

Participatory Approaches to Re-Imagining Women's Social Inclusion as Social Justice:  
Experiences of Community after Federal Incarceration in Canada

by

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## **Author's Declaration**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## Abstract

Women who have been incarcerated are disadvantaged in many respects as they enter community (Pedlar, Arai, Yuen, & Fortune, 2008). When putting their lives back together upon release they typically face tremendous hardships which are often intensified by the absence of healthy and supportive relationships (Richie, 2001). Hannah-Moffatt (2000) identified several gender-specific barriers facing women in prison that impede their chances for inclusion once they enter community. Women in prison, she explained, are often poorly educated, unemployed, and many have survived some form of physical or sexual abuse. Furthermore, feelings of guilt, fear, anxiety, and alienation are often compounded when women are apprehended and sentenced. This combination of challenges tends to produce a group of women with low self-esteem who will have difficulty readjusting in the community and are at risk of being socially isolated and excluded (Hannah-Moffatt, 2000; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2008).

Structural determinants and individual agency both lie at the heart of social inclusion (Dominelli, 2005; Lister, 2000). Often overlooked in the literature is the fact that women who have been incarcerated have agency and possess a capacity to resist, overcome oppression, and counteract exclusion. As I embarked on this research project, an emphasis on women's capacity was both a starting point and rationale for adopting a participatory approach.

Very little is known about how women's experiences with inclusion or exclusion shape their entry process. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine inclusion from the perspective of women entering community after release from a federal prison. Using a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) approach guided by anti-oppressive research (AOR) as my theoretical framework, I asked women living in community in a region of southern Ontario and who had been incarcerated to come together to discuss ideas around inclusion and explore ways to foster a more inclusive environment.

This research project was rooted in a concern for social justice. Hall (2005) argues that negotiating the discourse of inclusion and exclusion requires a critical re-imagining of inclusion as social justice. Consequently, this study was designed to encourage dialogue and a critical re-imagining of what inclusion means among women entering community after incarceration, with an emphasis on collaborative learning. Plans and strategies were shaped and altered based on decisions of the research team and resulted in the development of three distinct phases of research involving team meetings, individual conversations, and engagement in photovoice.

Data explored in each phase of the project, as well as my own reflexive knowledge acquired through ongoing critical self-reflection, provided insight into the complexities of difference, power, and identity. These findings are presented in four chapters beginning with a description of how the FPAR process based on principles of inclusion, participation, action, and social change unfolded. Then, themes were identified which revealed the swings of a FPAR process including: assumptions of collective identity and difference impede inclusion and participation, grappling with tensions around partnerships and power, and negotiating identity and resisting stigma. Findings also explored the contested nature of community and its role in inclusion. This chapter describes the kind of community women experienced before and after incarceration. Themes of feeling pushed out of community, being pulled into community, and negotiating issues of responsibility upon community entry highlight the ambiguous nature of community and social inclusion for women who have broken the law.

Deep exclusion experienced by women who have been placed outside of community and sent to prison is arguably unparalleled, and this study was ultimately concerned with society's tendency to exclude people based on difference. Experiences of inclusion/exclusion are often a result of normative social beliefs that construct difference as "less than" (Moosa-Mitha, 2005). Indeed when difference is viewed negatively, it often results in the exclusion and marginalization of those who are defined as the other (Woodward, 1997). Alternatively, social inclusion involves respect for differences and the removal of barriers to participate in public life (Salojee, 2005). When women in this study felt free to participate in the life of their community in ways that did not undermine their sense of self and their differences they were in the process of being included. Supportive relationships and judgment free spaces seemed to remove pressures for women to conform to dominant expectations of behaviour to gain acceptance. Findings from this study suggest we need to create space for difference and social inclusion to co-exist in community. This space would be one that centres difference, promotes social justice, values different forms and levels of participation, acknowledges that relationships grow and change over time, interrogates taken for granted assumptions of power and privilege, and emphasizes dialoguing through difference.

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I am saddened to be writing this acknowledgement on the day NDP leader Jack Layton died of cancer. To me this study is rooted in hope and I find additional hope and inspiration from his final message to Canadians:

*Love is better than anger. Hope is better than fear. Optimism is better than despair.*

*So let us be loving, hopeful and optimistic. And we'll change the world.*

*Jack Layton (1950-2011)*

## Table of Contents

Author’s Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures.....	x
Chapter One: Setting the Stage.....	1
Inspiration Behind the Study.....	1
Clarifying Issues of Terminology.....	3
Women’s Entry into Community and Social Inclusion.....	4
Research Purpose and Approach to Inquiry.....	7
Feminist participatory action research.....	8
Theoretical Framework and Guiding Questions.....	9
Hope for a Socially Inclusive and Socially Just Community.....	10
Summary.....	11
Chapter Two: Experiences of Exclusion, Marginality, and Oppression - Participatory Research as Approaches to Support Agency and Resistance.....	13
Introduction.....	13
Challenges Experienced by Women Incarcerated in Canada’s Federal Correctional System..	13
History of Women’s Corrections in Canada.....	15
Community Reintegration and Self-Reform.....	18
Reintegration: Into a <i>benevolent community</i> or a <i>nowhere community</i> ?.....	19
Social Inclusion, Social Exclusion and Marginality.....	23
Moving Social Inclusion Toward Social Justice: Exploring Power, Resistance, and Agency .	29
Oppression in the lives of women who have been incarcerated.....	32
Women’s acts of agency, resistance, and reframing.....	34
Conceptions of power.....	37
Conscientization and resistance of oppression.....	39
Chapter Three: Research Methodology.....	42

Participatory Action Research.....	43
Feminist participatory action research.....	45
Anti-oppressive research. ....	47
Tenets of anti-oppressive research and reflexivity. ....	48
Commonalities between anti-oppressive research and participatory action research. ....	52
Embarking on a Quest for Collective Knowledge: Undertaking FPAR Informed By AOR ....	55
Research meetings. ....	55
Photovoice. ....	58
Follow up conversations. ....	63
Data Analysis .....	64
Challenges Inherent in Participatory Methods .....	66
Relationships of Power and Reflexivity.....	68
My Personal Journey of Self-Reflection .....	69
Chapter Four: Unfolding of a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) Process.....	72
Women in the Study and the Research Process .....	72
Phase One: Participating in Group Meetings .....	75
Meeting one: Coming together in “community”. ....	75
Meeting two: Negotiating understandings of belonging and difference. ....	78
Meeting three: Establishing membership and discussing change. ....	81
Meeting four: Acknowledging difference and resisting responsibility. ....	83
Meeting five: Dwindling interest and the call for action. ....	85
Meeting six: Exploring housing and community through photovoice. ....	86
Meeting seven: Reflecting on photos. Life challenges and hope(lessness).....	88
Phase Two: Engaging Additional Women in Individual Conversations around Photovoice ...	90
Phase Three: Following up Conversations on Phase One and Further Exploring Difference ..	93
Summary .....	95
Chapter Five: The Promise, Complexities, and Contradictions of a PAR Process.....	96
Grappling with Tensions around Partnerships and Power: Is There Space for Difference?.....	97
Ambiguity of power as choice.....	107
Attempts to share power. ....	109
Assumptions of Collective Identity and Difference as Impediments to Inclusion and Participation .....	114

Group cohesion across class struggle. ....	114
Difference in values around community and the meaning of contribution. ....	120
Distancing and the women offender as <i>the other</i> . ....	122
Negotiating Identities and Resisting Stigma: Women as Agents of Change? .....	126
Reclaiming an identity.....	127
Struggling with identity and feeling hopeless. ....	131
Summary .....	140
Chapter Six: Aspirations and the Often Forgotten Dark Side of being an Anti-Oppressive Researcher.....	141
Ideals of Action, Commitment, and Social Justice .....	141
Arrival of Enigma: Troubling Assumptions and Deepening Understanding of Power and Privilege in the Hyphens: The Enigmatic Nature of Research Relations .....	146
Participatory Ideals Increasing Research Pressures and Propensity for Blame .....	152
Summary .....	154
Chapter Seven: The Contested Nature of Community and Ambiguity of Inclusion for Women Leaving Prison .....	155
Feeling Pushed out of Community: Vulnerability to Exclusion and Stigma .....	156
Support as a threat to independence, sense of self, and difference. ....	161
Stigma and exclusion.....	163
Being Pulled into Community: Social Supports and Judgment Free Spaces .....	168
Mutuality and connection beyond stigma.....	171
Need for formalized supports. ....	174
Judgment free spaces. ....	176
Comfort in nature.....	183
Negotiating Issues of Responsibility in Community and Insights on Social Justice .....	184
Change as conformity.....	185
Individual responsibility for change versus cooperative approaches to change.....	190
A shift away from individual responsibility toward social justice. ....	194
Summary .....	196
Chapter Eight: Insights into Negotiated Identities, Difference, and the Move to Collective Action .....	198
Negotiated and Fluid Identities: Impediments to Collective Action.....	199

Difference <i>and</i> Inclusion: The Challenge for Collective Action .....	205
Recognizing Difference While Working Toward Inclusion .....	207
A New Vision of Inclusion that Values Difference .....	210
Closing Thoughts and Future Possibilities.....	214
References.....	217
Appendix A: Information Letter .....	232

## List of Figures

<i>Figure 1:</i> Grand Valley Institution for Women.....	157
<i>Figure 2:</i> Tina’s montage of needed support.....	160
<i>Figure 3:</i> Missie's new accommodation. ....	164
<i>Figure 4:</i> Methadone Clinic.....	174
<i>Figure 5:</i> Ontario Disability Support Plan (ODSP) office. ....	175
<i>Figure 6:</i> McDonald's.....	176
<i>Figure 7:</i> Dundas Community Services. ....	177
<i>Figure 8:</i> Space used for Home of the Heart meetings. ....	178
<i>Figure 9:</i> Tim Hortons.....	179
<i>Figure 10:</i> Hamilton Public Library. ....	180
<i>Figure 11:</i> Welcoming spaces. ....	182

## **Chapter One: Setting the Stage**

### **Inspiration Behind the Study**

The seeds for this study on women's social inclusion following incarceration in one of Canada's federal prisons were planted approximately six years ago. I was hired by my Master's advisor to be a research assistant on a study examining women's experiences with Stride Night, a weekly recreational evening offered by Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) in Ontario. I was hired to facilitate weekly Stride Night activities and assist with analyzing data derived from interviews conducted with women in GVI who regularly attended Stride Night. My involvement with Stride Night and women at GVI not only significantly shaped my decision to continue graduate studies; it also shaped the direction of my PhD research.

The purpose of Stride Night is to create a space for women at GVI to come together with community volunteers and Stride staff and connect over shared leisure interests. Through these interactions, relationships form and understanding develops between women and volunteers. Such relationships and understandings are believed to contribute to more knowledgeable communities that can better support women's reintegration efforts. In essence, Stride Night provides a setting where women with very diverse backgrounds and life histories may interact and participate together in a common pursuit (Pedlar, Arai, Yuen & Fortune, 2008).

During my time at Stride Night, I heard many women express an interest to have Stride happen in community so they can continue to connect with volunteers after they leave prison and maintain these supportive relationships. I suspect such sentiments are indicative of the fear and insecurity most women seem to have about entering a less than supportive community where they may be isolated and excluded on the based on stigma and difference.

As I started to volunteer in other capacities within GVI I began to gain more insight into the fear and insecurity many women feel when they prepare to enter community. As a volunteer citizen escort, I accompanied women on escorted temporary absences (ETAs) away from the prison so they can re-connect with their families, attend community gatherings (such as religious ceremonies, AA meetings, and Aboriginal drum circles), and volunteer to serve supper and engage in conversation with older adults at a retirement residence. During these outings I witnessed women experiencing great anxiety over being away from the institution and having difficulty relating to people in community because they felt they did not belong or would not be accepted. I also shared in the jubilation women experience when they went on ETAs and began to feel they were being included in the life of their families and outside community.

The most recent experience that sparked my interest in the nature of social inclusion in the community entry process was my involvement as a member of a Stride Circle supporting two women who entered community after a lengthy period of incarceration. A Stride Circle is comprised of a group of volunteers, often recruited through Stride Night, who established supportive relationships with a woman in GVI and maintained these relationships in community. Through my involvement with Stride Circles I developed an appreciation of women's need for emotional support and practical assistance as they attempted to enter community after incarceration. My experience was in keeping with other research studies which confirmed the importance of relationships in supporting women as they faced the challenge of leaving the institution and seeking integration and acceptance in community (see Fortune, Thompson, Pedlar & Yuen, 2010; Pedlar et al., 2008). My participation in a Stride Circle made it difficult for me to imagine how women can even begin to negotiate the systemic barriers that preclude social inclusion without having a social support system in

place. I also recognize, however, that the support provided by Circle volunteers is merely a drop in the bucket in terms of what must be done to create a more inclusive and socially just environment for women being released from prison. This insight provided the inspiration for this study.

### **Clarifying Issues of Terminology**

Many terms are used to describe women who have spent time in prison. Women who have spent time in federal prisons in Canada are most commonly referred to in Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) documents and academic studies as *federally sentenced women* (Hayman, 2006; Maidment, 2006). Other labels often used include *female offenders* and *incarcerated women*. Such labels serve to objectify women as *other* (Faith, 1993). Certain terms, such as *women in conflict with the law* have been applauded by women's groups for putting women first (Comack, 1996). However, Maidment (2006) argued that if we were to consider the systemic nature of much of women's criminal activity we would be more inclined to conceptualize our laws as being in conflict with women.

As a researcher who aspires to conduct research that is anti-oppressive and respectful of difference, I was uncomfortable with many labels used to describe women who have been incarcerated. In this dissertation when I recount how the research unfolded and the themes prevalent in the data, I refer to women who participated in this study either as *women* or *members of the research group*. However, when referring to the extant literature I maintain terminology used by the authors to reflect their perspective on women who spent time in prison.

## **Women's Entry into Community and Social Inclusion**

Women who have been incarcerated are disadvantaged in many respects as they enter community (Pedlar et al., 2008). Upon release, they often face tremendous hardships while putting their lives back together and this is intensified by the absence of healthy and supportive relationships (Richie, 2001). Hannah-Moffatt (2000) identified several gender-specific barriers facing women in prison that make it challenging for a successful transition back to the community once their sentence has been served. Women in prison, she explained, are often poorly educated, unemployed, and have survived some form of physical or sexual abuse. Furthermore, feelings of guilt, fear, anxiety, and alienation are often compounded when women are apprehended and sentenced. The combination of these challenges tends to contribute to low self-esteem and difficulty readjusting in community. Concomitantly, women leaving prison are at risk of being socially isolated and excluded (Hannah-Moffatt, 2000; Maidment, 2006; Pollack, 2008).

Literature on women who have been incarcerated tends to be deficit-based and focused on their oppression. However, there are indications that women often exercise agency and autonomy to resist and transform their experiences in ways that support their reintegration efforts. Research studies have captured the agency of women who have resisted the potentially adverse effects of incarceration and oppression through performance art (Baird, 2002), capacity building projects (Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002), and counter-narratives (Pollack, 2003). However, there are also challenges associated with entering community after incarceration that must be considered, particularly when women's agency is undermined by a lack of resources and support and other systemic oppressions.

Considerable insight into the challenges that surround community entry has been gained from research conducted with women while incarcerated (see Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001;

Miccuci & Monster, 2004; Pedlar et al., 2008; Petersilia, 2001). However, there are sure to be clear differences between women currently incarcerated and women living under supervision in community. Studies with women living under supervision in community after a period of incarceration shed light on women's experiences of exclusion and their struggles to gain acceptance in community (see Maidment, 2006; O'Brien, 2001; Pollack, 2007). As Pollack (2008) discovered, the stigma of incarceration is one of the greatest barriers to feeling included as a member of community. Similarly, Maidment (2006) acknowledged that when a woman transitions from prison to the outside world, her experiences affect her response to the world and the prison record will affect the way others respond to her.

When we think about women entering community, social inclusion becomes an important focus; however the notion of social inclusion has been both under-examined and over-idealized. There are assumptions that social inclusion can be adopted as a blanket term and used to address all facets of exclusion without critically examining its premises (Labonte, 2004). This realization, coupled with a lack of involvement by individuals deemed to be most excluded, prompted me to actively seek the participation of women living in community after incarceration to explore the complexity of social inclusion and exclusion in the context of community entry.

A closer examination of social inclusion for women entering community after incarceration seems necessary given that social exclusion continues to be a major societal issue requiring consideration (Laidlaw Foundation, 2002; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Issues of social inclusion and exclusion often demand the attention of those involved in shaping public policy (see Laidlaw Foundation, 2002; Shookner, 2002) as well as those who are part of the academic community (see Labonte, 2005; Lister, 2000). Efforts to create more socially inclusive communities have been a major focus of work in recent years and it has been argued

that for social inclusion to be a reality, *all* members of society should be able to participate as valued, respected, and contributing citizens (Laidlaw Foundation, 2002). Discussion about what this participation looks like must necessarily include individuals and groups most at risk of being socially excluded.

Shookner suggested that:

Inclusion reflects the need to address poverty and exclusion by including the voiceless and powerless in shaping the policies that affect their lives. It welcomes these individuals and groups into the planning, decision-making, and policy-development processes in their community. And it empowers them by offering the opportunities, resources, and support they need to participate (p. 16).

However, this definition is predicated on the assumption that it is up to individuals already included to welcome the inclusion of individuals who are marginalized into normative structures without considering whether these normative structures were problematic in the first place (Labonte, 2004). Also disconcerting is the way Shookner describes individuals who are marginalized as “voiceless and powerless” and in need of empowerment because this victimizing language fails to give recognition to individual agency.

The Laidlaw Foundation’s (2002) series of Working papers: *Perspectives on social inclusion* acknowledged social inclusion is not simply a response to exclusion. This work advanced the idea that structural forces need to be addressed to facilitate inclusion. Yet, the perspectives of individuals and groups who experience exclusion seem to be absent from this document. A lack of input from individuals who experience exclusion is problematic if we accept that anti-exclusion initiatives should be inclusive in process as well as outcome (Lister, 2000).

## Research Purpose and Approach to Inquiry

The overall purpose of this study was to examine social inclusion from the perspective of women who entered community after release from federal prison using a participatory approach. There was an increase in the number of women opting to settle in Waterloo region when released from prison. This increase was partly due to the expansion of the Stride Circle program and the availability of other already established local support systems (e.g., church groups, AA meetings, and informal volunteer support). Consequently, I invited women living in the region to come together to form a research group and explore ways of fostering a more socially inclusive environment for women entering community.

This research was intended to explore how issues of difference, power and oppression shape social inclusion. As Pedlar et al. (2008) highlighted, there are considerable differences among women who are incarcerated, including their experiences prior to incarceration and their access to the determinants of health upon entering community. Unfortunately, attention is often directed toward differences between women who have been incarcerated and the rest of mainstream society. This view of difference results in victim-blaming and an effort to explain marginalization as a natural outcome of difference (Pedlar et al., 2008). In this study issues of difference were examined from a critical lens and a difference-centered approach was used to identify strategies for change.

There appears to be many definitions of social inclusion and exclusion. They are considered multi-dimensional since disadvantage takes place in a variety of domains (Mitchell & Shillington, 2005). For example, Salojee (2005) noted social inclusion:

is about social cohesion *plus*, it is about citizenship *plus*, it is about the removal of barriers *plus*, it is anti-essentialist *plus*, it is about rights and responsibilities *plus*, it is about accommodation of differences *plus*, it is about democracy *plus*, and it is about a new way of thinking about the problems of injustice, inequalities and exclusion *plus* (p. 198).

Multi-dimensional understandings of social inclusion, such as Salojee's are often rooted in classic liberal theory and a focus on issues of citizenship, rights, and responsibilities which is often criticized for presenting culturally specific social relations as universal norms and encouraging assimilation under the guise of integration (Luxton, 2005). Therefore there was a need to examine social inclusion from other perspectives using methodologies which allowed for voice and difference to be honoured while countering prevailing ideologies and power relations. Such goals are central to anti-oppressive (Moosa-Mitha, 2005a) and feminist participatory action research (Reid & Frisby, 2008) approaches.

### **Feminist participatory action research.**

This study was designed as a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) project. FPAR centers gender and women's experiences while challenging forms of patriarchy, transforming power relations, and promoting social change (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Using FPAR to explore how issues of difference and oppression shape social inclusion helped to critically re-imagine social inclusion for women whose relationships and aspirations are often different from the assumed norm. Since inclusion and participation are central to FPAR (Frisby, Reid, Millar & Hoeber, 2005), it seemed well-suited for a study about social inclusion and answers Lister's (2000) call for strategies aimed at inclusion to be inclusive in their development and implementation. In this study, I not only sought to understand the nature of social inclusion from the perspective of women who have entered community, I attempted to encourage their involvement in creating a more inclusive environment.

While women are often asked to provide insight into the challenges they encounter upon release from prison, rarely are they asked to participate in helping address these challenges. This is a rather unfortunate oversight since women who have been incarcerated have firsthand

experience, agency, and capacity to collectively invoke change. Using agency and capacity as a starting point for their research, Parsons and Warner-Robbins (2002) involved women formerly incarcerated in a participatory action research project aimed at developing their own plans, strategies, and actions to support their own and other women's healthy futures. This is one of the first known participatory action research projects with women released from prison. Participants in Parsons and Warner-Robbins' study considered access to transportation and housing as being integral to their healthy futures; thus collective action was aimed at increasing access to these resources.

### **Theoretical Framework and Guiding Questions**

An anti-oppressive theoretical framework was used to guide the study. As Moosa-Mitha (2005a) explained, anti-oppressive researchers adopt a difference-centered stance by recognizing that oppression is based on multiple differences. They also strive to expose dominant constructions of reality by questioning normative structures that serve the interests of a particular class; namely those who are included. As Salojee (2005) argued:

The intersection of an anti-oppression discourse with social inclusion as process and outcome is an incredibly powerful impetus to social change and political solidarity. It presents a radical alternative to the dominant discourse that is steeped in liberal notions of formal equality (p.201).

An anti-oppressive framework provided the critical lens to explore how issues of difference could be used to guide social change efforts.

During this study I gave critical attention to inclusionary practices that encourage women to fit into normative structures within society. I also questioned the relevance of liberal theories that do not challenge normative practices and assumptions (Moosa-Mitha, 2005a). Together, the research group engaged in dialogue intended to re-imagine what social inclusion might look like if we moved away from adopting the dominant discourse on inclusion and take

a more difference-centered approach. The following four questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are the meanings and experiences of difference, social inclusion and social exclusion for women entering community upon release from prison?
2. How can women's perspectives on social inclusion and difference be used to (re)shape their environments?
3. How can anti-oppressive research (AOR) using an FPAR framework be used to guide a research process that is inclusive?
4. How can this approach improve our understanding and lead to a re-imagining of social inclusion?

Adhering to a participatory approach meant that much of the design for this study emerged as discussions with women involved in the research unfolded; therefore, these questions were merely intended to guide the unfolding of the research. Ultimately, my hope was for this study to contribute to an understanding and realization of a more socially inclusive and socially just community.

### **Hope for a Socially Inclusive and Socially Just Community**

Similar to other researchers (e.g., Hall, 2005; Reid, 2004), I recognize a strong connection between social inclusion and social justice. This connection helped me realize that as much as this study was concerned with social inclusion it was also concerned with social justice.

I recently had coffee with a friend who playfully challenged me to explain why people should care about social justice. Believing that social justice is integral to our collective well-being, I had always assumed everyone would, on some level, be concerned about social justice. It did not really dawn on me until this coffee-time conversation that there would be a need to convince anyone of its relevance. I tried to make a convincing argument by explaining

that as much as social justice is a social issue, it is also an individual issue. As Bell (1997) explained social justice holds to a vision in which individuals are both self-determining and interdependent while there is a sense of social responsibility aimed at addressing inequities.

My belief that people should be concerned about social justice is predicated on the assumption that we are generally concerned about both individual and social well-being. Bach and Rioux (1996) captured the connection between individual and social well-being when they explained, “individuals cannot attain well-being by themselves. They do so in the context in the communities in which they belong to” (p. 71). Individual well-being is enhanced when communities provide the social, economic, cultural, and environmental context for supporting the well-being of diverse members (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Thus, not only are individual and social well-being intertwined, they are both dependent on the extent to which social justice is achieved.

Social justice is indeed a health issue (Reid, 2004; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). While there may still be a reluctance to accept our interdependence and our social responsibility for health and well-being, keeping social justice at the forefront of discussions on inclusion might help us to remember that caring about issues of health and well-being necessitates caring concerned about social justice.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I explained that women who have spent time in federal prison often experience many forms of oppression that impede their chances for inclusion once they enter the community. However, they also often possess the agency and capacity to resist and overcome oppression and to counteract exclusion. I argued that social inclusion discourse must involve individuals and groups most at risk of being excluded. Thus, seeking

involvement of women who were incarcerated was an important first step in efforts to promote their inclusion. Conducting FPAR from an anti-oppressive perspective can help us understand how issues of difference shape inclusion efforts and move toward a vision of inclusion as social justice. In Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the federal corrections system in Canada and the characteristics often associated with women who have been incarcerated in this system. I also provide a review of the literature as it pertains to women's entry into community. Chapter Three then describes the research methodology that guided the study. Findings from the study and a related discussion are presented in chapters four through seven, with each chapter exploring a different layer of this participatory action research study. Finally, in Chapter Eight I provide some insights that emerge at this point in the process, discuss implications arising from this study and explore possibilities for future research.

