economically and in their daily lives. For several of the women, the wages they received from the program gave them a sense of economic stability which they had rarely experienced before. They were able to financially care for themselves and their families. Previous research has shown that mothers living in poverty spend most of their time finding ways to care for their children (e.g., CRIAW, 2005).

With the economic stability provided by the program, the mothers in this study were able to spend their time achieving their own goals instead of worrying about how to provide for their families. In a study done by the Kappel Ramji Consulting Group (2002), seventy-six percent of women reported receiving social assistance, but only sixteen percent felt they were receiving an adequate income. Many of the women interviewed for this study had been receiving welfare support, which, as they said, was simply not enough to live on. Women in Burman's (1988) study deprived themselves of clothing and self-care items they could not afford. Women in this study were able to buy essentials and other things they would not normally have bought for themselves, for example the participant who bought herself her first winter coat.

Another aspect of economic stability was freedom from dependence on others through the acquisition of financial capital. This was particularly vital for women who are survivors of abuse. The woman in this study who was a survivor of an abusive relationship found great emotional strength through her financial independence from the welfare system, her abuser and her family. Previously Mosher et al. (2004) found that many women return to their abuser because it is too difficult to survive on welfare support alone. In this study, the woman spoke to the power of being independent and mentioned that without the financial support the program provided, she might have returned to her abuser as well. In general, the women in this study did not like receiving welfare support. The people in Burman's (1996) study had similar feelings of being 'on the system'. They felt that their welfare case workers did not understand their circumstances (Burman, 1996). Mosher et al.'s (2004) study also showed that women felt scrutinized and under suspicion by the welfare system. For a short period of time, the WOW program pulled the women out of the oppressive clutches of the welfare system. Women receiving welfare prior to starting the program tremendously enjoyed their financial freedom.

This was a small but important step to overcoming the oppression these women faced in their lives. The power women feel from being 'off the system' is not a new contribution to the literature. However, this study indicated that programs that provide economic assistance to women so that they can become economically independent help them re-gain a sense of control over their lives.

The women interviewed also found stability and meaning in the scheduling of the program. In particular, they looked forward to spending Fridays with the group as it gave them the chance to further develop their connections with one another. They viewed it as a break and as fun. Leisure for women living in poverty is not often recognized, but viewing Fridays as leisure was beneficial for the participants and made their experience with the program more positive. Further, having something to look forward to was very significant for women who were dealing with difficulties on a daily basis. This discovery is similar to Klitzing's findings (2002; 2003) that leisure for women living in poverty may help them cope with their lives. In this study, leisure helped the women cope with the demands of their placements and home lives. Having fun was extremely valuable to their experiences with the program. Further, having a scheduled, stable life gave the women in this study purpose and a reason to wake up every morning. Unemployed people in Burman's (1988) study often felt they were simply killing time and felt no value or meaning in their everyday lives. These participants tended to dichotomize good and bad times, where, 'good time' was spent doing productive activities, while 'bad time', "was devoid of event or variety" (Burman, 1988, p.148). Further, 'good time' was desired but opportunities were rare. The WOW program, on the other hand, gave the women something meaningful to do each weekday. They were able to be productive and work

towards achieving their goals. The women in this program found meaning in their daily lives through the structured schedule.

Many people living in poverty are isolated from family, friends and their communities (Burman, 1988; Mitchell, 2008; Khandor & Mason, 2007; Reid et al., 2002; Pippert, 2007). Further, unemployed immigrant women also deal with high levels of community exclusion and isolation (Man, 2004; Mojab, 1999). The women interviewed in this study highly valued the connections they developed with other women in the group, through sharing their thoughts and talking about their problems and difficulties within the safe environment provided. This created strong bonds between the women. Having opportunities to socialize and take part in leisure activities with the group further deepened the social connections among the women. Many of these relationships continued after the program had ended.

Giving and receiving advice was a key aspect in connecting with the group and forming relationships. Burman (1996) states that: “Lower-income people are often creative and proactive in cultivating mutual aid networks... where subtle reciprocities and skills exchanges allow people to give without diminishing the recipient” (p.181). Consistent with Burman, the current study found that mutual exchanges without negative consequences were helpful to many of the women in the group. Wheeler (1999) also found that women use conversation to establish rapport, and they feel closer when they share similar problems. The time for group discussion gave women in the WOW program the opportunity to exchange ideas and advice. The women felt they shared similar circumstances, which allowed them to share ideas and advice with one another. In particular, new mothers appreciated the advice and support they received from the other mothers in the group.

Connections among participants were also evident in the way they talked about the sense of community or sense of family that the program facilitated. Some of the women in this study had contact with their families, but many of their families did not provide much support. Further, about half of the women in this study were removed geographically from their families, adding to their isolation and lack of social support. Pippert's (2007) study found that many men living in poverty have little or no family contact. Burman (1988) also found that unemployed people socialize much less than when they were unemployed, adding to their isolation. The WOW program, though, promoted inclusion of all of the women and a conscious effort was made to encourage positive interactions and social circles among the participants. The feelings of community and family discussed throughout the interviews were shown to be very valuable for all of the women, whether they were single mothers, had recently moved to Canada, or were living in sustained poverty. Thus this study confirms previous research that has suggested that a sense of belonging and acceptance can be facilitated among people who share similar circumstances and difficulties (e.g., Downing-Orr's 1996 study with homeless youth).

The idea of close connections as "family" also relates to Bella's (2002) concept of "family making": that is, that when people come to care for one another through leisure and rituals this can lead to the construction of a "sense of family". The women in this study talked about the importance of being together on Fridays. Many of them would go for lunch every week together. They enjoyed participating in the activities together, and through these activities came to care deeply for one another. Further, they often referred to the group of women in the program as 'family'. This construction of family was even more important to women who were removed geographically or socially from their immediate families. Also, it

was evident that this sense of family or sense of community improved the quality of women's lives not only within, but also beyond the context of the program. Many women mentioned that these relationships and support systems had carried over after the program ended, decreasing their sense of isolation and increasing their access to social supports in their daily lives.

