



**Religion, Interaction, and Experiential Research: A Study of a “Christian Healing  
Women’s Group**

by  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the social construction of “Christian healing” of a group of Christian women, as well as the significance of researcher/participant interaction and experiential research.

Conducting participant observation research, I attended the meetings and social functions of a “Christian women’s” group, made up of a dozen women, for a period of 20 weeks. Through the process of gaining access, being asked to leave the group, returning to the group, and formally leaving the group, it became clear that the methodological experiences were related to the formal and informal structure of the group. Thus, method, as opposed to theory, became to focal point of this thesis.

The formal structure represents the religious ideologies of the church as they are used within the group. The informal structure represents the network of support the women developed for themselves. Further, the informal structure allowed for the questioning of certain religious principles as well as the development of empowerment for the women.

Future research in this area needs to move beyond the formal structures of religion to explore how individuals construct religious ideologies to meet their individual needs. Beyond the rhetoric of the formal structure lies an opportunity to develop support structures of a wide variety. How these structures are developed and the individual needs they meet, could point us in the direction of a broader understanding of the role of religion in a pluralist society.

## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this thesis to the women of the Beveridge Street Healing Group, to my parents, Janet and Jerry Clarke, and to my children, Meredyth, Keith and Emily Van Every.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people that I need to acknowledge. I am certain that I would not have been able to complete my thesis and my degree without support from colleagues, family and friends.

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To my parents, Janet and Jerry Clarke, I offer all my thanks and love for never giving up on me. My parents made me believe that whatever I wanted was well within my reach. Their love, support and generosity, as my parents and “Nanny and Papa,” are always appreciated.

My brother, Jerry, is one of the most gifted thinkers I know. I feel honoured to have him on my side, and thank him for everything he has done for me, from “my chair” to my “Reekee” to brotherly support and love, to “Uncle” guidance and wisdom. I could not ask for a more loving brother.

I extend the deepest gratitude and thanks to the women of the Beveridge Street Healing group. They opened their doors, their hearts, their church and their lives to me, and for this I am forever indebted. I was, and still am, honoured to know such a courageous group of women, and wish them all the best as they move forward in their lives. I truly was their student, and took much more from them than I would ever be able to return.

Finally, I must thank the three people who have sacrificed the most for me and this degree. My children, Meredyth (Meris), 8; Keith (Pookie), 7; and Emily, (The Divine Miss “M”) 4 are the reasons why I took on the task of this degree. Their love, devotion, frustration and understanding that I was not like “all the other mothers” has given me what I needed to start and finish this degree. This is as much their accomplishment as it is mine, and I want them to know how much I love and cherish them. I truly am the luckiest mother around to have such love and support on my side.



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*Sociologists and anthropologists, among others in the social sciences, have voluntarily immersed themselves for the sake of research in situations that all but a tiny minority of humanity goes to great lengths to avoid (Shaffir, Stebbins and Turowetz, 1980:3).*

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the role of religion in healing in the frame of the social process of research. In the course of my research, it became clear my methodology was defining the substance and the context of my thesis. At the same time, there was a need to keep the thesis as close to the original research question as possible, and to remember at all times that this is, essentially, the story of a group of women and their experiences.

There are two significant parts to this thesis: the significance of the methodological experiences, and how these experiences shaped the structure of the final writing stages. Further, from the methodological experiences came an understanding about the structure of the group, and the experiences of the women. On the one hand, this final product is a testament to the importance of an “inclusive research process,” where both methods and theory combine to develop a final product that is strong in structure as well as content.

#### *Methodology*

Methodology has typically been located in a chapter of a book or thesis, where the whys, where and hows of the research process are detailed in a specific number of pages, with the remainder of the book or thesis devoted to the data. **Thus, methodology was**

**something that was done, taken for granted, but not subject to the same rigorous sociological inquiry devoted to understanding other social processes. Methodology, as with other the other elements of research, is a social process, and thus warrants inclusion and exploration.**

One of the most confusing aspects of exploring methods is that, in the past, we neglected to incorporate the methodological processes into the actual text, choosing to footnote or endnote these processes. The way we approach methodological processes is similar to talking about a cake. We take for granted that the cake is there, without sharing how it was made. This is odd when we consider that the cake would not exist if it were not for the recipe. Much the same is with the manner in which we approach the detailing of our methodological experiences; we know they existed, because the sociological study is before us, but we have no idea how it got to where it is. Recently, there has been a change in the manner in which we incorporate methodological processes, incorporating them directly into the text, or having them as part of an edited collection (see Shaffir, Stebbins and Turowetz, 1980; Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991).

This thesis moves a step beyond incorporating methods into the text, to exploring the significance of the methodological process on the manner in which the data was gathered, and how the final product is presented. How I was able to get into the group, as well as other methodological experiences, is as much a part of the final product as my “real” sociological findings on the structure of the group and how it facilitates “healing.”

My struggle with this thesis was how to frame the experiences of the group in light of the methodology, as it was clear to me that the methodology was shaping the final

product. I knew I was treading into dangerous ground: was what I wanted to present truly sociological? Kleinman and Copps, in their monograph **Emotions and Fieldwork**, write,

There is one place where fieldworkers break the taboos of scientific writing: in their confessionals about methodological adventures, and in the appendices of their ethnographies. . . by placing these pieces in an appendix we suggest that the information to be found there is merely a supplement to the real story (1993:16-17).

I argue that these "confessionals" should be interpreted as actual data. The "real story" is a combination of the researchers experiences as well as those they are researching. The efforts the women made to convert me are as much a part of the data as their spiritual journey, as converting me was part of their spiritual/religious mandate. To leave out these "confessionals" is to leave out a significant part of the overall data, and therefore only telling part of the story.

It is my hope that this thesis will find itself as one among a growing understanding of sociological accounts, where the understanding of the sociological significance of the research process is subject to legitimate inquiry.

### *Using the Inductive Approach*

In approaching the development of my research strategies it was essential, for me, to be able to stay as close to the "grounded theory" method as possible. My goal was to allow the significant aspects of this group to open themselves up to me, as opposed to me approaching the group with a knowledge of how things should be. I knew nothing of this group prior to gaining access, and knew from the start that I was, indeed, the "student"

while the women in the group were the “teachers.”

Essentially, I used the inductive approach. Strauss defines the inductive approach as,

actions that lead to the discovery of a hypothesis --that is having a hunch or an idea, then converting it into an hypothesis and assessing whether it will provisionally work as at least a partial condition for a type of event, act, relationship, strategy, etc. Hypotheses are both provisional and conditional (1987:12).

I think it is important to note that, for many reasons that will be outlined later, the inductive approach was the better approach to take as it remained true to what I feel is the nature of research, and further, to how I feel about myself as a researcher. As Strauss points out, it is essential for the success of the research project to know where the researcher’s strengths lay; “some people are better at generative questions, intuitive flashes, hunches, etc. . . some are better “theorists”--better at drawing out hypotheses and drawing out implications” (1987:13). Therefore, I think the debate regarding inductive and deductive is not so much about which approach is more “true” to research, but rather, which is more “true” to the researcher’s natural abilities. Enhancing and supporting the researchers natural abilities can only produce a higher quality sociological study.

Of importance to this research, and in relation to the inductive approach, was my understanding of self, and my proclivities in choosing this area of research. That I am deeply interested the experiences of women was a given, however, the confusing aspect had always been the area of religion. I was, at the time, an athiest, and made no effort to hide this. However, having been recently inundated with “religion” at this period of my

life, and having grown up in a fundamentalist Christian community, it was clear to me why I wanted to explore the role of religion in the lives of women. Aligning ourselves as researchers with topics we are familiar with is not unusual. Peshkin writes,

that personal factors penetrate all points of the research process is a matter of record. Although it would be farfetched to claim that we could predict what researchers would study if we but knew enough about them, their choice of topics for investigation is far from random. . . we are generally attracted to a limited, if not narrow, band of topics (1988:268).

Another aspect of the inductive tradition is to allow the research the flexibility to explore areas that may not have been thought of during the initial thinking stages. I started out with the following research question: how does religion facilitate healing for women who are recovering from substance abuse? Early on, I realized this question significantly narrowed my exploration, and the time came when I abandoned the question in favour of a more open approach. I was going to observe the group, and record all of what they did, both in terms of religion and support, as well as the less formal group activities the women participated in. Only after I allowed myself to be more open was I able to return to the original research question with an “answer.” Although I have not presented what was initially expected, I have presented an account of what occurs in the group, and how religion facilitates the activities of the women.

One reason for my becoming more open had to do with the group itself. These women did not get together and discuss solely their addictions and abusive circumstances, and how religion was helping them “heal.” The group was used for a more intensive exploration of “self,” in relation to what it was to be a “devout Christian” to what it was



to be a “woman.” The group was more about healing damaged emotions<sup>1</sup> than it was about recovering from the specific traumas of drug and alcohol abuse. I believe this points towards the understanding the women had that these behaviours were the indicators that there was something wrong with their lives over all. In other words, their addiction and abusive behaviours were part of a much bigger problem. The group served as a forum to discuss these larger problems, and learn how to address them in a “Christian” manner.

Therefore, it was essential that I adopt a more open position in terms of where I was coming from with my research question, and what it was that I wanted to accomplish. The inherent problem with this was that I felt, quite often, that I had deviated so far from my original purpose that I had nothing of sociological significance to present. Only after leaving the field, and re-connecting this research to its methodological foundation was I able to see the significance of my observations. Inasmuch as I needed to use the inductive approach, its approach to relying on the generalities proved to be both a positive and a negative for me. In the final product, however, the positives definitely outweigh the negatives.

Finally, although not specifically feminist in orientation, I have, in all aspects of this thesis, approached it with the understanding that along with being an inductive, qualitative researcher, I am a feminist as well. In terms of presentation of the women’s experiences, my own experiences and my approach to the group as a sociologist and a researcher, I have tried to stay as close to my feminist foundation as possible.

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<sup>1</sup>*Healing Damaged Emotions* was the name of the guidebook used by the group.

### *The Women*

On the outside, the women of the Beveridge Street Healing group appear to be similar to most of us. In many ways they are; they worry about finances, their children, families, spouses and their future. The day-to-day parts of most of our lives are very much a part of our own.

The differences lie in the past, lived experiences of these women. These are “multi-problem” women; meaning that there has been a multitude of pain and traumas in their lives that have shaped who they are in the present and how they have chosen to address these issues. Of a dozen women in the group, eight have partners, four are single parents and only one of the eight women with partners is childless, by choice. Seven of the women are employed, and five are living on social assistance. Most of the employed women work in clerical, health care, administrative, computer or child-care related fields. One woman is attending university part-time, one woman has a bachelor of arts, and the rest have finished high school. These women range from lower class to lower middle class. The women have children ranging from adult children to elementary school aged. Three women have one or more children with learning and physical disabilities. Ruth is the only woman in the group who has grandchildren.

The past traumas of these women range from drug and alcohol abuse, to sexual, physical and emotional abuse at the hands of parents, siblings and partners. Two of the women have had partners who have been, or currently are, incarcerated, and all the women with partners say their partners are “unsaved.” All of the women are “born-again,” and most admit to coming from religious backgrounds different from where they are

now. Some women were Catholic, others were United or Baptist.

### *The Group*

The group is loosely affiliated with the church, in terms of religious foundations and teachings. As opposed to meeting in the church, this group has chosen to meet in the home of a woman who is a member of the church, but not a member of this group. She has, however, attended groups of this nature in the past. This group does not, to my knowledge, report to the church.

Most of the women are actively involved in their church. They attend Bible study classes, missionary groups, assist in the church nursery, work with the youth groups, and all of the women assist in one way or another with the annual “passion play” held during Easter. This is not uncommon, as most church women are reported to have four or more church jobs (Nason-Clark, 1997).

This thesis covers many different areas of sociological inquiry. Chapter two will discuss the significance of the process of gaining access, both in terms of physically getting into the group, and how the process of getting in helped inform and shape the data. Locating a “Doc,” developing the “researcher role,” negotiating with the group leader, being put “on probation,” attempting to make connections with the women are all part of my process of gaining entry and had a significant impact on the data I was able to gather.

Chapter three discusses the positive and negative aspects of developing and maintaining research barriers. In my case, attempting to be aware about the women and their experiences in the group, and being concerned about damaging the integrity of the

group, I developed methodological guidelines that protected the women. With this came the understanding that I was giving the women the power of decision regarding whether or not I would remain in the group. Believing that as long as I followed, to the letter, the promises I made to the women, there would never be any cause for them to ask me to leave. Unfortunately, even the best laid research plans, and attempting to account for as many situations as possible is not enough of a buffer against being asked to leave. However, as we shall see, being asked to leave was another event that bore much influence on the relationship I had with the women as a researcher, and the areas of their lives I was admitted to. Further, the formal process of disengaging from the group will be explored.

Chapter four details the manner in which the women negotiated our roles as participant and researcher in the group. Every honest research relationship is premised on the understanding that there will be negotiation of roles. In return for being asked to return to the group, the women made more effort at my increased participation in the group, and in their desire to convert me to their religious philosophies. The implications of this process of negotiation will be examined, as well as the impact it had on the data gathering.

Chapter five deals with the structures of the group. Participant observation, as well as the methodological process illustrated that within the group there is a formal and informal structure. The formal structure is responsible for the development and maintenance of the “healing perspective,” a perspective that is developed to meet the spiritual mandate the group, and the spiritual needs about the women. The formal

structure of the group brings the women together as “devout Christian women”, and represents what is “expected” from a Christian based self-help group.

Chapter six examines the informal structure of the group, the “unexpected” element of the healing journey. Here, the challenge lies in developing a sense of self; of facilitating an understanding of who the women are apart from their religious identity. Questions and conflicts the women have regarding the “healing perspective” are discussed within the “practical perspective”; that is within the informal network of support the women have developed within the boundaries of the formal structure. Further, the women develop and maintain empowerment, and as we will see, it is the informal structure that facilitates the women being able to meet the day to day challenges of their lives. The discovery of the informal structure of the group was the “sociological discovery” of this thesis.

Chapter seven brings everything together: the methodological process and the understanding of the formal and informal process. As we shall see, the process of gaining access, being asked to leave, then returning, and the process of disengagement are a result of the formal and informal structure of the group. I conclude by returning to the original research question, as well as discussing other areas that are in need of sociological inquiry in the area of women and healing.

## CHAPTER TWO

### GAINING ACCESS

Fieldworkers enter the field as more than researchers. Our identities and life experiences shape the political and ideological stances we take in our research. . . ignoring the interplay of person and research ultimately has analytical costs. (Copps and Kleinman, 1993:10).

"One central problem shared by all field investigators is the problem of getting in" (Berg, 1995:89). The following chapter is an account of how my political, ideological and methodological stances determined the process of gaining access. Gaining access into this group was sociologically, as well as personally challenging, but assisted my understanding of how individuals interact with others. There are many means by which the researcher can understand how individuals interact with one another, and in my case, gaining access seems to be the most illuminating. Gaining access is, for the researcher and the participants, a process of give-and-take, negotiation, and learning;

Immersion or stepping into, or becoming a member of, a society or culture of living people is always a *joint* process, involving numerous accommodations and adjustments by both the fieldworker and the people who "accept" him (Wax, 1983:192).

Through gaining access, we become aware that the role we play as researcher is ultimately one of student. The role we play as researcher, and therefore one who has knowledge, and therefore power, is an illusion. To gain access, and in turn gain the trust of those we wish to research, is to put aside our constructed notions of power and knowledge, and accept that we are the less knowledgeable in the relationship between researcher and participants. I believe that if a researcher approaches a group with this mind set, than she is, from the

beginning, being open and honest about her intentions.

There is some material related to other's experiences in gaining access (Wolf, 1991; Shaffir, 1991; Liebow, 1993; Ammerman, 1987). However, gaining access is a subjective experience that is dependant upon a wide variety of factors that differ depending upon the research project.

Although certain general rules of thumb may be offered, the uniqueness of each setting, as well as the researcher's personal circumstances, shape the specific negotiating tactics that come to be employed (Shaffir, 1991:73).

I could read as much as I wanted concerning the experiences of others, however, the assistance I would get from these accounts would be minimal. My personal and academic experiences differ greatly from others who are, at least, more established as academics. Further, the circumstances of the group affect the process of gaining access, and therefore make it difficult to use the experiences of others as a gauge.