## **Chapter Two: Experiences of Exclusion, Marginality, and Oppression - Participatory Research as Approaches to Support Agency and Resistance**

### **Introduction**

This chapter begins with a description of challenges experienced by women who are incarcerated in Canadian federal institutions and an overview of the federal correctional system for women. A discussion of issues often experienced by women entering community follows, including the contested nature of the community to which they enter. Attention is given to the ways social inclusion can be fostered despite women's susceptibility to exclusion brought on by their marginal status. Dominant discourse around oppression and marginalization is balanced with an exploration of women's agency and potential to resist oppressive structures. A case is then made for participatory research approaches as ways to promote agency and resistance against oppression.

### **Challenges Experienced by Women Incarcerated in Canada's Federal Correctional System**

The federal corrections system in Canada incarcerates people whose crime carries a sentence of two years plus a day. Within this system, women are often referred to by scholars and policy makers as "forgotten offenders" (Thomas, 2003) since they are relatively few in number compared to male offenders. In 2004, for example, there were only 379 federally incarcerated women in Canada compared to 12,034 federally incarcerated men (CSC, 2006). The disproportionately low numbers of women incarcerated in Canadian federal institutions prompted concern over treatment of women within a correctional model designed for men that does not adequately address women's specific programming and rehabilitation needs (see Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Pollack, 2000).

While spending time in a federal prison is sure to have adverse consequences for anyone, women seem to experience additional challenges associated with incarceration. The stigma of being an offender is such that the person receives a punishment not merely of being incarcerated and being removed from society for a period of time, but there is also punishment present in the stigma that lasts well past release from prison. If a woman who has offended is a mother the stigma is even more pronounced and the marginalization that ensues from having committed a crime is deepened (Pedlar et al., 2008). It is worth noting that approximately two thirds of women in Canadian prisons are mothers (Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003).

Studies conducted with women incarcerated in Canada indicate they often come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, experienced high incidences of abuse and substance abuse, and have low levels of education (Pedlar et al., 2008; Pollack, 2008). Dauvergne-Latimer (1995) found that at the time of arrest, many women are unemployed and possess limited marketable skills. Researchers investigating the socio-economic status of incarcerated women report pathways to crime rooted in a constant cycle of poverty and economic dependence (Maidment, 2006; O' Brien, 2001).

Poverty is a shared reality for many women who are incarcerated and as Faith (2006) reminded us, even if poverty is not an issue for a woman when she enters prison, it is almost certain to be an issue by the time she leaves. Faith also pointed to an association between women's impoverished circumstances and their increased vulnerability and susceptibility to participate in other forms of criminal activity. For example, poverty may force some women to remain in abusive relationships because of economic dependence. These women, feeling trapped in an abusive relationship, may see violence as the only alternative to free themselves from their victimized situation. Moreover, it is not uncommon for women to admit to using

drugs and other illegal substances as a means to temporarily escape the reality of living in poverty (Maidment, 2006, O'Brien, 2001; Richie, 2001).

The high proportion of women incarcerated for drug related offenses poses significant challenges when they enter community. Taylor and Flight (2004) reported that forty-three percent of women are incarcerated for drug offenses and thirty-three percent of women on conditional release have conditions which stipulate abstaining from drug and alcohol use. Challenges that substance abuse pose to women entering community are evidenced by the high numbers of women who return to prison after being revoked for breaking a condition of parole. Verbrugge, Nunes, Johnson, and Taylor (2002), for example, found a revocation rate of 48% for substance abusing women who left prison on a conditional release. However, the tendency for women to return to prison after breaking a condition of their release may also be explained in part by their view of prison as a safe place and their fear of entering community when the only way they know how to cope or make ends meet is to engage in behaviours that resulted in their incarceration in the first place (Pedlar et al., 2008).

### **History of Women's Corrections in Canada**

Historically, there was only one federal prison for women in Canada. This was Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario. In 1990 the Task Force for Federally Sentenced Women (TFFSW) in Canada created a report entitled *Creating Choices* which recommended the closure of the Prison for Women and the creation of four regional prisons and an Aboriginal healing lodge. The recommended closure of Prison for Women was primarily a result of inadequate accommodation, geographic dislocation, and limited programs being offered to female offenders.

The deplorable conditions and abusive treatment endured by women at Prison for Women has been well documented in reports and commissions spanning the last sixty years (Hayman, 2006). With changes to women's corrections considered long overdue, *Creating Choices*, a report created by the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (TFFSW, 1990), was hailed as a *landmark document* which carried promise for a new women-centered model of corrections (Maidment, 2006). This pivotal report resulted in sweeping changes to women's corrections and the adoption of gender-specific programming intended to foster the empowerment of women to make meaningful choices so they may live with dignity and respect. Specifically, *Creating Choices* recommended that the following five principles be used to guide the philosophy of women's corrections: 1) empowerment, 2) meaningful and responsible choices, 3) respect and dignity, 4) supportive environments, and 5) shared responsibility (TFFSW, 1990).

According to the guiding principles proposed in *Creating Choices* (TFFSW, 1990), the notion of empowerment is connected to the understanding that women generally lack self-esteem to direct their lives and therefore feel disempowered in their ability to make choices. The idea of meaningful choices encompasses women's choices in terms of programming and directing their lives. Respect and dignity promote the idea that mutuality of respect is needed for women to gain self-respect and respect for others. A supportive environment refers to the need for physical environments conducive to reintegration, highly interactive with community and reflective of low risk generally associated with federally sentenced women. The final guiding principle, shared responsibility, emphasizes responsibilities of the offender, government, and community. This principle responds to the charge that responsibility has traditionally been too narrowly assigned to correctional systems. It also addresses a lack of responsibility taken by the larger society, which accepts and nurtures social conditions that

often produce criminal activity. Indeed, the idea of collective or shared responsibility for crime and individuals who commit crime suggests the need for a more inclusive and socially just society.

Despite an effort to be responsive to the needs of women, *Creating Choices* has been criticized for creating policy that narrowly defines women offenders as having low self-esteem, an inability to cope or make sound decisions, and a long history of dependence on men, drugs, and the state (Pollack, 2004). Though it was intended to promote empowerment, this report can perhaps be more accurately described as a blueprint for transforming women into responsible individuals who will start to make wise choices. As Pollack argued, placing too much focus on issues such as self-esteem and dependency and how these issues contribute to poor choices, leads to false assumptions that good choices are equally available to everyone. Moreover, constructing dependence as an individual character trait to be addressed through therapy and programming fails to take into account the social and structural origins of dependency and overlooks the fact that women's criminal activity is often triggered by attempts to avoid or escape dependency (Pollack, 2000).

Efforts to empower women while incarcerated have been considered an oxymoron since the reality is that federally sentenced women remain disempowered in most aspects of their lives (Hannah-Moffat, 2001). In 2003, this point was emphasized in reports by the Auditor General of Canada and the Canadian Human Rights Commission condemning the treatment of women in federal prisons. The Canadian Human Rights Commission (2003) concluded that in contrast to being empowered, women's human rights, with respect to gender, race, and ability, were consistently being subject to discrimination due to the lack of support and programming they receive while incarcerated. Similarly, the Auditor General's report (2003) determined that reintegration needs of women leaving federal prisons were not being met since they were not

presented with adequate pre-release opportunities that could enable them to develop work skills and make community connections.

### **Community Reintegration and Self-Reform**

The reintegration of federally sentenced women back into community is a primary focus of many policies and programs implemented by CSC and recognition has been given to the role community should play in the reintegration process (CSC, 2006). CSC seeks to partner with community organizations to offer reintegration initiatives and share responsibility for supporting women offenders. Stride Night is the result of a partnership intended to enhance reintegration opportunities for women in prison. Brought into GVI through a community organization called Community Justice Initiatives of Waterloo Region (CJI), Stride Night connects women with volunteers from community who are concerned about social injustices and believe they can be instrumental in helping support change in women's lives (Yuen, Thompson & Pedlar, 2006). Presumably, however, not all members of community are willing to support women's reintegration efforts, especially since the perception that female offenders are either bad or mad still pervades much of our society (Pedlar, Arai, & Yuen, 2007; Pedlar, Yuen, & Fortune, 2008).

The perception of female offenders as bad or mad suggests that for women to live as integrated, law-abiding citizens, they must first become *good* and start to behave in accordance with dominant social norms (Pedlar, Yuen & Fortune, 2008). In other words, successful reintegration is perceived to be dependent upon women's ability to self-reform. Pollack (2007) highlighted the importance of self-reform to the reintegration process when she argued that if women do not self-reform they are unlikely to experience social inclusion upon release from prison. This idea is in keeping with correctional discourse that encourages self-reform based on the assumption that community is only willing to welcome back ex-offenders

who have reformed themselves (CSC, 2006). Ideas of self-reform are in keeping with liberal discourse that places value on individual rights and responsibilities and blames *victims* for their disenfranchised circumstances (Maidment, 2006).

Recent studies that examined reintegration issues from women's perspectives challenge the notion that community at large is automatically inclusive and welcoming of women released from prison. Women participating in Pollack's (2008) study, for example, found stigma of incarceration to be one of the greatest barriers to social inclusion. Similarly, women participating in the study by Pedlar et al. (2008) described being aware of stereotypes and judgments placed on those who have been incarcerated and anticipated their incarceration experience would have a negative impact on community entry. These studies highlight systemic challenges to an inclusive and equitable society and raise questions about whether community is willing to support women's reintegration efforts.

### **Reintegration: Into a *benevolent community* or a *nowhere community*?**

Maidment (2006) noted that much of the literature focusing on community reintegration of federally sentenced women assumes the existence of a *benevolent community* which can provide an empowering environment for women as they leave prison. Community, however, can be a contested concept which often lacks definitional consensus (Labonte, 2005). For some scholars, community encompasses an emphasis on shared values, joint efforts, and involvement of all members in aspects of community life (Pedlar & Haworth, 2006). Other scholars, such as Walter (2005), simplify the term by referring to community as a group of people with a shared identity. According to Walter, community exists when there are relationships between people and organizations. Recognition is often given to the boundary dimension associated with community. In this sense, community is not only defined in terms

of sharing and identity, but also in terms of geography and a distinct set of boundaries (Labonte, 2005).

Attention is sometimes directed toward prerequisites needed for community. Jane Jacobs (2004), for example, argued that for community to exist, people must encounter one another in person. These encounters should involve more than best friends or colleagues at work; they should also involve diverse people who share the neighbourhood and often share its needs. For Jacobs, the most important community resource is speaking relationships among neighbours and acquaintances in addition to friends.

Women who leave prison are certain to be entering *community* in the sense that they will live in a distinguishable geographic space but it is quite possible, perhaps even probable, that no other defining feature of community may exist for them. Regardless of how one chooses to define community, it is clear that while women are incarcerated they are excluded from being part of community in virtually every aspect of its conceptualization. During their incarceration, women are physically removed from their geographic communities and this removal significantly reduces their chances of encountering other community members in person. Consequently, they are not involved in aspects of community life, nor are they part of any joint efforts or initiatives with other citizens. Pedlar et al. (2008) identified that while there are pockets of activity and attempts to connect women to community beyond the institution; disconnection from community remains a central issue that negatively impacts their community reintegration.

The way I see it, during periods of incarceration women are so far removed from community life it is unlikely they share similar values with other citizens on community related issues. For example, safety and freedom from violence is undoubtedly a concern for most people in society but I suspect many women who have spent time in prison would not

necessarily share society's seemingly unmovable resolve to punish those who offended. Women in prison are also unlikely to be familiar with many of the issues affecting their communities since incarceration often results in a sense of isolation from the world outside of the prison (Dodge & Pogrebin, 2001; Petersillia, 2001; Severance, 2005).

During periods of incarceration, women can easily be conceived as being without community. Presumably, there would be widespread agreement among the general public that the very aim of incarceration is to keep *offenders* separate from community so that community safety can be protected. This presumption stems from the realization that women who spent time in prison are frequently stereotyped and ill-judged by the rest of society (Faith, 1993; Mahoney & Daniel, 2006; Pedlar, Arai, & Yuen, 2007; Richie, 2001). However, it is an inescapable fact that many women leave prison, return to society, and seek to establish themselves in a particular geographic community.

Often compounding difficulties associated with gaining employment after a period of incarceration, being judged by case workers, parole officers, government bureaucracies, and potential employers, are women's experiences of being caught in a *nowhere community* zone (Pollack, 2008). The term, nowhere community describes the space federally sentenced women, particularly those with addictions, find themselves in when they need to sever ties with former friends to stay clean. In essence, they are caught in a space where they are barred from the larger community and can no longer connect with their former community.

Lack of connectedness and belonging that result from being in a nowhere community can have detrimental effects on women's health, well-being and adjustment. Baumeister and Leary (1995), for example, pointed to considerable research suggesting that belonging is a fundamental human need which enhances general well-being and happiness. Cohen (2004) and Thoits (1995) also discussed the psychological benefits of social support and social

integration. Whether or not women's needs for belonging are being met will not only impact their health and well-being, but also the way they experience community upon release from prison.

Cultural imperialism (Young, 1990) is another factor that may impact how a woman experiences entry into the community. Cultural imperialism refers to the process by which the dominant group reinforces its position by measuring other groups according to dominant norms (e.g., whiteness, heterosexuality, productive citizen, mother). When culturally dominated groups are defined by outsiders it not only renders their experiences and perspectives invisible, it also forces them to look at themselves through the eyes of a dominant group that views them as deviant and inferior (Du Bois, 1969, cited in Young, 1990). Further, Pedlar et al. (2008) reported that incarceration often leads to confusion around identity produced from a diminished sense of self due to stigma and a felt sense of being deemed less than human. Women are further marginalized during incarceration because they are removed from family supports and are denied opportunities for civic engagement and employment (Maidment, 2006).

Despite the importance often placed on family supports and employment, Collins (2000) argued that work and family are culturally normative structures based on a white, male standard that a woman is expected to adopt. She explains that the normative family is often defined as a heterosexual couple who lives together with their children and is economically independent. Experiences of black women often do not fit the normative family model so Collins argued rather than trying to explain why black women's work and family patterns deviate from the *norm*, it would be more fruitful to challenge the dominant constructs of work and family.

It is easy to see how work and family could be highly contested constructs in the lives of women who have been incarcerated. For many women security in terms of employment and family relationships has never been a reality (Richie, 2001). Therefore, to expect them to fit back into work and family domains based on constructions of economic independence and responsibility (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004) can be an unrealistic expectation. Moreover, the high incidence of incarcerated women who report being abused by a family member (Richie, 2001) suggests family is often not a source of comfort or support. Indeed, theories on women's criminality have identified a link between gender-related oppression in the family and the etiology and continuation of women's illegal behavior (Morash & Robinson, 2002).

Before efforts can be made to promote social inclusion for women entering into community, the term community must be clearly defined and critically conceptualized. Helpful here is Walter's (2005) depiction of community as being "multidimensional to describe the way in which the various dimensions that characterize community – such as people and organizations, consciousness, actions, and context – are integrally related with one another forming the whole that is community" (p. 68). Also helpful is Cornish and Ghosh's (2007) assertion that communities should be defined by "interdependences rather than likeness" (p. 498). From a feminist perspective, building relationships based on interdependence requires alternative means of working together across our differences. This is considered to be especially important for women who have been excluded, isolated, and marginalized from community support systems (Reid, Frisby & Ponio, 2002).

### **Social Inclusion, Social Exclusion and Marginality**

Efforts to address issues of social inclusion for women entering community must first consider the complexity inherent in the concept of social inclusion. The Laidlaw Foundation

(2002) identified social inclusion as Yet, the usefulness of this concept is believed to be dependent upon how effectively it can address the problem of exclusion (Salojee, 2005). Exclusion, based on differences in race, class, gender, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, exists when people lack opportunity for full participation in the economic and social benefits of society (Ratcliffe, 2000; Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). With systemic oppressions such as race, class and gender contributing greatly to exclusion, it is not surprising to find that women, people of a races other than white, and individuals living in poverty top the list of those in need of greater social inclusion (Labonte, 2004). Individuals who spent time in institutions such as prisons are also particularly vulnerable to community exclusion (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003).

Exclusion is the social process of being marginalized, powerless, and considered as *other* (Young, 1990). According to Young (1990), marginalization refers to the process whereby “a whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination” (p. 53) and “involves the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction” (p. 55).

Porter (2000) argued social exclusion is a gendered term which rests on norms that associate inclusion with the male sphere of production. Gendered processes, such as the consideration of paid work as work and the neglect of domestic work, are central to the idea that women are more susceptible to social exclusion (Jackson, 1999). As long as paid work continues to lie at the heart of government attempts to build a more inclusive society the effect will be to exclude those who, for various reasons, are not part of the paid workforce (Lister, 2000).

Women, already at a disadvantage in terms of being included through paid employment, are at an even greater disadvantage if they spent time in prison (Pedlar et al., 2008).

Unemployment and subsequent poverty is a shared reality for many incarcerated women (Faith, 2006; Richie, 2001). Prospects for social inclusion are further diminished when women in prison are portrayed as evil, aggressive, and pathological outcasts and are subsequently denied opportunities to exercise their capacity as contributing citizens (Pedlar, Arai, & Yuen, 2007).

Unemployment is often deemed to be one of the main causes of exclusion (Mitchell & Shillington, 2005). However, the idea that employment necessarily leads to inclusion has been challenged on the basis of its narrow conceptualization of social inclusion (Lister, 2000). Indeed, this idea fails to consider that employment creates inclusion because social and economic arrangements have been constructed to either include or exclude people solely on the basis of their employment status (Mitchell & Shillington, 2005).

Researchers emphasized the necessity of supportive family relationships for women leaving prison and trying to find employment. For example, Nelson, Deess, and Allen (1999) found that family encouragement and perceived emotional support from family members were related to female offenders' reintegration success in terms of obtaining employment and abstaining from drugs. Maidment (2006) also identified familial and social support networks as paramount to women's successful reintegration. Visher and Travis (2003) argued when individuals coming out of prison can draw on family roles and relationships they had before incarceration, they will have more positive experiences with reintegration and social inclusion.

Uggen, Manza, and Behrens (2004) suggested civic reintegration as an important reintegration domain existing alongside work and family. They explained that a desire to be productive and give something back to society is believed to be critical to the desistance

process and helps former prisoners transform their identities from deviant to law-abiding citizens. The idea of civic reintegration seems to be picking up momentum in criminology research. However, scholars concerned with power relations may be suspicious that a woman's transformation from offender to civic-minded citizen is a concept being privileged by white, middle-class, educated, non-incarcerated (often male) academics and those involved in the custody or care of women. It has been argued that individuals in positions of privilege cannot fully understand or appreciate the experiences of economically disadvantaged, uneducated, often ethnically different, incarcerated females (Thomas, 2003).

As the proceeding paragraphs suggest, women entering community from prison face exclusion if they do not reintegrate in the areas of civic duty, work, and family. A more complete view of exclusion also necessitates a discussion of racism. Evidence of racism as exclusion abounds in North American correctional systems. For example, as Richie (2001) explained, the racial profile of incarcerated women represents one of the most striking examples of racial inequality in our society since the vast majority of women incarcerated in the United States are women of colour. A similar racial discrepancy exists in Canada, with black and Aboriginal women being disproportionately over-represented in the Canadian federal correction system (The Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2003). Salojee (2005) noted that racism can be as prevalent as unemployment for contributing to exclusion. He argued that racial inequality and discrimination are by-products of the power imbalances present in our society and racism works to constantly exclude, marginalize and disadvantage subordinated, racialized groups. Excluded groups face multiple risks to their well-being, including unemployment, poverty, and disproportionate contact with the criminal justice system (Galabuzi, 2004).

When people are excluded because of dominant conceptions of work, productivity, family, and race it is considered to be exclusion by cultural imperialism. According to Young (1990), cultural imperialism results in exclusion and marginalization when dominant cultural practices are universalized and normalized such that any cultural practices or experiences different from the norm are deemed deviant. Foucault's (1975) work similarly depicted how the creation and legitimization of social norms inevitably result in the marginalization and exclusion of those who do not conform. When this occurs, those who are marginalized and excluded experience a double and paradoxical oppression. Stereotypes are used to mark them but at the same time their experiences and perspectives are rendered invisible (Young, 1990). In this sense exclusion is not as much about difference as it is about societal responses to difference (Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Individuals who are excluded are held powerless in social institutions since they lack authority, status, respectability, and a sense of self (Young, 1990). The effects of exclusion include cultural and material deprivation, marginalization from social practices, reduced access to public resources, denial of human rights, alienation from decision-making and civic participation, and isolation from community (Galabuzi, 2004). As Ponc and Frisby (2010) have highlighted, when people are chronically excluded and come to believe they are devalued members of society, their health is often compromised.

The above examples emphasizing racial discrimination and gender and class inequities, suggest that social exclusion comprises the negative opposite of the positive characteristics associated with individuals deemed to be *included*. Such positive characteristics, according to Porter (2000), describe people who are productive and responsible citizens earning a family wage and paying taxes. These people are usually white, middle-age, and middle-income males (Labonte, 2004). It has been argued, however, that such a dualistic notion of inclusion and

exclusion is problematic because it suggests a unitary notion of power in which the included are powerful and the excluded are powerless (Jackson, 1999).

This duality of inclusion and exclusion overlooks individuals who may rely on their excluded status for their power, resist the mainstream, and present an alternative viewpoint (Porter, 2000). O'Reilly (2005) argued that using binary logic to describe exclusion discourse implies that someone is either included or excluded and fails to recognize that people are often included or excluded in relation to a particular variable. Porter (2000) suggested "an over-emphasis on the dualistic structures of exclusion and inclusion misses the critical element of agency and the dynamics of identity, power, and resistance" (p. 77). Jackson (1999) similarly argued that social discourse needs to pay greater attention to the concept of resistance and proclaims "one way of protesting marginality is to demand inclusion, another is to challenge the centre" (Jackson, 1999, p. 133).

Shakir (2005) explained that the term social inclusion is deeply problematic because it contributes to paternalistic policies rather than challenging power imbalances present in our society. Canadian social inclusion discourse, according to Shakir, advances the goal of integrating those at the margin into the centre. In a similar vein to that of Jackson (1999) and Porter (2000), Shakir criticized such normative assumptions for failing to consider that people at the margin may have no desire to integrate. This criticism gives cause to argue that rather than accepting social inclusion as a solution to problems of exclusion, it may be more effective to question who is defining inclusion and who is expected to include whom. Moreover, as Labonte (2004) argued, consideration must be given to how we go about including individuals and groups into structured social relationships that are responsible for excluding them in the first place.

Salojee (2005) attempted to address issues relating to power imbalances when he argued that social inclusion is a new way of thinking about the problems of injustice, inequalities, and exclusion. For Salojee, social inclusion encourages respect for differences and the removal of barriers to participation in public life. It promotes social justice and creates an inclusive democracy that provides space for a discussion about oppression and discrimination. Ideally, what follows is a society that can support the conditions necessary for all individuals to exercise capacities, express experiences, and participate in determining actions. Thus, social inclusion, like social justice, requires promotion and respect for group differences without oppression (Young, 1990).

### **Moving Social Inclusion Toward Social Justice: Exploring Power, Resistance, and Agency**

Social inclusion as social justice is primarily about addressing issues of power and difference (Shakir, 2005). Of importance here is what is required to shift if inclusion is to occur for women entering community. Simply opposing exclusion runs the risk of assimilation if the inherently inequitable and unmovable centre does not change (Labonte, 2004; Lister, 2000). Shakir (2005) argued that “the problem with social inclusion discourse in Canada is that it has integration of the margin into the centre as its desirable end” (p. 212). There is a similar “desirable end” being advanced in literature pertaining to the reintegration and social inclusion of women entering community from prison. For example, Uggen, Manza, and Behrens (2004) suggested that reintegration and social inclusion efforts will be enhanced and the stigma of incarceration minimized if offenders are able to adopt a *pro-social identity* upon release from prison. Pro-social identities are considered to occur when offenders become productive, responsible, and active citizens in the work, family, and community domains. In

this sense, social inclusion is linked to becoming a “productive citizen at work, a responsible citizen at home, and an active citizen in the community” (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, p. 263). Thus, encouraging the pro-social behaviour of offenders is not unlike encouraging assimilation into the centre (Shakir).

Linking pro-social behaviour to inclusion seems problematic for two main reasons. First, it is naive to assume that women will feel any sense of community responsibility upon release from prison since, like most women, they were apt to live in communities that were male-dominated, often inescapable, and void of opportunities for women to resist oppressive social roles (Frazer & Lacey, 1993). The path to incarceration is often paved with issues such as abuse, poverty, inadequate education, and drug abuse (Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002; Pedlar et al., 2008; Pollack, 2008; Richie, 2001). Thus, it can be argued that the inability of communities to tackle these systemic issues results in the marginalization and desperation of vulnerable individuals. Women marginalized by community structures are unlikely to place a high priority on becoming active community citizens.

Second, it is hard to believe that power relations present in community will support women to achieve a meaningful level of productivity. Stigma associated with a prison sentence often limits participation in community life and detracts from civic reintegration (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). Reactions women receive from other citizens as they enter community may impede neighbourly connections and restrict their opportunities for community participation. Moreover, perceiving that their communities view them as *outcasts* may actually threaten women’s identities as citizens.