Some of the women interviewed experienced conflict with other group members. Most of the women thought that conflict in a group of women was natural, and many were able to work through their difficulties by talking or choosing to ignore the problem. Much of this conflict centred on conflicting opinions between women. Wheeler (1999) found that, in conversation, many women want others to agree with their points of view and prefer not to be challenged. However, in this group, where openness and honesty was valued, the women may have felt free to disagree and challenge others. Nevertheless, one woman who was not able to work out conflict with another group member developed negative feelings about the program and her overall experiences within the program were hindered.

A New Sense of Self: Skill Development, Confidence and Empowerment

The second set of themes described the value or benefits the women received through participation in the program, not only in terms of learning new skills but also developing a new sense of self. The women highly valued learning both work and life skills. The women felt that learning work skills set them up to succeed in the future careers. Further, they felt that learning life skills helped them in their relationships, family and personal lives. The participants also gained a tremendous amount of confidence through their participation in the program. They felt strong, proud and capable which helped in their daily lives and they believed would help in their futures as well. Confidence was important for almost all of the women, but mothers expressed that feeling confident helped in their family role as well. The women also gained

self-esteem through the program. They learned to take time for themselves and view themselves as beautiful. This also led to feelings of worthiness, and the women found that they began taking better care of themselves. Further, the skills, confidence and worthiness all appeared to contribute to a growing sense of empowerment that the women felt as a result of their participation in the program. They described empowerment as feeling capable of success and achieving their goals. In addition, watching other women succeed in the program made them feel even more empowered and capable of personal achievement. For some women, feelings of empowerment led to a desire to help other women in the future and to pass on lessons they had learned in the program.

Similar to the findings of the Kappel Ramji Consulting Group study (2002), the importance of learning new skills and gaining pre-employment training provided the women in this study with a bridge to the work environment. People experiencing long term unemployment face many barriers to entering the work force including lack of appropriate work skills (Burman, 1988). Learning work skills was very valuable for women who had little work experience. These skills were also particularly important for women who had recently moved to Canada. Prior to the program, without Canadian work experience and references, they had found it difficult to find good jobs. Statistics Canada reports (2006a, 2006c) demonstrate the difficulty immigrant women face with regard to finding employment in their field. Burman's (1988) study with unemployed youth also found that a major constraint was the, "mountainous obstacle of lack of experience" (p.38). Finding employment without experience is a vicious cycle since people are not able to get experience without employment first (Burman, 1988). Through the WOW program, women gained work skills and experience.

In addition, this skill training was provided within the security of paid work, at least for the duration of the program.

Learning life skills was of additional significance for the WOW participants. The women noted that these kinds of skills are not taught through traditional educational programs. There are a number of studies on life skills training for youth-at-risk (for example, Botvin & Kantor, 2000; Moote & Wadarski, 1997) and for people with disabilities (for example, Cronin, 1996). However, there are no studies examining the benefits of life skills training for women living in poverty. In the current study, though, these skills were found to help the women to address a range of problems that they faced in their lives. In particular, the skills they learned in the program helped them improve their relationships with partners and family.

Learning skills through the WOW program positively contributed to the women's level of confidence. While learning skills for employment gave the women confidence in their current and future careers, learning life skills gave the women confidence to deal with other issues in their lives. However, skill development was not the only contributing factor to the women's increased confidence. Coates' (1996) study found that women's talk often validated issues in their lives, which boosted their confidence. For women in this study, being able to open up about their issues and get advice from other women in similar circumstances gave them strength. Further, having strong social connections and the support of a community/family increased their confidence to be able to deal with a range of different life issues.

Women living in poverty often internalize self-blame for their circumstances (CRIAW, 2005). People in both Mosher et al.'s (2004) and Burman's (1988) studies felt as though they had lost control over their lives and could not re-gain their power. Lewis (1963) also discusses

that many people living in poverty feel inferior, unworthy and helpless, and the CRIAW report notes that: “Being poor limits your choices... Poverty grinds you down, body and soul” (p.4). Gaining confidence through the WOW program allowed the women in this study to feel better about many areas of their lives, including work, relationships with family friends and parenting. Through this program, women gained strength to take control of their lives, which made them feel proud and capable. Further, the women could back-up their new level of confidence with work and life skills, which made them feel even more capable of success. They also felt proud of the changes they had made in their lives. In this way the program had a positive impact on the way they viewed themselves.

For many of the women, increased confidence in different areas of their lives led to increased self-esteem. Many women living in poverty suffer from low self-esteem (CRIAW, 2005). Some people have such little self-worth that they see themselves as unworthy of care (Burman, 1988). Both Short (2005) and Mosher et al., (2004) found that mothers living in poverty will sacrifice their own needs in order to care for their children. Further, Mosher et al. (2004) found that women who had experienced domestic abuse had very low self-esteem. Low self-esteem can affect many areas of a woman’s life, and not just areas related to employment. Further, an impoverished lifestyle is often accompanied by high levels of stress (Khandor & Mason, 2007) and these stresses may also lead to unhealthy coping behaviours (CRIAW, 2005). Many of the women in this study gained motivation to take better care of themselves, which continued after the program ended. This indicated that they had started to feel worthy of care. For example, they cared more about diet and health issues as well as personal appearance. Taking time for the self can be a positive leisure experience for women (Henderson et al., 1996). By taking care of themselves, the women in this study were also better equipped to deal

with any continuing stresses in their lives. Economic stability also acted as a springboard for women to improve other areas of their lives, which is another important contribution of this study. Financial stability allowed them to take care of themselves in ways they could not before. Mothers were also able to afford to care for themselves and their children with their income. In addition, the women were motivated to deal with unhealthy behaviours, such as smoking and drugs. Since women living in poverty are more susceptible to health problems (CRIA, 2005), this was particularly beneficial. All of these changes related to health and self-care suggest that the women's gains in confidence were also associated with gains in self-esteem. Feeling strong and proud made them feel more worthy of self-care. These gains were beneficial not only in terms of their work lives and work potential, but also in other aspects of their lives as well.