Nonetheless, we cannot dismiss accounts of gaining access, or any other methodological experience from the overall sociological understanding. It is now accepted understanding that these experiences impact greatly on how we collect and analyse our data<sup>2</sup>

One of the myths I faced from colleagues and others was that I would not have any difficulties in gaining access, as I wanted to get into a group where the members are notorious for soliciting membership. This is echoed by Wax when she writes,

In a complex culture there are groups or societies that solicit membership, and a fieldworker will have no trouble at all in becoming a participating

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<sup>2</sup>See specifically E. Burke Rochford's *Hare Krishna in America* for a more thorough discussion on the impact of research experiences on the data.

member if he is willing to pay the expected price of money or time (1983:194).

Generalizations like this indicate a lack of understanding about the nature of some social groups. This group may have consisted of members of the church, however, the group itself dealt with issues that were not necessarily part of Sunday sermons, Tuesday evening Bible study, or the general mandates of the church itself. Yes, these are women who solicit membership for their church; for others to come and share in their religious experiences and philosophies. *They do not, however, solicit membership for this group.* Although the group and the church are premised on the same religious philosophies, there is a difference in the mandate and the experiences of the two different organizations. I would have no trouble gaining access into the general church community, however gaining access into the group would prove to be very difficult.

### *How did I gain access?*

Being bound by ethics and by the existing parameters of the nature of the group, I had to formulate a means of getting into the group that would facilitate my research needs, as well as respecting the women and the group. The question, then, is how did I begin the process of gaining access into this group?

Berg states that

. . . a bit of luck, taking advantage of certain relationships, considerable background work, and making the right contacts frequently aids in attempt to access restricted groups (1995:89).

This may sound common sense, but the general premise of Berg's assessment is accurate.



It was through luck, and taking advantage of relationships and contacts, that I was able to begin the process of gaining access. I was fortunate to have located a "Doc"<sup>3</sup>. My "Doc", Jennifer, is in her mid-thirties. Married, she is the mother of five children, two girls and three boys. Her husband is deeply involved with the several of the church's outreach ministries, and both he and Jennifer are recovering from long-term substance abuse. Jennifer is currently a member of the church, a former member of this type of Christian self-help group, as well as an undergraduate university student.

Jennifer's role in my gaining access to the group was pivotal. In fact, I would go so far as to say that I believe I would not have gained access if it was not for her initial discussions with the group facilitator. Much like Daniel Wolf and his experiences gaining access into a society of outlaw bikers, I needed someone to *recommend* me; to vouch for who I was as a person. How I presented myself as an academic was my responsibility, but I needed someone to go to Esther, the facilitator and say, "Yes, I know her and she is an honourable person." Jennifer was able to do this for me.

Jennifer, along with being my "Doc" was a "bridge" between the world of the Christian woman, and the world of the researcher; between my needs and theirs. Her knowledge of both worlds allowed for her to communicate on behalf of the women and myself. She possessed an insider knowledge of the church, and of how groups of this

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3

The term "Doc" comes from William Foote Whyte's now legendary study of Italian immigrants, *Street Corner Society*. "Doc" was Whyte's informant during his study. In saying that I had located my "Doc", I am referring to the fact that I had located someone who was willing to share insider knowledge of the group, allowing me to formulate the most appropriate means of gaining access.

nature functioned. This allowed her to assist me in beginning to understanding the group. As a student, she was able to share with the group what I was trying to do; what it was like to be a student. Knowing how important this was to me, and the implications of not getting in, Jennifer proved to be a valuable ally on both sides. She was able to protect the women as well as bring me into the group. What occurred between the group and myself after I was introduced to the group was the responsibility of the group and myself, not Jennifer.

I knew as an outsider that I required the assistance of an insider in order to gain access. After sharing my concerns about gaining access, and a strategy that I had developed, Jennifer gave me her input. Knowing the group, she suggested that one approach would be to focus my energies on the group facilitator, Esther who was also as the the "watchdog" for the group. In terms of Esther, I had two things going against me: I was a university student<sup>3</sup> and I was not of the same faith. Given this, I decided that I needed to demonstrate that she and I had several things in common, thus downplaying my university status as much as possible. I realize now that what I wanted to convey, more than anything to Esther, was that I did not feel I was superior to her; that my being in university did not make me any "better" than any of the women in the group. In as much as I had fears and misconceptions about their world, I was to soon find out that my world was just as confusing to them. Copps and Kleinman sum these fears succinctly when they write,

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3

According to Jennifer, Esther has had negative experiences with university in the past, and this has left her with a distaste for university and students.

We do not want participants to see us as better than they are, as more competent, successful, or smarter. Often their beliefs about our superiority stem from their notions about the world we represent, one that *might* be of a higher class or at least cleaner, safer, or freer (1993:29).

Speaking with Esther was my first attempt at contacting the women themselves.

The goal of my initial conversation with Esther was to demonstrate that she and I shared the same concerns: *that my entrance in the group would not compromise the safety of the women*. Although we were coming from different perspectives, she as facilitator, and me as researcher, I wanted her to believe that my intentions were not dishonourable and I would not jeopardize the integrity of the group, or jeopardize its purpose: to help the women heal.

My first conversation with Esther was cold and stilted. It was very apparent to me that she had agreed to speak with my only because Jennifer had asked her if she would. Jennifer and Esther are close friends, and in having Jennifer as my Doc, I was able to take advantage of that friendship. My sole purpose in that conversation was to explain to Esther what it was I wanted to accomplish with the group, and to ask if it would be permissible to come to *meet the group, and explain to them, as a whole, what I wanted to do*. I was careful to explain to Esther that I was not interested in the individual stories of the women in their own right. Had that been the case, I would have asked to observe the group with the intention of interviewing the women separately later in the research. My focus was to explore how religion facilitated the healing process; that is, what was it that the women received from religion that made them feel as if they were healing? She

further questioned my presence in the group, telling me that it was her responsibility to ensure the safety of the women. I again reiterated that even though we approached the group from different perspectives, we had the same objectives in mind. During the conversation, I did my best to make my intentions clear, and to put her at ease.

This was the beginning of an ongoing theme I encountered throughout my time with the group: they could not comprehend why I wanted to observe them. What was it about this group, they asked, that made them worthy of sociological inquiry? This is not an uncommon question, as Ammerman writes, "most people [are] never quite sure what a sociologist would be studying, especially in their church" (1987:12). I was asked this question several times throughout my research and my response was that everything/one was worthy of sociological inquiry, even if they felt they were not. On a broader level, I believe questioning their worthiness as a group comes from being socialized that are not worthy as individuals; believing that their experiences, collective and individual, were mundane and trivial. Being aware of how the women felt about themselves made understanding their questions easier, although it in no way facilitated finding an answer that would satisfy them. During my last session with the group, they still asked why I was interested in them, and in the group.

My goal of making Esther comfortable with my research was not realized during our initial conversation. In spite of my best efforts to the contrary, she felt that I had some sort of hidden agenda. Why she did not refuse me outright remains a mystery, but at the same token she did not welcome me with open arms. Rather she developed a compromise that would temporarily, meet both our needs.

Esther did not grant me permission to meet with *her* group. She did, however, invite me, grudgingly, to a group that was currently meeting. Many of the women in this group would attend Esther's group, and Esther herself was a participant in this group. I could attend this group, and this would give the women the opportunity to assess whether or not I could begin the next group with them.

Inasmuch as Esther was offering me a compromise, she was also "putting me on probation." She wanted to observe me, as much as I wanted to observe the group. She wanted proof that I was going to do as I said, and that I was not going to damage the integrity of the group. Thankful for any opportunity to meet with the group, I agreed to her terms and said I would attend the next meeting.

Key to understanding my relationship with Esther is to know that one of the issues between Esther and myself was power. In this situation, I felt powerless. Esther was in the position of knowing I wanted access to the group, and knowing that she was the only one who could "give me what I wanted." I struggled with being grateful that she allowed me in the probationary group, and this feeling stayed with me through my fieldwork. It was only after I left the group that I realized that there was more to my conversation with Esther than I had initially thought: there was an imbalance of power, however, I may have willingly given over that power. Copps and Kleinman write,

. . . participants are the teachers and we are their students. . . we usually feel so grateful to participants for letting us hang around that we feel and act humble rather than superior (1993:29).

Feeling grateful was something that would permeate my fieldwork process. I was very grateful that Esther allowed me the time with the probationary group. I was grateful

the women accepted me. In the next chapter, however, I will discuss that being grateful was not enough, and may have had an impact on my fieldnotes and my relationship with the women, and later, my analysis, and writing.

### *The First Meeting*

Prior to the beginning of my first meeting with the group, I had my first face to face discussion with Esther. She then introduced me to John the facilitator of the probationary group. He appeared enthusiastic about my research, and I was taken aback by his enthusiasm, given the cold reception I received from Esther. I explained to him that I would need just ten minutes of the group's time to introduce myself to the women, and make a brief presentation to introduce myself and explain the purpose of my research.

My strategy in talking with the women about my research was to place them at ease. I wanted them to know that being a graduate student was just one part of whom I was. Sensing from Esther and Jennifer that the women would be wary and intimidated, I set out to demonstrate that I was interested in them as people, and more specifically, as members of the group.

My goal was to highlight the similarities we all shared as women. I wanted to, as much as possible, downplay those elements that made me appear different to the women. The links I made between my experiences and theirs may appear simple on the surface, but I learned early on in my research that simplicity was often the best route. Further, in dealing with people who have traumatic life experiences, I had to be aware that fear was the base emotion these women felt. Wariness and fear were the only emotions they had to

deal with new and uncertain situations. They had every right to be concerned about someone who wanted to invade perhaps the only safe place they felt they had.

While taking care not to divulge aspects of my personal life, I attempted to make connections with the women on three levels:

**1. I was a mother, and as such, knew of the joy and pain associated with raising children. Further, I was a single parent, and knew how daunting it was to face such a responsibility on one's own.**

Of the dozen women in the group, eleven were mothers and only four had partners at the time of my fieldwork. I felt that this would be one of the more comforting aspects of my identity to them, making me more accessible to them. As a mother, I knew what it was to experience children. Defining myself further as single mother was to share that I knew of the emotional, physical and financial difficulties of raising children alone.

**2. As a divorced single mother, I had, and still was, experiencing the difficulties in relating with an ex-spouse; both in terms of finances, emotional difficulties and children.**

This was important to the women, as much of the pain and trauma they had experienced was at the hands of an ex-spouse. Although I shared limited details about my relationship with my ex-spouse, they knew that I could relate to the dilemmas they faced, both in terms of staying in an unhealthy relationship, in finding the courage to leave, and in learning how to cope in the aftermath of an unsuccessful relationship .

**3. Although I have never been an alcoholic, or addicted to drugs, I knew what it was to live in an abusive and violent marriage.**

These women have lived with, and now choose to confront, the darker aspects of human

relationships. I was hesitant about sharing this part of my life with the women, but knew that I was in control of how much I shared. Some of the women in the group were in abusive relationships at the time, and almost all had experienced abusive relationships in the past. I felt it was important for them to know that I had these experiences as well, and was not in the position to pass judgement; on their past, or on their choices to remain in these relationships. I could relate to the women who remained in their relationships, and with those who had left.

I felt that comparative roles, such as wife and mother, were not enough, and that I had to demonstrate comparative experiences that would demonstrate awareness and understanding of some of their life experiences. These women live with the belief that there are few people who understand their experiences, or their life choices, and I needed to make them aware that I was not one of those people. Kirby and McKenna write,

...we must include our own experience and understanding as a part of doing research. This means that we invest part of ourselves in the process of creating new information. We are an ingredient of our own research (1989:7).

By including my own experiences, I was letting the women know that I was willing to invest a part of myself in this research, and that I was much more than a researcher: that I had experienced pain and trauma, as well as joy in my life that was not unlike their experiences. Above all, I did not want to appear as a traditional researcher; "the conventional image of researcher is someone who neutralizes his or her "irrelevant" identities and viewpoints while conducting research" (Copp and Kleinmann, 1993:10). I did not neutralize any parts of my identity, I merely made connections with those parts of



myself that were more salient than others. Perhaps unconventional, I felt these connections had to be made for the women to begin to feel comfortable with me. I realized that it would take a considerable amount of time to build a relationship of trust with the women, and that this would only occur if I followed through on the promises I made: to not compromise them, their life experiences, and the group; that I would remain non-judgmental of their lives, and of their religious choices; that I would leave the group at any time, at their request, regardless of their reasons for wanting me to leave. I promised to not "write down every word they say" during the meetings, and not to participate in group discussions. My goal was to be there, and to be visible, but not to be intrusive.

After my presentation, I answered their questions. Noteworthy was the question "will anyone know who they were by reading my thesis?" Interestingly, before I had a chance to answer, Esther jumped in and responded that I was to ensure that they would not even know themselves.

I then was in the position to ask the women, one-on-one, if she was comfortable with my being in the group. I was very clear in telling them that I needed to hear from them individually that this was acceptable for them, and that this was part of the university's ethical boundaries as well as my own personal ethics. Even with all this said, John stepped in and said that all the women were pleased that I there, and would do anything they could to assist me. His attempt to silence the women startled me, as I was very clear in stating that I needed to hear from each woman. Thus, I had to interrupt him, and told him that I would need a few more minutes to ask the women how they felt.

Before he could respond, I began, prefacing my question with "it was certainly acceptable to say that they did not want me there, and all it would take was one woman to not be comfortable, and I will leave." Each woman said "yes", and I did not have the sense they were lying to me. Thus, I was, if only temporarily, accepted into the group as an observer.

### *On Probation: The First Four Weeks*

I was very aware that I was on probation with the group, and in particular with Esther. They were observing me, and adjusting to my presence, and I was adjusting to the group routine. From the beginning, however, there were subtle hints, "So, Dawne, did you try that prayer I suggested last week?", or, "Dawne, did you read that passage I suggested." Further, there were not so subtle hints that the women were trying to convert me; "Dawne, all you have to do is open your heart to Him<sup>4</sup>, and the weight of your problems will be gone" and "He knows Dawne. . . you may believe that He doesn't know, but He does. You can't fool Him.". Their attempts to convert me is an ongoing theme through my research and, I think, may be one of the reasons I was accepted into the group: they saw me as a challenge.

I never formally stated my religious beliefs, but they did know that I did not share their religious convictions. Nonetheless, after the first meeting one of the women, Judith, approached me saying, "Who knows Dawne, you may be healed just spending time with

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For the purpose of clarity, note the following: He/Him represents how the women refer to God. "He/Him" represents my discussions of how the women refer to God. The without quote version is meant to respect the women's construction of God in their lives.

us (week #1). After a particularly grueling meeting, Ruth approached me as I was leaving, telling me

... I know and He knows that you are confused, and He has lead you here to help you accept Him, and to heal. He knows what is in your heart, no matter how hard you try and deny Him (week #14).

Common among groups who proselytize is the belief that you are never in the group because you choose to be, but rather because you were lead there. Gordon, in his article, "*Getting Close by Staying Distant: Fieldwork with Proselytizing Groups*" believes the most forthright manner in which to approach groups who proselytize is to engage in

... open, honest, *disagreement* with the groups' beliefs as well as a *visible* role as a researcher [this results] in increased rapport and acceptance by the groups and reduced psychological stress on the researcher (1987:267).

By being open and honest about the role the researcher wishes to have in the group, as well as the understanding that religious beliefs are contradictory will, in the end, result in a less stressful and more fruitful relationship with the group. This is important, as groups of this nature tend to expect commitment from those who are "knowledgeable about their point of view" (Gordon, 1987:267; Rochford, 1985). The prevalent belief is the no one could be aware of "God's love" and be able to deny a relationship with "Him."

Another reason honesty is important is that if access is granted to the researcher, then it can be expected that efforts will be made to convert the researcher. Gordon states that he believes this can cause "emotional responses that can adversely affect field relationships" (1987:267). I agree with this, but at the same time the researcher must be aware that proselytizing is going to occur, and that it will be directed to them. Being open and honest is one part of the process of understanding the group, and developing relations

with them, but accepting that certain activities, and religious rituals will take place is also important. How would we feel, as researchers, if the groups did not engage in proselytizing activities?

This points to the need to understand that researchers, in the spirit of inductive research, understand that there are at least two parts to the researcher: the researcher and the individual. Both parts create opposing reactions to situations, and accepting these parts exist is essential in the data collecting stage.

### *Negotiating Emotions: Changing the Face of Fieldwork*

As stated earlier, one of the promises I made to the group was to not participate in the group discussions. My reasons for this are apparent enough: I did not share their religious beliefs, and because of this felt that I could not assist in group discussions. What I did not account for were the repercussions of **not** participating; of not having the group as an outlet for emotions that were caused from being in the group.