When theories of civic reintegration and the adoption of pro-social identities are privileged in the reintegration literature, insufficient attention is given to inequality, control, and oppression. Oppression experienced by female offenders has been explored by feminist

researchers, indigenous scholars, and critical race theorists. Radosh (2002), for example, explained that female offenders have been victimized through multiple stages of patriarchy when she stated, “structure, oppression, economic exploitation, and marginalized social opportunity explain almost all of women’s crime” (p.303). Where notions of pro-social identities suggest the only way women can achieve social inclusion is by conforming to dominant social norms, this literature overlooks how women’s agency and efforts to resist oppression may foster their social inclusion.

It is important to consider that both structural determinants and individual agency lie at the heart of inclusion processes (Dominelli, 2005; Lister, 2000). Definitions of inclusion that employ agency consider “how individuals transcend structural limitations to create resources that promote inclusivity” (Dominelli, 2005, p. 16). However, if efforts at inclusion ignore the ideological, material, and political structures that unequally benefit some and disadvantage others, there is the risk of assimilation whereby the agency of those who are less powerful becomes assimilated by the mainstream (Lister, 2000). Increasing attention has been given to ways structural dimensions shape the inclusion process (Shookner, 2002). Efforts have been made to address social issues such as poverty and to reduce barriers that limit access to employment, education, and other material resources (Mitchell & Shillington, 2005).

Hall (2005) contended that negotiating the discourse of inclusion/exclusion requires a critical re-imagining of inclusion as social justice. According to Young (1990), social justice requires the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression to foster self-determination and self-development. Thus, aims to foster social inclusion for women who have been incarcerated necessitate an examination of forces of oppression that render them excluded. When there is no structural analysis of marginality or exclusion, social inclusion

initiatives become paternal policy options that fail to challenge existing power imbalances or create any real change (Shakir, 2005).

### **Oppression in the lives of women who have been incarcerated.**

Critical theorists attribute oppression to social structures, processes, and practices that favour certain groups in society and oppress others based on factors such as class, race, and gender (Mullaly, 2002). Most critical theories are informed by a critique of domination and driven by a goal of liberation. Critical theory emphasizes social structures as a major source of oppression since people's everyday lives are shaped by structures of politics, economics, culture, discourse, gender, and race (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Feminism, particularly radical feminism, rests on the notion that men's domination over women is the most fundamental form of oppression (Stanley & Wise, 1983). Patriarchy is believed to be at the root of all oppression and class differences are considered to be a result of inequality between the sexes due to the exercise of male power (Mullaly, 2002). For critical race scholars such as Collins (2000) and hooks (2005), oppression is viewed in relation to the dominance of whiteness. Anti-oppressive researchers promote a more difference-centred view of oppression that considers multiple and intersecting oppressions experienced on the basis of difference (Moosa-Mitha, 2005b).

Mullaly (2002) described oppression as the domination of subordinate groups by politically, economically, socially, and culturally powerful groups. Iris Marion Young (1990) described modern day oppression as structurally systemic and often unintentional:

In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms, in short, the normal processes of everyday life. We cannot eliminate this structural oppression by getting rid

of the rulers or making new laws, because oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions (p. 41).

Similarly, Foucault (1975) has maintained we must go beyond viewing oppression as the conscious and intentional acts of one group against another. He urged us to recognize that oppression is often unintentional and many people contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of oppression while carrying out many of their day to day activities. Often, however, people do not see themselves as agents of oppression. Young (1990) argued there is no single set of criteria that can capture all forms of oppression and hooks (2005) succinctly conceptualized oppression when she claimed “being oppressed means the *absence of choices*” (p. 241, original emphasis).

Once incarcerated, women seem to be devoid of choices and opportunities to rise above their oppression. For example, a study by Delveaux, Blanchette, and Wickett (2005) showed women often express interest in community-based work release programs, but an extreme lack of such programs meant that few women actually participate in work release programs during their incarceration.

A lack of work experience, coupled with a criminal record, can make it increasingly difficult for women to escape exploitive work situations when they are released from prison. Thus, as bell hooks (2005) suggested, oppression occurs from having a lack of choices. However, despite their oppressive circumstances, women can also be agents of control acting against oppression. For example, in their study, Pedlar et al. (2008) described women who viewed incarceration as an improvement over their lives prior to imprisonment since it gave them access to stable housing and food, mental health programming, and high school and post-secondary education. Although work and education are not necessarily institutional

requirements, many women exercised their agency and took advantage of opportunities they felt would otherwise be difficult to pursue.

**Women's acts of agency, resistance, and reframing.**

*Agency* is described as the capacity to make a choice or decision and the capacity to enact that decision (Morgan, Eckert, Piggee, & Franowski, 2006). Agency of women who are incarcerated becomes apparent in situations where they make use of the limited resources available to them to survive deprivations of the prison environment. As Severance (2005) explained, agency is not only related to obtaining material possessions but also for relationships since being isolated from family and friends prompts women to forge “functional equivalents” with other inmates. In her study, Severance found that incarcerated women cooperated with one another and worked toward mutual economic support to access material goods that were limited. Agency is also apparent in situations where women resist the oppressive nature of the prison system.

*Resistance* provides people who are oppressed with an empowering tool for confronting oppression (Ferraro & Moe, 2003). Shaw (2006) defined resistance as “an act or series of actions that enhance freedom of choice and personal control” (p. 534). Resistance is a form of power that is manifest in the ways that oppressed groups and individuals struggle against domination. This notion challenges the view that individuals are helpless to do anything about oppressive situations. When attention is given to the resistance used by individuals who are marginalized, the focus is most often on deviance as a form of resistance (Cohen, 2004). However, notions of resistance can also reflect the struggle of those who are most marginalized to maintain or regain agency and a sense of power over their lives.

Resistance can be considered both individual and collective: As Shaw (2001) noted, “the individual may engage in acts of resistance, and these acts will affect her or his life on an individual level, but at the same time such acts will also affect others in similar situations” (p. 193). Considered from a structural perspective, resistance may contribute to a collective act against power relations when the act of resistance has implications for others (Shaw, 2001).

Similar to attention directed toward issues of oppression by feminists, indigenous scholars, and critical race theorists, researchers in these domains have also been interested in the ways gender, class, and race have shaped acts of agency and resistance by oppressed groups. Collins (2000), for example, argued that although behavioural conformity is imposed on African American women, they often engage in both organized and anonymous acts of agency and resistance. Collins stressed the importance of self-definition as part of the journey from victimization to a free mind, offering examples of black musicians who reject externally defined, controlling images to validate black women’s power as human subjects. Similarly, she explains that black feminist writers often encourage self-definition and self-valuation by linking black women’s self-reliance with issues of survival.

Examples of resistance to being defined and categorized by outsiders can be found in indigenous cultures as well. Telling their stories, reclaiming the past, and giving testimony to past injustices are powerful forms of agency and resistance used by indigenous peoples (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Concepts of spirituality are also critical sites of resistance for indigenous peoples since values, attitudes, and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent a clear contrast to western culture. According to Tuhiwai Smith, spirituality also represents something the western culture cannot fully understand and control.

Tuhiwai Smith (1999) described the way indigenous peoples use *reframing* as a strategy to take greater control over the ways social issues and problems are discussed and handled.

She explained that governments and social agencies often frame indigenous issues by placing them in “the indigenous problem basket, to be handled in the usual cynical and paternalistic manner” (p. 153). However, indigenous activists have argued that issues such as mental illness, alcoholism, and suicide should not be viewed as individualized failure but as issues stemming from colonization and lack of collective self-determination. Similar arguments have been made in reference to women’s lack of collective self-determination before and after incarceration. For example, Pollack (2000) and Hannah-Moffatt (2000) criticized the correctional system’s use of the rhetoric of empowerment to individualize women’s problems and blame women for not being able to rise above them. They argued that by focusing on women’s perceived inability to change their circumstances, the system is failing to realize that the same choices are not equally available to everyone.

Reframing can be a strategy for incarcerated women to reduce the propensity with which they are being labeled as either victims or deviants. It can also help to expose the ways women reject these labels and establish new identities that resist negative stereotypes. Bosworth (2003), for example, explained how a *gendered identity* can enable incarcerated women to recast themselves as more than just *prisoners*. For some women, holding strong to their identity as mothers gives them an opportunity to resist self-images as prisoners and insist that parental responsibilities makes them deserving of respect. Similarly, Bosworth explained that incarcerated women may use their racial and ethnic identities to replace their identities as prisoners. Bosworth observed that when groups of women from similar cultural background co-exist in prison, their differences can at times be a source of strength and unity. She found women who were the racial minority would offer one another support and observe traditional forms of courtesy and respect.

Ferraro and Moe (2003) found that some women perceive incarceration in a positive way and this perception can be a strategy of reframing the usual pains of imprisonment. However, since some women view prison time as a welcome respite from constant alcohol and drug use, and violent victimization, Ferraro and Moe criticized the “lack of resources and concern dedicated to assisting women who are consumed with day-to-day survival within drug-infested, poverty stricken, and violent homes and neighbourhoods” (p. 91).

### **Conceptions of power.**

While the dominant conception of power relationships in Western societies is predicated on the notion of *power-over*, concepts of agency, resistance, and reframing cast a different understanding of power. Power-over is based in patriarchal, hierarchical, colonialist, and other oppressive understandings of how individuals relate to one another (Yoder & Kahn, 1992). Power is sometimes understood to be a limited commodity that you either have or do not have (Teske, 2000). In this type of dichotomy, power of those in privileged social locations is maintained through material, authoritative, and ideological structures (McCall, 2005). Thus, those who are included have power and those excluded do not (Dominelli, 2005). However, this dualistic view of power has been challenged. Foucault (1975), for example described power as being inherent in all social relations. He considered it to be a feature of the interactions between individuals, groups, and organizations. For Foucault, power can be either constraining or enabling. Thus, an assessment must be made of who is exercising power, in whose interests, and who has defined those interests. Young (1990) argued that the capacity to exercise power is always shaped by structural conditions that differentially privilege the power of some over others, especially on the basis of gender, class, and race.

Power-over strategies often dominate research and practice because they are built upon the assumption that those living on the margins are powerless and in need of help from those who have the power to intervene (Cornish & Ghosh, 2007). Sharing power in anti-oppressive research processes calls for a differentiated view of power and exposes it as more than a zero-sum game. As Potts and Brown (2005) explained, power lurks in all research reflections and decisions so attending to issues of power in research relationships can be complex. They argue that anti-oppressive researchers attempt to shift power from those removed from what is trying to be *known* to those with epistemic privilege of the issue under study. According to Dominelli (2005), power is shared when researchers adopt participatory approaches that bring in other voices and validate knowledge that is not often otherwise validated.

Feminist and anti-oppressive researchers promote research processes that value the diverse resources participants and researchers bring to the table and believe these resources enable power to be shared in ways that facilitate women's capacity to resist, redefine, and recreate their life circumstances (Dominelli, 2002; Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006). Collective dialogue is considered an essential aspect of this process (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Collective dialogue has long been considered a cornerstone of participatory research that has roots in Freirian dialogical education and democratic participation of community members to transform their lives (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Freire (1970) believed that systematic resistance requires the process of *conscientization* whereby members of oppressed social groups come to understand the political and social nature of their oppression. Conscientization involves becoming critically aware of the systemic power imbalances that shape one's life and taking action to resist these systems.

### **Conscientization and resistance of oppression.**

Freire (1970) argued that people do not have to accept structures of de-humanization and oppression as absolutes. For Freire, a structure, system, or institution of oppression does not have to be “a closed world from which there is no exit, but a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 49). He further explained that critical consciousness is essential for such a transformation.

Critical consciousness, or conscientization, is possible through praxis which entails “action and reflection upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p.79). Freire insisted dialogue is fundamental to the process of conscientization. Effective dialogue, he explained, necessitates elements of love, humility, faith, trust, hope, and critical thinking. From this perspective, people cannot begin to enact change and move towards freedom from oppression without entering into dialogue with people most affected by oppression.

The creativity of the Freirian approach, which enables people to view their reality in a new light, has led to increasing use of dialogical methodologies in research (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). In their list of new forms of representation being explored in FPAR, Reid and Frisby (2008) highlighted dialogical and collaborative approaches such as participatory workshops, film, photography, and co-writing.

Similar dialogical and collaborative approaches to those highlighted by Reid and Frisby (2008) have been used to address structures of oppression for incarcerated women. For example, Richie (2001) recounted how dialogue focused on consciousness-raising was used to help incarcerated women develop critical insight into the structural influences on personal choices. Richie explained that as women became directly involved in identifying and expanding their options, they believed they were better positioned to engage in the struggle for freedom from oppression.

Baird (2002) provides another example of how dialogue has been used to address issues of oppression among women who have been incarcerated. Baird described how Freire's theory of conscientization (1970) shaped an education program for incarcerated women and provided an opportunity for them to "reflect on, discuss, recognize and address, in their own words, how their lives have been shaped" (p. 8). These stories, in turn, provided the context for a theatrical production that put the spotlight on issues of oppression facing incarcerated women. Baird (2002) explained that performing the play for a diverse community audience, including policy makers and justice officials, provided an opportunity to collectively examine policy issues that condone and perpetuate oppression.

Narrative approaches can also be effective ways for women who have been incarcerated to engage in dialogue and co-construct stories of oppression as stories of strength and determination. Mahoney and Daniel (2006), for example, discussed how writing narratives has helped incarcerated women describe their experiences and articulate a plan for change. When researchers or practitioners use narrative approaches, they are able to see women in context and listen for ways gender, culture, and social and economic forces have shaped women's worldviews and experiences. As Mahoney and Daniel explained, the process of co-constructing stories can assist women in viewing outcomes of problem-dominated stories as examples of courage, determination, and strength in the face of continued oppression.

As the above examples demonstrate, when women are involved in articulating their experiences and being part of a plan for change, they are better positioned to resist structures of oppression. Participatory approaches to research, drawing heavily on Freirian emancipatory traditions (Reason & Bradbury, 2006), have potential to be a tool of resistance against the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, culture, and class since the goal is to place those *less*

*powerful* at the centre of knowledge creation and shift people's lived experiences of marginalization to the centre (Varcoe, 2006).

Wallerstein and Durran (2003) explained how Friere's writing has reinforced a need for participatory researchers to have a deep belief in humanity and people's capacity to create change. Fine, Torre, Boudin, Bowen, Clark, Hylton et al. (2004) have written about research that underscored transformative capacity of women who have been incarcerated. Describing a PAR project they undertook in a women's prison, Fine et al. acknowledged the remarkable social and psychological accomplishments of women who regained the capacity to trust and give back to community after enduring a long list of social and personal betrayals within their families and communities.

Frierian principles involving the acquisition of group knowledge for purposes of transformation that shaped this project have been grounded in a belief of women's capacity for conscientization and resistance. To collectively imagine alternatives to experiences of oppression (Freire 1970) and exclusion for women entering community requires dialogue in which women speak for themselves (Brydon-Miller, 2004). When individuals from marginalized groups speak for themselves it is believed to promote an inclusive research process (Dominelli, 2005). However, several researchers (e.g., Dominelli, 2005; Ponc & Frisby, 2010; Reid, 2004; Varcoe, 2006) have drawn attention to the complexity of inclusion in research. The complexity of inclusive research was also experienced during this study and will be discussed in more depth in the following chapters.

## Chapter Three: Research Methodology

This study was rooted in a concern for social justice. The overall purpose of this study was to examine social inclusion from the perspective of women who entered community after release from federal prison. Thus, my aim was to engage in a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) project with women who have spent time in prison and were living in community. The project employed the tenets of anti-oppressive research and adopted a consciousness-raising approach rooted in feminist participatory action research (FPAR). The study involved women who had been federally incarcerated. Women were invited to form a research group and asked to explore alternate ways to conceptualize inclusion and help foster a more inclusive environment for women entering community after their release from prison.

The following four questions were used to guide this study:

1. What are the meanings and experiences of difference, social inclusion and social exclusion for women entering community upon release from prison?
2. How can women's perspectives on social inclusion and difference be used to (re)shape their environments?
3. How can anti-oppressive research (AOR) using an FPAR framework be used to guide a research process that is inclusive?
4. How can this approach improve our understanding and lead to a re-imagining of social inclusion?

These questions were used to guide discussion and encourage a critical examination of normative structures designed to serve the interests of the dominant class. Following Hall's (2005) argument that negotiating the discourse of inclusion/exclusion requires a critical re-imagining of inclusion as social justice, this study strove to create dialogue aimed to critically re-imagine what inclusion means for women entering community after incarceration. In keeping with the participatory nature of this study, there was an emphasis on the value of

collaborative learning. Thus, rather than adhering to a rigid research design, I was committed to using a research design that unfolded over time and was influenced by the decisions of women who participated and the knowledge exchange that occurred.

Reflexivity was a central element of this study. Gutierrez and Lewis (2005) explained that a participatory researcher who is from a different racial, ethnic, or class background than those she works with must recognize how her life experience has shaped her perceptions and how her status has influenced her power relative to the group structure. Thus, I constantly reflected on how my background and experiences shaped my involvement in this study.

### **Participatory Action Research**

Participatory action research (PAR) involves a collaborative approach wherein partnerships are formed between individuals with firsthand knowledge of the issue under investigation and those who possess technical skills and formal knowledge with the issue (Lykes & Coquillon, 2006). With an emphasis on education, collaborative learning, and transformative action, PAR is as much about the processes as it is about the outcomes of research (Ristock & Pennell, 1996). An important aspect of the process is that it involves the education and capacity building of the organizer as well as the other PAR participants (Gutierrez and Lewis, 2005). PAR emphasizes agency (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003), promotes subjectivity and participation throughout the research process, and strives for consensual validation through data collection and analysis formulated around local priorities (Lykes & Coquillon, 2006).

Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell (2008) argued that PAR is an appropriate methodology to use when working with people who are often experience powerlessness and oppression.

Rutman, Hubbersty, Barlow, and Brown (2005) explained that researchers employing PAR

often involve those deemed to be powerless and ask what kind of knowledge they are interested in generating and to what end. Not unlike efforts to promote social inclusion (Shookner, 2002), this approach to PAR seems to assume those who lack power (i.e., the marginalized and oppressed) are dependent upon individuals with power (e.g., researchers) to welcome their involvement in a participatory process. There also seems to be an assumption that research participants are incapable of addressing their own sources of oppression without this type of intervention. However, Strier (2007) reminded us, anti-oppressive researchers engaged in PAR view participants as experts of their own lives capable of self-determination; thus, the researcher's role is to facilitate exchange of collective group knowledge based on principles of inclusion, reflection, participation, empowerment, and social change (Ristock & Pennel, 1996).

Critics of PAR questioned whether the reality of participatory research has approximated the ideal. Maguire (2001b), for example, argued that PAR is typically conducted under the assumption of gender-neutrality or gender-equality and argues a feminist lens should be used to guide the PAR process. She asked, "without a grounding in feminisms, what would action research liberate us from and transform our communities into?" (Maguire, p. 60).

Frisby, Maguire, and Reid (2009) questioned how advances in feminist theories can contribute to action research. They determined that feminist theories act to intentionally counter dominant theories about human experiences and strategies for change. If PAR is not guided by feminist theories, they argue, sources and consequences of gender inequalities may be overlooked or misunderstood.

Some scholars noted a complimentary relationship between PAR and feminist theory. Maguire (2001b), for example, explained that PAR brings to feminist theory a challenge to act

while feminism challenges action researchers to take a more critical look at women's experiences of oppression and to recognize strengths women bring to social change efforts.

### **Feminist participatory action research.**

In response to calls to create a framework that integrates PAR principles with feminist theories and methodological concerns, Reid and Frisby (2008) proposed a feminist participatory action (FPAR) framework which:

- centres gender and women's diverse experiences while challenging forms of patriarchy
- accounts for intersecting oppressions
- honours voice and difference through participatory approaches
- explores new forms of representation
- encourages reflexivity
- acknowledges that many forms of action have the potential to lead to social change.

A participatory approach is appropriate when researchers seek to understand experiences of those who are involved in, affected by, or excluded from the phenomenon of interest (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005). An essential component of this research is that data collected have relevance for women involved. Thus, in this study it was important women were able to frame the concept of inclusion and identify aspects of this concept that were most salient in their post-prison lives.

FPAR is based on the assumption that women have the capacity to create progressive knowledge by analyzing their own circumstances (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoeber, 2005). Most of the *pathways to crime* literature reports that the majority of women live in poverty, have histories of abuse, struggle with addictions, and have often experienced systemic violence as a result of their race and gender (Maidment, 2006; Richie, 2001). While these characteristics can be used to describe many women I met in GVI, I was becoming

increasingly uncomfortable with contributing to a knowledge base that focused on women's deficits and portrayed them as victims powerless to change their circumstances.

Often overlooked in literature about women who have been incarcerated is the agency they have and their capacity to enact change. An exception includes Parsons and Warner-Robbins' (2002) PAR project that was aimed at assessing services needed by women leaving the prison system. Parsons and Warner-Robbins worked with formerly incarcerated women for a two year period. They documented issues women considered important for a successful transition to the community and worked collectively to arrange for transportation, housing, and social support.

The study by Parsons and Warner-Robbins (2002) provides an example of the potential for change that exists when one taps into the collective knowledge and capacity of women who have been incarcerated. However, the authors provided little insight into the ways they involved women in the research and what they may have learned as they engaged with women in a participatory process. Thus, for me, embarking on a FPAR project with women who have been incarcerated felt a bit like navigating uncharted waters.

hooks (2005) argued that feminist theories should be of primary significance for all groups and individuals who desire an end to oppression. However, it has also been argued that feminist theories, specifically those grounded in White feminism, overlook oppression that individuals and collectivities experience on the basis of their multiple differences (Moosa-Mitha, 2005a). Moosa-Mitha contended that anti-oppressive theories are more inclusive in their analysis of oppression than other social theories because they question normative assumptions and practices that result in the social exclusion of people on the basis of their difference from the assumed norm. Normative assumptions were scrutinized in this research

project when women described being excluded because of their difference from others in society.

### **Anti-oppressive research.**

Anti-oppressive research (AOR) has been described as an extension of Marxist, feminist, and critical theory (Potts & Brown, 2005). While AOR shares the critical orientations with these other approaches to social science research, it adopts a more *difference-centered stance*, arguably making it more appropriate for understanding oppression based on multiple differences (Moosa-Mitha, 2005a). It has been claimed, for example, that critical theorists examining social arrangements through the lens of power, domination, and conflict with the intent of exposing subjugation in our society, failed to explain interrelations between and within the totality of oppressive relations (Bains, 2000). No one theory, Bains contended, can depict the multitude of ways in which experiences of oppression continuously interact with, contest, and reinforce each other. AOR, however, goes beyond analyzing oppression from the basis of a singular social identity, such as race or gender, and brings into focus the intersection of oppressions resulting from multiple social identities. This study highlighted the complexity of identity and oppression. Multiple differences intersected and contributed to a multi-faceted understanding of oppression.

AOR shares a foundational basis with intersectionality theory because it holds that women's diverse experiences of privilege and oppression are socially constructed by multiple and fluid systems of power in relation to gender, race, class, ability, and sexual orientation, which intersect to situate each of us (McCall, 2005). Intersectionality theorists suggested we move beyond seeing ourselves as possessing one fixed identity and "imagine ourselves as existing at the intersection of multiple identities, all of which influence one another and together shape our continually changing experience and interactions" (Brydon-Miller, 2004,

p.9). As I describe more fully in subsequent chapters, it became evident in this study how women's negotiated and fluid identities shaped experiences in community and interactions within the group.

According to Moosa-Mitha (2005a) AOR is informed by the Marxist assumption that knowledge is historically situated and it has also adopted a social constructionist epistemology. Similar to Marxists and structuralists, anti-oppressive researchers strive to expose dominant constructions of reality that serve the interests of a particular class of society. The departure from Marxists and structuralists occurs when anti-oppressive researchers argue that by advancing alternate truth claims, social researchers are often complicit in using knowledge to gain a position of power. Rather than advancing truth claims, this research project was intended to generate new knowledge based on shared understandings.

In situations where knowledge exchange occurs through collaboration and consciousness-raising among a research group, power can be more evenly dispersed among members. Fostering a feminist and emergent research process can destabilize traditional power relations which at times left me, as the primary researcher, vulnerable when other members of the research group exercised power and control over the process (Brydon-Miller, Maguire & McIntyre, 2004).

### **Tenets of anti-oppressive research and reflexivity.**

Potts and Brown (2005) proposed three tenets of AOR. The first tenet is that research is concerned with social justice and resistance in process and in outcome. Research can be a powerful tool for social change but it can also be used to maintain the status quo and support structures that reward some people while inhibiting others. Engaging in research as a practice of resistance requires researchers to be reflexive and consider the extent to which they have

been complicit in systems of domination and subordination (Strega, 2005). AOR challenges researchers to examine their beliefs, values, identity, and power as well as the ways they perpetuate power imbalances (Rutman, Hubberstey, Barlow, & Brown, 2005). As such, researchers must continually reflect on their location and recognize it as an integral part of the research process.

Absolon and Willett (2005) explained that location is absolutely essential in certain research contexts, such as Aboriginal research, because it helps to offset existing unbalanced scholarship about Aboriginal people. They argue that if location were more widely examined in Aboriginal research, readers would be able to distinguish between authors who have a vested interest in the research and those who do not. The same argument could be applied to research being done with all groups who are marginalized and often become the subjects of knowledge claims being made by outsiders.