Seven of the women interviewed indicated that they felt strong and capable of success as a result of their experiences in the program. The women indicated that these feelings were strongly linked to the skills they learned through the program and their gains in confidence and self-esteem. When the women felt good overall, it led to feelings of empowerment. Dierckx's (2009) research shows that people are empowered through increasing access to tools (basic needs, social networks, political participation) and increasing capabilities (economic/human, socio-cultural, political), which in turn develops a person's protective capabilities to withstand adversity. Dierckx (2009) believes that these factors can lead to poverty eradication, a suggestion which this research study supports. Dierckx (2009) states that, "Empowerment at the micro level is considered to increase individuals' capacity to deal with daily affairs" (p.14). This helps people plan for the future, allowing them to re-take control over their lives, and bring themselves out of poverty (Dierckx, 2009). This study, therefore, adds to the argument

that boosting skills, confidence, self-esteem and subsequently empowerment are central to women's success in changing their lives, and can end the cycle of poverty for women and their families.

Feminist scholars have tended to define empowerment in terms of increased capability, rather than power and dominance over others (see Bunch & Frost, 2000; Morley, 1998). In this sense, empowerment reflects the potential of those who have been oppressed to bring change to their lives (Bunch & Frost, 2000). In a discussion on power, Bunch and Frost (2000) state that feminist scholars have distinguished 'power over', "from 'power to', conceived as the ability to determine the course of one's life and actively to participate in society and culture" (p.555). This feminist conceptualization of empowerment seems fitting for the program studied, as the women described empowerment in terms of personal strength and capabilities. The findings of this study demonstrated that the women underwent several changes in their lives which gave them a sense of personal power and control.

Women in this study were also empowered through watching others in the group succeed. They had close relationships with one another and felt more capable as they saw others in the program achieve their goals. This is an idea that deserves more attention in the literature on empowerment, and may be relevant to other disempowered populations as well. The idea of advocating for others and for social change has been linked to empowerment by Dierckx (2009), who says that community empowerment can be seen as a "social action process by which individuals, communities and organizations gain mastery over their lives in the context of changing their social and political environment to improve equity and quality of life" (p.8). Further, Henderson et al. (1996) have made links between women's leisure and social change. That is, once an individual is personally empowered, she or he may engage in

community empowerment to further affect change in other people's lives. In this study, two of the women found themselves wanting to advocate for others as well. This suggests that they themselves felt empowered, and also that their empowerment might well lead to positive social change for other women in the future. This is another important finding of this study and indicates an additional potential benefit of the program both for the participants themselves and for other women in the community.

The changes that the women experienced can also be seen as the development of social capital among the participants. Putnam (1995) states that social capital refers to, "features of social life- networks, norms and trust- that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (p.664). Coleman (1990) conceptualizes social capital as useful resources developed in community social organizations. Fabricant and Fisher (2002) argue that non-profit organizations are in a unique position to facilitate the development of social capital in poor communities. They state, "Direct service provision offers a basis for establishing the relationship and trust necessary to build both extended social networks or capital and political capital" (Fabricant & Fisher, 2002, p.4). As demonstrated in the findings, this development of resources or social capital through the WOW program influenced many areas of the women's lives. Trust was developed by the creation of a safe environment, as the women developed strong ties with each other. By working together as a group, sharing and exchanging ideas, information and advice, the women's lives were positively affected, ultimately leading to empowerment.

While building social capital may be extremely important for women, and women living in poverty, the role of gender in social capital has been largely ignored (see Lowndes, 2004). Thus, we do not fully understand the influence of social capital on women's lives. This

study supports Lowndes' (2004) belief that women use social capital, "as a resource for getting by- for balancing the competing demands of home and work for protecting their own and their families' health and well-being" (p.61). This belief was also supported by Parry and Glover's (2008) work, in which women experiencing infertility developed social capital through their relationships. In Parry and Glover's (2008) study, women's social capital influenced their health and well-being through expressive action (being able to talk/vent and receive support), instrumental action (gaining information), and also negatively through obstructive action (developing negative feelings). These findings are similar to the findings of this study, in which women gained expressive and instrumental action. Further, this study supports the idea that women's relationships can also result in obstructive action and negative feelings. However, in this study, the social capital the women developed with each other (as well as the organization) had a mostly positive influence on their lives.

The themes constructed are interrelated and affect each other in different ways. When participants felt safe, stable and connected to the program, they were able to make significant, positive changes in their lives. Conditions such as a safety, stability and connectedness ultimately led to outcomes such as skill development, confidence and empowerment. Specifically, the safe environment and the close connections with other women, as well as the job skills and life skills training, helped them to raise their self-esteem, confidence and sense of empowerment. During the placement phase of the program, the Friday sessions were essential to furthering the outcomes of the program. Spending Fridays as a group allowed the women to deepen connections with one another, allowed time for support in a safe environment, and provided opportunities for leisure. These interrelationships among the themes indicate the importance of a holistic program to address the issues that women living in poverty face.