An overwhelming number of the meetings were emotionally exhausting, for the women as well as myself. Given the nature of the group, and the issues the women deal with, it is not surprising that emotions are always close to the surface. As an observer in the group, I had set parameters that would inhibit my participation in the group, but I could not place parameters around how I **felt**. I had not thought of how I might feel attending these meetings, and not being able to participate. Indeed, many times during this research I felt as if I was two very different people, and under no circumstances was I able to reconcile these two seemingly different people.

Part of this comes from an unspoken understanding that I was to follow a set of rules: I was to automatically like the people I was researching; the relationship I would build them would happen quickly and we would be as close as my methodology would allow; the relationship would be terminated after I was finished.

Initially, we keep a low profile, acting emotionally flat, passive, and non-threatening, and learn enough to avoid embarrassing ourselves, or getting kicked out of the field (Coppes and Kleinman, 1993:28).

What are the repercussions of taking this position? What happens when the researcher tries to be emotionally flat, and fails?

There were several incidents in the group where I struggled with my pre-determined levels of participation in the group. One occurred three weeks into my field work, while I was still in the probationary group. That evening, a young woman, approximately nineteen, spent most of the group detailing a traumatic childhood, where she experienced rape, prostitution, drug abuse and alcoholism. While sharing her story, she was sobbing and crying, at times unable to speak. The women responded by praying; some had tears streaming down their faces, others were rocking back and forth in their seats. Esther sat with her head in her hands, crying and praying at the same time. There was not one woman in the group who was not visibly upset. The woman beside the distraught young woman was rubbing her back, saying softly, "it will be alright. Just let it go." John was encouraging her to share all of her painful experiences; to give them over to the Lord. One woman left the room and came back with a box of tissue.

When the group came to a close, most of the women encircled this young woman, hugging her, and telling her how brave she was to have come and shared her story. John

told her that they had missed her coming to the group, and they worried about her. He told her to remember that the Lord was there for her; all she had to do was open her heart to Him. Other women hugged her individually, telling her they loved her and would pray for her.

While all of this was happening, I hung back, observing but not participating. Being a compassionate person, I wanted to offer support to this woman, even on the most basic level. But I did not, as I knew I would be stepping out of the bounds of my research design; I would no longer be a “researcher.” Later in the evening, after I returned home and began typing my notes, I was upset at what I had heard and witnessed, and that I had not done something to demonstrate to the young woman, and the group, that I, too, was saddened by her life experiences. I felt cold and calculated, very much the kind of researcher I did not want to be. I did not need to share the women’s religious philosophies to be supportive, compassionate, and upset by the situation. I felt that I had maintained myself as a researcher, but let myself down as a person.

Such experiences are not uncommon among scholars who are honest about how their research can affect them. Rothman, in her study of women who make the painful choice to abort their fetus due to birth defects revealed through amniocentesis, shares her fear at revealing how she felt during her research,

...but when I share the horror at the core, I risk being dismissed as not only unscholarly or sociological, but just plain hysterical, overemotional (Rothman, 1990:53).

Rather than be dismissed and overemotional and hysterical, I chose to not demonstrate any emotion, therefore, hiding how I truly felt about being in such a heart wrenching situation.

I was concerned about the damage that I may have done to my relationship with the group. How would they feel about me afterwards, given that I was, seemingly, unable to show this young woman that I was sorry for what she had experienced? Would they think me cold, heartless? In as much as I wanted to gain access, and was prepared to be as non-participatory as possible, I had not accounted for the traumatic and emotional situations in the group that would make me uncomfortable with who I was as a person, and as a researcher. It was one of several incidents where I questioned my role, but more so questioned what I had negotiated (and negotiated away) to gaining access.

This is not uncommon among researchers. Rochford (1985) gives a detailed account of what he did, and did not do, in order to be able to study ISKON (Hare Krishnas). Rochford's research resulted with his taking more of an active role in the ISKON community than he had initially intended. He, too, experienced emotional difficulties as a result of his research design. The commonality with Rochford's experiences and my own, as well as those of countless other researchers, is that no matter how much we try to prepare for each situation that will arise research, we cannot. In wanting to gain access, I made what I thought would be the best decision for myself and the group. Rochford believed the only way he could obtain the data he wanted was to take on more of an active role than he originally wanted. Wolf (1991) was willing to risk incarceration in order to prove his loyalty to the Rebels, much the same as Whyte (1965) was willing to do for the Cornerboys. Literature is fraught with accounts of researchers who were not able to account for all situations, and either compromised themselves, their research or their participants in order to obtain data. If nothing else, these experiences

point to the unpredictability of qualitative research, and why it is a mirror for social life.

Having gained access, I was ready to move forward to the data collecting stage of my thesis. What I was to encounter in this stage of my thesis served only to re-enforce the unpredictability of qualitative methodology.



## CHAPTER THREE

### MAINTAINING ACCESS AND LEAVING

Most sources on gaining access to the field agree on one thing: Whether it is a highly accessible or a very restricted setting, *decisions made during the early stages of research are critical* (Berg, 1995:89).

Rarely do we read an account of a failed project (Copps and Kleinman, 1993:17).

For all the methodological literature available in sociology, there is very little that discusses the problems associated with failure: failure to gain access, to remain in the group, and failure to establish a rapport with the participants. Accounts of field research suggest that the attempts have been **successful**, with little mention of difficulties encountered, and how this affects being in the field, the data gathering process, and the writing up of the data..

This chapter is about being unsuccessful; or rather, what we perceive as unsuccessful and how it can turn into something beneficial for the researcher and the participants. Overall, however, it is about acknowledging that our research experiences do not always follow the path we have designed for them. It further supports the arguments concerning the unpredictability of qualitative research, and why we need to be more inclusive regarding methodological experiences.

After establishing myself in the first group, or passing my "probationary period," I was ready to move on to the next group<sup>5</sup>, the "real" group that I intended to study when I

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There were several differences in this group, aside from the new members. Esther was

began my research. One condition of my transition, both mine and Esther's, was that I give another presentation to the group, as there would be new members who were not aware that I was in the group as a researcher. We agreed that I would have ten minutes at the beginning of the first meeting.

I went to this group with more ease and comfort than the first; I knew most of the women, and felt that they were comfortable with me. I did not go in with the reservations that I experienced previously, although I was still very aware of the nature of the group, and the importance of being as non-intrusive and non-judgmental as possible. The methodological restrictions I had developed for the first presentation applied here as well. I made the same presentation to the new women and as I anticipated, the women from the previous group were comfortable, while the new women asked many of the same questions that I had dealt with during the first presentation. When the women finished asking questions, Esther<sup>6</sup> took the initiative to ask them individually if they were comfortable with my being in the group, in the role of researcher. The first time she

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facilitating, and I was interested in relating how the women reacted to a female facilitator as opposed to a male. Further, the group was moving from the church to a private residence of someone who was not attending the group. Finally, the women were using a workbook, *The Twelve Step Guide To Healing Damaged Emotions*. One of the purposes of this book was to allow the women to share what they wanted with group, but to put their private pain and spiritual issues to paper.

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Another significant difference in the groups was Esther's move from passive in John's group, to aggressive in her own. In John's group, she refrained from voicing her opinions on my being in the group. I sensed there may have been some conflict between John and Esther in relation to my research. No longer in John's group, Esther was very aggressive in providing the opportunity to have the women's voices and feelings heard. This instance, where she asked the women about my being in the group, was one example of her aggressiveness.

asked, there were no objections. She then re-iterated that I would have to leave if there was even one woman who was not comfortable with me being there. Again, no one objected. At this point, one of the new women asked why I was interested in this group, and I repeated what I said earlier (see chapter 3) . I then repeated everything about confidentiality, being non-judgmental, and their safety. Esther then said that I could not use their real names, the location of the group, and that I would not be tape recording the meetings-- all points that I had taken care to repeat to the women. She then asked, for the third time, if everyone was comfortable with my being in the group<sup>7</sup>.

It was at this time that the woman who asked the last question hesitantly said that, although she did not want to be the only one, she felt she could not attend the group if she thought that I was going to be there "writing down everything she said." She then apologized for the way she felt, but she had to be honest.

True to all I had said to the women, I left the group. I thanked the woman for her candor, and said I would have been upset if she had not voiced her reservations, and allowed me into the group against her wished, and because "it was what everyone else was doing." I thanked Esther and the other women in the group, and then left.

### ***Dichotomous Responses: Researcher or Individual?***

Throughout my research, I felt as if I were often two different people. As

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<sup>7</sup> I suspect that one of the reasons why Esther repeatedly asked the women about my being in the group was that she sensed that there was some hesitation on the part of the new women. I, too, sensed that some of the women were still not sure about why I was there, despite my efforts at being clear.

explained above, the first would occur whenever I was in a situation where I was at odds with my research parameters. The second occurred after I left the group. During the time after having left the group, I realized that I was processing the experience of leaving from two different, yet complimentary perspectives. I was, in essence, caught in a debate with two sides of myself: the individual who experienced rejection, and the researcher who was fascinated by the experience. This is further supported by Gordon (1987) who believes the researcher plays two major roles: the researcher and the person.

*Individual response:* My initial response was very emotive: I felt angry, betrayed, hurt, afraid that I would not be able to locate another group, and I would have to start all over again. I had experienced rejection from a group, despite my best efforts at keeping the promises I made to them.

*Researcher response:* Although unexpected, I was fascinated by being asked to leave. Several questions came to mind: what would be the implications for my research? Was there something I could have done to prevent this from happening? These questions are the parts of research that every researcher experiences, but few incorporate in their final write-up.

Above all, my dichotomous response supports the argument that the researcher must incorporate the various aspects of who they are into their research, in presentation to those we study, and in what comes out of our field research. Dawne the person was very upset at being asked to leave; Dawne the researcher thought this occurrence was sociologically fascinating.

What fueled my sociological understanding of being asked to leave were the

reactions of the women themselves. Shortly after I left, one woman called me to see how I was feeling. She told me that the group had come up with a solution that would allow me to attend the group: I could attend the group as a member. In as much as I was touched by the offer, but could not, morally and ethically, attend the group as anything other than a researcher.

There were also "political" reactions to my leaving: one woman left the group<sup>8</sup>, saying she felt they were hypocrites: how could they profess to be Christian women when they acted in such an un-Christian manner? Although her reasons were also based in some intra-group conflict with the other women, she said that my leaving was, for her, "the straw that broke the camel's back"<sup>9</sup>.

Nonetheless, I was in the position of trying to assess what my next step would be. Should I start to formulate a new thesis topic? On the advice of my thesis committee, I waited. The prevailing position was that I would be asked to return to the group. If not, I would develop another thesis project that would focus in the same area.

To my relief, I was asked to return. Three weeks after I left the group, I met Phoebe on the street, who greeted me with a hug, and told me how much I was missed in

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I was very concerned that I had done something to make this woman leave a healing place that she, at one time, felt was important for her to attend. After speaking with her later, she assured me that she was leaving because of other things, including that there were things she needed to be free to discuss that were not acceptable to the group.

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Regardless of what she said, I felt somewhat responsible, even though I had witnessed some of the intra-group conflict she referred to. As a researcher, I believe we have to take what our participants say as true, otherwise we spend our time second guessing ourselves.

the group. I was responded that I wanted to be there as well. That afternoon, I received a telephone call from Esther, inviting me to return to the group. Esther said, "the woman who wasn't comfortable with your research hasn't returned since that night, so you are welcome to come back if you would like." I was elated, and relieved, and returned to the group the for the next meeting.

### *The Sociological Significance of Leaving*

The fear inherent in ail field researchers is either being denied access, or being asked to leave the group. On the one hand, critics of my research can claim that I set myself up to be asked to leave. My response was that I had no other choice: I had to demonstrate to the women that I was committed to keeping the group as their healing place, therefore, being willing to leave when, and if, asked. Leaving open the option to leave was to protect the women, as well as myself, and to remind them they were in control of their "healing experience." Keeping in mind these women have spent the majority of their lives feeling powerless, I believed it essential to make it clear that I was not a threat to the group. I considered it a privilege to be included in the group, and maintained this position throughout my research.

Being asked to leave became the most significant methodological moment of my research. During my probationary period with the group, I was engaged in the process of "proving myself." Considering trust as the cornerstone of the researcher-participant relationship, I did all I could to initiate the development of trust. Part of this involved making promises to the women to maintain the integrity of the group, of leaving if I was

asked and maintaining confidentiality and anonymity. When I was asked to leave, I was being asked to follow through on the promises I made to the group. In the social process of developing trust, and following through on my promises, being asked to leave was the telltale event; the "test" of my integrity as a researcher, and my respect for the group. Wolf (1991), in his discussion of outlaw bikers, referred to leaving three years of field research behind if the Rebels were not comfortable with his wanting to study the group as an academic, and ride with them as a biker. This points to levels of commitment a researcher should have invested in the research project, and a willingness to discard whatever has been done at the request of the participants. In leaving, I did more to develop trust with the women than anything else I could have done.

I mentioned earlier that being asked to leave became the most significant event of my research. Much of the significance lies in how the women approached my return to the group. First, *the women called me and asked me to return, indicating that they were comfortable with me, and that they trusted me.* Second, *the women were willing to accept me into the group on my terms and in my role as researcher.* Third, *the women were willing to keep their promises to me.*

Returning at the request of the group, and Esther specifically, was an indication that the work I had done while I was in the group demonstrated my commitment to the group. If the women were not comfortable with me, they would not have asked me to return. Accepting me on my terms as a researcher, and not as a participant or convert, indicated to me that the women were willing to accept me as a researcher, and believed that I would remain committed in maintaining the same non-participating research status I

had previously. In keeping their promise to me, the women were showing me that they were willing to have me in the group for the purposes of the research. Further, I no longer had the nagging doubt that I was there because it was "the Christian thing to do."<sup>10</sup>

Gordon, in describing similar circumstances, characterizes these feelings as *being accepted v. feeling accepted*. I believed I was accepted into the group after the first meeting, however, I never felt accepted. Feeling accepted came from being asked to leave, and then asked to return.

The point at which I felt accepted, however, followed shortly after an action that I felt feared would have the opposite effect. . .not only did this event not reduce my acceptance by the groups, it seemed to have enhanced it (Gordon, 1987:276).

Much the same, my leaving enhanced my relationship with the group, and I both believed I was accepted, and felt that I was.

### *Leaving the Field*

Because of the uniqueness of every field situation, there are different nuances to exiting. Ethnographers, however, must always be mindful that the time will come to leave--at least physically. Toward the end, researchers must prepare both the community members and themselves for the exit (Berg, 1995:116).

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From the beginning of my fieldwork, and despite the difficulties I encountered, I was concerned that I was there because the women felt it was the Christian thing. Asking me to leave, and then inviting me to return, the women demonstrated to me that I was there because it was what they wanted.



Considering the dramatic events related to my gaining access and returning, I felt that the process of leaving the group was less traumatic, but certainly no less emotional.

Berg writes,

Exiting any field setting involves at least two separate operations: first, the physical removal of the researchers from the research setting, and second, emotional disengagement from the relationships developed during the field experience (1995:115).

The first stage, physical removal, was initiated two weeks before I planned on leaving. During a ride home one evening, I informed Esther that, although I had not gathered all the information I thought I needed, my committee thought it best for me to leave. The emphasis on my academic committee was necessary, because once I returned to the group, it was evident the women did not want me to leave. I became aware of this when I told Esther I would be leaving soon, and she offered two options: one, I could remain with the group and not tell my committee, or two, I could now attend the group as a participant. As I felt these options were neither ethically nor morally acceptable, I politely declined. Esther said she would tell the group the following week that I was preparing to leave.

The group reacted in the same manner as Esther, even offering the same suggestions. However, unlike Esther, the group decided to take it one step further. Naomi said, "like it or not, we are going to do the laying on of hands to you next week. We are not asking you if we can, we are telling you we will. So get used to it" (week#19).

Again, I found myself, despite my ethical and moral position, dueling with the

researcher and the personal part of myself. As a researcher, I wanted to stay and continue to take fieldnotes, seeing the group to its end in the spring (which was two months away), and participate in the ritual “laying on of hands,” despite my apprehensiveness, in order to understand the ritual for my own perspective. At the same time, I wanted to leave the field and being the process of writing up the data. Although I did not feel “saturation”, I did believe that I had witnessed the significant parts of the group’s interaction, and staying would only be delaying the inevitable.