My location in this research project was that of an outsider since I did not have first-hand experience with incarceration and only a limited understanding of the forces of oppression impacting women who have been incarcerated. However, the “vested interest” and genuine concern I developed for many women I met at GVI was real. As previously noted, I spent a considerable amount of time connecting with women over common leisure interests, helping them to re-establish ties to their families during escorted absences, and provided emotional and practical support to women as they entered community upon release from prison. I had been, and continue to be, affected and shaped by my interactions with women at GVI and the deep emotions that come with supporting women whose wounds run deep.

The vested interest I have for members of the research group and the project prompted me to design a set of reflexive questions aimed at helping me understand my location,

perceptions, and emotions to better facilitate an FPAR/AOR process. Some of the reflexive questions I asked myself included:

- How did my actions reinforce the status quo?
- What values and beliefs did I bring to the study?
- What is my identity and differences and how did this shape my involvement?
- What is my view of success for women involved in the project?
- How did I negotiate the focus of the study with the other members of the research group?
- How did I experience women relapsing or returning to prison?

The second tenet of AOR is that all knowledge is socially constructed and political.

Knowledge is produced through interactions between people and all people are socially located with biases, privileges, and differing power relations. Similar to critical theory, AOR recognizes that knowledge is political since it is created through power relations between people. Knowledge can be oppressive in how it is constructed and used, or it can be a means of resisting power structures. Thus, AOR is not meant to be a process to discover knowledge. Rather it is a political process involving the co-creation and rediscovery of knowledge that enhances the agency of people who experience marginalization and oppression.

My hope was that knowledge would be co-created during this project and used to identify ways to foster a more inclusive environment for women entering community. PAR raises questions about what knowledge is defined by whom, about whom, and for what purpose (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003). Thus, it was important to encourage critical dialogue and knowledge exchange through group discussion. Stoecker (2003) questioned whether collaborative participation goes far enough in changing existing knowledge relations and argued this can be done if it generates new knowledge and understanding for both participants and academics. From an FPAR perspective, this new knowledge and understanding incorporates a focus on women's divergent experiences embedded within relations of power

(Reid & Frisby, 2008). With this in mind, I decided it was important to identify and value the experience and knowledge each member of the research group brought to the project.

Consequently, some of the reflexive questions explored included:

- How were relationships with people with different backgrounds, experiences, interests, and ideas used to broaden our perspectives on what it means to be included?
- How were our experiences connected to gendered, classed, and racialized power relations? (Reid & Frisby, 2008)
- What experiences and knowledge were being privileged in group discussions?
- How was group knowledge being constructed and shared?

The third tenet of AOR is that the research process is about power and relationships.

Within positivism, the researcher is the expert and is viewed as the primary person with the power and ability to create knowledge, to act on that knowledge, and to benefit from it. Anti-oppressive researchers stress the importance of relationship development and believe these relationships can be fostered by engaging in dialogue in an egalitarian manner (Dominelli, 2002).

Anti-oppressive researchers recognize that some *participatory* research approaches involve participants being involved in aspects of the research with little substantive control over the research process. With critical theory, for example, control of the research process often remains very much with the researcher. The researcher usually has a political agenda and brings participants on board as collaborators in the political process. AOR, by contrast, makes the effort to “shift power from those removed from what is trying to be known to those closest to it – that is, those people with epistemic privilege or lived experience of the issue under study” (Potts & Brown, 2005, p.263). Anchored in participatory, action-oriented, and emancipatory approaches of social science research, AOR encourages active inclusion aimed at harnessing the skills and knowledge useful for improving the lives of those involved in the research (Strier, 2006). In an effort to enhance opportunities for inclusion, I engaged women

in discussions about how knowledge being co-created could be acted upon. I tried not to influence the direction action would take. Instead, I hoped the group could identify what, if any, action plans would be meaningful and useful. Consequently, some of the reflexive questions included:

- What is the nature of the power that I hold?
- What is the nature of women's power?
- How were the voices and experiences of each woman heard?
- How were knowledge and skills of women brought into the study?
- How was leadership shared among group members?
- How were decisions being made and how were conflict, boundaries, and roles negotiated?
- Who decided what direction the action took? How was this decision negotiated?
- Did the interaction between dialogue and reflection promote a willingness to pursue group goals?

### **Commonalities between anti-oppressive research and participatory action research.**

Rutman et al. (2005) identified four main commonalities between AOR and participatory action research (PAR). The first commonality is that both AOR and PAR represent philosophical approaches rooted in social justice and based on notions of equality, rights and justice, and non-discrimination. Young (1990) defined social justice as the "elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression" (p.15). She argued that within a society characterized by power imbalances where oppression remains a dominant experience in the lives of marginalized populations, distributive justice is less effective than social justice in redressing imbalances. Arguing for the relevance of social justice, Young made an important distinction between material goods with which distributive justice is rightly concerned, and goods such as self-respect, opportunity, power and honour, which are in her view matters with which social justice ought to be concerned.

Second, AOR and PAR are in keeping with Young's (1990) view of social justice because they promote relationships and rely on the strengths of the people within these relationships to solve problems and guide action. In her view, "rights are relationships, not things; they are institutionally defined rules specifying what people can do in relation to one another. Rights refer to doing more than having, to social relationships that enable or constrain action" (Young, p. 25). Potts and Brown (2005) argued that anti-oppressive research cannot be done without attention to relationships. As I attempted to engage women in this study, I paid particular attention to the importance of relationship building. Attention to relationships continued throughout all phases of the study. The quality of dialogue and collective knowledge that was generated was often depended on the extent to which relationships formed between various women in the project and the extent to which relationships evolved between me and the other women.

The third commonality is that researchers using both AOR and PAR believe that research participants must have a role in deciding the research agenda and determining how the research should occur (Rutman et al., 2005). Researchers adhering to principles of AOR assume people have the capacity to create progressive knowledge by analyzing their own experiences. They believe participation not only contributes to the increased quality and validity of research, but also increases the relevance of research for people affected. Women were asked to be involved in decision making from our first meeting. Their knowledge and decisions influenced the unfolding of three phases of the research project. I continued to invite and encourage their participation throughout each phase.

The fourth commonality between AOR and PAR is that they both share the understanding that researchers are knowledge producers and are located within a complex set of social structures (Rutman et al., 2005). Consequently, identities, motives, and agendas of

researchers influence questions they ask, methods they use, and conclusions they draw. Thus, researchers are expected to engage in critical self-reflection and consciously write themselves into the text (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Since identities and motives of all research participants undoubtedly shape the research agenda, there should be ongoing interaction between dialogue and reflection. I used a journal as a tool to engage in critical self-reflection using the questions outlined in the previous section. I also scheduled regular meetings with my advisor to discuss and reflect on some of the decisions being made as the project unfolded. Journal writing and discussions with my advisor enabled me to identify and scrutinize the motives and agendas behind some of my decisions and actions.

These four commonalities suggest a natural fit between PAR and AOR. Advocates of PAR contend that it holds promise as a methodology designed to promote social change (Reid & Frisby, 2008). A social change agenda is in keeping with the emancipatory nature of AOR (Potts & Brown, 2005). Combining AOR with PAR increases the likelihood that research is both critical and difference centered. A critical, difference centered perspective promoted by AOR is particularly useful when examining social inclusion discourse steeped in liberalism. As long as liberal theories shape normative assumptions about social inclusion and contribute to universalizing visions of social justice, people whose realities and experiences are different from the assumed norm will continue to be excluded. Moosa-Mitha (2005a) explained that important insight can be gained from anti-oppressive theories advancing the idea that knowledge is owned by and belongs to groups and communities experiencing marginalization. As Moosa-Mitha described, “knowledge about something is gained by the interaction of the subject and the observer, where both are understood as having agency and are involved in defining difference” (p. 67).

## **Embarking on a Quest for Collective Knowledge: Undertaking FPAR Informed By AOR**

As described in the previous section, key considerations when conducting FPAR from an anti-oppressive perspective include fostering relationships, encouraging shared knowledge and decision making, and engaging in critical self-reflection. Relationships between all women involved in this research greatly shaped the nature of the project. Decisions were made by the group that led to three the distinct phases of research. These phases involved research meetings, photovoice, and follow up conversations.

### **Research meetings.**

The first step of this research project involved participant recruitment. I expected this research topic would be of interest to women released from GVI and living in Waterloo region. When the study began there were approximately fifteen women living in the region and I planned to invite them to participate in the study. While I had developed relationships with women who had been in GVI through my volunteer endeavours, women I knew were not living in the region at the time of the study. I was involved in a Stride Circle with one woman who agreed to participate in the study. With her help I recruited a second woman to participate. Recruiting additional women with whom I had little or no prior connection proved to be more challenging than I originally thought.

When I spoke to some women about the study they explained to me that their parole officers advised against them being part of any initiative that would involve interacting with other women who were also on parole. With the help of my advisor, I constructed a letter summarizing the intent of research (see Appendix A) and arranged to meet with the supervisor of parole officers in the region. She spoke to area parole officers about the research and asked them to pass along the research summary letter to each woman under their supervision. After

receiving a letter from their parole officers two women contacted me and expressed an interest in participating in the study. In total, four women participated in the first phase of the project.

I believed relationships I developed with women at GVI through my volunteer endeavours would be helpful in the recruitment process and help to minimize skepticism they had about research. However, I also realized that relationships between researchers and participants engaging in FPAR can raise concerns around coercion and voluntary consent (Brydon-Miller, 2004). My volunteer role had the potential to make some women feel coerced into participating if they believed not agreeing to participate would jeopardize my support of them. However, when the study began I was no longer providing any formal support to women beyond my Circle involvement and since I had no prior relationship with other women who participated in the study, coercion did not seem to be an issue.

The first several research meetings were held at Community Justice Initiatives (CJI). The location was selected because it was familiar to women who had been in GVI and it is a space where I thought they would feel comfortable and safe. Refreshments were served at each meeting to create a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere. Exercises planned for the first few meetings were intended to help women identify and discuss commonalities and shared experiences beyond that of spending time in a federal prison. In keeping with ideas behind participatory action research and with notions of community, meetings were designed to acknowledge strengths and foster a sense of community through relationship building and creating a shared identity (Walter, 2005).

At the first meeting, I explained the issue I was interested in exploring with my dissertation. I asked women to introduce themselves and share a bit about what life has been like since they left GVI. Believing it was important for participants involved in participatory research to decide what it meant to have a collaborative and equitable partnership (Wallerstein

& Duran, 2003), I asked how women felt about research and what principles they thought should guide us in this research project.

To identify and acknowledge strengths women brought to the study, I asked them to think about the ideal community and how they contribute to its creation. FPAR researchers have called for participatory strategies that involve participants in all stages of the research, including the design of the research project (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Thus, I developed questions to serve merely as a guide for discussion. They provided an overarching framework from which we began our exploration.

As Pollack (2003) discovered, focus groups are a particularly appropriate method for research with groups of people who have experienced oppression and marginalization because they have the potential to shift power from the researcher to participants. Our meetings were more loosely structured and more informal than focus groups. These meetings were intended to engage women in dialogue based on the FPAR and AOR principles and invite discussion aimed at critically examining experiences of inclusion and exclusion. Questions that helped generate discussion on inclusion and exclusion included:

- When do you feel like you most belong? What contributes to this feeling of belonging?
- What aspects of community life do you want to participate in that you are currently not participating in?

When knowledge and skills of doing research are passed on to all participants there is a sharing of power that promotes an inclusionary process (Dominelli, 2005). Conversely, as Dominelli explains, when knowledge and skills are not passed on, research can remain the privileged domain of the researcher. However, since this was my first time engaging in participatory research, I did not feel as though I had any more insight than other members of the research group about what knowledge and skills would be required as the study unfolded. I

designed some initial questions and exercises to stimulate discussion but I relied on the collective knowledge generated by these discussions to determine next steps for the project. For example, discussion from our second meeting generated interest in identifying the top things women would like to change so this became the focus of conversation during our third meeting.

Grant, Nelson, and Mitchell (2008) argued for researchers to approach relationships with PAR participants with transparency and clarity about their position and about the expectations they have of participants. I attempted to be transparent about the aims I had for the project and attempted to negotiate expectations and level of involvement with members of the group. However, as I discuss in greater detail in the following chapters, regular research meetings seemed to place a heavy burden on women. Research meetings gave way to a second phase of the project which consisted of photovoice. At this time, some of the original participants left the project and five additional women became involved.

### **Photovoice.**

A central aspect of this project was for collaborative participation to generate new knowledge for everyone involved. I felt it was important to engage in data collection strategies aimed at enhancing skills and expanding capacities. In the first phase of the project, when we discussed ways to collect and represent the data, consideration was given to the group's strengths and interests and what methods would be complementary.

Reid and Frisby (2008) explored alternative forms of representing data and explained that FPAR projects commonly use techniques such as dairies and journals, interactive interviews, participatory workshops, poetry, photography, and other artistic expressions. While I intended to explore various techniques with members of the research group, I also

realized they were interested in moving quickly into data collection. Therefore, I bought disposable cameras and suggested we try photovoice. I asked women to take pictures that represented a feeling of belonging in community. Women were initially excited about this particular method and identified the potential for photovoice to be a vehicle for changing public perceptions about women who spent time in prison.

When women who participated in phase one left the project I decided that it was important to honour the decisions that had been made regarding the use of photovoice. Therefore, when I recruited additional women to participate in the project I did so by inviting them to engage in photovoice and asked them to take pictures of people, places, and things in the community that make them feel either like they belonged or did not belong.

The use of photovoice, in which participants document their daily lives through photography, has been shown to be an effective way to initiate sharing and knowledge exchange (Lykes, 2001; Yoshima & Summerson Carr, 2002). Rooted in health education principles, critical education, and feminist theory, photovoice is an increasingly popular method used for community based participatory research (MacDonald, Sarche, & Wang, 2005). Photographs represent the photographer's perspective or point of view and then become a stimulus for her to tell the story behind the picture (Lykes, 2001). Sharing and talking about photographs provides an opportunity to use the power of the visual image to communicate life experiences, expertise and knowledge (Wang, Kun Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998).

Photovoice has three goals (MacDonald, Sarche, & Wang, 2005) I considered to be complimentary to this research project. First, it enabled participants to record and reflect on their personal and community strengths and concerns. During our initial group discussions around photovoice women identified personal strengths by highlighting their affiliations and

achievements in community. They also identified community strengths and concerns when they discussed the support they received from social networks. Community concerns became evident when they spoke of the challenges associated with getting a job or feelings of stigma. As described in greater detail in Chapter Seven, photographs taken by women who had not been part of the first phase of the project depicted similar personal and community strengths and concerns as those identified by women who participated in initial discussions.

The second goal of photovoice was to promote critical dialogue and knowledge about personal and community issues through group discussion of photographs. While this was a goal I had for the project, women seemed to be resistant to continuing to meet as a group and it did not come to fruition. However, I found critical dialogue and knowledge about personal community issues was stimulated through individual discussions with women who participated in photovoice. Much of this critical dialogue and sharing of knowledge led to the formation of the themes described in Chapter Seven.

The third goal of photovoice was to reach and touch policy makers. This was an explicit goal identified by women who participated in the first phase of the study. They discussed wanting to influence policies around the provision of safe and affordable housing and felt one way to achieve this would be by getting the attention of the general public. Photovoice was considered to be an effective way of appealing to public sentiment. Since women who were part of this discussion discontinued their involvement with the study, this potential for photovoice to gain the public's attention has yet to be realized.

Photovoice provides researchers with an opportunity to see the world from the view of participants and it provides participants with the opportunity to describe what their photos mean and reflect on their meaning (Wang & Burris, 1997). Photographs taken by women in

this study powerfully demonstrated some of their experiences with inclusion and exclusion upon community entry.

As a method, photovoice can help build a rapport between researchers and participants because it encourages communication (Loeffler, 2004). A very helpful aspect of photovoice was the way it enabled some women to relax and enjoy their participation in the project. Their enjoyment in the project made it easier to develop connections. Providing minimal direction to guide the picture taking enabled women to have considerable freedom over pictures they took. Pictures set the tone for dialogue that followed which undoubtedly enhanced women's comfort level.

Ethical tensions existed around the use of photovoice in this project. I initially responded to these tensions by re-visiting the consent process and obtaining separate verbal consent after having conversations with each woman about the use of her photographs for the study. Each woman who took photographs consented to their use in publication but we did not specifically discuss which photographs would be used. I made decisions about which photographs would appear in my dissertation during the analysis stage.

I did not want to undermine women's self-determination so I believed their decisions around the use of their photographs should outweigh concerns I had about anonymity and confidentiality; emphasizing the women's right to choose. However when members of my dissertation committee questioned me about the nature of women's informed consent I started doubting whether I and other members of the research group fully understood potential implications of research dissemination. The fact that acceptance of my dissertation and any subsequent published journal articles will be made available on the internet minimizes control we have over how photographs are used and circulated.

Ponic and Jategaonkar (2011) developed an ethics and safety protocol to guide the use of photovoice and help navigate tensions inherent in working with women in vulnerable situations. When describing this protocol they stressed the importance of re-visiting the consent process on an on-going basis to ensure participants' consent remains relevant to their current life circumstances. This point made me reflect on conversations I had with women at GVI who spoke about the need to conceal they had a record when asked about it on job applications. I gave serious thought to the implications for a woman's photograph appearing on the internet at the time she is applying for a coveted job. The risk and detrimental consequences of this happening has the potential to far outweigh the benefit of having the photograph appear in research publications.

For these reasons, I decided it was best not to use any photographs that could potentially compromise confidentiality of the women's identities. As such the only photographs that appear in this dissertation are ones depicting community spaces and in which no people are visible. While photographs involving people were integral to women's experiences of community, it was the meaning they ascribed to these photographs that was the most vital to the study. Therefore I provide detailed written descriptions of the photographs taken by women in place of the actual photograph.

Insight gleaned from the photovoice exercise provided impetus to re-connect with some women from the first phase of the project and to welcome their continued involvement in the project. The next phase of the project engaged women in follow up conversations elaborating on methods used. Moving from group to individual discussions was responsive to participants' needs and conducive for continuing to nurture research relationships.

### **Follow up conversations.**

Recognizing that participatory action research emerges over time means researchers must respond to the diverse and unique ways participants' realities and perspectives permeate the research process. Thus, rather than adhering to a rigid research design, collaborative researchers should be open to having their plans and strategies challenged, revisited, and altered based on the decisions and actions of participants (Tom, 1996). I entered this research project with a loosely structured plan to provide space for women to help shape the project's direction. However, I had a vision of how I thought participatory research should look, and I considered a collaborative group process to be an essential component of this vision. It mattered little to me how the process unfolded as long as it was collaborative and there was shared responsibility for making decisions and doing work. After holding group meetings with four women involved in the phase one, my vision for the project changed. Members of the research group had life plans that did not necessarily coincide with the research and their decisions and actions ultimately collapsed the group process.

Yoshihama and Summerson Carr (2002) spoke of the need to consistently negotiate, balance, and adapt PAR methods to suit women with whom they worked. Similarly, Ladkin (2004) suggested participatory researchers should create a plan while remaining open to processes that might emerge. Although the group process did not fit with some women's plans at the time the project began, I sensed they were interested in participating because they identified with the study's purpose. Therefore a process of negotiation was required to determine how women could be involved in ways of their choosing. For two women follow up emails, telephone calls, and informal face to face conversations seemed more conducive to their preferred method of participation. These follow up conversations enabled women to

maintain a foothold in the project and share their insights without the pressure of long-term commitment or striving to meet others' expectations.

Committing to an emergent and open-ended plan can foster inclusion because it provides a framework in which the researcher can respond to the needs and demands of participants and adapt to the situations at hand (Tom, 1996). Elaborating on methods used for this project opened the door for a woman to participate who would have otherwise been excluded. While recruiting women to participate in photovoice, I connected with a woman who indicated she could not participate due to restrictions imposed on her while living in a halfway house. To offset these restrictions, we discussed issues relating to inclusion and exclusion by telephone and over email.

Ultimately, participatory methods that adhere to emergent designs give research participants more power and control over the research process (Fonow & Cook, 2005). I discuss power issues inherent throughout the process in greater detail in chapters that follow. In this phase of the project, however, it became clear to me that being responsive to the needs and situations of the group by adhering to emergent designs helped to promote inclusion and relinquish researcher power.

## **Data Analysis**

Anti-oppressive researchers assume that analyzing data, or making meaning, happens throughout the research process rather than in any particular phase of the research (Potts & Brown, 2005). With this in mind, it was important for me to pay attention to the process of interpretation, reflection, and construction of meaning as this research project unfolded. Relationships are central to FPAR conducted from an anti-oppressive perspective (Potts & Brown, 2005; Reid & Frisby, 2008). Thus, I planned to analyze the data collectively with

other members of the research group. I expected all members of the group would engage in at least the first level of analysis of the data collected. This did not happen as planned but since the study was designed so everyone could provide insight and reflection on conversations that happened, women who participated in the study had some input into the analysis process.

Data was explored frequently during the various phases of the project. In this first phase I continuously thought about data as it was gathered, shared my insights with women and facilitated group reflection. Data analysis was used to guide discussions around a plan for action. I asked members of the research group how they wanted to act on the knowledge and information being co-created. While I had no specific agenda when it came to an action plan, I wanted the information from this project to be used to make a positive difference in the lives of women who participated in the study.

Sources of data in this project included information from seven group meetings, individual conversations with four women who participated in photovoice, follow up conversations and emails, and my reflexive journal. I analyzed data using a coding process (Charmaz, 2006). As I read through the data I conducted a line by line analysis “using chunks of text as the unit of analysis and assigning codes that represent thematic units” (Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006, p. 320). While coding I gave consideration to what was being suggested in the data and from whose point of view (Charmaz). Adhering to advice offered by Charmaz, I tried to ensure my codes fit the data. I kept codes simple and precise and compared data with data to find similarities and differences.

As I was the person conducting the analysis, findings reflect my interpretation and prior perspectives. Realizing my perspectives represent one view among many, I made efforts to look at the ways women in this study understood their situations rather than simply judging their attitudes and actions through my own assumptions (Charmaz, 2006). Similar to Mauthner

and Doucet (2003), I attempted to incorporate reflexive observations into my analysis of data. Developing a list of reflexive questions prior to the start of the project prompted me to think about ways in which my emotional responses to women shaped my interpretations of their accounts and I took this insight into consideration during analysis.

Mauthner and Doucet (2003) spoke of the benefit of hindsight and explained how it can deepen our understanding about how our multiple social locations influence our knowledge production. Since initially data analysis occurred at the same time as data collection, it was not always easy to be reflexive in the moment and to be fully aware of ways I shaped the research. However, data analysis continued well past the data collection stage. Lapses between each phase of the research, while not always intentional, provided the time and distance needed to deepen my reflexivity and to use this awareness in my analysis.

### **Challenges Inherent in Participatory Methods**

One of the biggest challenges in this research project was getting to a point where collective action could be taken. While I am disappointed that collective action has yet to result from our individual and group discussions, I also recognize how this type of action can be overwhelming for women plagued by feelings of powerlessness emanating from their marginalized positions.

In their discussion about the complex nature of action, Reid, Tom, & Frisby (2006) highlighted several reasons why PAR may not be readily embraced by researchers. They explained that participation in action research endeavours carries a degree of risk for participants and researchers may not want to assume responsibility for such risk. They also explained that institutions exercising control over people's lives often do not support collective action. Thus, researchers may be unwilling to adopt an action research approach if

they believe participants, faced with feelings of powerlessness, would be hesitant to push for change. I am eager to see findings from this study used for social change but I am reluctant to take action without some level of involvement from women who were part of the study.

Reid, Tom, and Frisby (2006) acknowledged that both individual and collective action can lead to change and a multitude of incremental actions may eventually contribute to a larger social change agenda. As I discuss in the following chapters, women who participated in this project were already taking personal steps to contribute to the kind of community in which they wanted to live. The pursuit of collective action was not meant to discount women's individual change efforts, it was intended to foster discussion and lead to a re-imagining of what it means to be included.

Participatory action research strives to liberate oppressed people from unjust social structures that inhibit the full development of their self-determination and self-development (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). Brydon-Miller (2004), argued, however, that power dynamics must always be addressed within an emancipatory project. She pointed out that power relations are inherent in participatory research projects and maintain a foothold in the privileged location of academic researcher. Differences in power and privilege were apparent in the research process. For some women, power was manifest in ways they expressed their individuality and resisted acquiescing to someone else's research project requirements.

Certainly there are limits to what I can know about the realities of being incarcerated and entering community while being faced with stigma and powerlessness. Yet, in my roles of research assistant and volunteer, I had the unique privilege of being involved in research and programming with women at GVI for approximately six years. These endeavours gave me particular insight into women's histories of oppression, their experiences of incarceration, and their future plans and aspirations. When conducting a study guided by an AOR theoretical

perspective and using a FPAR framework, it is not important that I *know* about women's realities of being incarcerated and experiencing stigma and powerlessness. It was important that I share my level of understanding and engage in dialogue so we can generate new knowledge together.

There are ethical issues embedded in any collaborative project involving community participation (Minkler & Pies, 2005). One such issue involves ensuring commitment to real rather than symbolic participation by those involved. Minkler and Pies argued that without a strong commitment to real participation, we risk jeopardizing the trust of participants and undermining the efforts of the project. The issue of participation was addressed at the beginning of this project when women were invited to determine their level of participation.