Further, this serves to emphasize the importance of recognizing the diverse needs of women living in poverty and the importance of providing support in all areas of their lives. By meeting women's needs in a holistic way, the program was able to provide a "hand up" to women living in poverty. In contrast, narrowly focused employment and training programs seem to be less effective in changing women's sense of self and improving their lives as a whole. For example, an earlier study by Mosher et al. (2004) found that "band-aid" programs such as welfare do not necessarily empower women or succeed in bringing them out of poverty. Two of the women interviewed in this study had taken courses offered by Ontario Works, but reported relatively few benefits. For example, Maria said that she finished the program, "[b]ut it just wasn't really worth it". This may have been because of the relatively narrow focus of Ontario Works on job training. The WOW program may have been more successful because of its broad focus and holistic nature which addressed the diversity of needs and concerns within the group of women involved. Thus programs that work to empower women may be more able to bring women and their families out of poverty, to help them to rise above economic oppression, to become economically self-sufficient, and to succeed in all areas of their lives.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research Process

One of the strengths of the research process was my close involvement with the program and knowing the participants. I believe that my relationship with the women was very valuable in terms of enhancing connections, insights and understanding. It seemed that the women trusted me and were comfortable talking about the program in relation to their lives, which provided a richness of data. Our knowing each other made the interviews relaxed and casual. The participants and I had shared our lives with each other for six months, so they

seemed to be at ease talking about their experiences with the program knowing I had gone through the process with them. Further, since I am a volunteer and considered a member of the group, I feel that the women were able to freely talk about issues they had within the program, and give recommendations to make it better in the future.

During the interviews, some of the women asked, “Is that what you’re looking for”? I took these opportunities to remind them that I was not looking for any specific answers and just wanted to hear their thoughts. I told them that I wanted to hear about both their good and bad experiences. There were times during the interviews where some of the women seemed uncomfortable expressing their difficulties with the program. However, with reassurance that this kind of information would also help the study and that I would make sure the information could not be traced back to them, they were able to open up more about any problems they had experienced. I believe that they trusted me, and though some needed re-assurance, I was able to get considerable insight into their experiences and feelings about the program.

My relationship with the program and the participants also helped during the analysis of the interviews and structuring the findings. Since I have an understanding the program, I was able to provide further information about the program itself and the women’s experiences. I had to constantly consider my role in the program and how it affected my interpretation of the findings. Although the findings represent a co-construction of the women and my own experiences and feelings, I attempted to keep their voices were at the forefront, supplemented by my own opinions and experiences only when appropriate.

Another valuable aspect of this study was the use of a semi-structured interview guide. Open-ended questions were asked that allowed the women to talk about their diverse personal experiences and situations. Although I had a set of questions I wanted to cover during the

interviews, the interviews were largely guided by the participants. I was able to ask for clarification when needed, probe for more information and validate the women's experiences and feelings. Some topics were brought up that I had not anticipated, and I was able to explore these areas and their relevance for each woman. I also know a lot about the women I interviewed, so I was able to ask questions that fit within the context of their lives. Further, my interview with the program director was very exploratory and unguided. This gave her the freedom to talk about things she felt were important about the program.

The adoption of a grounded theory approach was very useful for this study as well. The exploratory nature of the grounded theory process was helpful as little is known about these types of programs. Also, this approach helped me to continuously reflect on the program and the women's comments. Understanding the women's experiences within the program and the changes they went through can provide insight and a point of reference for similar studies in the future. Further, grounded theories provide 'snapshots' into time. This was important for this study as every group that goes through the program is different. The study showed that women who come from very different backgrounds may not have the same experiences. Thus, it is important to note that the findings of this study may not necessarily be relevant for all women who take the program.

One of the things that initially surprised me in the research process was that some of the interview participants knew other women who had or were going to participate in the study. Many of the women interviewed knew each other and some of them are still in regular contact. I was always neutral in my responses when they talked about other women's participation in the study. I do not have reason to believe that the women's communication with each other affected the interview process.

Confidentiality was a major concern when I started this study. Due to some of the women's specific challenges and backgrounds, I could not always provide details about how the program affected the situations in their lives without violating confidentiality. When I sent the women their interview transcripts, one asked me to not mention one of the issues she was dealing with. I do not feel that this took away from the study as a whole, although it was a limitation.

Significance of the Study

This study was aimed towards the development of a theoretical understanding of the role of the WOW program for women living in poverty. The program is focused on overcoming barriers to employment, which is an extremely difficult problem that many women living in poverty face. However, this study indicated that it is the broader, holistic aspects of the program that make it particularly very valuable for the participants. Both pre-employment training and personal development were shown to be essential components to the women's success in the program. Learning necessary skills was also a very important aspect. However, the study highlighted the importance of addressing other areas of women's lives as well, such as gaining self-esteem, confidence and empowerment. These gains affect all areas of women's lives, including employment but also their relationships, family, community and leisure lives as well. Analysis of the experiences and changing sense of self for the women in the program draws attention to the significance of a holistic program that takes a broad perspective on the lives of the participants involved. This idea has received relatively little attention in the literature to date but may be important for other marginalized groups as well.

This study has demonstrated that programs can affect the lives of women living in poverty in a positive way. It has also showed aspects of the program which assisted in the

women's development of a new sense of self. Researchers and service providers can gain a greater understanding of the importance of creating a program environment that is stable, safe and supportive for women. Further, this study has given voice to the women interviewed by giving them the chance to express their opinions and changes they went through during the program. In many of the studies about women living in poverty, the voices of the women themselves are too often absent. This study brought in the voices of the women in the program and this enhanced insight and theoretical understanding. There a lack of other literature exploring the outcomes of similar programs for women living in poverty. Thus, this study has filled an important gap.