The personal part of myself wanted to avoid the ritual “laying on of hands.” Having witnessed the ritual, I did not feel that it was appropriate for me to participate, knowing how the meaning of the ritual was constructed. I would have felt “dishonest” if I had of agreed to participate. At the same time, I did I want to hurt the women’s feelings, knowing that the offer came, in part from their need for closure. I struggled with how to meet my needs, as a person and a researcher. Either way, I was confronted with a mix of emotions that I was not wholly prepared for,

...but it should be noted that relationships are two-way streets. Subjects make personal emotional commitments, and so, too, do many researchers--even without actually going native! Consequently, when it comes time to leave the field, researchers have developed some deep emotional feelings for their subjects (Berg, 1995:116).

The irony lay in their not wanting me to leave, when initially they struggled with letting me stay. I was not prepared for how my leaving the group would be handled, hoping that it would be treated as any other group meeting.

Rather than have a "normal" meeting, the Esther decided to play a praise tape for the group. She said, "it would be a nice, relaxing way to spend the group, and I don't

know about anyone else, but I need to relax" (week#20). After the tape, (it lasted for about an hour) Esther presented me with a card and gift, on behalf of the group, and told me how much I would be missed. And, of course, that the group did not want me to leave. I was then approached about the laying on of hands.

I knew that this was the one way the women could express how they felt about me, much the same as when one of the men in Gordon's research group washed his feet;

. . .it culminated with the group's leader washing my feet during a meeting. This was *the group's most solemn and powerful expression of love and deference to an individual*. When the leader finished he said, "I know what you say, Dave, but I love you" (Gordon, 1987:277; emphasis added).

I knew, that as well as a healing ritual, the women perceived the laying on of hands as an opportunity to express the feelings towards me; to demonstrate to me that they accepted me, and wanted to perform, what they believed to be, an important, spiritual ritual. It would be a method of closure for them, and provide them with the sense that they had done all they could do to bring me to salvation.

However, unlike Gordon, I could not allow the women to perform this ritual. There is, I believe, a distinct difference between participating in the group honestly, and participating in something without a clear conscience. As with the entire time I spent with the group, I was engaged, here, in the process of negotiation. I was honest and said that I could not, in good conscience, participate in this ritual. I referred back to the words of Ruth, when she said several weeks earlier, prior to Mary's laying on of hands,

If there is anyone here who does not fully believe in the Lord, and His power, then they have to go. Nothing can interrupt the spiritual flow. . .nothing can get in the way of the healing (week#11 ).

Knowing the group could not argue with this, I suggested two alternatives. They could either perform the ritual the following week, when I was not there, to an empty chair, or they could pray for me while I was there. Esther asked if they could pray for me while I sat in a chair in the middle of the room. I said that I was comfortable with their praying for me as long as everyone remained sitting where they were. They acquiesced, and began to pray for me.

Esther began the prayer, and as with other prayers the women have done for themselves and others, they moved in a circle. When Esther finished, the prayer was continued by the women beside her. This continued until each of the women had said something. Esther then closed the prayer, and *immediately* after she said "Amen" there was a burst of thunder, on what had been an absolutely cloudless night. (When I went into the group, the sky was blue.)

One would have had to have been present in the group to understand the reaction the women had to that one burst of thunder. They fully believed, without question, that they, or rather I, had been given a sign that "He" was waiting for me to accept Him into my heart, and further, that "He" knew I was going to. The women further interpreted this burst of thunder as "His" letting them know they had done with me all they could, and any further actions would have to be at my initiative. Needless to say, the remainder of the group was spent discussing that one burst of thunder<sup>1</sup>. It is safe to say I have never experienced anything like it before.

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To this day, whenever I see any of the group members, they ask me if I have acted on the burst of thunder. They saw this as a truly significant event.

Before I was able to leave the group as researcher, they made me promise that I would attend whatever function they put together to signify the recess of the group for the summer. Seeing this was important to them, and it was a means for them to experience closure, I agreed<sup>12</sup>. In addition, I see my attending their final gathering as a means to put closure on their relationship with me as a person, thus completing, for them at least, our researcher/participant relationship.

In the following chapter, I will discuss another significant element in methodological understanding: negotiating roles and building trust with the research participants. As I will discuss, no amount of preparation can account for every possible situation that can arise while in the field. At times, many decisions come from on-the-spot, with the researcher having to assess in the situation whether or not this is a path that should be taken. With these decisions, data is formed, and then collected as part of the overall data gathering process.

With negotiation, comes the building of trust. In some cases, decisions are made that may enhance the process of building trust, but may be contrary to the research design. The question of which is more important will be explored.

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Several weeks later, I attended a Chinese potluck at the church. I was able to catch up with the women, and I was able to sense a distance with them that had not existed previously. It was also during this time that the women and I discussed the roles of women in the Bible, and Dorcas suggested that I use women in the Bible as pseudonyms for the women.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### BUILDING TRUST: NEGOTIATING MY ROLE AS RESEARCHER

[Members of the group were] disturbed by the presence of a researcher who appeared to understand, yet was not compelled by that understanding to believe (McGuire, 1982:22).

Throughout my time with the group, in gaining access and being asked to leave, the women were engaged in the continual process of trying to change my role in the group; from researcher to full-fledged participant. As they were a group whose religious foundations were rooted in proselytization, it is not surprising that they could not accept me into the group as a mere researcher.

The reasons for wanting me to change my role are varied. One the most basic level, they believed I was "there [researching the group] for a reason, no matter what I said I was there for." This is not unusual with groups whose members proselytize (Gordon, 1987). Regardless of the researcher's own, stated purposes for being in the group, members of the group themselves will always assert that you are with the group because a Higher Power leads you there. I experienced this on several occasions: "you may well be healed while you are here" (Deborah: week#1); "you are here because He lead you here. He has a reason for you being here" (Ruth: week# 12). Gordon shares his experience,

. . . I know a lot of people who started out studying Christianity to disprove it and ended up getting saved . . . you must have come all the way out here for a reason. Nobody comes through that door by accident. . . I was there for more than research. (1987:274).

I see the group as having three purposes in relation to my role as researcher: first,

to have me as a full-fledged participant in the group, and subsequently the Church; second, to convert me to their religious philosophies; third, if the above two did not prove fruitful, to manipulate my role to fit situations that arose in the group. In this chapter, I will explore the negotiation of roles, as well as how this affected data gathering and trust building.

### *What was my role with this group?*

There is a plethora of methodological literature discussing the role of the researcher (Kirby and McKenna, 1987; Adler and Adler, 1987; Wax, 1983; Berg, 1995; Gordon, 1987; Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991). Most characterize field researchers as filling one of three roles: peripheral, active or complete, each assuming its own set of responsibilities and limits according to the level of involvement the researcher wishes to have.

From the beginning, I took the position of peripheral researcher<sup>13</sup>, meaning exactly what it says: I remained on the edges of the group, not participating, merely observing. Although this was clear to me, and I did my best to make certain it was clear to the women, there remained a continual struggle in the group to maintain my identity as researcher. Therefore, I was engaged in the process of negotiation throughout the time I was with the group. The next section discusses what I perceived to be the roles the group

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Efforts made by the group to convert me were an issue long before I ever went into the field. There was concern on the part of professors, and other graduate students, that I would not be able to maintain a non-participatory status, and would end up converted.

wanted me to take, versus the roles I was willing to take.

### *Full-fledged participant*

One of the most puzzling aspects of my research to the women was how I was going to attend the meetings every week, and not participate in the group; how could I shield myself from His word? According to the women, as long as I was attending group meetings, I was going to be affected by what was going on<sup>14</sup>.

There were several means by which the women attempted to make me a full participant, and some were more obvious than others. On the most basic level, I would be encouraged at the beginning of every group to share in the group "round": this was the time taken at the beginning of every group where the women would take a few minutes to share what happened during their week.

Another means was to ask me questions about my family. The women knew I had children, and would often ask me how they were doing. Further, one of the women had a child who was in the same grade and class as my oldest daughter. Dorcas would frequently ask how my daughter was faring in school.

On occasion, they would ask about my research, or about my experiences at the university. I saw this as having two purposes: they were trying to make me a participant, and, they saw me as a source of information about experiences they knew little about.

To be fair, asking me about my children and research could have more to do with them wanting to know about me, and the kind of person I am. Gordon (1987) writes that

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<sup>14</sup>Of course, I was affected, but just not in the ways the women believed I would be.



if we are to see research as a two-way process of negotiation, then we have to accept that those we are researching have the right to get to know who we are as well.

Even though the women were more interested in my role as person, as opposed to my role as researcher, they were, nonetheless, curious about my role as academic. As mentioned previously, I fielded several questions during the initial stages of gaining access where I answered such questions as "what is a sociologist?" and "why are you interested in us?" Further, having little to no experience with academic researchers, they were confused about what I was trying to accomplish. Gordon sums this up when he writes,

A participant observer may not appear to be doing research, so the claim that he continues with the group for research purposes may not be completely convincing to group members (1987:281).

There were some in the group who were, at the least, confused about what I did in the group, given that appeared impervious to their conversion efforts, and to the healing exercises and worship the group experienced every week. I would sometimes receive "joking comments" such as "what are you writing about us crazies this week, Dawne?" ; "I can't wait to see what you do with us?" ; or, "how much longer are you going to be?" <sup>15</sup>

McCall and Simmons account for this when they write,

The primary reason that the researcher finds his field relations so problematical is that his subjects, accustomed to life in a more or less ordinary social world, do not know how to be studied. That is, first of all, they do not know what kind of creature a participant observer is. .

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Gordon states that he was often asked similar questions from his participants, "I was continually asked by members of both groups when my paper would be finished, or whether my paper was finished yet" (1987:281). (I would posit that questions of this manner extend to any person, colleague or otherwise, who encounters the researcher.)

.(1969:28).

Given that the women were comforted by my role as mother, ex-wife, and/or someone who had some understanding of their life experiences, they were, at the same time, confused by my role as researcher. By trying to make me a completely participatory member of the group, they could continue to work on converting me, and, give me a role in the group they could feel comfortable with: member.

### *Conversion*

Along with attempting to make me a full-fledged participant in the group, the women were also trying to convert or "save" me. For groups of this nature, there are only two states of being: saved or unsaved (Ammerman, 1987; Gordon, 1987). Even my "Doc," Jennifer, expressed the opinion that I was going to come out of this converted, or, in the very least, with a renewed faith in God. The first evening I met with the women, Deborah<sup>16</sup> approached me at the end of the meeting, saying, "you may well be healed from being in the group, Dawne"(week#1).

Efforts towards conversion involved several social processes. First, above all, proselytization was part of the teachings of the Church. According to church members, those who were not of their faith were condemned to "eternal damnation" (Ammerman, 1987). Therefore, even though this group was closed, the teachings of the Church dictated that members work towards opening the hearts of others to "Him." As these women were members of the church, their religious ideologies took precedence over the

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<sup>16</sup>Deborah never made it to Esther's group.

group mandate, and they made every effort to convert me.

Conversion was first, overt and second, covert. As I was the only person in the group who was not a participant, "witnessing," in the traditional sense, was not useful. Witnessing is a process where believers in Him spread the word to their peers, or in more extreme cases, to people they do not know. It is considered a very important Christian activity (Ammerman, 1987). However, I do feel that I experienced witnessing "en masse," just by virtue of attending the group meetings. Further, the women were continually questioning me regarding my being saved. For example, they would ask "if I was ready to accept Him" or "do you know He is working in you, now, and all you have to do is acknowledge Him?"

Perhaps the most overt expression of conversion came one evening after my first experience of the ritual "laying on of hands." An emotionally charged, and draining ritual, it leaves even the most solid of non-believers in a state of questioning and confusion. When I was leaving (finally), Ruth stopped me outside the door, and asked me if I was okay; "these things can be rough when you experience them for the first time." I replied that I was confused and drained, and she said,

You know and He knows [pointing upwards] what is going on. He brought you here for a reason, and everyone knows it: even you. Pretty soon you are going to have to stop fighting it and accept Him. There is no getting away from it (Ruth, week# 17).

My confusion and exhaustion came from trying to comprehend an important healing ritual, amidst the emotional chaos that was present. Ruth, however, as well as the other members of the group, assessed that my reaction came from struggling to accept

Him as my saviour. Gordon experienced a similar experience when one of his participants said,

. . . you know it says in the Bible that Jesus is like a stone and either you will step over it one day, or it will crush you. Jesus is going to be dealing with you real heavy. He already has in fact because you have been coming here an hearing all about Him, and one of these days you are going to have to face up to Him. It's the truth (1987:272).

Although not as extreme, the message I received from the women in my group was the same: as long as you continue to come to the group, for whatever purpose, you are going to be saved, no matter how you feel.

In other instances, attempts at conversion were more covert. Not only was I observing the group, but some of the weekly church services as well. Understanding the group, and their religious philosophies, could only come from observing where and how they received their religious instruction. My first visit to the church was the cause of some stir among the women, and I received information on what to expect, how long the service would be and how many people would be there, to mention just a few. Esther also added that "after I go once, I won't be able to stay away" (week#12 ). In the middle of the service, Esther came over to greet me, and exclaimed, "THIS is Church!!!!" During the service, every women who was there from the group made a point to come over and greet me. Jennifer was there, and there were several people, who I did not know, who introduced themselves to me. After the service, the women asked me extensive questions about what I thought, and if it had changed my religious outlook; "Are you ready to accept Him, Dawne?" (Ruth, week#17 ).

On occasion, I was offered a drive home after the meetings, and quite often,

although the drive was short, the driver asked me questions about my accepting "Him." According to the women, all plans were laid down, and it was merely a matter of time. I was "avoiding the inevitable." Despite their insistence that I was existing in a state of denial, the women, as we will see later on, make accepting Him into your life sound much easier than it actually is. It is a social process, and one that is fraught with confusion and inconsistency.

*Being the "outsider"*

There were advantages to taking the role of "outsider" or "peripheral member." For some in the group, I was seen as a confidant for their dissatisfactions with the group, or other group members. There were several instances when group members would come to me with issues they felt needed resolving, or with the sole purpose of "getting things off their chest."

The first such incident, and perhaps the most significant, occurred after I had been in the group for several weeks. Deborah, while driving me home one evening, said she needed to tell me something, because,

You're in the group, but you're not, and I know you can't repeat anything I tell you. . .and you know the group and why I can't say anything there (week#5).

Deborah confided in me that she was caught in an intimate triangle, one that included herself and two women friends. Her concern for several reasons: given her religious beliefs, she was taught that what she was feeling was wrong, even though she did not think so herself; she wanted to share this with the group, but knew how such an issue

would be received; she did not want to damage her friendship with the couple. She then added that she was struggling with her religious beliefs, as she felt that God would want to include everyone, regardless of their sexual orientation. She said there were times when she disagreed with the philosophies and principles of the group. In some instances she felt they were exclusive instead of inclusive, and she asked if that was what He would have wanted.

Adapting my peripheral role in the group allowed Deborah to share an experience that was troubling her deeply. Given my role in the group, she knew she could come to me knowing there would be no repercussions from church, or the group, as I was not in a position to share anything that I was told by the women. How Deborah resolved the solution remains a mystery, as she left the group shortly after this conversation.

One of Deborah's reasons for leaving the group was one that was expressed by other women in the group<sup>17</sup> group cliques. As with other groups, there were subgroups within the main group, and there were some who grumbled that the "main" group received more attention. This group, comprised of Esther, Ruth, Naomi, and Mary was considered the force behind the group. Others, such as Phoebe, felt that the concerns of this group overrode those of the other women. Such sentiments were not echoed in the confines of the group, but I was privy to them during chance encounters on the street, or on the few minutes before everyone arrived at the group.

There were instances when the women would grumble to me about the

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Although Deborah was the only woman to leave the group, stating the cliquish nature of the group as her reason.

inconsistencies they believed existed in the group. Many of the women are single mothers, and an outing in the evening can pose problems when you are living on a small income.

Deborah and Naomi both talked with me about how the group talks about being Christian and helping others, but could not do something as simple as provide childcare for the women who needed it; or at least assist with some of the cost of getting a sitter;

. . . Deborah told me the reason she had her children with her was because she could not afford a sitter every week. She said she believed that if the church, or the group, could arrange childcare, more women would attend. She said she knew of several women who wanted to come, but are unable because they could not afford a babysitter. . . she said she almost hoped the kids would "act up" so she could use it as evidence for Esther that child care was needed (week#3).

Other instances included Naomi calling me regarding university entrance, or Phoebe asking me about how to resolve situations with her teenage daughters. These attempts are not an uncommon manipulation of the researcher role. Copps relates a similar experience while researching a shelter for people with physical and mental disabilities; "employees [of the shelter] occasionally used me to resolve their conflicts and demanded my opinion on disputed matters" (Copps and Kleinman, 1993:30).