While there are many challenges involved in doing participatory research that is truly inclusionary (Dominelli, 2005; Varcoe, 2006), Ladkin (2004) reminded us that the success of participatory research is measured by one's willingness to grapple with, and work through, the complexity of PAR while remaining optimistic it will contribute to the betterment of humanity.

### **Relationships of Power and Reflexivity**

Reflexivity can be a means of recognizing power relations and the exercise of power in the research process (Reid & Frisby, 2008). Dupuis (1999) summarized what it means to do reflexive research. She explained the researcher's "full self", consisting of both the "researcher self" and the "human self", must be included in the research process. Dupuis identified three implications of adopting a reflexive methodology. First, a reflective portrayal of self can address how the researcher's personal experiences of the past and present shape the construction of knowledge. Second, reflexivity encourages consideration of how emotions

influence the research. Third, a reflexive methodology recognizes collaboration between researchers and participants in the co-creation of knowledge. Journaling about the research process was an effective way to engage in self-reflexivity. Journaling was also used to invite discussion with women about aspects of power that permeated the research process. Reflexive questions that guided my journal writing and discussions with my advisor helped me recognize and respond to hierarchical power situations as they arose.

Mullaly (2002) argued that since we all internalize to varying degrees parts of the dominant ideology, it is important to develop reflexive knowledge of this ideology to see how it constrains us and limits our freedom. Reflexive knowledge, acquired through critical self-reflection, is knowledge about *ourselves*. It is knowledge about our location in the social order and how we may exercise power in our lives to either reproduce or resist social features that limit others' agency. For Mullaly (2002), "critical self-reflection is a form of 'internal criticism', a never-ending questioning of our social, economic, political, and cultural beliefs, assumptions, and actions." (p. 207). In keeping with feminist expectations to constantly interrogate how researchers' multiple identities inevitably shape the research process (Reinharz, 1997), I regularly reflected on the impact my gender, race, age, and lifestyle had on the project.

### **My Personal Journey of Self-Reflection**

I began to engage in critical self-reflection as I was thinking about and writing the proposal for this research. I noticed I went back and forth between sympathizing with women who had been incarcerated about their histories of oppression and grappling with how this research could use and further develop their many talents, capabilities, and sense of determination. This struggle involved me moving away from justifying the need to support

women due to their histories of oppression and moving toward approaching my relationships with women from a strengths-based perspective. An early indication of this on-going struggle occurred in a meeting with my committee while writing my proposal. During this meeting a member of my committee asked me how I respond when people confront me about my particular research interests. Specifically, she wanted to hear the counter argument I would present to individuals who declare that these women are simply offenders who screwed up and deserve to be in prison. To my sheer embarrassment, I did not have a response.

Although it had been a while since I had a conversation that required me to justify my research interests, I remember arguing with conviction about underprivileged circumstances experienced by women who spend time in prison and forces of oppression affecting their lives. More recently, however, I moved in the direction of trying to cast women who had been incarcerated in a different light by describing many ways they continue to amaze me with their fortitude and personal gifts. Not being able to articulate a response to this original question was indicative of where I was in this journey and suggested I was caught somewhere in the middle of accepting the dominant discourse focused on oppressive life circumstances experienced by women who have been incarcerated and grappling with how to challenge this way of thinking and put the spotlight on women's strengths and capabilities.

As I embarked on this research project, an emphasis on women's capacity was both a starting point and rationale for adopting a participatory approach. I felt confident that as the research project progressed my thinking would become clearer and my ability to express what these women are truly capable of would become more developed. The new knowledge and new forms of producing it that emanated from this project were central to acknowledging issues of oppression and providing opportunities for research participants' self-development and self-determination (Maguire, 2001a).

Opportunities to promote continued reflexivity throughout the research process were fostered through the use of journaling and regular dialogue with women in the study as well as with my advisor. Journaling not only provided me with an emotional outlet, it was a way to describe and reflect on the various stages of the research process and engage in consciousness-raising. In the process of journaling I continuously asked myself to identify situations that may have inadvertently resulted in women's exclusion or reinforced my power as researcher and situations in which certain choices might have resulted in a more inclusive process.

While destabilizing power relations in research projects can be challenging, a reflexive practice helps researchers make sense of, and negotiate, uncertainty and complexity (Maguire, 2001a). The participatory nature of this project enabled group members to deliberate on issues and discuss themes and topics as they came up, further providing an outlet for reflection. Engaging in participatory research with deliberate thought and reflexivity increased my accountability to the other members and increased the transparency of the research process (Ristock & Pennell, 1996).

## **Chapter Four: Unfolding of a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) Process**

I had high hopes for this research and I entered the project with idealized notions about ways inclusion, participation, and social change would be enacted. Since inclusion and participation are central tenets of FPAR (Frisby, Reid, Millar & Hoerber, 2005), this approach to research seemed to offer promise that as a researcher, I could facilitate the exchange of collective group knowledge based on these principles and move the group toward social change. I realize now this was not only a lofty ideal, it was *my* ideal. Women who participated in this study had other plans, other priorities, and other interruptions that were in some ways contradictory to a process guided by notions of inclusion and participation. In this chapter I tell the story of how the research process unfolded. I introduce women who participated in the study and describe how a range of methods including research meetings, photovoice, and individual conversations, were used to respond to women's varying needs and enable a range of voices to be heard. The chapters that follow provide critical insight into the complexities associated with issues of difference, power, and identity interceding on a FPAR process. While my reflections on the process are interwoven throughout this chapter as well as Chapter Five, I reflect in more detail in Chapter Six about some of the ways my own plans, priorities, and interruptions were also at times contradictory to the FPAR process.

### **Women in the Study and the Research Process**

As I mentioned in Chapter One, I endeavoured to assemble a research group consisting of women who spent time in GVI and were living in Waterloo region. Prior to the start of this research project I had been in touch with six women who expressed an interest in participating in the study. I had been a Circle volunteer for a woman for approximately a year and a half. She and I had many conversations about this research project during which she expressed both

interest to be involved and skepticism about being able to find any other interested participants. Despite her skepticism, she helped me connect with two women who both agreed to participate. Two additional women contacted me about participating in the study after receiving an information letter from their parole officers. Another woman whom I had known from GVI and had been in touch with through email also indicated a willingness to participate. In the fall of 2009, six women expressed an interest in participating in the study and I invited them to get together and discuss the research project and the direction it should take. By the time this first meeting was scheduled, only four women were still willing and available to participate in the project: Misha, Lucy, Sloan, and Bella<sup>1</sup>. Seven meetings were held in the fall of 2009 and each woman attended at least two of the meetings.

Although the research project was still in its formative stage, when the group held its seventh meeting in November of 2009 only one woman, Misha, was still interested and able to participate in the project. She did not however want to be a lone participant. At this time the research group disbanded. Before disbanding, the group started to engage in photovoice and I was eager to see this aspect of the research taken further. I made efforts to recruit other women to participate in photovoice resulting in the participation of five additional women in the research project: Missie, Tina, Liz, Karen, and Christie. All but one woman participated in photovoice. At the time of the study, only one woman was living in Waterloo region and the others were living in halfway houses just outside of the region (three women resided in a halfway house in Dundas, Ontario and one woman resided in a halfway house in Brampton, Ontario).

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms were used to protect women's identity in this study. However some women chose to use their real names in the reporting of the study.

Five women engaged in photovoice during the winter of 2010. During this phase of the study I made efforts to contact the four women who participated in Phase One and was able to re-connect with Bella and Misha. I arranged to have follow up conversations about their participation in Phase One of the project and welcome their continued involvement in any and all aspects of the research. By the time the study was completed, nine women participated in at least one phase of this project but no one was involved with the project from beginning to end.

Women who participated in this study ranged in age from early twenties to early fifties. The range of time since being released from GVI was between two months and two and a half years. Seven women were white and two women were black. Seven women indicated they had drug and alcohol addictions and their incarceration was directly related to their addictions. Women differed with respect to sexual orientation and at the time of the study one woman was married, one woman was engaged, and all other women were either single or in casual relationships. Four women were mothers but only one had dependent children at the time of the study. There were variations in employment status, with one woman working a part-time job while going to school, one woman temporarily laid off from a seasonal job, one woman who had just finished employment through a summer grant, one woman starting a part-time at-home business, and other women choosing to work on their addiction recovery before searching for employment. There were also variations in education levels. One woman was a full-time university student, one woman was taking university courses through correspondence and had been accepted into full-time studies in the fall, and one woman was taking courses in preparation for university. Several other women spoke about taking their General Educational Development (GED) test while in GVI.

Women who participated in this study were similar to other women leaving federal prison when it came to addiction issues. As I stated above, seven out of nine women indicated

they had drug and alcohol addictions. This compares with other studies that acknowledged a high proportion of women in federal prisons are there because of drug related offenses (Pedlar et al., 2008; Taylor and Flight, 2004). Women in this study varied from the profile of women who have been federally incarcerated in terms of education and employment levels since most had higher levels of education and lower employment-related needs than what is often reported (cf. Pedlar et al., 2008; Pollack, 2008).

Outlined below is a general description of each phase of research process. Phase One consisted of seven meetings that occurred between September 2009 and November of 2009 and involved four women who came together to engage in a FPAR process. Phase Two involved individual conversations with four women who engaged in photovoice and one woman who shared her insight about inclusion through telephone and email correspondence. Phase Three entailed follow up conversations with two women who participated in meetings held during Phase One.

### **Phase One: Participating in Group Meetings**

In the following passages the seven meetings that unfolded in Phase One are described in more detail. During these meetings the group struggled to establish membership and connection which created difficulty finding a focus for the research. Ideas for our collective action provided hope for change but eventually life challenges and feelings of hopeless permeated the process.

#### **Meeting one: Coming together in “community”.**

The first research meeting was held early in September of 2009 in a meeting space at CJI. I had expected five women to attend but only two women, Misha and Lucy, showed up. I had assumed that by agreeing to participate, each woman had embraced the idea of coming

together around shared concerns and working toward a plan for action. Thus, I was a bit concerned by the dismal turn out and by what I perceived to be a lack of interest in the project. However, I quickly got the sense that Misha and Lucy both saw value in the project and I became energized by this realization. In my reflexive notes I describe the tensions regarding my feelings about the meeting:

*There were two women in attendance at tonight's meeting and at first I wasn't even sure that it was worth having a meeting. Going into the meeting I felt like the only person who would end up being committed to this project was me and that hardly seemed like participatory research. However, I realize now that commitment as well as relationship building among the group is something that will likely occur gradually. The two women who came out tonight did not know me very well and did not know each other at all, yet they were willing to take the time to share their experiences in a very open and honest way. I really got the sense that this research topic is important to them and they want to see this thing through. That is huge! (Reflexive notes, meeting #1)*

I determined it was important at this first meeting to facilitate sharing and relationship building and to begin to acknowledge difference in terms of each woman's experience. Thus, I tried to create a welcoming environment by offering refreshments and keeping things informal. I asked Misha and Lucy to introduce themselves, talk briefly about their transition from GVI, and discuss how they were experiencing being back in community.

Lucy explained she had only been released from GVI two months prior to the meeting and was new to this community. Before prison Lucy lived on the streets of Toronto. She explained since being back in the community, "*(things) had just kind of fallen in my lap.*" Lucy seemed to feel this way because she was able to secure transitional housing and get a job.

Misha had been back in the community for two and half years. Since being released from GVI she lived in a house with her husband. Misha felt her relative financial security set her apart from other women who spent time in prison.

After introductions, I invited discussion around assumptions about research and endeavoured to have women shape the research project by establishing shared responsibilities. To explore how research is generally perceived, I asked Misha and Lucy to share what comes to their minds when they think about research. I then introduced my main purpose for the research project and asked for their feedback. Misha and Lucy both indicated the purpose of the project was important and expressed a desire to share their experiences. Lucy expressed this desire when she said, *“I think it’s great that people even care about women and how they are re-integrated back into the community. So, yeah, I’m definitely interested.”* To facilitate women’s role in shaping the research project and to establish shared responsibilities I asked Misha and Lucy to generate a list of principles to guide us in the project. The essence of this list was captured in my reflexive notes:

*They acknowledged the importance of respecting difference when they talked about everybody’s experiences being unique and important. They also seemed to want to create a safe and comfortable environment by saying things like people should have the right to their own opinions, there should be no hostility and judgment, and it is okay to cry (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

I hoped during the research to encourage sharing and relationship building, to uncover personal meanings of community, acknowledge differences in perceptions, celebrate women’s strengths, and build a sense of community within the group. To this end, I asked Misha and Lucy to create a picture of their ideal community using words and pictures. I also asked them what they think they contribute to the ideal community and what the gap looks like between their ideal community and the actual community in which they live. I wrote about my perception of this exercise in my reflexive notes:

*The exercise to identify aspects of the ideal community seemed to go well and is certainly worth building upon in subsequent meetings when the group size is larger. It helped to uncover individual meanings of community and provided insight into the areas where women feel their community needs to be improved or re-shaped. Women could also easily see a role for themselves in re-shaping their communities. One of the*

*intended purposes of this exercise was to celebrate strengths and begin to build community within the group and I could see this actually start to happen. As Lucy struggled with how she could contribute to her ideal community, Misha pointed out that the work Lucy will be doing will be helping the community. This comment showed recognition of and appreciation for each other's strengths (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

In an effort to decide on next steps and develop strategies for sharing leadership among the group, I asked Misha and Lucy what they thought should happen next and if, when, and how often they thought we should meet. While they were initially a bit reticent about sharing responsibility for these details, they eventually decided we should hold weekly meetings. Misha offered: *"I could meet weekly"* and Lucy responded with: *"Yeah, weekly is good."* We then scheduled our second meeting for the following week.

### **Meeting two: Negotiating understandings of belonging and difference.**

The second meeting was held the following week in a meeting space at CJI. Two additional women, Sloan and Bella, attended this meeting. My intention was to build on some of the issues we explored in the first meeting and include Sloan's and Bella's ideas and perspectives. I started the meeting by re-introducing the purpose of the study. Mentioning the study's purpose provoked questions about what kind of difference the study is going to make. Sloan posed questions such as *"Well where is this going to go?"* and *"Will it really make any kind of difference?"* These questions eventually led to a discussion around differences in class. Misha suggested challenges facing women when they come out of prison are not influenced by one's class: *"I came from having money yet I'm faced with the same reality that you (other women in the group) are because of the restrictions put on me."* This comment took the conversation in a direction that was personal in nature and infused with undertones of resentment which prompted me to re-visit the list of principles generated from the previous meeting. I explained, *"This is an important conversation but before we get too far here we*

*should probably re-visit the principles we talked about last week.”* After a review of the previously generated principles the group decided to add principles pertaining to demonstrating commitment to the group and valuing different opinions. Punctuality and showing up for meetings were considered to be indicators of group commitment. Sloan summarized the need to value different opinions by saying, *“We’re all going to have a difference of opinion and that’s how you get your research.”*

I asked Sloan and Bella to introduce themselves and talk about their experiences transitioning from prison to community. Bella had been back in the community for a little over a year at the time of this meeting and was attending university. She felt fortunate when she was released from prison because she had a lot of family support. However, she expressed frustration around how long it took to find a job and an apartment. She eventually found a job by not disclosing she had a criminal record: *“I got a job now. They don’t know. I didn’t tell them.”*

Sloan had also been back in the community for over a year. She described her experience as *“amazingly uneventful”* and explained by reaching out to people who would help her; she made a smooth transition from prison to community. Stating, *“I don’t think I have ever been judged, that I know of, around employment”*, Sloan explained things were going well for her in terms of being back in community.

I followed introductions with a return to the discussion around the ideal community. As I discussed in my reflexive notes, all members of the group seemed to struggle with identifying how they could contribute to the creation of an ideal community:

*It was a bit of a challenge to get everyone to think about what they could contribute to their ideal community beyond dream scenarios that involved winning the lottery to create affordable and non-judgmental housing options. I am thinking that perhaps instead of asking women to identify their own strengths by asking how they can contribute to the ideal community, it would be more in keeping with FPAR to ask them to*

*help identify the strengths of others in the room. An exercise for encouraging this to happen might involve women interviewing each other about their interests and previous or current work experiences and community involvement (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

Women's struggles may have been indicative of the discrepancy between merely envisioning an ideal community and actually taking steps toward its creation. I wondered if for women who never lived in an ideal world, its existence may seem as far-fetched as winning the lottery. Moreover, for women who have often felt powerless in the face of marginalization, suddenly having the power to make a contribution may seem overwhelming and implausible.

I hoped during the second meeting that we would uncover ideas about what it means to be included and excluded so I asked women to describe when they felt like they most belonged. Responses to this question included: "*I belong when I'm by myself*" (Lucy) and "*I feel like I most belong when I'm in my own home by myself*" (Sloan). As I described in my reflexive notes below, at the heart of this conversation was the idea that women did not feel they belonged when they were with others, and instead got a feeling of belonging when they were alone or set apart from mainstream society:

*The discussion of belonging did not go in the direction I had expected since women expressed that they feel they belong most when they are alone or in their own homes. I think I was expecting to hear about the aspects of community where they felt included and the aspects of community in which they felt left out. Bella raised the issue of feeling like she belongs when she is not part of mainstream society and explained that at different times in her life when she was on the margins, she felt like she most belonged (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

Insights gained from women about their feelings of belonging may have been early warning signs that they would not easily derive a sense of belonging from participating in this project together, as part of a group. I got the sense, as each woman shared their view of belonging, that they valued spaces where they could belong without the need to negotiate their difference.

We ended the second meeting by discussing next steps for the project. Members of the research group seemed concerned that only four women were involved and indicated they

would try to identify other women to participate. As I discuss in my reflexive notes, it was difficult to get input into how the project should unfold:

*As the meeting wrapped up and we discussed next steps I got the sense that a couple of women wanted to identify a clear focus sooner than later while others felt there was a need to spend time having more discussion before we get to the point of focusing on one main issue. I could not seem to get much feedback on what direction the next meeting should take. The sharing of ownership for the project is proving a bit more difficult than I initially thought. I wonder if the next meeting is too soon to start brainstorming about the possible directions that this project could go (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

After some initial reluctance to suggest what should happen at our next meeting, Bella suggested everyone identify their top choices for things that needed to be changed for women who are entering community. The group agreed and decided this exercise could guide the focus of our next meeting.

In the days that followed between this meeting and the next Sloan was arrested and sent to the women's provincial correctional facility. Since I doubted her interest in the project, I assumed her arrest would have effectively halted further participation. Misha was on holidays with her family. Thus, only Lucy, Bella, and I attended the third meeting.

### **Meeting three: Establishing membership and discussing change.**

The third meeting was held one week later in a meeting space at CJI. After we re-visited the list of principles generated from the last two meetings, Lucy, Bella, and I discussed how we could welcome new women to the group and how we could bring members of the group up to speed if they missed a meeting. Lucy suggested we quickly recap each meeting so anyone not in attendance could catch up. I offered to post some of the main ideas from each meeting on flipchart paper and post them for review.

As we re-visited the notion of the ideal community conversation focused on women's individual life experiences and provided an opportunity for each woman to highlight positive

changes in her life. Both Bella and Lucy agreed women coming out of prison could change their circumstances if they changed themselves. Lucy reflected on their experiences and noted both she and Bella were able to turn their lives around and put an end to their crime cycle. Lucy emphasized the importance of personal responsibility for change when she stated, “(We’ve changed) because we *want* to change.” The essence of the conversation around personal responsibility is captured in my reflexive notes:

*The conversation around their individual life circumstances was interesting for me because they seemed to be emphasizing the importance of taking personal responsibility for making change. Initially Bella spoke about changes that are needed in the environment, an idea which had me excited about pursuing further. However, the acknowledgment that both women, especially Lucy, had overcome such adversity to make positive changes in their lives changed the direction of the conversation toward one of personal responsibility. It seemed they shared the opinion that if they could turn their lives around, others should be able to do it too. There was discussion around the need for resources to help make this happen, most notably accommodation and support (Reflexive notes, meeting #3).*

In keeping with Bella’s suggestion to consider top things that needed to change, I asked Bella and Lucy to identify three things they felt needed to be changed when entering community. They both agreed that access to safe and affordable housing was their top issue to be addressed. I tried to encourage Bella and Lucy to think beyond fundamental needs I considered to be the bare minimum when a woman enters community. However, Bella pointed out a very obvious and important point by explaining, “*But some people don’t have the bare minimum.*” My reflexive notes capture my initial naivety around women’s priorities:

*When we spoke about the things they feel need to be changed in terms of returning to the community, access to safe and affordable housing was the top priority for both Lucy and Bella. While I am also aware of the importance of housing, I found myself feeling disappointed that this was the burning issue they identified. I think I was hoping for something a bit more contentious and politically charged. I had also hoped we would return to the idea of what makes people want to be part of the community and perhaps talk about what changes need to happen around that in terms of feeling included. Access to housing, while extremely important, just seems like such a basic need. However, this basic need, they were quick to remind me, is not being sufficiently addressed (Reflexive notes, meeting #3).*

When I asked what we, as a group, could do to address the housing issue Lucy and Bella suggested for me to find some information on what housing is available locally and compare this information to cities similar in size.. I asked if we could each do a piece of this investigative work and as I wrote in my reflexive notes, I was both delighted and relieved they were receptive to this idea:

*The highlight of tonight's meeting for me was that there was recognition of shared responsibility. Initially it was suggested that I do the research around what housing is available locally. However, both Lucy and Bella were open to taking on a bit of the leg work associated with determining the gap between what is available and what is needed. We each walked away with some 'homework' to do and this started to make our group feel to me like it was more of a partnership (Reflexive notes, meeting #3).*

Since I thought Bella, Lucy, and I would each have some information to bring to the next meeting I planned for the fourth meeting to revolve around discussing what we should do with this information.

#### **Meeting four: Acknowledging difference and resisting responsibility.**

Although I was expecting all three women to be present for the fourth meeting, only Bella and Misha showed up. Bella informed me she had not collected the information that she had agreed to collect. With Lucy not in attendance, the only housing information we had to discuss was the information from a report I brought along highlighting the housing needs of women leaving GVI. I reflected on my frustration around what I perceived to be lack of accountability and follow through:

*At our last meeting Bella, Lucy, and I decided to go away and collect some information about housing to bring it back to the group. Bella informed me at the beginning of the meeting in an unapologetic way that she had not done this. She told me that she has too much else going on and I shouldn't expect her to do any type of 'homework'. These comments seemed to effectively kill any momentum that had started to build during earlier meetings. I thought the last meeting had gone very well and I sensed that we*

*were about to address priorities that were not only identified by Bella and Lucy, but also priorities that they were both passionate about.*

*I am finding it very difficult to work with women who do not follow through on what they say they are going to do, whether it is collecting information or showing up to meetings. This leaves me wondering if I am asking too much of them. Am I expecting too much in terms of reliability? This is something that I value in this process but do they? Maybe structured meetings do not work for women who may be resistant to certain forms of structure. At this point, however, I'm not sure how else to involve them in the project. (Reflexive notes, meeting #4).*

With assistance from Bella, I re-capped what had been discussed at the last meeting to bring Misha up to speed. We then discussed actions that would be both feasible and practical to address the housing issue. Bella and Misha conveyed the importance of educating women who are incarcerated to access safe and affordable housing when they get released. They also suggested that if women who get released from prison are sufficiently motivated, they will be able to find housing upon release. They seemed to view housing as a woman's individual responsibility rather than a systemic issue.

Bella acknowledged the class disparity between herself and Misha when she said to Misha, *"You and me aren't in the same situation."* It is important to note that while differences in class meant that their type and style of accommodations varied greatly, neither Bella nor Misha had endured difficulty obtaining housing on their release from prison. Their perspective regarding where the responsibility lies for securing housing was undoubtedly influenced by their personal circumstances and experiences.

Bella and Misha resisted my suggestion for us to do research as a group around the housing issue. Bella tried to enlighten me by telling me I was not working with a group of women with high levels of motivation. She also explained that if we wanted to tackle an issue as big as housing we would need a much larger research group. We brainstormed about who else might join the group. Both Bella and Misha mentioned a woman who they thought would

be a nice addition to the group but neither of them knew how to get in touch with her. They were referring to Missie, who participated in the next phase of the research project. Sensing that we were lacking both a sense of direction and enthusiasm for the project, I asked Bella and Misha to think about what the next couple of meetings should look like. This question did not elicit much of a response. I then asked them to think about how they thought housing connected to inclusion and suggested we could pick up on this topic in our next meeting.

#### **Meeting five: Dwindling interest and the call for action.**

The fifth meeting had originally been scheduled for the following week; however, Bella could not meet because of a family engagement, Lucy could not meet because of a work commitment, and Misha could not meet because of travel plans. Difficulty finding a mutually convenient time to re-schedule the fifth meeting caused me some anxiety because I feared the group would lose whatever momentum had been starting to build in the first four meetings. I discussed this matter with my advisor and upon her suggestion I decided to contact each woman by telephone to get their feedback about how things were going with the project. All three women assured me that things were going well and they were still interested in being involved in the project. Lucy suggested meetings could be improved if they had more structure and if we had different topics to discuss each week. Bella also suggested our meetings could involve input from people in various community organizations. Bella then informed me she was not really interested in accomplishing anything and stated, “*I am not save the world idealist that I once was.*” Misha seemed to be more interested in what I was looking to get out of the project than what she was deriving from her participation. She was concerned a low number of participants and infrequent attendance meant I would not get enough data for my dissertation. Each woman assured me they were optimistic about the project. They also

indicated a desire for something to happen beyond group conversation. I received a message from the group that it was time to try out a method of data collection.