As discussed in the literature review, feminist scholars recognize that women's equality is far from being achieved (Kourany, Sterba and Tong, 1992). In particular, women living in poverty often deal with much oppression. In addition to gender oppression, they also face oppressions due to their race/ethnicity, sexuality, and disability. Single mothers deal with further oppression. Kim's (2007) notion of 'triple oppression' was a very valuable lens used in this study. The women in the program had different needs. This lens helped me understand that the women interviewed had very different experiences within the program, and that the program had different meanings in their lives. These differences in experience and subsequently meanings were discussed throughout the findings. Pheonix and Brah's (2004) discussion on intersectionality suggests that, "different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands" (p.76). This statement has particular relevance for the current study. First, it supports the idea of looking at the broad context of women's lives. Second, it shows how the program, which addressed a broad range of life problems, helped the participants not only in terms of work skills and experiences, but also personal skills,

confidence, self-esteem and self-care. Together these new skills and perspectives seemed to help the women to gain control over their lives. At the same time, it is also important to point out that the experiences and meanings associated with the program did vary due to different life circumstances. It is my hope that throughout the findings, each woman's situated experience was recognized.

Implications for Practice

Many of the women interviewed for this study wished that the program had been longer. Most of them wanted the program to last a full year. With proper funding, perhaps this will be possible in the future and may allow the program to help women even more. Both the pre-employment training and placement period of the program were seen as very important. The desire for a longer program demonstrates the high value of the program in the women's lives. More pre-employment training, such as career coaching, computer training, and hands-on practical preparation may help the women achieve even greater success in their future careers. Further, teaching the program participants how to write letters to decision-makers may help them to advocate for better services for themselves and for other women. Self-care workshops may further contribute to increases in women's self-esteem. Finally, giving the women more resources at the end of the program may set them up to better handle difficulties in the future. These aspects, if implemented, may give further value and significance to the program.

Some of the negative experiences discussed in the interviews also have implications for practice. For example, one of the women felt judged and threatened by another group member and this negatively affected her experiences with the program. This speaks to the importance of creating a non-judgmental atmosphere in programs for women living in poverty. This also

suggests the need to pay close attention to possible conflicts and judgements among participants. This issue may be particularly difficult to address, but indicates the need for vigilance and the need to find ways to prevent interpersonal conflicts. The WOW program is very individually focused and the director tries to cater to each woman's unique needs. However, what works for some women may not always work for others. Some women may have more difficulties and need more support, during both the training and placement periods.

This study has the potential to assist other programs that help women as well. By understanding the importance and striving to create programs in which women feel safe, stable and supported, other programs may be able to facilitate similar outcomes for women, such as self-esteem, confidence and empowerment. Safety, stability and support were found to be the three unwritten pillars on which this program stands, and these can be a model for other programs. Perhaps these are aspects that the Ontario Works system and other non-profit organizations could incorporate into their programs. Further, any program that works towards employment could use this program as a model for addressing the issues that affect the women's lives and that may impede success and empowerment. There needs to be opportunities for program participants to work on themselves and their personal barriers and gain experience in areas they find meaningful. Further, making connections, having fun, and having something enjoyable to look forward to each week were also found to be important. Perhaps other organizations that support women living in poverty should consider building these types of activity into their programs. In sum, the holistic perspective adopted by this program proved to be very valuable for the participants. Other programs may adopt a similar perspective to meet the needs of women living in poverty.

Due to this research, the WOW program director can now say with certainty that many women are gaining important skills, feelings of confidence, self-esteem and empowerment. As demonstrated, this can help in many areas of their lives, and will certainly contribute to their future careers. The program also contributes to breaking cycles (for example, of violence and generational poverty). A single mother learned that she did not need to return to an abusive relationship to provide for herself and her child. Another woman described the powerful emotion she felt because of getting out of poverty for the first time in her life. She was stuck in the cycle of welfare but was able to break through and see the benefits of being financially independent. She was able to buy herself her first winter coat. She also spoke about the personal importance of doing things she could not do as a child, such as making her own stuffed bear. These stories speak to the power of changing people's lives, of offering a "hand-up" and not merely "hand-outs". This knowledge of the value of the program can be used in the future to justify more funding to better or expand the program. This knowledge can also be used to argue for starting similar programs in the community, such as a program for women over the age of thirty.

This study has the potential to contribute to community understanding on the multiple issues and barriers that women living in poverty face to employment and economic self-sufficiency. It is my goal to provide information from this study to the community about the ways in which women living in poverty need to be supported. Poverty is not simply an issue of unemployment and economics. All areas of the women's lives are affected. The findings of this study demonstrate that women's poverty is not simply overcome by giving women a job. Many women require employment supports, such as help with child care and transportation. Pre-employment training is very valuable. Further, they need assistance and support to change the

ways in which they view themselves. Women who feel good about themselves and worthy and capable of success are much more likely to succeed in future employment. This information will be shared with the community in hopes that we can better support women in the future.

Socialist feminists take into account women's oppression in both productive and reproductive labour (Tuana & Tong, 1995). In this study, women were able to keep their commitment to their families while succeeding in the workforce as well. However, it is also known that, "Employed women are far more likely than their male counterparts to lose time from their jobs because of personal or family responsibilities" (Statistics Canada, 2006c, p.14). This understanding demonstrates the need for employers to be sensitive to mother's priorities, especially single mothers. If more single mothers are given the opportunity to work in environments that are sensitive to their needs, we can decrease the extreme levels of poverty that they and their children face. In particular, mothers need to be able to take time off to care for sick children when necessary. There needs to be advocacy for flexibility towards mothers in the workforce, such as the flexibility provided in this program. Further, there should be supports put into place for employed mothers, such as childcare centers open outside of non-traditional work hours, including weekends. Sarvasy and Van Allen called for a national child care program in 1984, yet this call has still not been heard. With sensitivity and proper supports in place, many more mothers will be able to succeed in the workforce, and the extreme poverty of mothers and their children can be decreased.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study has shown that it is important to find out what makes programs for people living in poverty effective, and to understand what works or does not work in these programs. The study also demonstrates the importance of researchers working with service providers to

better understand the needs of their participants and to enhance the effectiveness of their programs. It is my hope that the recommendations previously discussed, if implemented, would serve to ensure that women are getting the most value from their program participation. Other organizations providing similar programs could also recruit researchers or become involved in collaborative research in order to learn more about the value of their programs in the participants' lives.