Although I was not receptive to the attempts of the women to make me into a full-fledged participant of the group, they did manage to make my role as researcher advantageous to their own needs by making me a *receptacle* for those experiences and dilemmas they felt would not be received by the group. My role as peripheral member of the group placed me in a position where I knew the inner workings of the group, but my role as researcher made me a confidant in that the women could share things with me they

could not share with others in the group. Due to the parameters of my research, they knew that I was not in a position to repeat anything they said to me, or anything I heard indirectly. My role as receptacle was, perhaps, the only part of my researcher role the women found to be to their advantage.

***Negotiation: Keeping Close, but Remaining Distant***

Given the above experiences, how was I able to remain in the group, and yet maintain my researcher role? Simply, it was through a continual process of negotiation and re-negotiation. This elaborate process of negotiation began as soon as I entered the group, and continued on well after I left.

There are numerous discussions in the sociological literature on "role *playing* and role *taking*" (Wax, 1983; Gordon, 1987; Copps and Kleinman, 1993). Gordon writes that to manoeuver in the field, all the researcher has to do is engage in the process of playing or taking a role, given the situation. I disagree and I posit that role playing and role taking are a **part** of the negotiatory process that exists in the field setting. In part, this is because, as Wax states,

some experienced fieldworkers speak of role playing in fieldwork as if the fieldworkers roles were ready and waiting for him in the society he wishes to study. All he has to do is find the roles and "assume" them (1983:200).

The roles are not ready and waiting to be assumed at the whim of the researcher. Rather, they are created and re-created; negotiated and re-negotiated as part of the give and take that exists in the relationship among the researcher and the participants. Further, I take



objection to the concept of "role playing" believing this infers dishonesty in the field and in the relationship we attempt to develop with those we are studying. We role play on stage; in the field we negotiate the process according to the situation.

The danger lies, I think, in developing an insincere relationship with the participants. Clearly, as researcher, we state the role we wish to take in the group. For example, I took on the role of peripheral member; if I had feigned conversion in order to get closer with the group, I would have been **role playing** at being a "saved" Christian. Taking on other roles; being a confidant, and participating in various functions with the group, were part of the negotiatory process that I was continually engaged in. Therefore, although I was engaged in negotiation with the women, and the group, I was not willing to compromise the role I took with the group. I remained a peripheral member.

Negotiation was central to my relationship with the group, especially after I "felt" (as opposed to *believing* I was accepted. See previous chapter) accepted. At that point, although I was pleased to feel accepted, there was increased pressure from the women to convert; to be saved. Further, I was grateful that they allowed me to return to the group. Feeling grateful is not uncommon among field researchers (Gordon, 1987; Adler and Adler, 1987; Copps and Kleinman, 1993), and if not examined carefully can lead researcher to making the transition from role taking to role playing. I remained clear with the women in my refusal to be converted, even though I was grateful they asked me to return.

Gratitude exists primarily because we know, that as researchers, the "success of our work depends on participants" (Copps and Kleinman, 1993:3). Without this group

allowing me in initially, and then asking me to return, I would have been left without a group to research, and in the position where I would have had to locate another group, or begin again.

Therefore, the circumstances of negotiation to remain in my role was bounded by my feelings of gratitude, acceptance, guilt (in that there were times when I felt I was taking advantage of the women), and knowing that I would not compromise myself, my research, or the relationship I had developed with the group.

My strategy was to negotiate **through** these feelings, as opposed to **around** them. In respect to the efforts of the women to convert me, I maintained my position firmly, but let them know that I was always keen to hear what they had to say. I was not going to brush them aside, but they also needed to realize that they were not going to "save me." I understood this was confusing to the women, as they operate on a "with-us-or-against-us" perspective (Gordon, 1987). Essentially, such a perspective harkens back to the argument that I could not possibly attend the group, hear the Word, listen to their experiences, attend church, and **not** want to be saved. To not offend the women, I had to assume the blame for their not being able to convert me; "what is important here is that these accounts all blame the sinner (researcher) rather than the beliefs of the proselytizer" (Gordon, 1987:279). Therefore, their failure to convert me had nothing to do with their ability to proselytize, and bring "the Word" to the "unsaved." Rather, there was *something wrong with me* that was preventing me from being "saved." What is important here is that the failure to convert was mine, not the women's.

I was adamant on the point that I was not going to convert. However, refusing to

become a full-fledged participant was a more complex issue. The dominant philosophy in the group was that I would not have been able to attend the group unless I was “saved”, and was in need of healing. As I was neither, the group had to take alternate approaches with me. In this instance, they were willing to have me as a participant in the group, waiving the requirement of being “saved”<sup>18</sup>.

Full-fledged participant is exactly what it says: I would attend the groups, take part in all the discussions, prayer, rituals, and social events. I was not willing to take, or play, this role, even though I realized it would make data gathering simpler<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, I negotiated with the women in terms of how much participation I was willing to assume. Initially, I stated I would attend the meetings, but not saying anything. After I was asked to return, I consented to taking part in the “round.” When it was my turn to speak, I would touch on the mundane aspects of the previous week, but did not share any difficulties I may have experienced. Most often, this would suffice, but there were times when I was asked if there was anything else I wanted to say.

I also consented to participate, or attend, some church activities. One was a Valentine's Day party that was for single mothers only. Not only did I attend, but I included my children, because Phoebe's daughters were providing child care, and my daughter was friends with Dorcas' daughter. Taking my children, I suspect, demonstrated

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Of course, the understanding was that I would eventually convert, therefore whatever status I assumed prior to that would have been characterized as an interm status.

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I suspect that if I consented to being a full participant, the group would have allowed me to tape record the group meetings.

to the women that I was more than a researcher, that there were other sides to who I was. Even as recently as a couple of weeks ago, I was invited to partake in a Mother's Day celebration for single mothers.

The other significant event I attended was the Easter service at the church. Almost all the women were involved in this service, and outside of the Christmas service, is the largest and most public Christian service in the church. The church members perform a "passion play," with three evening performances<sup>20</sup>. I consented to attend the final evening performance, and as with the church service, was greeted by every group member present. Again, I was questioned extensively during the group meeting following the play, with the women wanting to know if I was ready to be "saved."

I did not have a significant amount of difficulty in increasing the level of participation in the group, so long as the women knew that I was there for research purposes. One of their alternative approaches when I was asked to leave the group was to return as a participant. They were, even at the end of my fieldwork, very persuasive, wanting me to lie to my thesis committee about finishing my field work so I could continue with the group as a participant. I came to realize that it was not my presence in the group that was the issue, but rather my role as researcher. Given this, they were persistent in their efforts to remove my role as researcher.

Negotiation was, for me, about give and take. I was willing to give, as long as they understood that I was going to remain peripheral. Once I realized they would not cease their conversion activities, I participated more, but remained true to my original

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<sup>20</sup> These plays have become so popular additional performances have been added.

position. Being honest with the group, and with myself proved, I think, to be more beneficial to my relationship with group as a person, and as a researcher.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **FORMAL IDEOLOGY AND STRUCTURE**

The previous chapters went to great lengths to outline the methodological issues that shaped the data gathering process of this thesis. Although I have included much detail, I believe it necessary to understand how I gathered the data, including the stumbling blocks, before we can analyse the data. The hows, in this instance at least, very much influenced the ways I was able to gather data, and had a profound effect on the kind of data I found.

This chapter introduces the women of the Beveridge Street Healing Group. Looking average and ordinary on the outside, they are women who are standing in the face of adversity, who are coping with many problems and issues. Wuthnow expresses a similar perspective,

As I sat with [the group] week after week, I had no doubt that I was in the presence of a group of people who knew what it meant to start a spiritual journey, who knew how to be honest, how to be vulnerable, how to stand in need of love, how to give love (Wuthnow, 1994:180).

There are a dozen women who attend the group, and bring with them a multitude of problems: sexual abuse; physical and emotional abuse; husbands in prison; dysfunctional families; health problems; alcoholism and substance abuse. At the same time, the women bring with their problems the desire to effect change in their lives, and the lives of others; the desire for solutions, collective strategies; a desire to share, and to be heard. Using religion, “God's Word” and the “knowledge of His love for them,” the women believe

they are ready to embark on a “healing journey” with the knowledge that it will require work and personal sacrifice.

**Esther** is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict, and reports that she has been “saved” six years ago. **Ruth** is married to an unsaved husband, and uses the group as a place to strengthen her relationship with God. **Naomi** is a divorced single mother, with two teenagers. She is in the process of recovering from her ex-husband's abuse. **Mary** is in the process of recovering from intense childhood abuse; physical, emotional and sexual, as well as a problem with alcohol. **Phoebe** is divorced and attempting to recover from her drug addiction through her faith. **Elizabeth** is in the process of coping with her husband's recent return from prison, and her own drug and alcohol addictions. **Dorcas** is a divorced single mother, struggling to understand her marriage to an abusive “Christian man.” **Priscilla** is trying to recover from two bad marriages, an abusive relationship, and a daughter with a learning disability. **Sara**, recently widowed, is struggling with her son's addiction to drugs and alcohol. **Martha** has recently separated from her abusive husband of twenty years. **Eve** is recovering from a nervous breakdown, and the fact that she is denied access to her only child. There are several elements that bring these women together, but none is stronger than their desire to live peacefully. Hence, they are drawn to this group for “healing,” support and an enhanced understanding of God and His role in their lives.

To begin, the notion of healing and support in this group are, at best, complex. One of the most difficult aspects of writing this thesis was how to incorporate the data on healing into a comprehensive and concise discussion of healing. How could I take what I

learned for the group and relate it to others in a manner that would make sense, and that would honour the group's experiences? This was my dilemma. Stated simply, the group has two means of "healing" and support: formal and informal structures. The formal structure represents the official, stated purpose of the group, namely to achieve "spiritual healing," emphasizing praying, rituals and a discourse about "getting closer to God." The informal culture represents the emotional and physical support the women provide for one another, the empowerment the women develop as a result of doing for others, and having others do for them. The formal and informal cultures occur simultaneously, and both are necessary for the totality of healing to develop. At the same time, the two structures are not a perfect mirror image of each other. The group's process is an outcome of the dynamic tension between the two cultures.

To understand the dynamic that exists between the two cultures, this chapter and the following chapter will explore the formal and informal structure in detail. The formal ideology encompasses their stated purpose, the relationship with the church, the language and the context of the group. The subsequent chapter explores the informal beliefs and interactions of the women. The social support the group provides and is, indeed, the integral part of the women's "healing." The goal is to illustrate how the formal and the informal support structures of the group contribute collectively to what the women call the "healing journey."

### *Formal Structure*

The formal structure encompasses both the explicit discourse and structure of



activities and actions that direct the women towards the development of “spiritual healing;” the element of the “healing journey” that is explicitly religious in nature. The women are initially drawn together from their desire to know God and to learn how to make Him the foundation of their lives. It is in this way that the group carries on the teachings of the church, tailoring the group to match the needs of the women.

The formal structure of the group is founded on the ambiguous notion of “spiritual healing.” The women come together in a collective as a means of understanding God in relation to their lives. There are various means used in the development of this collective understanding; language, action and ritual. As with other formal structures, there is a previously developed set of “rules and regulations” or a perspective used for the maintenance of the collective. For example, in Becker’s Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life, he outlines the *student perspective* of academic life;

As students interact with one another, with teachers and with other college officials, they develop ideas that, because they are *held in common* create a universe of discourse, a common frame of reference in which communication may take place (1995:28).

As the women interact with one another in the group, as they attend formal Church services, as they interact with other members of the church community, they are, in fact, developing a healing perspective. Because, as Becker writes, they have ideologies that are common, they are able to come together, in a formal collective with the purpose of understanding “Christian healing.”

Before we can understand the “healing perspective” we must first explore the elements that define any perspective. *A definition of the situation, kinds of activities, and*

*criteria of judgement* is one means of developing a perspective. I shall look at each separately in relation to its importance in the development of the “healing perspective.”

### *Definition of the situation*

Definition of the situation is the “set of ideas describing the character of the situation in which action must be taken (Becker, 1995:29). The women in the group share a worldview directly related to their definition of the situation; an understanding of , first, what their world is like, and second, what they would prefer it to be like. Their worldview defines what their world is like, what is acceptable to do, what is not acceptable to do, as well as an understanding as to why they are in their current situation.

Becker describes the following as the most feature of the definition of the situation,

... a statement of goals one can reasonably strive for in the situation; a description of the organization within which action occurs and the demands they make on participants; the rules, both formal and informal, by which one’s action is constrained; and the rewards and punishments one may look forward to as a consequence of his (sic) performance (1995:29).

For the women in the group, their primary goal is developing a stronger, one-on-one relationship with God, to develop a “healing relationship.” One organization, the church, plays a significant role in the development of the definition of the situation.

### *The role of the church*

In this group, the actual role of the church is minimal. However, its influence exists in relation to the religious philosophies of the group. Not only do formalized beliefs

play a crucial role in defining the formal structure of the group, but so does the physical setting and social environment afforded by the Church.

The church, as an institution, meets many of the physical needs of the group. Esther is an employee of the church, therefore, giving the women access to her that they may not have had otherwise. At any time, the women can walk into Esther's office to see her, or call her if necessary. The church provided physical space for John's group, as well as other extra-curricular group activities, such as the Chinese potluck and the single mother's Valentine's Day party.

More important, however, is that the church provides the religious foundations of the group. With several evening programs available in the church, and two formal services on the weekends, the women have as much access to church ideology as they choose. Many of the women participate in Tuesday Evening Bible Study, the nursery program, the single mother's group, as well as other self-help support groups sponsored by the church.

Therefore, the women can have as much exposure to church teachings as they choose. The religious ideologies, philosophies, and rhetoric the women have come from the formal teachings of the church. There were incidences in the group where themes and teachings from the church would incorporate themselves into the weekly meetings. Often, these discussions would start out as , "Did you hear what Pastor Matthew said about forgiveness Sunday evening?"

How the church teachings frame the religious ideologies of the women and the group is important to the definition of the situation. As with other charismatic/evangelical type religions, religion is the frame of reference for these women. Evangelical type

religions are a contrast to a more mainstream approach to religion, where it serves as one of a collective frame of reference for individuals. For these women, their religious frame of reference flies in the face of the plurality of frames of reference that exists in the secular society. Religion is the way of life for these women. Everything they do, say, feel and believe is grounded in Jesus as their Saviour. This includes traumatic life events, such as husbands in prison, or children using drugs to everyday occurrences at work, such as losing an important work-related document and then finding it. All events are related to God and “His” influence in the lives of these women. The church reinforces their teachings as the frame of reference for the women, and in turn the women take the teachings and rhetoric to the group. Therefore, the church may have little influence in the administration and informal activities of the group, but the religious foundations of the group are solely based on the teachings of the church. The church, as a consequence, feels the need to define the situation of the women.

Rewards and punishments, according to this group, would be minimal. Unlike Becker’s students, these women do not risk expulsion, as the group itself tends to be informal. For example, some of the women attend regularly, others sporadically. Further, rewards and punishment fall into the “healing perspective,” as the only one who can determine what the rewards and punishments are is “God.” How the rewards and punishments are interpreted is within the purview of the group.

*Activities*, another element in relation to developing a perspective, refers to those activities that are proper and sensible to engage in (Becker, 1995). There are expectations of the church that must be met: ie: here and elsewhere attending services, or organizational

meetings; of the group, that if there is an attendance problem, that the women who are having difficulty attending contact Esther. It could be a matter of transportation, or something more serious. There are certain activities the women must be prepared to engage in, if they are to be part of the group; praying, “healing” rituals, engaging in discourse, providing “Christian” support, to name a few. These activities help to develop, and maintain, the “healing” perspective.

*Criteria of judgement* is the final element in developing a perspective. Here, “standards of value against which people are judged” (Becker, 1995:30) becomes the focus. The means by which the women judge themselves against others, and how they perceive themselves judged by others, is key in understanding why they have developed a “healing perspective.” However, keeping in mind the religious foundations of the group, we have to accept that the concept of judgement is contextually different for these women than it is for those who do not share the same religious foundations. For them, judgement is tied in with the concept of reward and punishment. The only one who can truly judge is God.

In describing the elements of the “healing perspective” it is important to understand that this perspective is not an explanation of the women’s activities. Rather, as Becker writes, it is a

description of what [the women] do and think and can be conceived as an explanation only in the sense that it constitutes the larger whole in relation to which any given [woman’s] action or idea makes sense (1995:30).