Shortly before speaking to each woman by phone, Sloan was released from custody and expressed an interest in re-joining the group. Believing that she was participating in the research simply for my benefit, I assured her there was no obligation to continue to participate. However, when she pressed the matter I got the sense participating in the group was more important than she had initially indicated. I asked Bella, Lucy, and Miisha if they thought her return would be disruptive in any way and they all indicated it would be good for the project to have her back in the group.

I asked each woman if there was anything we could do differently for our next meeting. They offered no suggestions so I proposed mixing things up a bit by having a breakfast meeting at another location. Everyone readily agreed and suggested Tim Horton's as the location. To address concerns around lack of structure in our meetings I bought disposable cameras and asked the group to experiment with photovoice.

### **Meeting six: Exploring housing and community through photovoice.**

Bella, Lucy, Misha, and Sloan were all present for the sixth meeting which was held at Tim Horton's approximately one month after the fourth meeting. We started the meeting by re-capping the main points of discussion during our last four meetings and I reminded the group that we had previously decided to address the lack of safe and affordable housing. Women raised concern over the magnitude of the housing issue and we discussed what was feasible for the group to accomplish in a reasonable amount of time.

In the midst of our discussion, Sloan, Bella, and Lucy went outside for a cigarette break. This break seemed to be a turning point in the meeting and shifted the focus from discussion to action. I described the momentum shift in my reflexive notes:

*At one point Lucy, Bella, and Sloan went outside for a cigarette and came back excited to share their idea. They decided that we need to do something that gets public attention and influences public opinion. I was feeling a bit energized by the fact that some momentum was starting to build and women were taking this in their own direction. It finally started to feel as though this was their project and not my dissertation. I wondered if I should be concerned that the decision to shift the focus toward influencing public perception was made without any input from Misha but I felt more at ease when Misha offered some suggestions about the approach the group should take. She suggested that the message should be family oriented and focus on the fact that some women coming out of prison are mothers, daughters, sisters, etc. Bella added that it should also focus on the connections that have been made and the supports women have available that help them do what they are able to do (not only stay out of prison but also volunteer, etcetera) (Reflexive notes, meeting #5).*

Women identified wanting to influence perceptions of the general public by demonstrating what women are capable of achieving when they have access to housing and support. As my previous reflexive note suggests, the focus grew beyond a need for housing and became more about being in community and the resources and supports needed to belong. I introduced the idea of photovoice, gave women disposable cameras, and asked them to take pictures to capture what it is about housing and support that helps them feel like they belong in community. As discussion ensued, women also identified a need to capture challenges experienced that detract from feeling like they belong in community. I offered to pick up the cameras and have the pictures developed so we would be ready to discuss them at the next meeting. The following excerpt from my reflexive notes captures how I perceived the photovoice idea to be received:

*The suggestion to try out the use of photovoice was well received. Everyone was quick to think of things they could take pictures of and identified both the positive and negative aspects associated with their experiences in the community including volunteering, being with their supports, searching for jobs, and struggling to find money to buy food. I think the group left feeling a renewed sense of energy about this project. It also seemed*

*as though they could identify with the use of photovoice as a research method (Reflexive notes, meeting #5).*

As the sixth meeting wrapped up we were not able to decide on a date and time to get back together to discuss the photos. For one reason or another everyone was busy in the weeks that followed this meeting. Lucy was attending a conference, Bella was attending her sister's wedding, Sloan was visiting with her mother, and Misha had family obligations. We agreed that I would contact everyone by telephone to arrange a time when we could all get together.

I had difficulty getting in touch with each woman in the weeks following the sixth meeting. Sloan continued to have legal trouble and seemed to be overwhelmed by her battle with addiction. I lost touch with her at this point in the study. Lucy left me a telephone message saying that she was too busy with work and could not continue to be part of the project. I tried unsuccessfully to follow up with her and was later told that she was also struggling with her addiction. I eventually got in touch with the two remaining participants, Bella and Misha, and we made arrangements to get together.

#### **Meeting seven: Reflecting on photos. Life challenges and hope(lessness)**

Misha and Bella attended the seventh meeting which was held at Tim Horton's. Bella seemed a bit despondent when the meeting first started but when I asked her about it, she shrugged it off. Tim Horton's seemed busier than usual and Bella informed me that many people hang out at Tim Horton's after AA meetings. Since she attended the Wednesday night AA meetings she knew many of the people at the coffee shop and was easily distracted by the conversation going on around us.

We started the meeting by viewing the pictures that Misha brought. She briefly explained the significance of each picture and why she chose it. When Misha finished speaking about her photos, Bella quickly told the story behind the pictures she had with her.

Neither Misha nor Bella had taken any new pictures for the project but instead selected an assortment of photos that captured key aspects of their lives. Efforts to engage Bella in a deeper level of conversation quickly failed. She did not want to be at the meeting and it was obvious. Her pictures shed some light on the nature of her relationship with her parents and she seemed to be on the verge of tears as she spoke about them.

Bella's and Misha's pictures conveyed messages of hope. They depicted a fresh start and a lifestyle different than what Bella and Misha described prior to their incarceration. However, dialogue at the meeting was not very hopeful. For example, Misha suggested efforts to garner public support for an issue such as housing would be futile because other people in community are much more deserving. As the conversation unfolded I kept wondering how we were going to get the attention of the general public and garner support for housing.

Dialogue during the seventh meeting was much more pessimistic than it had been during any of the preceding meetings. Bella, who had been unusually quiet throughout the meeting, abruptly announced that she did not want to be part of the research anymore. I asked her why and she replied, "*Cause I really don't care.... I'm going through a lot of shit right now and I have my own shit to worry about.*" Before she left I asked her if I could check in with her at some point and she agreed.

Misha and I discussed how to proceed as a group of two. She suggested we put the research on hold until after the holidays. In the meantime, I agreed to try to identify additional women to participate in the study. I attempted to do this by contacting staff at CJI and the Chaplain at GVI (who maintains connections with women after they are released) to see if they could help me get in touch with any other women in the area. Although names of a couple of women were passed along, attempts to connect with additional women were unsuccessful.

I left a voice mail message for Bella and followed up by email to see how she was doing. She responded by email offering the following explanation for abruptly leaving the meeting:

*Hey sorry i just left like that...I am ubber upset and depressed and it just keeps getting worse. My mom has been sick for a while and I just found out this morning that it's a tumor... so needless to say I am fucked but it is nothing I can control and I just need to not drink and be with my family (Bella, email correspondence).*

I sent her another email letting her know I was available if she needed someone to talk to.

Throughout this project I had already begun to notice some of the ways addiction was a barrier to women's participation in this study and Bella's email made this realization even more clear. I was starting to see the ways constant turmoil and interruptions in the women's lives are inherently contradictory to a research project rooted in participation and collective responsibility.

At this point in the study I was able to pause and contemplate ways to honour aspects of the research that members of the group identified as important. Determined to find a way to forge ahead with the use of photovoice, I invited any level of involvement from women who participated in the first phase of the study and was appreciative of any and all contributions from new participants. Thus, the second phase of this study unfolded in a more open and flexible, but less participatory fashion.

### **Phase Two: Engaging Additional Women in Individual Conversations around Photovoice**

Shortly before Christmas, Misha emailed me to say she was in touch with Missie through facebook and Missie was interested in being involved in the research. I followed up by sending Missie a message inviting her to meet and talk about the project. We arranged to meet in early January, 2010 at Tim Horton's. At this meeting we got acquainted, I briefly recapped what had happened with the research project to date and explained I was eager to

continue with photovoice. She agreed to participate and suggested involving women from the halfway house where she stayed prior to entering community.

After multiple emails and telephone calls during which I spoke to three different staff, I finally arranged a date for Missie and I to go to the halfway house and speak to women there. I invited Misha to come to the halfway house with us but, while she indicated she thought it was a good idea, she was not interested in joining us.

Missie and I went to the halfway house in mid-February. This was a day when there was a mandatory house meeting which ensured that all women staying in the house would be home. I arranged to speak with women after their house meeting and brought pizza to entice them to stick around and listen to what we had to say.

All eight women staying in the house met with us about the research and five women expressed an interest in participating in photovoice. I distributed disposable cameras and asked them to take pictures of people, places, and things in the community that make them feel either like they belonged or did not belong. Missie and I offered to return for the next scheduled house meeting, two weeks later, to discuss pictures that had been taken. I asked women if they wanted me to bring pizza to our follow up meeting but they opted instead for a Dairy Queen ice cream cake. One week after the halfway house meeting, Tina, one of the women with whom we spoke, emailed me some of the pictures she had taken and informed me she was the only person in the halfway house who had taken any pictures.

In early March I met with Missie at her place to discuss pictures she had taken for the project. She had recently moved and seemed excited about giving me a tour of her new apartment. She showed me around then we chatted about her photographs over breakfast. We also made travel arrangements to return to the halfway house the following day. During our discussion, Missie spoke to me about Christie, a woman living in a halfway house and

planning to settle in the Waterloo region. Missie thought Christie would be interested in participating in the study. I met Christie through my volunteer endeavours at GVI so I connected with her by email. She explained she was restricted in her movement while living in the halfway house and would not be able to engage in photovoice. However, she expressed an interest in the purpose of the research and offered to talk to me about her experiences and share her insights by email or telephone.

Missie and I showed up as planned to the next halfway house meeting, ice cream cake in hand, ready to discuss the photos that had been taken. Although women we initially spoke with joined us to have a piece of cake, Tina was indeed the only woman who had taken pictures and stayed to talk to us after the formal part of the meeting ended. Two women, Liz and Karen, assured me they still wanted to participate and intended to take some pictures even though they were yet to do so. I arranged to get in touch with them by telephone to set up another time to meet once they had finished taking pictures.

Missie and I spoke with Tina about pictures she had taken. She had taken two roles of film and had over thirty pictures. She explained that many of the pictures were unrelated to the study and were taken simply for pleasure but she provided a brief description of each one anyway. The conversation around Tina's pictures was a bit rushed since she was eager to watch a television program and Missie had to return home by a certain time to pick up her children. I suggested to Tina that we could communicate further by telephone or email if necessary and she provided additional information about pictures she had taken via email.

As previously arranged, I called Christie at the halfway house in early March. We spoke for approximately an hour, during which I told her what had been happening with the project and I asked her some of the questions that had been explored in previous meetings with the

research group. After reflecting on our telephone conversation I sent Christie an email asking for her insight on a couple of additional questions relating to inclusion.

In late March I returned to the halfway house to meet with Liz and Karen. Liz and I had been in touch by telephone and she informed me that she and Karen had taken some pictures together and they were both available to meet and discuss them. I met Liz and Karen at the halfway house and upon their suggestion, we went for lunch at McDonald's to discuss the pictures they had taken. They explained that since they are always together, each photo captured a shared experience. The mood at this meeting was very jovial, both women were laughing and joking, and conversation flowed easily. Similar to my experience with Tina, some of the pictures they had taken were related to the project and other pictures were taken simply for pleasure.

### **Phase Three: Following up Conversations on Phase One and Further Exploring Difference**

Around the time of the halfway house visit I had re-connected with Bella and Misha and arranged to meet with them in order for me to get their feedback about the experience of participating in the meetings held in Phase One. I also wanted to update them about the latest developments with the project (Phase Two) and let them know that their participation in the project, in any form, would always be welcomed. After several phone calls and email exchanges, we eventually set up meeting times for early March.

I met Bella at William's Coffee Pub in early March. We discussed the meetings held during the first part of the research project and why she thought the project did not go as planned. Bella explained she thought the project lacked a focus and housing was too big of an issue for the group to address. I asked her how she felt about the focus that had been identified by the group during the sixth meeting when we discussed trying to capture being in

community and to work toward changing public perception through the use of photovoice. She explained this particular exercise may have been feasible if Sloan and Lucy had not left the group and if she had not been experiencing issues relating to her mother's physical health and her own emotional health. Bella also suggested Misha was so much better off than the rest of the group with respect to family support and financial resources that her perspective on issues such as housing would be limited. At the time of this meeting Bella indicated there were marked improvements in her health as well as her mother's, and she expressed an interest in resuming involvement in the project at the end of her school term in April.

I met Misha at a restaurant about a week after meeting with Bella. We discussed her feelings about how the research project unfolded. Similar to Bella, she expressed her thoughts about why the project did not go as planned, explaining she did not have anything in common with other women in the study and did not share their financial struggles or need for support. She also explained why she thought ideas relating to changing public perception would not work and suggested it would be more fruitful to change women who are entering community after incarceration than it would be to try to change society. Misha was adamant that efforts to change society's perception about women who have been incarcerated would fail. She strongly emphasized the importance of image. Specifically, she argued image is important in our society and the only way for women to successfully enter community is to change their image and not make it obvious to others they have spent time in prison. When I asked her if she thought society was capable of accepting difference she responded by saying, "*It's all about image though. I mean you got one strike against you, do you need two.*" The conversation with Misha left me wondering how women who enter community after incarceration can ever really feel included when there is such a strong perception that they must constantly strive to measure up to societal expectations.

## Summary

In this chapter, I recounted how the research project unfolded and introduced women who participated in various aspects of the project. This description revealed how plans, priorities, and interruptions shaped the research process and resulted in the development of three distinct phases of research – some more participatory than others.

As was evident in Phase One of the project, the lofty ideals I held for this research influenced an approach where research meetings were designed around ambitious goals. When these goals seemed out of reach I grew concerned about women's resistance toward sharing responsibility, their dwindling interest, and the ways difference infiltrated group process. The final two phases of the project involved a more open and flexible, but less inclusive and participatory approach. In these phases, space was created to welcome additional women into the project, enable women to determine the extent of their involvement, and better appreciate how the fluid nature of women's lives can shape their participation.

Data derived from each phase of the research project guided the organization of the next three chapters and were used to examine how notions of an *ideal* formed a common thread throughout this project. In Chapter Five I discuss ways an ideal process is disrupted by complexities and contradictions. Chapter Six includes a discussion of the extensive agenda an ideal process creates for researchers and participants, and how this ideal can trouble issues of power and privilege inherent in research relations. In Chapter Seven I then discuss how notions of an ideal community create ambiguity around the concept of inclusion.

## **Chapter Five: The Promise, Complexities, and Contradictions of a PAR Process**

As this project unfolded I discovered what Reid (2004) meant when she wrote: “the rhetoric of feminist action research (FAR) presents the notions of inclusion, participation, action, and social change in relatively uncritical and idealistic terms” (p.191). As I described in Chapter Four, during the first phase of this project women came together in community and began to negotiate understandings of belonging and difference. As the research group was moving toward identifying strategies for change the process was disrupted. Interest dwindled and women began to feel hopeless in the face of life challenges and change. I learned from this process that there is a need to be both cautious and critical about the ideals of inclusion, participation, action, and social change.

In this chapter, I examine the swings of the research process which capture complexities of trying to engage in feminist participatory action research (FPAR) with women who occupy marginalized social locations and have internalized experiences of oppression and powerlessness. In the following chapter I scrutinize the extensive agenda placed on researchers and participants who engage in FPAR. To capture my experience as a facilitator, Chapter Six introduces my encounters with a character called Enigma, a composite of various women who participated in this project. I recount how my interactions with Enigma helped to expose certain tensions and contradictions associated with an extensive research agenda within the context of FPAR guided by anti-oppressive research (AOR).

As I described in Chapter Four, the group experienced several momentum shifts in Phase One of the project. First, discussions about change subsided as women resisted sharing responsibility for change efforts. Second, a call for action was prompted by dwindling interest among group members. Third, action that involved exploring housing and community through

photovoice was interrupted by life challenges and expressions of hopelessness. Throughout this phase the group continuously grappled with and negotiated issues of difference and identity while tensions around power were less evident but always present. In the sections that follow I describe how the swings of a FPAR process based on principles of inclusion, participation, action, and social change can be influenced by issues of difference, power, identity, and resistance.

### **Grappling with Tensions around Partnerships and Power: Is There Space for Difference?**

As this project began my measure of its success was tied to the extent to which a partnership could be developed. I felt partnerships, with an emphasis on relationships and collaboration, were at the heart of participatory approaches to research. To create a truly participatory process I knew I also had to attend to issues of power by working to minimize hierarchy that creates power imbalances. A conversation with Misha during the first meeting captures the complexity of forming partnerships and some of the assumptions I was making.

*Darla: Well, I don't want to take up too much of your time tonight but I wonder what our next step should be. I'd like to meet again but what should that look like? When and how often do you think we should meet?*

*Misha: Whatever you need.*

*Darla: Well, it's not just about what I need...*  
(Conversation from meeting #1)

This was then captured in my reflexive notes for that meeting:

*I didn't feel like I effectively communicated the idea that this is supposed to be a research partnership because when I asked about dates and times for future meetings the response was, "whatever you need", suggesting that this project is all about me and what I need to get from it rather than our collective interests (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

As I continued to reflect about what it means to be in a research partnership, I began to question the researcher's role in making this happen:

*Who am I to decide that this should be a research partnership and why I am trying to communicate this message? I think it is possible to present the opportunity for a partnership to develop but I am not sure it happens from the moment the group starts to work together. I think roles in a partnership are negotiated and change over time and like any relationship, a partnership takes time to develop and grow (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

Assumptions I was making about partnerships suggest a partnership approach may at times be incongruent with values various group members bring to the project:

*Perhaps I am insinuating women have to do work to earn their inclusion in the group. Can there be a place in this project for a woman who wants to be a part of the group but who just wants to be told when to show up and what to do? I hope so but I am not communicating that very effectively. Equating a partnership with equal and shared responsibility may very well be a normative view of what it means to be in a partnership. I think there is a process of negotiation that partners have to go through before they have a partnership. Does a partnership necessarily mean equal participation? What if some people in the group need more support than others to participate? Women expressed some of their values in the exercise when they came up with guiding principles. From this list of principles I discovered that they value a safe space where they can express themselves freely and without judgment. I should not assume that they also value equal participation (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

Many exchanges with women around their involvement in shaping the research project showed me they viewed this as my research project and they were merely helping with it. As such, there was an expectation I would do work required to find the group deemed to be important. For example, during a discussion about housing Sloan designated me to find statistics she thought the group should have: “*Maybe if **you** could get some stats on women who were able to get affordable housing and then didn't end up going back to old behaviours, didn't end up breaking the law*” (Sloan, meeting #5). Similarly, Bella's repeated use of the word “you” in the following conversation suggested she did not want to share the distribution of work. Sharing responsibility for work was clearly an aspect of this project I valued more than others.

Darla: *Could you think about one thing you would like to keep the same and one thing you would like to change for our next meeting?*

Bella: *What might be a good idea for next week, if we're going to run with this idea a little bit, is perhaps for **you** to come back, if **you** could do the research and find out what housing is similar to Louisa Street (transitional housing). If you want, **you** could do it on a small scale so say compare what's in Kitchener to another city of comparable size.*

Darla: *Okay I wonder if we could all do a piece of this. Maybe Lucy, you could check out what's available in this area? Perhaps you could connect with staff at the Working Centre about that. Then maybe you (Bella) and I could select a couple of areas to compare with?*

(Conversation from meeting #3)

When my suggestion to share the gathering of information was not immediately rejected I believed we were making strides as a group. As I discuss in my reflexive notes, I assumed this division of work had to happen for our group to establish an effective partnership:

*The highlight of tonight's meeting for me was that there was recognition of shared responsibility. Initially it was suggested that I research what housing is available locally. However, both Lucy and Bella were open to taking on a bit of the leg work associated with determining the gap between what housing is available and what is needed. We each walked away with some 'homework' to do and this started to make our group feel more like a partnership (Reflexive notes, meeting #3).*

However, my reflexive notes also suggested I struggled with what it really means to be in a partnership and questioned whether all members of our group could become partners when we did not all enter this project with the intention of becoming research partners.

*The idea of creating a partnership seems to be an important one to explore. Calling something a partnership doesn't make it one. Tonight women agreed to do some of the work associated with finding information on housing. Does this really move us any closer to a partnership? I think a partnership is something that develops as trust and reciprocity grows between members of the group. The question is how can I create the conditions under which a partnership can develop? Can this be done when women do not initially perceive themselves as partners in the research? (Reflexive notes, meeting #3)*

Women perceived me as the person in charge of this project and this continued to manifest throughout our meetings. In efforts to change this, I continuously suggested we were supposed to be working collaboratively. The following conversation between me and Bella is an

example of one of my attempts to persuade women to share responsibility for work being done for the project.

*Darla: Well how do you both feel about doing some research on this together? Maybe we need to talk to some other women in order to get a better sense of the situation? Perhaps we could interview a couple of women who are in community?*

*Bella: Isn't that your job?*

*Darla: Well we're working together, right? The idea is for us to do this together (Conversation from meeting #4).*

The futility around my efforts to establish a partnership became obvious after the above exchange with Bella. Frustration over a perceived failure to make this research participatory came through in the following reflexive notes:

*I am finding it difficult to involve women in the project outside of the weekly meetings. My suggestion for us to collectively do research was met with some resistance from Bella when she asked, "Isn't that your job?" Perhaps this question suggests women still think I am the researcher and they are merely helping me with my project. There are times when I get the sense that any action taken around the housing issue will be meaningful to them but at other times I feel like they are simply identifying problems and issues that they want me to go out and address (Reflexive notes, meeting #4).*

Inconsistent attendance at group meetings certainly impacted the group's ability to establish a collectivity. Bella explained this inconsistency was due to lack of motivation. Her comments also suggested that motivation, or lack thereof, may be tied to how closely women identified this project as my thesis. If women felt they were only involved in the project to help me to complete a thesis it was unlikely they would feel strong ties to the project. The steadfast association of this project with my thesis became evident in the following conversation:

*Bella: I think you need to go back and do some background information and really figure out what you want from this. I know you really want to make a difference and you want us to feel like we're making a difference with you but at the same time it's about your thesis. It's about writing a paper and having all the background information and knowledge.*

*Darla: Well a big part of my thesis involves the process of us working together as a research group to address an issue identified by the group.*

*Bella: Well I think you're going to find that difficult. Not to put us all in the same group but you're not asking the most motivated group of people to help you. I mean look at your attendance so far*

*(Conversation from meeting #4).*

By recognizing some of the ways in which values, beliefs, and behaviours of women entered this study I was able to see how taken for granted assumptions about partnerships and equal participation can be problematic. Maguire (2001a) and Chataway (2001) both wrote about the challenges associated with the non-authoritarian nature of participatory work. While training participatory researchers in South Africa, Maquire found that participants were resistant to partnership approaches and were more eager to participate when more traditional power relations existed. Similarly, while working with a Native community, Chataway discovered that equal participation may be the goal of outside researchers but it is not always the preferred approach for the community members involved in the research.

In her study Chataway (2001) found that inclusive behavior may be judged by participants as being indecisive or uninformed and cause them to think the research is a waste of time. Other researchers have written about the drawbacks associated with not presenting participants with a clearly defined research process. For example, Mason and Boutilier (1996) identified that one of the challenges to sharing power in participatory research is participants' beliefs that professional researchers are withholding knowledge and understanding when they do not clearly lay out the research process and explain how it might unfold.

There were times throughout this study when the group looked to me to make decisions about the focus of the research. Many of their comments suggested they viewed this project as my research and wanted some direction and guidance on how they could help. When I resisted making decisions in favour of a more inclusive approach, they also resisted by not accepting

decision making responsibilities. They seemed to be looking for some assurance that this project would have a clear focus and that I had a sense of how the process was going to unfold.

Not only did the association of this project with my thesis seem to keep women from embracing the project as their own, it also presented a struggle for women to see any purpose for the project beyond the fulfillment of my school requirements. However, the fact that, in the end, I must obtain the approval of my committee presented hope that the project had to make some kind of difference to be deemed satisfactory. In the following conversation Sloan questioned the worth of research being done for school requirements while Bella defended the added value that comes from external checks and balances:

*Darla: As I mentioned, the purpose of this research is to look at the experience of being back in community for women who have been incarcerated, around things like inclusion and belonging. Do you have any questions or comments about this as a study purpose?*

*Sloan: Well my thing is whether this will go anywhere beyond your schooling. Like will it really make any kind of difference?*

*Bella: Her professors won't accept it as a proper thesis statement and she won't graduate unless it makes a difference.*

*Sloan: Well where is this going to go?*

*Darla: I'm hoping we can answer that question together. This is part of my dissertation so there is a piece I have to do to graduate of course but I think the bigger part of this is the process of us all working together toward some kind of change. I can't tell you what that change is going to look like because –*

*Bella: Because we don't know yet what needs to be changed  
(Conversation from meeting #2).*

As I expressed in my reflexive notes, there appeared to be value to Sloan voicing her concern about the relevance of the research since her comment elicited discussion about the type of change that can result by working together as a group to identify an issue to address:

*In some ways Sloan's skepticism regarding the research was a welcome perspective. When she stated, "Well my thing is whether this will go anywhere beyond your schooling" she may have been expressing what others were feeling about the project but perhaps were not comfortable saying. I wonder if hearing Sloan's skepticism actually helped other women become invested in the project and start to think realistically about what we can reasonably expect to accomplish. I think it is important to have questions on the table like whether this will go anywhere beyond my schooling because it helps to ensure that there will be accountability for using the information gathered to make change (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

Chataway (2001) described a lack of ownership results when participants view the main purpose of a research project to be the completion of a dissertation. Her strategy for addressing this issue was to explain that she had another project which could serve as her dissertation if the PAR project did not result in a product acceptable to her committee. I encountered similar challenges in encouraging research group members to think of this project as something that existed beyond my dissertation. While I did not have another project to fall back on, I tried to explain I could write about the research process for my dissertation and not necessarily the product. I hoped this would enable women to realize that the product or action can come from the needs of the group rather than the need to produce a dissertation.