Although this study did not specifically focus on single mothers, it did show that the program played a particularly significant role for women with children. Future studies could focus on the specific needs of single mothers and the value of this type of community program. For example, what are the carry-over effects of these types of programs? How are programs better able to meet the needs of single mothers and help them transition into the workforce? How are the children affected by their mother's participation?

A similar study could also be done to examine the effect and role that community programs may have in the lives of immigrant women. The current study did not specifically probe the issues that immigrant women face with regard to finding employment and other concerns. There is a considerable amount of statistical information about the employment issues immigrant women face, but a lack of qualitative information on how these issues affect other aspects of their lives. Further, there is no information on the role and meaning of employment programs for these women other than the small amount of data this study provided. Future studies could give more in-depth attention to the role these types of programs play in the lives of immigrant women.

Having the opportunity to work with women living in poverty, the placement partners of the WOW program have witnessed firsthand the struggles that women face. However, many

of them have also witnessed the power of offering women a better way of life and learned that they are capable of success. They have learned the importance of mentoring women to learn important skills and work through their barriers to employment. In the future, research could be done with the community partners on their experiences with the program and their attitudes towards the women. This research would further engage the community in the program and may point to useful suggestions to better these partnerships.

One of the findings of this study was that women were not only empowered by their own success in the program, but through watching others succeed as well. This is a new contribution to the literature on empowerment, and is something that could be studied in the future. This idea may be applicable to the empowerment of other marginalized groups as well. Studies could focus specifically on how people may be empowered through others' success. Also, some of the women who were empowered in this study expressed a desire to help others as well. Perhaps future research could examine the 'spill-over' empowerment effect of community programs such as this.

Future research conducted with women living in poverty and in vulnerable situations should strive to ensure that the women are comfortable and have strong rapport with the researcher. I firmly believe that the data from this study would not be as rich if I did not have such good relationships with the interview participants. It was clear that they felt comfortable speaking to me about their experiences with the program within the contexts of their lives. This suggests to me that research with women living in poverty should be conducted by someone the women know, and that researchers need to take the time to get to know the research participants. Also, future research with women living in poverty could benefit from taking a socialist feminist approach, taking into account all aspects of the women's lives, and how this

affects their experiences. In particular, a feminist approach that incorporated the notion of intersectionality was shown to be valuable for working with a diverse group of research participants.

Personal Reflections and Conclusion

Personally, this study has been a learning and growth experience. Journaling and reflexive writing were important parts of the research process. Many of the interviews were filled with emotion that I shared with the women. Writing was used to clear my thoughts. It gave me a stronger connection to the research I was conducting. Writing also gave me insight into the women's feelings towards the program and their lives in general.

Since I started volunteering with the program, I have been challenged to grow and develop in my own life. I had just moved to a new city, away from much of my family and friends. Further, when I started this research, I was diagnosed with a life-changing illness. I lost myself and my joy of life. I began spending a lot of time with the women in the WOW program and we became extremely close. I found friends in the group with whom I still maintain regular contact. Like many of the women in this study, I would go to the group and cry and I am so grateful for all of the support I received during my time of need. The director has become like a mother to me and we have a wonderful relationship. Her mentorship has changed my life. I have been able to re-set goals for myself in the future. I feel better about myself as a woman and much more confident in both my work and personal life. I have learned to not judge myself in the eyes of others. I am very appreciative to have met and continue to have such determined and inspiring women in my life. I very much look forward to continuing my relationship with the organization and program.

I was touched by the openness of the women interviewed and their willingness to share their lives and stories with me. I am so grateful for their rich contributions to this study and for their support of my work. They have taught me that hard work is necessary to rise above difficulties, but that women are capable of overcoming adversity and hardship, especially when given a helping hand. Every interview that I conducted, I was inspired by their dedication to changing their lives. I was moved by the mothers' devotion to their families and to providing a good life for their children. This study gave me hope that despite the off-putting statistics regarding women living in poverty, with the right kind of assistance, individuals and communities are capable of changing and beating the odds.

As previously demonstrated, women are affected by poverty in different ways than men and are at a higher risk for living in poverty (National Council of Welfare, 2006c). Further, mothers (and in particular, single mothers), visible minorities, Aboriginal, and women who have immigrated to Canada are at an even higher risk for living in poverty (FAFIA, 2008; National Council of Welfare, 2006c). I have researched other women's programs in Canada and have found similarities to WOW, but they are only offered for specific groups of women. The program director, who recently participated in a teleconferencing group of service providers for women in Canada, agrees. She commented:

I think that having spoke to a whole bunch of professional people through Canada, there doesn't seem to be any other programs like this... They pertain to addictions or for women that are battered women, women on the streets. They're specific.

The WOW program is distinctive in that it reaches out to many, diverse groups of women who are the most at risk for living in poverty and addresses a broad range of issues of relevance to the women's lives. Programs such as the WOW program are therefore extremely valuable in helping women who are the most vulnerable to poverty in Canada. I highly value the

program's contribution and significance. By providing a safe environment, stability and connections, women were able to learn important skills and discover a new sense of self. This program has pushed women to develop themselves and has given them the necessary tools to be successful in their personal and work lives. This program is working to change the lives of women living in poverty, albeit a few at a time. More research and work such as this is needed to ensure that the needs of women living in poverty are being met in the future.