Therefore, the “healing perspective” can only be understood in the context of the formal structure of the group, and not outside of it. The “healing perspective” is the overarching

perspective of the women; it defines their situation, their actions, and how they perceive themselves and others. Further, it assists in the development and maintenance of the formal structure of the group.

How does the “healing perspective” translate into action? In other words, how does it become active in the formal structure of the group? The “healing perspective” is comprised of actions, rhetoric and language that bind the women to their religious principles, and as we shall see later, help in the formation of their identity as “devout Christian women.”

Part of the rhetoric of the “healing perspective” is the notion of “control.” The women believe they are ultimately “controlled” by God, and their actions serve to fill “His” goal’s for their lives. Control is constructed via the following elements.

1. To begin, the women in this group believe they, and anyone else who finds themselves in the group, were “lead to the group” (Ruth, week#9). This implies that no one in the group is there of their own volition; they have been lead by God, and there is a distinct reason why. The reason may not be readily apparent, but there is a reason, because “He” does nothing without a reason. The women used this “logic” with me when trying to understand why I was in the group. Clearly, in my case, research alone was not enough of a reason to be in the group, and I was lead there by “Him.”

2. Next, is the belief that “no one is alone (Esther, week#3).” No matter what has occurred in the past, what will happen in the future, or how anyone feels about “Him,” no one is alone, as “He” knows all. Whether you chose to believe in “Him” or not, “He” knows what is going on in your life, and is waiting for you to acknowledge “Him” so that

“He” can “go to work” in your life. For example, Esther shares with the women that “He” knew what was happening in her life before she was “born-again,” and “He” knew what was going to happen in her future, but “He” could not participate fully in her life until she was ready to acknowledge “Him.” This rhetoric and dialogue and understanding of “Him” is essential for the women, and they need to believe there is someone there, constantly, who they can turn to (Rinck, 1990).

3. “Let go and let God” is one of the most frequently used rhetorical phrases in the group. The premise of the group is that as long as you can “let go,” you will be healed. “Letting go” refers to no longer taking responsibility for anything that happened to you at the hands of another. Until you are able to “let go” you will never be fully healed. For example, Mary grew up in an extremely abusive home, and has carried these experiences with her for most of her life. Her goal in attending the group is to be “healed” from this trauma, and move on with her life. She is an angry, hurt woman, who stomps out of the group when she feels that there is nothing there that can help her; when she is unable to accept the rhetoric of the group. Esther believes the reason for Mary’s behaviours, and her anger, is that she is unable to “let go” of these past experiences, and the present hurt and angers. In turn, “He” is not able to “heal” her. If she could only “let go” she would be able to feel “His healing” and be able to move past these experiences, and devote her energies toward becoming a “good Christian woman.”

Much of the conflict related to “letting go” or “giving it over” stems from the desire to do things “our way” instead of “His way.” As Dorcas said,

... the problem is when we try to do God’s will “our way” instead of “His”

She then referred to her experiences with AA and addiction, and how she would try to make the pain go away through addiction rather than surrender it to God. She said, “we have to give it all up to God: our hopes, fears and dreams. . .” (week#9).

All of the above comes under the umbrella of *control*. In order to accept the “healing perspective,” the women must give up control of their lives. As long as the women believe they are in control of their lives, they will never be able to experience “healing.” Eve said one evening,

. . . the point is to learn to give control over to God, and that it is important to understand that it is an ongoing process. One of my problems is that I don’t want to submit, to give it all to Him. I want to, but can’t, and I probably won’t until I meet Him at Heaven’s gate (week#8).

Learning to give control over to Him may be the point, but for most of the women it is easier said than done. Although I will explore this in further detail in the next chapter, there is much conflict for the women over giving it over and control, and what they are struggling with as women who want to be in control of their lives. Naomi said one evening that,

she has become so accustomed to dealing with things on her own that she feels she cannot give it over to God. She wants to admit powerlessness, but she can’t (week#8).

The theme of control takes many forms: submission and forgiveness are two other means the rhetoric of the group uses as a means of adhering to the formal structure. Ruth says, “. . . the only way to make the program work is to **submit to God**.” The women feel submission has negative connotations, and is misunderstood by the world,

. . . submission is misunderstood, because of the way the “world” has used it; most people think that to submit in religion is to let men have all the



control. . . . submission is giving it over to God: stopping and asking Him what we should do. We need to follow through with our promise to honor God and His work. Part of this is to submit all our hurt and fears to God (Naomi, week#9).

Forgiveness seems to be more difficult for the women to grasp. Their definition of forgiveness entails literally forgetting about the painful events and traumas in their lives: forgive and forget. Using Mary again as an example, the group re-enforces this approach to forgiveness by telling Mary that as long as she continues to not forgive her father, as long as she continues to harbour resentment toward him for what happened, she will never heal. This is because she cannot forgive and forget. Elizabeth is supposed to help her husband with his return to the community (after being released from prison), by forgiving him for why he was sent to prison, and forgetting the abuse in their relationship. If she is able to accomplish this she will be better able to “heal.”

“Giving it over,” “let go and let God,” “surrender,” “forgive and forget” are all part of the larger concept of control. Each of these rhetorical phrases points to first, literally forgetting past life events, and second, surrendering control of one’s life to God. As much as this rhetoric is passed around the group, there is little concrete advice provided, detailing **how** the women are to accomplish these large tasks. Accomplishing the impossible is necessary if these women are to experience what it is to “heal.” And “healing” is the structured goal of the group; it is the stated reason for the group’s existence.

All of this combines to move the “healing perspective” from a sociological concept to a tangible means of maintaining the group’s formal structure. The rhetoric, language

and action used by the group enforce their desire to “heal” through God, and to become better women in the process.

Although the healing perspective is the most essential element of the formal structure of the group, there are other pieces that must be in place in order for the totality of the formal structure to be realized. What are the other elements of the formal structure, and how do they come together with the healing perspective to develop the formal structure of the group?

The primary “need” drawing women to the group centres on using religion as a means of overcoming drug addiction, alcoholism, and various forms of abuse. This need is founded in the knowledge that there is little available, founded on Christian principles, that is able to facilitate healing. Dorcas said one evening that she has attended AA, and found it lacking in the spiritual element. Other group members have commented on reading material that centres addiction problems in the individual, therefore placing the onus on the individual to heal. The needs of the women are formally defined in using religion as a means to “heal,” where other non-Christian programs have failed in the past.

The needs of the women, are in part, formed around the group mandate; that the group can “heal” these women from the trauma of certain life events. As long as the women believe in the powers of God and Jesus, they will experience “healing.” Along with “healing,” the group claims it can bring the women closer to God; help them understand “His” role in their lives; assist in living with those who are not saved, and generally living with the knowledge that their worldview is in the minority.

The combination of all that maintains the formal structure of the group is realized

in the social construction of the *devout Christian, healed, woman*. Along with being “healed” the side-by-side goal of the group is to have each woman “heal” and to move “to a one-on-one relationship with God.” With this comes the devout Christian woman; a woman who has been “healed” from past life experiences; that is has successfully been able to forget anything that has happened to her; who has a one-on-one relationship with God, to the point where there is no doubt “He” is hearing her, listening to her, is aware of her pain and suffering; a woman who is able to give over all control of her life to God: her family, children, anxiety, stress, pain, everything in her life she will be able to give over to God without difficulty. If the women can achieve this, then they will have successfully healed, and will be “all God wants them to be.”

This woman, however, by the group’s own admission, cannot exist. The devout Christian woman can only exist through true “healing” and “The only way we will truly be healed is through death” (Ruth, week#10). Knowing this, the women are able to continue within the confines of the formal structure of the group with a goal, even though they are aware that the goal is unattainable until death. As long as their formal, stated purpose is clear, the women feel they have a reason to desire “healing.”

In sum, the formal structure is responsible for the construction and the maintenance of the “healing perspective.” This perspective encompasses the maintenance of the women’s identity as “devout Christian women.” Further, the explicitly religious rhetoric and actions of the group are constructed within the boundaries of the formal perspective. The formal structure provides the forum for all group interactions to exist, both, as we shall see, formal and informal activities.

Key to understanding the following chapter is knowing the formal structure of the group. Formal meaning the reasons for the group's maintenance and development. This formal structure "tows the party line" so to speak, in all that the group is *expected* to accomplish exists in this structure. As the following chapter illustrates, however, it is often what is *not expected* to occur that piques the sociological imagination.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **INFORMAL BELIEFS AND INTERACTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the group “deviates” from the official perspective and goals. If there is a “healing perspective,” can we apply the same criteria and develop a “practical perspective?” How does the “practical perspective” differ from the “healing perspective?” How do the two perspectives work together to create a group atmosphere conducive to the development of “self?” Are both perspectives equally important? Most important, however, is the following question: is it the informal beliefs and interactions, and not the formal structure, that (1) empowers women and (2) provides the much needed practical support in how people carry out their daily lives?

#### *Developing a “practical perspective”*

The previous chapter discussed the development of the “healing perspective.” Without going through the step-by-step process again, I think we can understand the development of the “practical perspective’ in the same terms.

Keeping in mind that perspectives are comprised of (1) definition of the situation, (2) activities and (3) criteria of judgement, how can we develop a “practical perspective?” In terms of the definition of the situation, adopting a “practical perspective” allows the women to function outside of the confines of the “healing perspective.” The thoughts, feelings, and emotions that do not fit in the “healing perspective” can exist here.

Questioning their religious philosophies, their roles as women/mother/partner, discovering their “self” can occur within this framework. Therefore, participation in the group is a matter of acquiring both perspectives, and operating withing the framework of both.

If we examine activities in terms of “a more or less realistic way of dealing with the problems they see the environment posing for them” (Becker, Geer and Hughes, 1995:29), then we see the “practical perspective” as a means of dealing with problems developed from the “healing perspective.” In needing another framework, there is an acknowledgement that a religious perspective alone is not enough to help the women through their past experiences and in the development of who they are now. The women need this outlet as a means of working through the constraints placed upon them by the formal institution of their religion.

Criteria of judgement, in the development of a perspective, allows for the “standards of value against which people may be judged” (Becker, Geer and Hughes, 1995:30). With this in mind, we can assess that a “practical perspective” allows for the women to judge their development of self in relation to others. The rewards, here, are the knowledge of support and understanding in the undertaking of endeavours that are almost more challenging for these women than anything that comes under the umbrella of “healing perspective.”

With an understanding of the “practical perspective” in place, we can now explore the evolution of this perspective in the group. How do these informal beliefs, and hence this new perspective, evolve during the life of the group? I think the primary reason for the evolution of this new perspective was that it was necessary. In exploring and trying to

understand the “healing perspective,” the women were confronted with questions, issues and emotions that did not fall into the confines of the “healing perspective.” The role of the “practical perspective,” then, is to manage some of the unexpected issues and questions that have come to light, from exploring the role of religion in the lives of the women.

We can see the importance of this perspective in the growth and development of these women, both in terms of who they are as Christian women, and women in general, if we can approach their religion as the “given.” What I mean by this is that religion has been and will continue to be for these women the foundation of their lives. When these women approached the “turning points<sup>21</sup>” in their lives, they used their religious beliefs as a means to ground themselves.

Much of their time, after becoming “born-again,” has been devoted to exploring their relationship with God, and the role “He” plays in their lives. All of the women have been “born-again” for at least the last five years, and some for as many as twenty-five years. In this time, they have built a strong foundation in terms of who they are “in Christ.” They know God is the guiding force in their lives, and they know that no matter what, “He will be there.” (Naomi, week#9 ).

Where the insecurity lies, for these women, is in who they are as people, separate and apart from their identities as religious women. I suspect that these women would say they have no identity outside that of Christian women. However, in observing their conflicts listening to their questions about religious ideals, we can see that there is a

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<sup>21</sup>The importance of the “turning point” will be further discussed in the development of self.

conflict there. In other words, the religious foundations have been laid, and it is now time for exploration into who these women are beyond their roles as religious women.

Hence the “practical perspective.” Here, the women are able to engage in exploration that includes the process of discovering the “self”, and providing the forum to express concerns and dissent in terms of their religious ideals. Therefore, although the group expresses and presents itself in terms of the formal, structured perspective devoted to religious “healing, ” underneath we can see a more informal, exploration of self taking place. An exploration that permits the women to nurture each other as well as themselves, and still remain within the formal structure. And in the end, both the formal and the informal strive to achieve the same goal: to facilitate the “healing” of the women.

In the following sections, we will explore some of what can occur within the boundaries of the “practical perspective.” We will begin with the complex process of the development of “self.” Here, with the aid of Kathy Charmaz’ work with the chronically ill, we will see how life events and traumas can benefit individuals and help them achieve a stronger sense of who they are. Following this, a discussion of one of the “informal activities” of the group, sharing stories, will take place. Why does sharing stories fall into the informal structure, and how does this benefit the women and the “practical perspective?” Finally, we will examine how the differences in perspectives are resolved, and how this benefits the women.

### *Development of “Self”*

In much of this thesis, I have dichotomized two relationships: between my personal



self and my researcher self, and between the women's religious self, and their personal self. Through the "healing perspective" the women strive to attain a sense of a religious self, or a "devout Christian woman." Much the same occurs through the "practical perspective". The women are struggling to attain a sense of who they are, and it is clear that the "healing perspective" can only take them so far in understanding who they are as people.

"Crises and losses disrupt life, but may result in a changed, more valued self" (Charmaz, 1994:227). The above statement marks the beginning of a fascinating and relevant exploration, by Charmaz, into how chronic illness allows those who are ill to engage in a social process of discovering their "self." The premise is that through adversity, we can discover new aspects of self (Charmaz, 1994). How has adversity facilitated the "discoveries of self" for these women?

Charmaz contends that chronic illness places individuals in a position where they are left to reflect upon their lives; both in terms of where they have been and where they are going. I contend that any crisis, be it chronic illness, or traumatic life experiences, can place individuals in a position where they begin to question their "self." This process of discovery does not just occur. Rather, the process begins gradually. For those suffering from chronic illness, it can, perhaps begin with the onset of constant pain. For the women in the group, the process of discovery, I contend, can only occur after the women have situated themselves within the framework of the "healing perspective." The women need to feel a security that only their religious philosophies can provide. Only then can they allow for a discovery of self. In other words, their faith and belief in God is a "given";

their faith and belief in themselves requires much more effort.

Charmaz writes, “the person’s discoveries of self may occur when he or she defines striking contrasts between past and present” (1994:228). This sentence captures why it is necessary for the women to locate themselves within the framework of the “healing perspective,” as they need a point of reference to examine their life from a “that was the way I was then, and this is the way I am now” perspective. Only when the women begin examining their past in reference to their present, can they begin the process of discovering their “self.”

Before we can begin to understand this process, I think we need to clarify exactly what is meant by the “self.”

The self is a process in the sense of emergence and change; it is continually unfolding. This process of unfolding occurs as the person interacts with others, feels cultural constraints and imperatives, and evaluates himself or herself relative to experience, situation, others and society more generally. . . . The self is both subjective and objective. It is objective in the sense that the person internalizes the language, culture and meanings of his or her groups. . . . Sentiments shape estimations of self-worth and are subject to revision and even reversal when people do not have strong anchors to fixed and stable social organizations, communities, and other individuals. Without firm anchors, the self is more vulnerable to ongoing definition and redefinition. If so, these conditions warrant viewing the self as process (Charmaz, 1994:228).

Having located a fixed and stable anchor in the framework of religion, the women are in the position to engage in this process of discovery. In fact, I think it is safe to posit that prior to their being “born-again,” these women were without firm anchors, attempting to fix themselves in communities where ties were based upon the consumption of drugs and

alcohol, or in relationships that were debasing and abusive.

Having the firm anchors allows the women the opportunity to engage in the discovery of self. However, this is not enough. As with agreeing to take on the “healing perspective” there must be a *turning point* in the lives of the women that put them in the frame of mind where they feel they must develop a stronger sense of self:

Turning points often reflect more than just a shift in the direction of one’s life, or discovering new information about self. Rather, they also reflect *emotions* about self. . . emotions transform raw experience into meaningful events (Charmaz, 1994:234).

For most of the women in the group, turning points in their lives came slowly, and only after there had been more trauma, or stress than the women felt they could cope with. Esther, after years of abuse and addiction, said she was tired of the way she was living, and was concerned about the effects her lifestyle would have on her children. She may not have been able to change for herself, but she had to change for her children. She recalls an incident where she and her husband were having a physical argument, and he had pinned her to the floor and was yelling at her and hitting her. She turned her head to see her then two-year old son standing in the doorway. At that moment, she knew that she and her husband were going to have to make changes. For her, this was a significant turning point.