Difficulty establishing a partnership seemed linked to this project being framed as my thesis. In the following passages I wrote about the desire to share ownership with members of the research group and reflected on the challenge of doing so when the more obvious advantages of involvement seem only to apply to me:

*As the meeting wrapped up and we discussed next steps I got the sense that a couple of women might want to identify a clear focus sooner than later while others feel the need to spend time having more discussion before we get to the point of focusing on one main thing. I could not seem to get much feedback on what direction the next meeting should take. The sharing of ownership is proving a bit more difficult than I initially thought. I wonder if it's too early to start brainstorming about the possible directions that this project could go at the next meeting. (Reflexive notes, meeting #2)*

*Re-reading the passage above makes me uncomfortable with using the phrase “sharing of ownership”. I think it suggests that I perceive the ownership of the project to be mine to share. I guess in some ways I do. I’m also starting to question the extent to which people can feel any real sense of ownership over someone else’s project. I am hoping they will shape the direction the project will take. I want them to be involved to whatever extent they choose. In the end, however, it is still my project. I can pretend that there can be shared ownership or I can recognize the unlikelihood of this happening when the external rewards of being involved in this project are completely unequal. For example, I will use the information to complete a dissertation and earn a doctorate degree and I will present the information at conferences and publish papers. I must ask myself what members of the group are obtaining from their participation. Am I asking them to be intrinsically involved in this project when I am not? (Reflexive notes, meeting #2)*

As the project progressed, I further reflected on my desire to share ownership of the project and began to realize a more inclusive approach may involve being flexible and open to the fluid nature of participatory research. As the following reflexive note suggests, I questioned the sensibility of encouraging equal participation and questioned how important it was for women to participate in all stages of the project:

*The participatory nature of the project does not necessarily mean that women suddenly assume ownership. At certain times during meetings I felt like I was trying to convince them to be as involved in this project as I am whereas each person’s involvement probably should have been determined through a process of negotiation. If women were given an opportunity to negotiate their involvement they may have felt like they could enter and leave the project at different times. For example, some women may have preferred to be involved in deciding on the focus of the study, not be involved during data collection, and resume involvement when it comes time to act on the findings. The way things have gone until now makes me think I led them to believe their involvement had to be all or nothing (Reflexive notes, meeting #4).*

In subsequent notes I reflected on the need to demonstrate my commitment to the project even if it meant not properly facilitating a partnership approach to decision making. As the passage below suggests, I started to let go of the belief that the group needed to be a partnership with equal participation and shared decision making power and realized leadership was needed to move the project forward.

*Introducing the idea of using photovoice came with the risk of taking decision making out of the hands of the group. However, I think there was a need for action to be taken – no matter how small. Suggesting photovoice seemed to be a way to show everyone that I*

*was committed to moving things along. After the last meeting I noticed that Bella and Misha seemed to be lacking enthusiasm for the project and were questioning my role in making something happen. Therefore I think they needed some assurance that this project would soon involve some form of action (Reflexive notes, meeting #5).*

As I grappled with the idea of letting go of a partnership process in favour of demonstrating leadership I became more aware of the power dynamics present. Participatory research is often conceptualized as an approach to research stressing equalization of power between the researcher and participants (Mason & Boutlier, 1996). It has been argued when there is an imbalance of power; it is the responsibility of the researcher to use power for the benefit of participants (Conrad and Campbell, 2008). While there is certainly to be power that comes with creating and accessing knowledge, I do not believe I possessed or was able to create more valuable knowledge than women who were part of my study. We each brought different but equally valuable knowledge to the project.

As I discussed in Chapter Three, anti-oppressive research necessitates a shift in power from the researcher, who is often personally unfamiliar with the issue being studied, to those who have firsthand knowledge and experience. There were times during the project when I grappled with how I could achieve balance with respect to power. As I describe in the following reflexive note, efforts to acknowledge the value of women's experiences seemed to create an imbalance of power when it came to personal disclosure and sharing information:

*I wondered if having Misha and Lucy introduce themselves and talk about their experiences was creating a bit of a 'them' and 'me' distinction since I was not sharing anything about myself with them. I'm not sure it would have made sense to do so since my experiences are not particularly relevant to the project. It seems more in keeping with AOR and FPAR for me to be open to sharing aspects about myself if and when they ask me to (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

In subsequent reflexive writing I questioned whether by privileging information women had to share, I was actually excluding myself from knowledge creation process. I also wondered if by not being part of the information sharing I rendered myself powerless in the research process.

*I actually felt as though there was less power involved with not sharing information. Though not my intention, it makes me feel less like a part of the group when I am not included in the sharing of personal information. Looking back, it was the decision to start the meeting by asking Misha and Lucy to talk about their transition to community that contributed to a 'them' and 'me' separation. Asking the question this way left me nothing to offer to the conversation. If instead I had asked for us all to share a bit about ourselves in a general way, it would have seemed more natural and appropriate for me to take part in the conversation.....I wonder if by asking about the transition back to community I am creating a power imbalance in their favour. They have the expertise and knowledge on the subject, which in many ways makes their contributions to the project more important than mine – there is power that comes with that (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

I soon discovered that the power shift described above does not necessarily mean women feel like they have any power over the research process; nor does it mean women feel empowered. Feelings of powerlessness may persist even if I attempt to share power over the process. This realization became clear in one meeting during which Bella and Misha resisted the idea of gathering data for the project. Bella offered a somewhat paradoxical rationale to explain this resistance. First she suggested she had too many obligations on her time since she was working, busy with school, and going to AA meetings. She then suggested I would find it difficult to share workload responsibility since I was not working with a motivated group of people. The contradiction between Bella's perceived lack of motivation and her attempt to balance school, work, AA meetings, and this research project gave me cause to reflect on issues of power and powerlessness:

*These comments may be reflective of women's perception of power. I wonder if Bella is feeling overwhelmed with trying to balance work, school, her sobriety, and these meetings; resulting in feeling powerless about what she feels she can realistically accomplish. This feeling of powerlessness may be causing Bella to identify with women in prison. Perhaps she is using the excuse of being unmotivated to mask any fear she might have of falling short in any of her endeavours (Reflexive notes, meeting #4).*

Since I believed the success of this project was tied to our ability to adhere to a participatory process and share project responsibilities, I became dependent on women to be as invested in the project as I was. When this level of investment did not occur, I felt I had no

power or influence over how the research process unfolded. Feelings of dependency and powerlessness are evident in my reflexive notes:

*One of the reflexive questions I listed in my proposal concerns the nature of the power that I hold. After tonight's meeting I don't feel as though I have any more power than other women in the project. In fact, sometimes it seems that they are holding all of the power. They have the power to choose whether to be involved in this project, what their involvement looks like, and how much of a commitment they are willing to make. I know this is how it should be, but I feel totally dependent on them and it is making me feel really uneasy. It feels like I am the person who has the most to lose if this project doesn't go anywhere....Is there a way to arrange things so that we all share equally in the successes and shortcomings of this project? In other words, is there a way to distribute power throughout the group? (Reflexive notes, meeting #4).*

### **Ambiguity of power as choice.**

Power in participatory research can be derived from having choice. While engaging in participatory research with incarcerated youth, Conrad and Campbell (2008) acknowledged that in attempt to lessen the power imbalance between themselves and the youth, they had choices the youth did not since they could leave. Viewing power in terms of choice can be ambiguous for women who are marginalized.

There were times when it felt like women sometimes held the balance of power in this research project. My choice to participate in the project was predetermined when I proposed to conduct research with women using a participatory approach. Most of the choices that followed seemed to be made by the research group. They chose whether to participate, how long to participate, and what their participation would look like. Each time they exercised choice (e.g., when they chose not to attend a meeting or chose to discontinue their participation in the project) it felt like my choices were being diminished. However, I had choices women did not. I was in a position to choose to examine inclusion in community entry from an outsiders' perspective and did not have to grapple with trying to engage in participatory research amidst constant struggle and emotional upheaval to the extent they did.

In this sense, choices regarding the nature of our participation were not as straightforward as they may have appeared and differentiated access to power impacted the study in a multitude of ways.

Varcoe (2006) recalled learning about the fallacy of the assumption that the trained researcher has power. She engaged in a PAR project with women who experienced intimate partner violence and reflected on situations where her input on decisions was irrelevant since her collaborators had already made up their minds. Varcoe argued that power and privilege shaped her participatory action research project in more complex ways than “the fiction of the powerful researcher and less powerful yet homogenous researched” (p.532). In her study, race was considered problematic because one woman continually brought the issue to the forefront of discussion while other group members did not want to discuss race. A parallel exists between the issue of race in Varcoe’s study and social class in this study. Social class would frequently be brought to the surface during our discussions but some members of the group would resist engaging in conversations about social class.

Another parallel that exists between this participatory project and the one implemented by Varcoe (2006) pertains to the issue of giving guidance and direction. Similar to Varcoe, I tried to be careful to not dominate discussion at our research meetings. Similar to women in Varcoe’s study, women in this study resisted my efforts to involve them in decision making. Women who participated in Varcoe’s study felt the project was more involved and actions were less immediate than they expected. There were similar feelings expressed in this project when women I worked with indicated they came to the project expecting only short term involvement.

This study and the one implemented by Varcoe (2006) differed in two significant ways. First, Varcoe viewed continued participation of all participants in the face of conflict as a

marker of success. This tenacity was perceived to be a measure of conflict resolution. In this study there was not the same continued participation and sporadic attendance prevented us from getting to the point of explicitly acknowledging or addressing conflict within the group. Second, Varcoe reflected about the things she would do the same and the things she would do differently. While I tend to reflect on this project in a similar manner, I realize that too much emphasis on the things that I did right or wrong misses the point. If I was to undertake this research again I may be inclined to ask different questions or be more open to engaging in a less participatory form of research from the beginning. Ultimately, however, I feel that focusing too closely on changes in my approach detracts from an appreciation of the complexity inherent in working with women whose lives are fraught with turmoil and uncertainty.

### **Attempts to share power.**

Advocates for participatory approaches to research often stress the importance of professional researchers sharing power with stakeholders and intended users (Cargo & Mercer, 2008). Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, and Lord (1998) touted the value of engaging people who have been oppressed as well as other stakeholders and recognized the power imbalances inherent in doing so. They defined participatory research as:

*a research approach which consists of the maximum participation of stakeholders, those whose lives are affected by the problem under study, in the systematic collection and analysis of information for the purpose of taking action and making change (p.885).*

This definition is in keeping with approaches to community development that strive for active participation and rely on the community's initiative. Missing from this perspective is a critique of participation based on harmonious relationships and characterized by mutuality and consensus. If we consider ways power and privilege impact participation, we realize

participation without the redistribution of power is an empty construct for the most marginalized and powerless individuals.

It is often considered to be important for stakeholders and intended users to be respected citizens who have credibility and visibility and who are well-integrated in the community (Israel, Schulz, Parker & Becker, 1998). Emphasis is on high-level community involvement from community leaders engaged as equal partners in the research (Minkler, 2005). Thus, when the process of building partnerships is discussed in relation to participatory action research it often involves partnerships with those who already have power and influence in the community.

When researchers work to create partnerships with individuals and groups who typically experience a lack of power and control, they may do so from a perspective that they can share power. However, some researchers have argued power imbalances will always exist within a participatory project with marginalized groups (Conrad and Campbell, 2008). This necessitates a more critical examination of power.

In their work with people who have mental health issues, Ochocka, Janzen and Nelson (2002) adhere to values of empowerment, supportive relationships, learning as an ongoing process, and social justice. Empowerment was facilitated through a sharing of research responsibilities. Supportive relationships were nurtured by creating a psychological sense of community within the group. Learning consisted of training and educational opportunities that occurred throughout the research process. A commitment to social justice provided opportunities for people with mental health issues to train as researchers and access research resources to examine services they use. While I share the values described by Ochocka, Janzen and Nelson (2002), I question whether their strategies for demonstrating these values would have worked in this research project. While women who participated in this research were

interested in giving their voice to the project, they resisted invitations to share research responsibilities. It has been argued that while collaborative partnerships, in which participants participate as equal members and share control over all phases of the research, may be the ideal with respect to participatory research they are difficult to accomplish in practice (Minkler, 2005; Nelson et al, 1998). As Minkler explained, differential reward structures make equal partnerships challenging since outside researchers usually stand to gain the most from such collaborations. Minkler also argued that since individuals from marginalized groups are often not in a position to devote much time and energy to research, equal sharing is unlikely.

To create an academically credible data set to be used for my dissertation, I had to devote time and energy necessary to make this happen. The reward is a completed dissertation. For women who participated in the study, potential rewards were far less tangible and immediate. Incentive to fully participate was not as high for other members of the research group as it was for me. It was not surprising to discover that as lack of incentive became entangled with women's realities and life complexities, attending to matters of health and survival became more of a priority than participating in this research project.

Supportive relationships were encouraged by Ochoka, Janzen and Nelson (2002) by working to create a psychological sense of community within the group. Nurturing a sense of community within a research group assumes the group has a collective identity. Shared values, joint effort, and mutuality are central themes in definitions of community (Pedlar & Haworth, 2006). Presumably then, nurturing a sense of community necessitates group members identify with other members and share values espoused by their collective identity. However, there were enough differences between women in my research project to preclude this identity from forming. Certain issues, such as access to housing, were considered important by all members of the group. However, at the time of our meetings, no one was personally experiencing

difficulty obtaining safe and affordable housing. An inability to achieve mutual understanding and identify shared problems and concerns undoubtedly minimized the extent to which women felt a psychological sense of community within the group.

In her participatory project, Reid (2004) discussed how women living in poverty were excluded from involvement because they perceived they did not share the same problems as others in the group. A similar form of exclusion was evident in this project as some women struggled with hearing other perspectives and could not always relate to challenges and situations experienced by others in the group. Thus, striving to create a psychological sense of community within the group may have further perpetuated the exclusion of some members.

Commitment to learning and social justice was demonstrated by Ochocka, Janzen and Nelson (2002) by hiring and training people with mental health issues as researchers. The practice of hiring and training researchers comes from the belief that for people to participate effectively in partnerships and to be perceived as legitimate partners they need to acquire the necessary skills and capacity to do so. As a PhD student, I was not in a position to hire women I was working with on this project. I also do not believe that paying and training women to work with me would have accomplished sharing power over the research process. I am more inclined to think that by hiring and training women I would have been creating a hierarchy between me, as the *employer* and *trainer*, and women, as the *employees* and *trainees*. This hierarchy would have had power implications since they would have surely perceived they were working for me and were being trained to do my research. Women's choices would have undoubtedly been compromised if they felt they had to stay involved with the project simply because they needed the money.

I agree it is important for those who engage in participatory research to acquire the skills and knowledge to do so. However, practices of hiring and training do not sufficiently alleviate

imbalances of power. It seems that relying on women who are marginalized to engage in collective action without a redistribution of political power is antithetical to the idea of social change.

Another aspect of sharing power is the process of sharing ownership of the research. Dominelli (2005) argued that social positioning can affect the extent to which participants can actually own research. Often, she explained, anonymity precludes those involved in participatory research from being recognized for their involvement in the work. Thus, knowledge claims and power can be difficult to establish. While I have invited and will continue to invite women to co-present at conferences and co-author manuscripts, I doubt whether they will be able or willing to accept this invitation. I feel it is important to pursue opportunities to recognize women's involvement and suggest ways for them to share in the dissemination of the findings. However, I am not expecting women to embrace these opportunities given their understandable reluctance to be publicly *outed* as women who have spent time in prison. Such challenges around knowledge claims and power operate as a reminder that opportunities for full participation in collective research can be limited for women trying to stave off stigma and escape judgment.

In this section I highlighted problematic aspects of partnerships and ambiguities around sharing power in participatory research. I discussed how taken for granted assumptions around partnerships and power impact participatory research with women who do not necessarily value collaboration and often remain powerless over forces shaping their everyday lives. Another assumption in participatory research aimed at collective action is that a collective identity can be formed to help guide consensus about what change should occur. The next section illuminates how notions of inclusion and participation in research are often credulously linked to homogeneity and the formation of a collective identity.

## **Assumptions of Collective Identity and Difference as Impediments to Inclusion and Participation**

In this section I describe the complexity of trying to foster an inclusive group process among women who vary with respect to race, health, age, sexual orientation, and social class. I also discuss intricacies surrounding women's ability to relate to each other as a group and form a collective.

As Conrad and Campbell (2008) explained the process of doing participatory research usually starts with a problem collectively experienced by participants. Bringing people together around shared concerns and problems is intended to foster inclusion (Maguire, 2001b). A sense of inclusion can result from sharing similar problems and a collectivist group process that works toward hearing all voices (Reid, 2004). However, acting collectively necessitates having a group conception or identity (Piatelli, 2009) and working with differences does not always lead to the formation of a collective identity.

Members of the research group would at times identify and relate to each other and other women who have been incarcerated by discussing common experiences. Other times they would resist this identification by highlighting ways they were different from other women who have been to prison. Differences between me and other women in the group were also apparent throughout the group process. These differences were most apparent in terms of the life experiences and values we each brought to the research project and these values and experiences influenced issue selection and the research process.

### **Group cohesion across class struggle.**

Early in the process women acknowledged similarities between their situation and that of other women who spent time in prison. For example, while discussing her struggle with addiction Sloan related to other women she knew at GVI. She noted, "*there's a lot of women*

*in there who struggle with addiction or struggle with abuse and I'm talking about the women getting out of GVI with just the clothes on their back"* (Sloan, meeting #2). Sloan also identified with women released from GVI who have difficulty finding work or getting by when working for minimum wage: *"So when you come out you're faced with the exact same troubles as you went in with, not to mention you're no more educated. You know me, I would not accept minimum wage. But what did I have to do? Take minimum wage. And now I'm just barely getting by"* (Sloan, meeting #2). Similarly, Lucy shared the reality many women face who leave prison empty handed and do not have means of supporting themselves financially: *"I walked out with nothing besides the clothes on my back. Because I didn't have to pay first and last (rent) I was not entitled to a start-up. I had no money to buy clothes, nothing"* (Lucy, meeting #3).

Misha's experiences, both before and after incarceration, contrasted with those of Sloan and Lucy. Her financial security and middle class status quickly differentiated her within the group. This difference became apparent when she spoke about not having a need to find work after being released from GVI; choosing instead to become an entrepreneur and engage in a social network simply for the enjoyment of it: *"financially we're fine. My husband makes enough money so we're fine. So I'm starting my own business and I've joined the Red Hat Society. Now I'm a Red Hatter (laughs)"* (Misha, meeting #1).

Misha noted how she was different, not only from other women in the group, but also from other women who go to prison. She stated, *"You know, like I come from a different lifestyle than some other people do"* (Misha, meeting #1). While Misha often referred to herself as middle class, she also considered herself to be different from others in this class, particularly when she said, *"middle class people don't steal hundreds of thousands of dollars with a gambling addiction"* (Misha, meeting #2). The paradox for Misha seemed to be that she

distinguished herself from women in prison because she was middle class; she distinguished herself from women who are middle class because she spent time in prison. Incongruity in Misha's self-identify was also evident when she emphasized a connection to women in prison based on a history of family struggles and abuse: "*I'm a perfect example, as with a lot of men and women who go to jail, of someone who's (family) had a big crack in it and then we ended up being cracked ourselves*" (Misha, meeting #1). She further illuminated a history of trauma and abuse when she explained, "*I had to break the cycle that my parents started and probably that their parents started. So to make sure that my son doesn't take that cycle and the beatings and start to put it onto his kids*" (Misha, meeting #1).

Bella's life before going to prison enabled her to identify to some extent with experiences of the other women in the group. Similar to both Sloan and Lucy, Bella described struggling financially when she entered community: "*I was on OW (Ontario Works) for the summer. I had to get it because I was broke*" (Bella, meeting #2). She also acknowledged receiving financial support from family when she stated, "*I guess I was fortunate when I got out because I did have a lot of family support and I don't like to think that it made a difference but it probably did*" (Bella, meeting #2). Bella described a lifestyle more with Misha's middle class lifestyle than the financial hardship described by Sloan and Lucy. Bella also recognized she has had more choices than most women who have spent time in prison. Comments such as "*I'm sure it's harder for other people. I've been very fortunate, I've got a good life, and I'm at (name of university)*" (Bella, meeting #2) suggest Bella considered herself to be in a more privileged position than most women since she had financial help from family and the opportunity to go to university.

Although differences among women in the group existed in terms of race, health, age, and sexual orientation, it was the difference pertaining to social class was the most obvious and

explicit throughout our group meetings. Class difference seemed to have the biggest impact on the ability of women to relate as a group. In the very first meeting Misha put this difference front and centre by observing the group and stating, “*Well, you’re getting different classes*” (Misha, meeting #1). Class differences became immediately apparent at the first meeting when only Misha and Lucy were present. During this meeting Lucy explained, “*Before prison I lived on the streets of Toronto for two years*” (Lucy, meeting #1). As indicated in the excerpt from my reflexive notes below, I was initially reluctant to recognize class and the apparent divide it created. By acknowledging a divide that existed within the group, I feared it would have been more difficult for women to establish the collective identity I believed was so important to an inclusive process.

*Lisa mentioned living on the streets of Toronto for two years and Misha spoke about being financially well off and there not being a need for her to work. While this difference in class was acknowledged, it was not discussed. I remember feeling a little uneasy about Misha’s observation about class and I did not encourage further discussion about it. I might have been inclined to do so if there had been other women present, but discussing it at this particular time likely would have created an arbitrary divide between Misha and Lucy that would serve no purpose (Reflexive notes, meeting #1).*

In subsequent meetings, Lucy’s class status was put in stark contrast to someone returning to a situation in which money was not a concern. She spoke about challenges getting released from prison without having enough money to buy clothes: “*I had no money to buy clothes, nothing. They gave me \$511 and that’s it. I’m coming out with nothing and you’re not even going to give me \$200 to go and buy clothes?*” (Lucy, meeting #3). Recognizing her situation paralleled that of many women who get released from prison; Lucy suggested:

*... (give them) like a voucher for Wal-Mart or something that is not redeemable for cash. So they’re going out and looking for a job but they’re wearing their grey jogging pants they got out of prison with. What is a woman supposed to do that has no support or has no money? (Lucy, meeting #3)*

There were times during the meetings when I suspected that discussions about class were hampering the group from moving forward and identifying an issue to address. Researchers often assume, when doing research with an identified *community* they are working with distinct unit that is well-bounded, homogeneous and integrated. They invariably discover, however, that they are working with a heterogeneous group of people with multiple differences in terms of wealth, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, and power (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995). While women in this study had common experiences of incarceration, they also had many differences that precluded them from being a homogeneous group. These differences impacted how they related and identified with one another. They also at times obstructed an inclusive group process.

A conversation between Misha and Sloan in the second meeting indicated ways difference can make an inclusive process more elusive and move us away from what we were trying to achieve as a group. In this conversation Misha tried to explain she believed *all* women, who enter community from prison, regardless of their financial situation, face challenges being productive members of society. Sloan confronted Misha about what she perceived to be an easy transition back given Misha's access to family support and a vehicle.

*Misha: And (challenges you face entering community) has nothing to do with your class in life either. I came from having money yet I'm faced with the same reality that you are because of the restrictions put on me.*

*Sloan: When you got out of GVI where did you go?*

*Misha: To a halfway house.*

*Sloan: Did you have family support?*

*Misha: Yes.*

*Sloan: Did you have a vehicle?*

*Misha: Yes.*

Sloan: *Exactly.*

Misha: *But with the restrictions that were put on me through the court system it was hard for me to go out and get a job.*

Sloan: *I understand that, but still you were able to drive around.*

Misha: *I understand where you're coming from but with wanting to go out and get a job and wanting to be a productive part of society (Conversation from meeting #2)*

As I suggest in my reflexive note, when class was the focus of the conversation it was difficult for the group to get to a point of mutual identification. This note also highlights how I perceived discussion of shared experiences to be necessary to unite members of the group and keep the meeting moving.

*There was some initial tension in the meeting around the class issue and the belief that the barriers around being incarcerated are only experienced by those who do not come from money. When Misha, who is financially secure, tried to explain that she was also hindered by the restrictions imposed on her, she had difficulty being heard. I decided to re-visit the discussion we started last week around research principles to help set a tone of mutual respect and it seemed to work. As we moved into introductions women seemed interested in each other's stories. They asked questions and responded to common experiences. Dialogue suddenly seemed a lot less confrontational and more relational (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

It seemed important for women to find common ground at certain times throughout the meetings. There was resistance to conversation that put differences front and centre. After the exchange between Misha and Sloan, for example, Bella attempted to get Misha and Sloan to recognize similar aspects to what they were saying rather than focusing too closely on class differences. Bella declared, *"It sounds like you're both saying the same thing from different angles. The class issue doesn't need to be involved here"* (Bella, meeting #2).

As the excerpt from my reflexive journal below makes clear, I struggled with how to effectively address difference, particularly based on class, since it can impede a group's momentum and ability to arrive at a consensus around what the group wants to accomplish.