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Appendix A: Information letter/consent of Executive Director

Department Letterhead

University of Waterloo

Date

Dear Joyelle Rousseau, Executive Director of the Townsville Anti-Poverty Organization:

This letter is to provide you with information about the study that I plan to conduct as part of my Master's degree in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor Susan Shaw, PhD. I would like to provide you with information about the project and what your involvement will entail.

Throughout my volunteer work with the Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) program at The Anti-Poverty Project (TAPO), I have become interested in what kinds of experiences the participants have within the program, and what these experiences mean within the larger contexts of their lives. There are programs across Canada that are similar to WOW, but no research has been done to document the role that these programs play in women's lives. Many non-profit organizations do not have the money, time or resources to conduct research on their programs. This is one reason why I believe this research study is important, and also why I plan to share the results of the study with TAPO. This research will play an important role for women's studies in Canada, and may offer explanations as to why certain aspects of the program are effective, and what areas may be improved upon in the future.

The purpose of this study is to examine the meanings, experiences, and perceptions of the WOW program as told by past program participants. Attention will be paid to how the program addresses the diverse issues that women living in poverty may face in their lives. This will be done by interviewing women who have successfully completed the program.

Participation in this study is voluntary. For the women, it will involve an interview of approximately one hour in length in a private room at the Community Centre. The women's identities will remain completely confidential and there are no known or anticipated risks to participating in the study. With permission, the interview will be recorded and later transcribed for analysis. In order to not put any pressure on the women to participate, I ask that you make the initial phone call to the past participants and provide them with some basic information about the study. After this initial contact, I ask that you send the women an information letter about the study with my contact information should they wish to participate. Ideally, I would like to interview all of the eleven women who completed the program in March, 2009.

Further, with your permission, I would like to use the names of both the WOW program and TAPO in the final research report. You will be able to use the research report for your own purposes after the study is completed. It is my hope that the study can be of benefit to TAPO

and the WOW program in the future, by illuminating approaches that are meaningful to the women, and by pointing to areas that may be improved upon in the future.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information, please contact me at (613) 422-5216 or by email at mclare@ahsmaail.uwaterloo.ca. You can also contact my supervisor, Professor Susan Shaw at (519) 888-4567 ext. 35019 or email sshaw@healthy.uwaterloo.ca.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. If you have any comments or concerns on the ethical considerations for this study, please contact Dr. Susan Sykes of this office at (519) 888-4567 Ext. 36005 or ssykes@uwaterloo.ca.

I hope that the results of my study will be of benefit to the WOW program, TAPO, and other organizations offering similar programs across Canada, as well as the broader research community. I very much look forward to working with you on this project.

Yours Sincerely,

Megan Clare

Consent of Executive Director

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Megan Clare of the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor Sue Shaw, PhD. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

Furthermore, I give permission to the researcher to use the name of The Townsville Anti-Poverty Organization and the Work Opportunities for Women program in the final research report and in any meetings or conferences that result from the study.

_____ -
Print Name

Signature of Executive Director

Dated at Townsville, Ontario

Witnessed (Name and Signature)

Appendix B: Information letter for interview study

Department Letterhead

University of Waterloo

Date

Dear (insert participant's name)

This letter is an invitation to consider participating in a study I am conducting as part of my Master's degree in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Professor Susan Shaw, PhD. This letter will provide you with more information about the project and how you will be involved if you decide to participate.

During my volunteer work with the Work Opportunities for Women (WOW) program at The Townsville Anti-Poverty Organization (TAPO), I have become interested in what kinds of experiences the participants have within the program, and what these experiences mean within their work, home and community lives. There are programs across Canada that are similar to WOW, but no research has been done to document the role that these programs play in women's lives. I believe this is because the non-profit organizations that run these programs do not have the money, time or resources to conduct research. This research will play an important role for women's studies in Canada, and may offer reasons as to why certain aspects of the program are effective, and what areas may be improved upon in the future.

Participation in this study is voluntary. It will involve an interview of approximately one hour in a private room at the Community Centre. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions if you wish. You may also choose to withdraw from the study at any time by informing the researcher, without consequence. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis. After the interview is completed, you will receive a copy of the typed interview and have the opportunity to add, clarify, build on, or remove information. You will also receive information (by mail or email) on the initial findings of the study, and will have the opportunity to support or challenge any of these findings. All information you give is completely confidential. To support the findings of this study, quotations from the interviews will be reported using pseudonyms (made up or fake names). Your name will not appear anywhere in the thesis or any report resulting from this study. However, the WOW program and TAPO will be identified in the thesis and any other publication. Data collected during this study will be stored in a locked drawer in my home. Only I and my supervisor will have access. Audio records will be stored for one year and then confidentially destroyed while transcripts and other data will be stored for three years and then confidentially destroyed. There are no known or expected risks to you as a participant in this study.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Susan

Sykes, Director, Office of Research Ethics, at (519)888-4567 ext. 36005 or ssykes@uwaterloo.ca.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at (555) 555-5555, or by email at mclare@ahsmaail.uwaterloo.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Professor Susan Shaw, PhD at (519)888-4567 ext. 35019, or by email at sshaw@healthy.uwaterloo.ca.

The final decision to participate is solely yours. I hope that the results of my study will be of benefit to the WOW program, TAPO, and other organizations offering similar programs across Canada, as well as the research community. I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance with this project.

Sincerely,
Megan Clare
Townsville, ON
(555) 555-5555

Appendix C: Initial contact script

P = Potential Participant; I = Interviewer

P- Hello. I was given your contact information to get more information about participating in a study.