Mary knew she was in need of change, when, at the age of eighteen, she was diagnosed with bleeding ulcers. “The doctor told me it was 100% stress related, and I knew that meant it was because of my father. I knew then that I had to do something about how I felt, if I was ever going to be able to get on with my life” (week#4).

For others, even though they want to engage in the process of discovering self, they find the process difficult. Setbacks in relationships can make any effort seem fruitless. Elizabeth, after the return of her husband from prison, said she wanted to “go back to her own little world” (week#14 ). When asked where this place was, Elizabeth said it was the place where she was when she was high; she felt safe there. Therefore, Elizabeth’s initial reaction to the return of her husband was to retreat into past behaviours. Even though she wants to engage in the process, she cannot commit fully, as she has not experienced a “turning point.”

Turning points represent gains when individuals learn and grow from their experiences. Inasmuch as the group caters to the “healing perspective,” it provides a place to nurture the development of self, and a place to celebrate the changes the women make. The fact that the women do not experience these changes simultaneously, nor with the same levels of emotion, it is the knowledge that there are a group of women undergoing the same *process* that facilitates the growth of informal beliefs.

The importance lies in the understanding that what occurs at the informal level; the development of self; the nurturing, are separate and distinct from what occurs in the “healing perspective.” The women are given a new sense of control and awareness of themselves that they are unable to gain with the “healing perspective” alone. The long term implication of the process of self are still unknown, as the women are engaged in this ongoing process. However, one implication is that being involved in this process allows the women to work through the tension that is created in trying to be both “devout Christian women” and women who are willing to challenge their religious assumptions.

One important activity that develops from engaging in the “practical perspective” is the sharing of stories. Sharing stories, or life experiences, is the cornerstone of many self-help groups (Wuthnow, 1995). This group is no different, and as we shall see, this informal activity allows for the voices of the women to be heard in a manner they have never experienced before.

### *Sharing Stories*

...it points to something seemingly ordinary that requires the kind of social space that may not ordinarily be present in our lives. . .(Wuthnow, 1994:181).

In the development of a perspective, we have to acknowledge the activities that facilitate and maintain the perspective. In the case of the “practical perspective” there is one activity that encompasses all that is important about coming together to tackle traumatic issues: sharing stories. We must acknowledge the importance of sharing stories and the support the women give and receive from participating in this frank and open reciprocal dialogue,

...[in] telling all of their story as they are ready and able to at a given time, healing is facilitated (MacKinnon, 1990:45).

On the most basic level, sharing stories allows the women the opportunity to articulate their own life experiences, in their own manner. They begin where they chose, tell as much or as little as they want. For most of the women in the group, the opportunity to speak out for themselves, to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions, has been suppressed by past, and present, relationships. For example, just a few short weeks into

my time with the group, a young woman shared her horrific experiences with sexual assault, prostitution, and drug abuse. It took the young woman, Rachel, an hour to articulate all she felt she had to say. Amid tears and heartwrenching sobs, she released years of pent-up anger and frustration. It was, without a doubt, as difficult for her to share as it was for the others in the group to listen. However, when she finished she said she felt relieved, and for the first time she felt she was going to be able to overcome her anger (week#3). Rachel ended by saying she had never shared these experiences with anyone, except her mother<sup>22</sup>. Inasmuch as sharing is about getting one's life experiences into the open, it is also about knowing that a non-judgmental environment exists, and there is no fear concerning reprisal.

There are certain elements that must exist in order to develop an environment conducive to sharing stories. Opportunity and acceptance must exist in order for sharing stories to benefit the individual sharing and those who are listening. Opportunity involves,

bracketing out intrusions so that one is able to make full disclosures of something important. The acceptance is a norm that legitimates making certain kinds of personal disclosures (Wuthnow, 1994:181).

Providing the opportunity to disclose is as important as being able to disclose. The opportunity to disclose has been absent from the lives of many of these women, as they have been socialized to not say anything about their life experiences. Further, other commitments such as home, family, work, may prove to be barriers to locating

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Part of Rachel's sharing was revealing that when she did tell her mother, she reacted by slapping Rachel across the face and calling her a "whore." Having had this reaction when trying to reach out, she was afraid to say anything, fearing a similar reprisal.

opportunity, especially if they are part of the problem.

Acceptance involves the women believing and feeling accepted for who they are, regardless of what they may share in the group. They know they are accepted by God, as this is part of the “healing perspective.” However, they do not feel the same confidence in other relationships, and the practical part of the group, including sharing stories, allows the women to develop a sense of acceptance and security on a personal level with others. As Elizabeth was ending her sharing one evening, Esther said to her, “every woman in this group is here for you, and they will pray for you. You do not have to go through this alone” (week#11). Elizabeth knows the women will pray for her, however, she needs the reassurance that she can call them at any time, if need be, and she will be listened to. Even the most sceptical of the women know they have God, what they need to know is that they can rely on others. Sharing stories is one active means of developing this reassurance, and in turn facilitates the growth and importance of the “practical perspective.”

This leaves us with the question, why place the sharing of stories in the informal structure of the group? If the sharing of stories is inherent to the formal structure of most self-help groups, than why place it in the informal? I think the answer lies in knowing that the sharing of stories is an activity that re-enforces the process of self. The women are acknowledging who they are and who they want to be, both as Christian women and as women in their own right. Further, sharing stories is less structured than other formal activities, such as praying, or the ritual laying on of hands. The women can choose to participate or not participate, an option they do not have in the formal structure of the

group.

*How are differences in the perspectives resolved?*

The need for opposing perspectives in the group exists as a means of resolving conflicts posed by the questioning of some of the religious ideals held by the group. From the onset, I think it only fair to say that these conflicts are not resolved, but the dualing perspectives allows, in the very least, for these issues to be brought to the forefront and openly discussed.

In spite of the strong beliefs the women hold in their religious principles, there are, for them, many unanswered questions. Most of these questions focus on the relationship the women have with God, a relationship they find difficult in a world where they feel they are the minority. The women may chose to live within a strict religious framework. However, they cannot deny living in a world where secularism is prevalent, and secular ideas, such as feminism, are significant in the definition of the roles of women. I posit that many of the issues and conflicts the women have with their religious ideals come from, in part, the conflict between their religion and the secular worldview.

Many of the conflicts developed from the “healing perspective” take the form of “knowing God.” Questions surrounding whether “He” is listening, issues involving submission, and personalizing God are areas where acceptable explanations are absent. Further, the dilemma over “giving it over to God” versus “getting on with your life” is at the core of the women’s struggle with the religious rhetoric of the “healing perspective.” As part of the “practical perspective” the women have a forum where they can bring these



issues, questions and concerns. The goal is not to locate a definite resolution, as there is not any resolution for these issues, but to bring them into the open.

*"I want a God with skin": The Need to Personalize God*

The need to personalize God comes from the desire the women have to secure a tangible, supportive, physical relationship. Eve sums it up when she said,

[what] she wanted most was a "God with skin," someone she could equate with God that she could touch, who was not in the abstract. Ruth said she wanted someone she could share with, an earthly being. Esther told both of them that those they turned to, those people they received support from, were their "Gods with skin" in that the Lord was sending love and support through them (week#7).

Essentially wanting a "God with skin" is the desire to connect with another individual who can offer support and who shares the same worldview the women have. In this group, with the "practical perspective" this is achieved. Within the boundaries of the "healing perspective" a "God with skin" could not be achieved, as it would be improper to ascribe "God-like" attributes to another human being. In an informal structure, the women are free to do this, as they are aware that the kind of support they want from a "God with skin" already exists.

Part of attempting to personalizing God is the knowledge that developing this relationship is much like developing other relationships. Along with support, come the insecurities that are present in any relationship. The tension in wanting to personalize God arises in wanting to ascribe "personal" status to something the women have already defined as "supernatural." The women realize it is not possible to ascribe a "personal"

and “supernatural” status to the same being.

As with other relationships, including the relationships that exist in the group, it is work to develop a relationship with God. “It is work to do this, and who needs more work?”(Dorcas, week#12). Esther reminds the women that they are the one who must shoulder the onus for the work because,

...one way that people hide from reality is to ignore the problem; hope that whatever it is, it will go away. It is easy to bury ourselves in our lives. Every woman in this group is busy and this can act as a shield from our problems. For me, it is easier to bury myself in work and the church. . .

This flies in the face of the myth that those who are “Christian” are better able to deal with problems and concerns because they have a strong faith in God. The opposite is more the case, in that these women have to struggle with the teachings of their faith and how it applies to their existence in the everyday world. Such is the reason for wanting to personalize God, and recognizing that the relationship they have with “Him” is as complex as any other relationship they are engaged with.

One of the complexities of the relationship the women have with “God” surrounds the emotions the women experience. Esther says quite openly that she gets angry with God, “I spent three hours last night arguing with Him about why He wanted me to stay in this relationship [with her husband]” (week #15 ). My initial response to this was that Esther was engaged more in an internal dialogue with herself over why she remained in this relationship. However, she knows she was talking with “Him.” Not all the women believe they have the kind of relationship that facilitates talking or arguing with God. In fact, there are some women in the group who complain that God has favourites, and that

“He” listens to some over others. This results in confusion and concern for the women over their commitment to “Him.” What are they “doing wrong?”

*Ambivalence over “He is not listening to me”*

One conflict the women face surrounds whether or not God listens to everyone. This is in direct contradiction to the rhetoric of the “healing perspective” where the women are told that “He” listens and cares about everyone, even those who are “unsaved.” If this is the case, then why are there women who feel that “He” is not listening to them?

Perhaps one of the reasons the women feel this way stems from the undefined nature of their relationship with God, and from this the women experience confusion:

I do all the things that I am supposed to do, and I still feel that I am not building a relationship with Him. This is frustrating, but I still hold out hope that He is listening to me (Martha, week#9).

For Mary, one of her biggest issues is whether or not He is listening to her. She wants to turn her will and her life over to Him, but feels this is impossible, given that He does not seem to be listening to her (week#9).

Priscilla questions whether or not He is actually listening to her, or if He has favourites. . .(week#8).

In responding to these fears, some of the participants say: God is listening, the problem lies with the women. Clearly, there is something wrong with them that prevents their “hearing” God. The foundation for placing the onus on the women is found in their faith itself, if you have faith then you will be able to hear Him. This is a logic that is used to resolve similar group conflicts. For example, in struggling with her abusive past, Mary has

questioned why she is left to live with the repercussions of her father's abuse, while her father appears to be guilt-free. Ruth's response to this was that Mary was unable to let go of these experiences, and this was preventing God from being able to facilitate her "healing" from these traumas. Elizabeth wants to know why "He" cannot help her to be a better wife to her husband, and she is told it is because she cannot let go of the bitterness and anger she harbours against her husband for being in prison most of their marriage and being abusive when he is around. If there is a problem between the women and God, particularly as it pertains to their relationship-building with "Him," the problem solely belongs to the women. The onus lies on the women to recognize the problem and resolve it.

Now, the religious beliefs of the women may be able to pinpoint the problem; however, these women are not willing to believe that the problem rests solely with them. Hence, they have to move from the "healing perspective" to the "practical perspective" as a means of locating a solution. Thus far, there has been no tangible solution to the dilemmas created by the tension between the two perspectives. However, under the "healing perspective" there is a solution at the disposal of the women: "let go and let God," or, "just give it over to God." As we will see in the following section, the tangibility of this solution is in question.

*Just give it over to God, or, "let go and let God."*

The cornerstone of the "healing perspective" is that if the women can give their lives over to God, then they will be "healed" and become "devout Christian women."

Giving over means letting go of past traumas, present conflicts, familial relationships, work, everything in your life, but especially those things that are painful and destructive.

If you can do this, than you will achieve the ultimate level of “spiritual healing”:

... “let go and let God” . . . when we feel bad things happening, anger or control or whatever, we need to stop and ask God to show us the way, to show us what it is He wants us to do. . . (Ruth, week#8).

As a group, the women concur that “giving it over” is easier said than done; that it is a difficult, confusing and ambiguous process. Others have indicated their concern over a process that encourages women to “let go and let God” or “give it over.”

... I worry about the kind of faith that says, “let go.” I do have to let go of certain things, but I also have to take charge of others. . . and I think Jesus did that. But when I hear faith defined as “let go and let God” I get really worried. It depends on what the person means by “letting go” (MacKinnon, 1990:166).

The tension lies, for these women in wanting to let go of some things, and to keep others; in wanting to take charge of their lives, but remain Christian women. Hence, the need for the two perspectives.

Further, there is no clear understanding of how to “give it over.” Ruth, albeit vaguely, suggests that it is an ongoing process where we “give it to Him” and continue to “give it to Him”, because we struggle with “letting go.”

... Eve said she was more than willing to give it over, give it away to Him. He can handle it, she said, and it is apparent that she can't. Otherwise, she wouldn't be where she is now. Part of her problem is that she doubts whether or not He is really there (week #8).

Ruth said she wanted to give over her relationship with her husband and her children, but she didn't know how. She said she thought it had to do with wanting control and not wanting to let Him have control (week#7).

Esther said she wanted nothing more than to give Him her relationship with her husband, but she did not want to give over her relationship with her children. . .and you can't pick and choose. . .(week#7).

The process of “giving it over” is part of the “healing perspective” and the rhetoric associated with it. Often, when the women engage in the “healing perspective” discourse, they are doing so as a means of remaining within the boundaries of the “healing perspective” while exploring other aspects of their selves. This is not to imply that the women are not continually engaged in a spiritual journey. On the contrary, the women believe they will be on a spiritual journey until death. At the same time, the discourse of the “healing perspective” is comforting to the women, and they rely on the way in which it frames their world. At the point when they became “born-again,” they were consciously choosing to be “Christian women” believing they accept all that comes with this role. The key is now the women are comfortable enough in this role to challenge some of the inherent assumptions of their religious ideologies. With past attempts at “healing” the women have been disappointed with the absence of spiritual guidance in most secular programs. Having secured spiritual guidance, they are now in a position to explore other aspects of their “healing journey.” They believe they have laid the foundation necessary for their spiritual journey and accept that it will remain the constant in their lives.

When I began exploring the differences in perspective, it was under the understanding that there was some resolution to be made between the two. I believe that there are numerous benefits for the women in operating within the frameworks of two perspectives. To be sure, the “healing perspective” or the formal structure is the dominant framework in the lives of these women, and it will remain so. However, within this

structure there exists an informal support network, and within this framework, the women are engaged in a search for their selves beyond, but not excluding, who they are as Christian women. It is within the “practical perspective” that the women are exploring new and uncharted territory, even though it is clearly lower on their list of priorities in relation to “healing.”

That said, the two perspective are not in a competition. On the contrary, these two perspective are complementary to one another. The women remain “devout Christian women” but are able to pursue some of the ideological contradictions they see existing within their religious framework. Rather than seeing themselves as “not of the faith” they can see themselves as women who are exploring who they are, while remaining within their religious framework. Not a perfect match, the two perspectives allow the women a freedom they could not have under different circumstances. Many issues remain unresolved, and perhaps never will reach resolution. However, for these women, at this time in their healing journey, perhaps having a forum to discuss these issues is resolution itself.

### *Empowerment*

Throughout my time with the group, I was struck by the process of empowerment the women were engaging in. Christian ideology aside, participation in the group represents the desire the women have to change their lives, to move beyond the pain and traumas they have lived with, and become both “whole” and “holy.” However, the remaining question is, is it the formal structure or the informal beliefs and interaction (1)

empowers the women and (2) provided the much needed practical support in how people carry out their day to day lives? Credit must be given to the formal structure of the group, as without its influence, the women may not have been where they needed to be to develop their informal beliefs and interactions. However, I posit that it is within the informal structure that the women locate empowerment.

Within the informal structure, the women are able to focus solely on their needs: not their needs as Christian women, but as women who need to develop a sense of what it is to meet their own needs, and how those needs can be met through helping others. It is through helping others that the women experience empowerment. Empowerment, for these women, is not a goal they formally strive for; in fact if asked, the women would deny that they develop and maintain empowerment in the group. Empowerment is associated with a secular, “world” perspective, a harkening to issues that fall beyond the boundaries of their religion. Regardless, the women develop and maintain empowerment in the group. Through the varieties of emotional support they provide one another; listening, sharing stories, driving each other to the group, finding others a place to stay are all methods of developing empowerment.

To understand empowerment, it is necessary to develop an understanding of what empowerment is; what does empowerment look like in this situation? How does empowerment manifest itself in a group of Christian women? The following discussion will chronicle one of the most surprising elements of the group. . .and the one aspect of the group the women would vehemently deny.

Powerlessness, the real or perceived loss of control over one’s life, and the



devastating sense of alienation which usually accompanies it, are problems that have faced members of all oppressed groups at one time or another. However, through a critical examination of their situations, and the development of an awareness of their oppression, some people have become empowered and changed their life circumstances (Lundy, 19 :198-99).

Lundy defines empowerment as, “the need to understand and acquire a degree of control over one’s situation” (19 :204). The group setting provides a forum for the women to accomplish this for themselves through their interactions with others. Lundy, in her article entitled, “Empowerment of Alcoholic Women: The Importance of Self-Help” details the transition from drinking to sobriety for a group of 50 women. She writes that from her observations, it was the women’s participation in a self-help group that marked the most salient feature of their recovery (19 :204). She writes,

. . .[the support group] offered the women an opportunity to be connected with others and combat the loneliness and alienation that had been a large part of their existence. . .one of her interviewees said, “Someone told their story and more than anything I felt connected to people again that I hadn’t done in so long. I felt all this warmth and love that I hadn’t been able to feel for so long.”

For this reason, the informal structure of the group facilitates empowerment. The aspects of the group that inspire empowerment are located in the informal structure of the group. It is the empowerment the women develop among themselves that places them in the position to deal with the everyday realities of their lives. To be sure their religious ideologies contribute to their healing and in dealing with the overwhelming issues of their past. However, their religious ideologies do not provide money for groceries when it is needed, or a place to sleep when there isn’t one available, or a drive to the group. The religious ideologies of the group tell the women to “leave it in God’s hands,” but these

women know that they have to take an active part in their own lives if they are to accomplish their goal of changing their life circumstances. Many of them believe they are in their current situations because they felt powerless to contribute to their own lives. Part of empowerment is taking part in your own life and the life of others around you. And within the informal structure, this is possible for the women.

Empowerment for the women in this group is being able to get through each day, to accomplish the mundane, day-to-day tasks in their lives. On a broader level, it is connecting with others who can immediately and realistically help when support is needed. When Naomi shares with the group that she is struggling with her son's ADHD, and Priscilla offers her support, having lived with the same problem with her son; when Eve breaks down in the group because she has no where to live and is worrying about how to maintain her already limited visitation with her son; when Dorcas is being harassed by her "Christian" ex-husband; when Esther and her children needed a place to live after another abusive encounter with her husband, and Ruth took them in; this is how the women experience empowerment; and in doing for others they are doing for themselves as well.

The goal of the "healing perspective" is "holiness." The goal of the "practical perspective" is "wholeness." Although the "spiritual healing" is the initial attraction to the group for the women, it is the emotional and physical support they receive from one another that keeps bringing them back. Within the informal structure of the group, the women experience empowerment, the development of a "family," the building of a social support network that is tangible. The women have expressed doubts that God is there, or that He is listening. They may doubt God, but they do not doubt each other. Therefore, it

is the informal support network that creates and maintains empowerment in the group. The women are able to face the daily trials they are presented with, because they have the other women to turn to when they are in need of immediate, tangible emotional support. Only when coupled with the emotional and physical support, does “spiritual healing” take place.

The group denies the notion of empowerment because what I define as empowerment, they define as “what any good Christian woman would do.” This oppositional perspective is in line with the other dichotomies that exist between what the women claim to accomplish, and what they actually accomplish; between the “healing perspective” and the “practical perspective.” As women coming together, bonding, and creating and maintaining strength for one another, this group is a paragon of feminist empowerment in its rawest form.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### TYING THE PIECES TOGETHER

The goal of this thesis was to answer the research question while (1) framing it within the methodological framework and (2) to present a “snapshot” of the group that was able to detail the complexities of the formal and informal group structures. With the inductive approach as a framework for the research and the presentation of the data, I feel both of the above were realized.

The purpose of this chapter is to make the connections between the seemingly disparate elements of methods and theory. As I will demonstrate, the formal and informal structures that develop the “healing” qualities of the group also played a significant part in my methodological experiences with the group. Following this, I will draw conclusions from the data in terms of the role of religion in healing, answering the initial research question: how does religion facilitate healing for these women?

#### *Getting in and Getting Out: Demonstrating the Formal and Informal*

The first section of my thesis details my experiences, from a personal and sociological perspective, gaining access and leaving the group. If we are to move beyond the discussion of these methodological experiences, and move to a deeper level of analysis, we can see that in gaining access, I was bound by the formal structure of the group. In being asked to leave, return, and in the process of officially leaving the group, I

was operating within the boundaries of the informal structure. The data gathering process of this thesis was, then, bound by the structural boundaries that created and maintained the “healing experiences” of the women.

As detailed in the chapter on gaining access into the group, I was very concerned about damaging the integrity of the group. In that, what I was referring to was damaging the formal structure of the group; the criteria for entrance in the group, the religious ideologies upon which the group is founded, the women’s personal religious experiences, the teachings of the church; the women and the group themselves. My fear was that in being asked to research this group, I was going to somehow make it difficult for the group to function according to its official mandate: as a place for women to “heal as Christians.”

Given this, I worked at being clear and concise with the women regarding my research intentions. My method of doing this was to make connections with the women between their experiences and mine, lessening the gap between the researcher and the participants. I wanted them to see that I was more than “just a researcher.” My presentation of myself and my research was very formal, with me taking into account as many eventualities as possible: going to the group with an agenda of what I wanted to address, trying to anticipate what they would ask as questions, giving the women the power to terminate my time with the group whenever they chose. Although not on paper, our relationship at this stage was very contractual; very formal, with the women in complete control of the situation. One physical manifestation of this formal contract was my “probationary period” in John’s group. Further, just because I was asked to move on to Esther’s group did not mean my period of probation was over.

The manner in which the women responded to me at this time was another indication that I was operating within the confines of the formal structure of the group. I was treated as any new member of the group. The contractual arrangement with the group signified that I was aware that there were certain rules and regulations that I would have to accept, and that the women needed a period of time to adjust to my being in the group. Further, this formal relationship was a reminder that I, and other researchers, are not in the position to study any group I wanted whenever it suited me (Wolf, 1991). Restricting membership to women who were members of the church was one way the group could ensure the construction of a place where everyone shared the same religious philosophies. Offering participation to women who were not members would potentially cause a situation where a conflict of opinion could occur, damaging the initial intention of the group. Allowing me into the group was taking the chance that I might inject “world” ideas into the group.

When I was asked to leave, the women were exercising their rights as official members of the group to have me, the researcher and non-member of the group, leave. Much of my methodological and theoretical approach in this thesis was premised on the understanding that I was asking membership, as a non-member, into a closed group. Further, into a group where the religious ideal and philosophies are considered extremist, radical and marginal. Similar to Wolf, I was entering a “culture” different from my own. Culture, in this sense is defined as

the rules and categories of meaning and action that are used by individuals to both interpret and generate appropriate behaviour (1991:21).

Therefore, I viewed this Christian subculture as a human experience (Lofland, 1969). In order to be accepted into this human experience, I would have to function within the formal structure of the group, until such time that I was able to experience acceptance into the group or be asked to leave.

In leaving the group, and subsequently returning, at the request of the women, I experienced acceptance. With this, I was able to move from the confines of the formal structure to the informal structure of the group. In asking me to return, and accepting that I would return to the group on my terms as a researcher, the women were indicating that they were willing to accept me as a member, who did not share the religious ideals of the women and the group. Thus, I moved from participating in the formal structure of the group, to the informal.

This transition was marked in various ways. The women were more open to my being in the group. There was an increase in their efforts to both have me participate in the group and in terms of converting me. I was invited to participate in various church functions and social functions of the group. In general, the tension that existed between the women and myself was no longer present upon my return to the group. With the easing of this tension, and my acceptance into the group, I was better able to observe the women, enhancing the quality of the data I was able to collect. It would appear that there is credence to Shaffir's theory that gaining access, and thus gaining trust, is more coincidental and at that mercy of chance, despite the efforts of researchers to make it a distinct process, following a prescribed number of steps.

Thus, by following the contractual agreement of the formal structure, I was able to

move from the formal to the informal structure of the group in my role as researcher. In all aspects of this thesis, it appears that the formal structure of the group provides the place, the actual physical and emotional space, but it is the informal structure that develops and maintains the context of the group. Through the formal structure I was able to gain access into the group. Through the informal structure, I was able to remain and leave the group on my own terms.

Therefore, not only did the informal structure of the group allow for the development of empowerment, and the “practical perspective,” it further enabled the developing of the researcher/participant relationship. I think acknowledging the influence of the informal structure over the group opens the door for more sociological inquiry into the symbiotic relationship that exists between formal and informal structures. Only together are the structure able to construct a place for the women to experience “healing.”

The methodological experiences I encountered are inherent to the inductive approach. In my effort to be honest with the group regarding my intentions, religious preferences and my research, I was opening myself to a set of experiences. Others have approached the inductive approach from other avenues: methodological Kirby and McKenna, (1989); Shaffir and Stebbins (1991): contextual (Wolf, 1991); Leibow (1993); Charmaz, (1994); Whyte (1955); theoretical (Berg, 1995); Wax (1983 ); Shaffir and Stebbins, (1991), Ammerman, (1987); Kraybill, (1988). These texts, and many others point to the necessity of inductive research as a means of facilitating the understanding of human behaviour. In my case, the inductive approach developed a thesis whereby the women’s voices, their group experiences, and the complexities associated with who they



were as Christian women were all brought to light.

***Conclusion: Answering the Original Research Question***

After all of the above, we find ourselves back where we started, asking the same question: how does religion facilitate healing for this group of women? The simple answer to this is that through religion the women were able to come together and create a place where they were able to develop a network of support that met their physical, emotional and spiritual “healing” needs. Although the women believe, when they initially enter the group, that religion will bring them all they require in order to “heal,” they realize that religion is not enough. It provides the stepping stone to understanding all the elements needed to “heal,” but on its own it is not enough. The answer to this question is complex. Another group, different religious philosophies would certainly create new and different meaning to the “healing journey.” I think we need to be aware that groups of this sort are a product of the chaos and turmoil that exists in our society. In its own way, this group, and the religion it adheres to is an attempt to understand, and work through the chaos. The group and the “healing journey” are socially constructed. The group is inherently a “healing place” where the women come together to find, as a group, solutions to problems and issues that are religious in nature; their relationship with God; the role of God in the broader society; how religion can be used to “heal”; and throughout what it is to be a “devout Christian woman.” In addition, the group tackles issues that, unfortunately confront many women: abuse; incest; children with learning and physical disabilities; partners who are not present in their lives. Further, the group provided a

forum for the women to celebrate what it is to be women; both the trials and tribulations associated with being mother, caregiver, partner, breadwinner, cook, laundress, chauffeur, confidant, all at the same time. Inasmuch as the women come together to face problems, they also celebrate accomplishments big and small.

I said earlier that the group brought together women with multi-problems. In a step towards solution, the group becomes multi-purpose, meeting spiritual, emotional, social and physical needs of its members. This group represents a compilation of women's groups; the women's Bible study, the neighbourhood coffee klatch, secular women-only support groups missionary groups, women's shelter's-- in the group are elements of various support services available to women. In its own manner, the group has secured an existence based upon a variety of needs these women had but were unable to meet prior to their involvement with the group.

The Beveridge Street Healing Group came about because of the needs of a group of Christian women who wanted to "heal" from the trauma of past and present life circumstances. The women have accomplished providing this space, and with this, creating so much more that is able to fill the other, "non-religious" needs they have. If we take into account words from Ruth , "we will never truly heal until death; until we meet Him." If this is the case, the group then provides a place for the women to experience "interim healing"; healing that empowers the women spiritually, emotionally and personally. They are able to make positive connections with other women, other people. From the group, they gain a courage and confidence to tackle the problems that confront them, knowing that they have both "God" and the women in the group" to turn to when

needed.

In sum, the simple answer to the research questions is that religion provides the forum, but the women provide the context, and from this the women are able to embark on a “healing journey” that will lead them to “wholeness” and “holiness.” This group, as with other self-help groups, both secular and sacred, is about learning to cope in a world that is ever changing; where norms and guidelines that construct individual behaviour are changing constantly, leaving most of us breathless to catch up. Each of us clings to an formal, institutional construct; for these women it is religion and the church; for others the confines of the academic world, the military, politics. In each case, it is for the purpose of creating an identity, a knowledge, for ourselves and others, about who we are, a place to turn when we feel we are in turmoil. We develop and maintain relationships with others under the umbrella of these institutions, adopt their rhetoric, and incorporate it into our everyday lives. Examining the women and their relationship with the church, we can see how they function within the formal structure of their religion, and how they have adapted the religious philosophies of the church to meet their everyday needs; including empowering themselves and the other women in the group. In the end, these women are doing the same as the rest of us; searching for peace and trying to live their lives as best they can.

In the course of writing this thesis, it was apparent to me that most of us operate on a socially constructed notions about the purpose of religion. I think this thesis demonstrates that more goes on within the framework of religion than we have previously understood. More than providing a forum for spiritual worship, it is also a place for

personal and emotional development.

We now understand a little about what groups of this nature can bring to individual needs, from the perspective of the group. Further research in this area could examine how the women feel, on an individual level about what the group gives them. How would the formal and informal structure co-exist in a group consisting of men and women? How would the dynamic differ if the group consisted only of men? Critics of the self-help movement state that there is an emphasis on one element only; recovery, spirituality; could the knowledge gleaned from this thesis be used to develop a social support network that could combine mind, body and spirit without being explicitly religious? Or without alienating other elements that are necessary for one to feel whole? We need to recognize that any type of “healing” is the attempt to better ourselves, to make our surrounding more tolerable for day to day existence. As we move into a more pluralistic society, where the “rules” appear to be changing daily, we need to do whatever we can for the benefit of ourselves, and those around us, to help make the society we live in less chaotic.

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## APPENDIX A

### ETHICAL PROTOCOLS

1. Participant observation by graduate student researcher (hererafter called researcher) in the healing group is dependent upon the informed consent of every group member, including the leader/facilitator.
2. The researcher will present an overview of her research project where the purpose of the study will be explained and the following issues will be covered: the voluntary nature of the participation in the study; that the researcher will not conduct the research unless each participant and the leader/facilitator is agreeable; that all observations will be kept completely confidential; that the church and group will not be directly named in the thesis, or any dissemination of information of the project's results; that the group and its leader will receive a summary of the researcher's project; that the researcher's observations of the group will not be discussed with group members in other settings (i.e., between meetings); and that if participants become unhappy with the researcher's continued presence in the group, that she be asked to leave.
3. While participant observation always involves some degree of participation in the group, the researcher will be mindful at all times of the potential power of her presence in the group and therefore ensure that she does not seek to influence the group or group members in any deliberate way. As a result, she will offer very little personal information about herself or her own spiritual journey: she will introduce herself as a single parent mother with three small children, who is completing a graduate degree in Department of Sociology at UNB.
4. If the researcher sees women from the group in other settings, it will be important for them to make the first contact with the researcher, so as not to violate the confidential nature of the group and its membership.
5. The researcher will make contact with the group leader to ascertain when it would be appropriate to make a formal presentation to the group. After the presentation, all members (including the group leader) will decide upon whether to allow the researcher to conduct participant observation with the group.
6. If permission is granted, the researcher will start the project.
7. Each participant in the group (including the leader/facilitator) will be asked to sign an "informed consent" form indicating their willingness for the researcher to conduct her project. If someone in the group is willing to have the researcher conduct the research, but feels uncomfortable "signing" a form, other avenues of indicating informed consent will be sought (eg., verbal consent to the group leader, and the leader's indication in



writing to the to the researcher of group members willingness to participate in the project but unwilling to sign consent forms.

8. Group meetings will not be tape recorded, nor will extensive notes be taken during the meeting. From time-to-time, key words or concepts may be recorded in a small notebook, if the researcher is satisfied that it can be done discretely. Extensive notes of the group meetings will be recorded AFTER the meeting, once the researcher has left the group. Individual's names will not be used in these notes, rather initials or some other form of identification will be used. In the thesis, fictitious names will be used when referring to the group, the church, or specific group members.

**APPENDIX B**  
**WRITTEN CONSENT FORM**

I have listened to Dawne's description of her research project on HEALING AND WOMEN'S SPIRITUAL JOURNEYS. I understand the purpose of the project, that my participation is voluntary, that her presence in the group reflects my willingness to participate and anything that I say to Dawne in the group setting will be held as confidential.

I am willing to participate in the research and have Dawne Clarke-Van Every attend our weekly group meetings.

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Date

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Signature of Researcher