I – I will give you some information about the study. As you may know, I am a Masters student in the department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. I am currently conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Susan Shaw on the Work Opportunities for Women program. As part of my thesis research, I am conducting interviews with women who have completed the WOW program on the meanings and experiences that you have had with the program and your perceptions on the program's role in your life. You will be free to talk confidentially about any experiences with the program, positive or negative.

As you have completed the WOW program, I would be interested in talking to you about your experiences. Is this a convenient time to give you further information about the interviews?

P - No, could you call back later (agree on a more convenient time to call person back).

OR

P - Yes, could you provide me with some more information regarding the interviews you will be conducting?

I - Background Information:

- I will be undertaking interviews starting right away.
- The interview would last about one hour, and would be arranged for a time convenient to your schedule.
- Involvement in this interview is entirely voluntary and there are no known or anticipated risks to participation in this study.
- The questions are quite general, for example, what did you think of the group environment?
- You may decline to answer any of the interview questions you do not wish to answer and may terminate the interview at any time.
- With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis.

- All information you provide will be considered confidential and you will not be named in any papers written. A pseudonym (made up or fake name) will be used.
- The data collected will be kept in a secure location and disposed of in 3 years time.
- If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact Dr. Susan Shaw at 519-888-4567, Ext. 35019 or sshaw@healthy.uwaterloo.ca.
- I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. However, the final decision about participation is yours. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Susan Sykes in the Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567, Ext. 36005 or ssykes@uwaterloo.ca.
- After your interview has been transcribed, you will receive a copy and have the chance to clarify or build on any information.
- After all of the data have been analyzed, you will receive an executive summary of the research results.

Do you have any questions after reading the information letter you received from Joyelle? (if yes, provide answers). Does this sound like something you may be interested in participating in?

P - No thank you.

OR

P - Sure (get contact information from potential participant i.e., mailing or email address).

I - Thank you very much for your time. Are you able to set up an interview day and time now? (If yes, set up interview. If no, ask when they will know their availability). Once again, if you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at, (613) 422-5216.

P - Good-bye.

I - Good-bye.

Appendix D: Consent form for participants

Consent of Participant

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Megan Clare of the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo under the supervision of Dr. Sue Shaw. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in the thesis and/or publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.

I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact Dr. Susan Sykes the Director, Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ssykes@uwaterloo.ca.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

YES NO

I agree to have my interview audio recorded.

YES NO

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.

YES NO

Participant Name: _____ (Please print)

Participant Signature: _____

Witness Name: _____ (Please print)

Witness Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix E: Feedback and thank you letter for participants

Department Letterhead

University of Waterloo

Date

Dear *(Insert Name of Participant)*,

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study. As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore what kinds of experiences the participants of the Work Opportunities for Women program have within the program, and what these experiences mean within their work, home and community lives.

The data collected during interviews will contribute to a stronger understanding of the role of programs for women who have barriers to employment. The data may also point to suggestions of how to better meet the diverse needs of women in the future.

Please remember that any data pertaining to yourself as an individual participant will be kept confidential. Once all the data are collected and analyzed for this project, I plan on sharing this information with the research community through seminars, conferences, presentations, and journal articles. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of this study, or if you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at either the phone number or email address listed at the bottom of the page. When the study is completed, I will send you a summary of the results. The study is expected to be completed by December, 2009.

As with all University of Waterloo projects involving human participants, this project was reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Waterloo. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact Dr. Susan Sykes in the Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567, Ext., 36005 or ssykes@uwaterloo.ca.

Megan Clare

University of Waterloo
Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies
(555) 555-5555
mclare@ahsmail.uwaterloo.ca

Appendix F: Participant interview guide

Participant Interview Guide

- Ensure that a consent form has been signed and a review of the study has been explained to the participant. Gain permission and signed consent from the participant to audio record the interview (if willing).
1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Anything you feel comfortable with but things like your age, whether you have children, about your living situation, or anything else relevant?
 2. Initial involvement:
 - a. How did you come to be involved with the WOW program?
 - i. How did you find out about the program? (saw flyer, word of mouth, etc.)
 - b. What were your initial expectations?
 3. Activities:
 - a. Can you describe the kinds of activities you have participated in with the WOW program?
 - b. What were you doing?
 - c. How were other people involved?
 - d. What did you think about these activities?
 - i. Were they fun?
 - ii. Were they helpful?
 - iii. Were there activities you would have liked, but did not participate in?
 4. Group environment:
 - a. What did you think about the group environment?
 - i. How were you treated in the group?
 - ii. How did you treat the other participants?
 - iii. How did the group interact with each other?
 - iv. Did you feel like a member of the group? How did you know that you were a member (or not)?
 5. Experiences:
 - a. How would you describe your experience(s) with the WOW program?
 - i. How did you feel at the time?
 - ii. Did your feelings change as the program progressed?
 - iii. How do you feel now?
 - b. What does/did these experiences mean to you?
 - c. What would you say was most meaningful aspect of the program?
 6. Affect on life:
 - a. In what ways did the WOW program affect you and your life? For example,
 - i. Do you feel more financially secure? If yes, how?
 - ii. Have you gained any skills? If so, what kind? Employment skills? Personal skills?
 - iii. Have you changed the way you think about yourself? What about the way you look after/care for yourself? If so, how?

- iv. Has your quality of life improved, gotten worse, stayed the same? In what ways?
 - v. Did the program change the way that you feel as a woman? As a mother?
 - vi. Have your hopes and expectations for the future changed? In what ways?
 - vii. Are there any other ways in which the program has affected you and your life?
7. Current situation:
 - a. Can you tell me about what you are doing now?
 - b. Has the WOW program affected your plans for the future? If so, how?
 8. Do you have any suggestions for the program in the future or any other comments?
 9. Do you have any ideas on how you would like this research to be used?

End of interview notes:

- Ask permission to send a copy of transcript and to be contacted by phone to clarify, build on, add or contest any information.