*The class issue seemed to be at the forefront of the conversation when the meeting started and it is an issue that makes differences between the members of the group apparent. Bella wanted to downplay the class issue, which may have been due her own personal identity struggle around class. On one hand, she comes from a family with financial security and recognizes the support her family has provided. On the other hand, the image she seems to want to portray to the group is of the girl who lived on the streets of Toronto and rejected the norms associated with our class based society. She is currently a university student aspiring to be a lawyer. She acknowledges a contradiction between who she is now and who she was before going to prison but does not recognize a connection between class and post-secondary education.*

*Bella may also be downplaying any difference pertaining to class because if differences between members of the group were at the forefront of conversation there would be less of a collective and it would be difficult to find a common issue to address. This begs the questions of how difference can be explored in research. Most research I am familiar with seems to minimize or ignore difference in favour of highlighting collective experiences through themes, findings and results. In the context of this research, where women are identifying something they want to address or change, discussions about difference may be an unwelcome distraction to the task at hand (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

### **Difference in values around community and the meaning of contribution.**

Differences between me, as a middle classed, white, university student, and women in the group were never made explicit during group discussions. However, these differences existed and perhaps impacted group dynamics in ways that I may not even fully realize. During one meeting in particular, I was able to clearly see how my lack of struggle for basic necessities set me apart from other members of the group. This realization came after I found myself feeling disappointed with priorities women identified and wanted to address. In the third meeting Bella and Lucy identified access to safe, affordable housing as their top priority. I urged them to take this conversation in a different direction and discuss what enables them to feel they are part of community. They reminded me that women entering community after incarceration have practical needs, such as the need for safe and affordable housing, which must be addressed before we can talk about being part of community. The conversation below captured the importance of women's basic needs:

Darla: *These things that we've been talking about changing are all important for sure but what is it that enables you to feel part of community?*

Lucy: *Playing the tape to the end.*

Bella: *It's an internal thing. We're not looking for a lot but we're learning to be happy with the fact that we're not in fucking jail.*

Lucy: *And knowing that we have more potential than we were giving ourselves credit for.*

Bella: *What we need to work on here are the basics. We need to get the basics in place.*

Lucy: *Yeah, and once you have that you can work on the other stuff* (Conversation from meeting #3).

As my reflexive notes reveal, I hoped the group would identify a more contentious issue than housing since this need seemed to be so basic and obvious. Although I realized the importance of addressing a fundamental need such as housing, I hoped that our group discussion could move beyond this:

*This seems like a clear example of my values being incongruent with those of the group. While writing my proposal and before talking with any of the women I was thinking that this research would move beyond addressing the basic needs of women and move into a deeper discussion around issues of inclusion/exclusion. This makes me think of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In a sense, feeling included can be compared to achieving self-actualization – which could quite possibly be the last thing that women are concerned about. Instead, they are thinking about lower level, more basic needs that must be met first. Even if they personally have their housing needs met, they seem to be very practical in their thinking and consider this to be one of the biggest needs to be addressed for women who are entering the community. I think if I am doing anything right in these meetings it is remaining open to having the project shaped by the group – even if it means going in a direction I was not expecting to go. If I tried to push my agenda by encouraging them to talk more about ideas around inclusion I would have missed identifying the issues that are most important to them* (Reflexive notes, meeting #3).

As I continued to reflect on my position as a researcher trying to understand meanings of community as it relates to inclusion I further considered differences between values and assumptions I brought to the research and how they were different from those held by the group:

*I am making an assumption here that women want to belong in community. Maybe what they really want is for people in community to leave them alone so they can just live their lives without any of the repercussions that they have previously experienced (such as jail time). My language is suggesting that I view belonging as a desired goal. Do I feel this way? I think in many ways I do. I think in my ideal community everyone feels like they have a place and feels like they belong – regardless of gender, class, race, etc. It may have been worthwhile for me to share my view of the ideal community with members of the group. (Reflexive notes, meeting #2).*

Another passage from my journal illuminates assumptions I made around the concept of inclusion. At the time of the meeting I had not reflected on the use of the word, “contribute” but soon after I began to question what underlying values led to the assumption I was making by associating the term “contribute” with inclusion.

*I wonder if the word, “contribute” has a normative connotation and suggests women have to do something or give something (i.e., through working or volunteering) to be a contributing member of community. Thinking about this now, there are questions that would have been better suited to exploring inclusion without implying they have to do anything to be included. Some of these questions are: where do you fit in your ideal community? How do you see yourself in the ideal community? When you are not in community (as a result of being in prison), what impact do you think this has on community? (Reflexive notes, meeting #2)*

### **Distancing and the women offender as *the other*.**

Differences were highlighted among members of the research group, and between themselves and other women who had been incarcerated. At times throughout group meetings, members of the group fluctuated between identifying themselves as women who spent time in prison and creating a psychological separation between themselves and *other* women who spent time in prison. Misha not only distanced herself from women in prison by emphasizing class differences, she also distanced herself from women in prison by drawing attention to her capacity to understand what she needed to do to move forward after being incarcerated.

Misha’s ability to start a business, engage in volunteer work, and even participate in this research project was contrasted with her view of the skills possessed by women she knew at

GVI:

*The way you have to approach the women in jail is you have to make things pretty simple and put things in as plain English as you can. So it's like you need to do A, you need to do B, you need to do C when you get out of jail. You can't put too many steps in front of them because they're going to get bored or they're going to screw up (Misha, meeting #4).*

For Lucy, the main thing that separated her from women in prison was the ease with which she had been able to make the transition from prison to community, especially since she was entering community with nothing beside the clothes on her back. Since she was able to find employment much sooner than she expected, Lucy viewed her situation to be uncharacteristic of what she considered the typical transition experience for women leaving prison: *"I'm not the perfect example of challenges that you have when you're integrating back into society. Although I have heard from **other** women that it has been really hard for them to find jobs"* (Lucy, meeting #1).

Similar to Lucy, Bella did not easily identify with challenges she considered to be a natural part of the transition experience. Like all members of the group, Bella considered access to housing a top priority for women released from prison although accessing housing was not a challenge for her. She distinguished herself from other women getting out of prison: *"Well, not something I would need because I was very fortunate but something I think **other** people need is adequate, clean housing"* (Bella, meeting #3).

The process of *othering* suggested Lucy and Bella did not necessarily see themselves as being in the same boat as other women in prison. Sloan, however, seemed to have similar challenges as women entering community without financial support:

*We know that rehabilitation, employment, education, there are barriers to that when you've been inside if you're not rich. So really **we** are being warehoused. As a woman offender, a lot of women have children; a lot of women do not have family or come from a family with money who can give them an apartment or a vehicle or any of these things (Sloan, meeting #2).*

Sloan's language, specifically the use of the word "we", suggested a kinship with women who have been incarcerated.

For a couple of members of the group, being associated with women in prison was met with hostility. *Women in prison* represented an image from which they were trying to disconnect. Misha, for example, tried to emphasize how dissimilar she is from women in prison when she explained, "*I want nothing to do with the people who are in there. I mean I have nothing in common with them*" (Misha, meeting #6). Bella was a bit more direct with her condemnation: "*I don't really care what happens to the women in there....Most of them in there are fuckin' idiots and most of them did it to themselves*" (Bella, meeting #6).

Since it was difficult to establish a common ground among group members, no collective identity had been formed. These women were asked to join the group because they spent time in prison. However, beyond their shared experience of incarceration lie many differences. Young (1990) argued that every group has differences that cut across it. She offered an example of a group of gay men who may be black, rich, homeless, or old. These differences can lead to different identifications and potential group conflicts and an affinity with others outside of the group. It was clear to me that women I worked with wanted to highlight their affinity with others outside of the research group more than they wanted to identify with members of the group. By drawing attention to the ways they were different and emphasizing their identities as members of social groups such as the Red Hat Society and their identities as university students they effectively diminished a sense of group solidarity.

Perhaps the most enlightening aspect of my follow up conversations with Bella and Misha were their comments that highlighted the complexity of trying to establish a collective within a group where such differences exist. Misha set herself apart from others in the group at the very first meeting. She emphasized this distinction in our follow up conversation:

*Well, first of all, I don't have anything in common with any of the girls who are in there. Like I'm not going through any of the struggles that they're going through. I'm one of the lucky ones. I don't have the financial struggles; I don't have the support struggles (Misha, conversation from follow up meeting).*

While Misha felt her differences set her apart from the rest of the group, her reflections about this dissimilarity were somewhat incongruent. For example, although she admitted she could not identify with the struggles experienced by others in the group; she recognized a commonality in the problems and issues that helped pave the road to prison for each woman:

*I guess I kind of felt that they thought I didn't understand them....It was like 'what do you know about where I've been?' but I mean we all have our problems. If we didn't have problems we wouldn't have been in there in the first place (Misha, follow up meeting).*

I realized after talking with Bella the danger in trying to establish an inclusive group process when the only known common denominator is time spent in prison. The danger, I think, comes from constantly reminding women, who are trying to stave off the stigma of incarceration and move on in their lives, that their knowledge and experiences are important primarily because they have been incarcerated. In the following conversation Bella captured the tension associated with acknowledging the shared experience of incarceration while trying to escape what she believes to be a shared destiny for women who have been in prison:

*Darla: Thinking back to the last meeting, I know there was some other stuff going on for you, but did something else change for you in terms of your attitude toward women in prison? I can remember you saying something about not caring about them or what happens to them.*

*Bella: There is a little bit of that. I think that is a thought in my head that is always kind of there but at the same time it's not there 100% because I am one of them even if I try to deny it. It helps me to think that I'm different because if I think I'm the same it means I'm going to end up the same (Bella, conversation during follow up meeting).*

In this section I discussed how assumptions around collective identity do not necessarily consider how difference can be an impediment to inclusion and participation in research. In the next section I explore ways women in this study engaged in both individual and collective

efforts aimed at resisting the stigma of incarceration. Feelings of hopelessness that disrupted the project's momentum are most apparent when juxtaposed with the tensions around their negotiated identities.

### **Negotiating Identities and Resisting Stigma: Women as Agents of Change?**

Boudin (2007) observed that women in prison are often constructed by researchers and advocates as *victims* or *women with problems*. These constructions, she explains, overlook the resiliency of women who can be critical agents of change while incarcerated. Boudin provided powerful examples of women in prison working together to tackle social problems such as the AIDS epidemic as well as addressing their collective needs around parenting, childcare, and obtaining a post-secondary education.

As I described in Chapter Four, there were times when momentum started to build and women acknowledged ways their participation in photovoice could help change public perception around the stigmatized identity associated with women who have been in prison. Amidst various personal challenges they encountered in their lives the impetus to carry this mission forward was disrupted by feelings of hopelessness. Momentum was high when they believed they could resist a stigmatized identity by acting collectively as a group to change public perception. Momentum diminished when they struggled to negotiate their identities, believed it was hopeless to change public perception, and tried to resist a stigmatized identity by denying they were part of it.

Women in this study were asked to come together and form a group for no reason other than that they have all spent time in a women's federal prison. Essentially they were asked to come together because they possessed a stigma or "undesired differentness" from the norm (Goffman, 1963) that threatened their inclusion into community. Goffman theorized that

people who fall within a certain stigma category may be considered a group but they are often not part of single group since they do not have a well-defined pattern of mutual interaction or a capacity for collective action. In this sense, women's lack of collective identity could be considered resistance to adopting a stigmatized social identity. If their ex-prisoner status was the only thing holding them together as a group, it is not surprising to discover they would not easily develop an affinity for others in the group.

### **Reclaiming an identity.**

Young (1990) explained when certain groups are devalued on the basis of their difference they may assert a positive group difference that can be emancipatory because it "reclaims the definition of the group by the group" (p.172). At times, members of the group attempted to claim a positive group identity and change the way they are perceived by the rest of society. For example, as Bella describes, women identified a desire to change public perception and increase awareness around housing issues to gain support:

*So here is what we decided. The halfway house is not enough and it's not even here yet. We need to get the attention of the general public to get more support from the community people. We need the constituents of MPs to say hey, "we want this. We want this here. We want to help these people" (Bella, meeting #5).*

Women's efforts to claim a positive group identity often emphasized normalized aspects of their identities. Misha suggested a positive group identity could come from women's family ties and gender roles: *"I think you have to make the message family oriented. That not all of us are the typical criminal, you know. Some of us are mothers, we're daughters, we're sisters"* (Misha, meeting #5). Reframing identities seemed to be a common tactic used by women wanting to resist stigma associated with being *prisoners*. Bosworth (2003), for example, explained how adopting a *gendered identity* has enable incarcerated women to hold strong to their identity as mothers while resisting identities as prisoners.

Bella also saw value in making a connection to family and added the public may be more sensitive to needs of women released from prison if they realize these women have socially desirable connections in community. She replied, “*Yeah, that’s a good way to appeal.....it could also be about our connections to things like (name of several community and volunteer agencies) and that kind of thing*” (Bella, meeting #5).

As comments made by Misha and Bella suggested, a positive group identity was promoted through ways they are similar to others outside the group since they emphasized ways they are similar to, rather than the ways they are different from, others in society. Further, when Bella spoke of the importance of highlighting their involvement with community organizations or her status as university student, she was ascribing positive meaning to such associations. Women’s positive identity was related to individual affiliations and achievements and it seemed they were attempting to reclaim a positive identity – not as a part of a devalued group but perhaps in spite of being part of a devalued group.

During a conversation about appealing to public sentiment, momentum started to build and the direction women wanted the project to go was being shaped through their critical insight and reflexive questioning. Sloan, for example, observed that the conversation was moving toward a focus on connections in community and wondered whether support was becoming more of a prominent issue than housing. She stated, “*Yeah, so it’s all about supports in that sense. So it’s not about housing at all really*” (Sloan, meeting #5). This comment prompted Misha to reflect on the association between support and housing: “*Maybe it’s like support is in the middle and housing is a piece of the puzzle for support*” (Misha, meeting #5). As dialogue between group members unfolded, it seemed to shift away from the project being what I needed to produce for my dissertation and toward developing consensus about what would be meaningful for women involved.

Further questioning helped us decide on a direction for the project. This process seemed to enable members of the group to feel a sense of ownership over the project and recognize they were in a position to make a difference. In the following conversation, women spoke in terms of “we” and what “we” want to accomplish, which was a welcome change from their use of the word “you” in earlier meetings when they were referring to what I needed to accomplish. This change seemed to indicate a forming of a collective identity based on shared problems and concerns:

*Bella: Do we want to change it or do we want to draw attention to it so that it can be changed?*

*Sloan: We want to draw attention to it.*

*Lucy: Well I don't think we're in a position to change it but if we draw attention to it there is the hope that other people can get involved and then as a whole, it can be changed.*

*Darla: So let me make sure I've got this down. We want to raise awareness about housing?*

*Sloan: Well there's all sorts of issues about housing. People know that there's a problem with housing. We have to be specific. What do we want? More affordable housing? More halfway housing? What do we want pertaining to housing?*

*Darla: Good questions.*

*Lucy: Well I think the need is for housing after you leave the halfway house. I mean we have halfway houses. They may not be great but they're there (Conversation from meeting #5).*

As my reflexive notes suggested, I was thrilled to see decision making was being shared among the group rather than being considered as my sole responsibility. I reflected on ways this particular meeting moved us away from researcher as facilitator and toward a dialogical process:

*We mixed things up a bit at today's meeting by getting together for breakfast at Tim Horton's. This seemed to work out really well and it ended up feeling like a group of women getting together to chat over coffee about issues of social change. Far from*

*being the one to lead the conversation, I actually said very little in comparison to some of the others who were sitting around the table. We got down to the heart of the matter fairly quickly and a lot of ideas were expressed about what we could reasonably expect to accomplish with this project. Comments raised were thoughtful and showed a desire to be realistic when tackling issues such as housing. The conversation focused on what is feasible for us to accomplish in a reasonable amount of time.*

*What I think I liked best about today's meeting is that everyone seemed to be part of the conversation and women were building on each other's ideas. They were also negotiating a plan for action by asking each other questions about what they wanted to accomplish with the project. Early in the meeting Bella, in relation to housing, asked the group, "Do we want to change it or do we want to draw attention to it so that it can be changed?" This question elicited responses as well as other questions from others in the group. For the first time since these meetings began it felt like everyone was on the same page and everyone was invested in the idea of making something happen (Reflexive notes, meeting #5).*

To carry the momentum from this meeting to the next one, I introduced the idea of photovoice to the group. It was evident from the following conversation that women continued to take the lead on which direction the project should go by discussing the process and offering suggestions to guide the nature of the photovoice exercise.

*Darla: So what are some of the ways we could get our message across in a creative way? Maybe we can try something here. I brought some disposable cameras. I think we could go in a couple of directions with this. Perhaps we could take pictures that capture what it is about housing and the supports you have available that help you feel part of community. We could also take pictures that capture some of the challenges associated with being in the community without sufficient resources. So basically the pictures are telling the story. We could bring these pictures back to the next meeting and discuss the messages they present.*

*Lucy: So like we could take pictures of ourselves talking on the phone looking through the classifieds.*

*Sloan: Or maybe on a computer fixing up a resume.*

*Bella: It could also be a picture of a sad face and an empty fridge.*

*Misha: I can drive by and take a picture of GVI if anyone wants me to.*

*Bella: You two could stand together behind the CJI sign (said to me and the member of my Circle)*

*Sloan: And (name of community organization) would have pictures of the volunteer appreciation event we went to.*

*Bella: I could take before and after pictures. I have pictures of me from the old days holding a pile of money and that kind of thing. Then I could get a picture of me standing in front of the (name of university) sign. (Conversation from meeting #5)*

This conversation moved us from focusing solely on housing toward identifying common challenges women entering community experience and individual actions they took to counterbalance these challenges and resist a stigmatized identity. I continued to reflect on the ways women were starting to embrace their roles in the project:

*The suggestion to try out the use of photovoice was well received. Everyone was quick to think of things they could take pictures of and identified both the positive and negative aspects of experiences in community including volunteering, being with their supports, searching for jobs, and struggling to eat. I think the group left feeling a renewed sense of energy about this project. It also seemed as though they could see some value in exploring the ways their experiences corresponded with and diverged from the challenges typically associated with entering community after incarceration (Reflexive notes, meeting #5).*

### **Struggling with identity and feeling hopeless.**

In Chapter Four I explained that soon after the meeting in which photovoice was introduced Sloan and Lucy became overwhelmed by personal challenges that prevented them from continuing to be part of the group. For Misha and Bella, any momentum that started to build during the previous meeting had significantly diminished by the time we held our final meeting. Despite their previously expressed interest in wanting to change public perception and minimize stigma that surrounds women in prison, Misha and Bella admitted to believing this was a hopeless undertaking. As the conversation below indicates, they no longer thought society would begin to care about the plight of women who have been formerly incarcerated:

*Misha: I told you what my husband said, right? This is not a sexy subject. You're not going to get a whole lot of people who feel sorry for us. You're also not going to get a whole lot of people to listen to us. You're not going to get a whole lot of people to care. This is not a sexy subject. People are just going to look at us and say that you did this to yourself.*

*Bella: Yeah, it's true. There are people who have been in bad places in their lives who didn't go to jail. We did this to ourselves.*

(Conversation from meeting #6)

The perception that women who have been incarcerated do not deserve the public's support for housing pervaded our final meeting. For Misha, comments made by her husband seemed to serve as a marker for what she thought the rest of society believes:

*And that's what my husband says, "you did this to yourself. You brought this on yourself." He is the voice of reality to me. It's like he is society....We're not going to get support for housing because there are too many people out there that deserve housing more than we do that didn't do this. I mean who are we to expect housing when there are people on the street and people who have been struggling for years (Misha, meeting #6).*

Misha also suggested a hierarchy exists in terms of who deserves support. In her assessment, law-abiding citizens should have their needs met before women who committed offenses:

*90% of people will say too bad, they did it to themselves. There are law-abiding citizens out there that need the help more than we do that didn't kill anybody, that didn't do drugs illegally, that didn't steal. I'm sorry that I'm the voice of reality (Misha, meeting #6).*

Momentum in this project was building when women were collectively exploring ways to negotiate their identity and resist the stigmatization imposed on them. Momentum quickly faded as tensions surfaced around their collective identity and feelings of hopelessness set in. For Misha and Bella, feelings of hopelessness were perhaps heightened when Sloan and Lucy left the group. It may have been discouraging for Misha and Bella to see the ways that overpowering circumstances impacted participation for Sloan and Lucy. Disappointment with the overall mood of the final meeting was described in my reflexive notes:

*The conversation tonight was much more pessimistic than it was last time. Rather than wanting to convey a more positive message about women coming out of prison as was suggested at the last meeting, Misha and Bella both seemed to agree that people should not care about this population. The message being communicated tonight was "we did this to ourselves so we don't matter and people are not really going to care about our situation" (Reflexive notes, meeting #6).*

After this meeting I reflected on some of the reasons why we were not able to sustain momentum that started to build during the previous meeting. I noted the hope and optimism women sometimes express while they are still in prison and how this hope so easily seems to diminish upon release. My reflexive notes shed light on the challenge of engaging women in efforts aimed at change when they feel like these efforts are futile in light of their situations.

*I think sometimes when women can step outside of their daily struggles they may feel more optimistic about what they can accomplish and they start to have hope that things can change. I see this happening time and time again with women who are in prison. Conversations with women who are still in prison often reveal the more positive aspects of their reintegration plans. They often talk about reuniting with their children, getting a job, going to school - essentially turning their lives around. Whenever I speak to these same women after release many of their plans have changed. The change is often due to the impact that outside forces have on their original plans. For example, they may not be able to gain access to their children, they may not find a job as easily as they thought they would, or they may not get accepted into school or have the money that is required to go. I wonder if some of these things are happening within this group. One week they come to a meeting and they may feel confident in their ability to make change, then they leave the meeting, things in life happen that they can't always control and they become jaded. I think I saw this happening with Misha after she had a conversation with her husband who told her that women entering community from prison are not a "sexy subject." The motivation she had for wanting to portray women leaving prison in a more positive light was likely diminished by her husband's comments and lack of support for this endeavour.*

*I think women can be quick to believe what others tell them about themselves. Misha seemed to internalize her husband's comments and began to question why women coming out of prison should matter. In previous meetings, however, she spoke as if she believed that women coming out of prison do, in fact, matter. I also have to wonder to what extent women have internalized the program language they have heard time and time again at GVI. I have often heard women tell me that during programs they are constantly reminded about the need to take responsibility for their actions and not to blame others for their circumstances because they did it to themselves. This type of program language was certainly evident at tonight's meeting (Reflexive notes, meeting #6).*

Boudin's (2007) work highlighted the problem-solving potential of women in prison who are "filled with ideas, energy, dreams and possibilities" (p. 16). This is the very potential I have seen time and time again in women I have met at GVI – women who upon release want

to engage in public speaking, start volunteering, and pursue an education in order to work toward personal and social change. As I compare the collective action taken by women in Boudin's study to the hesitation to act by women in this project I see several important differences. It is not that women I worked with lacked ideas, energy, dreams, and possibilities - far from it; what they lacked was a sense of solidarity.

Boudin (2007) spoke of women who were all incarcerated at the time they were engaged in collective action. The experience of incarceration provided them with a commonality and shared aims. They were all experiencing the AIDS epidemic together and the challenges associated with being separated from their children and being denied a college education resonated with many. Women who participated in this project were encountering a set of diverse and complex challenges associated with being back in the community. While housing was identified as a top priority, each woman had differential access to housing and for some, their needs around treatment for addiction proved to be greater than their need for housing. While trying to stave off the stigma of incarceration, some of these women psychologically separated themselves from women who were still incarcerated. There was no collective identity formed since these women were trying to negotiate new identities that separated them from their prison experience. Thus, a sense of solidarity that can be formed when women are still in prison may not be so easily maintained after they are released into community.

Boudin (2007) described women who felt empowered by what they were able to accomplish in prison. It is often acknowledged that empowerment is difficult to accomplish in a prison setting (Hannah-Moffat, 2000; Pollack, 2000) but as Uggen, Manza and Behrens (2004) explained, it may be even more difficult for women to feel empowered in their post-prison lives. Uggen et al. discovered that during incarceration people may envision themselves being a model parent, an engaged citizen, or a change agent for social causes upon release.

However, when they enter community, they often encounter a lack of resources and relationships necessary to help them to assume these roles.

O'Brien (2001) described empowerment as the accumulation of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social power that enables one to make real choices in their everyday lives. Conversely, she explained, the disempowerment of individuals is less a result of personal deficits than it is a consequence of the failure of society to meet the needs of all people. There were times throughout this study when I could see women start to feel empowered and believe that they could, through their efforts in this project, make a difference in terms of changing societal perceptions about women who have been in prison. I could also see, however, that women had needs not being met in other facets of their lives. For two women, participation in the project was interrupted when their need for support around addiction was not being met. Two other women began to lose incentive to participate when they lost hope in the aim of the project due to the perception that needs of women coming out of prison would be inconsequential to others in society.

A conversation with Bella during which she decided to leave the group showed how volatile the lives of women involved in this study could be. This conversation highlighted challenges inherent in women's pursuit of lofty goals when personal needs are more palpable and immediate:

*Bella: Yeah, I don't feel like doing this. I really don't feel like doing this anymore.*

*Darla: Do you mean tonight or any part of it?*

*Bella: Any part of it. You can use my pictures if you want but I don't want to do it.*

*Darla: Can I ask why?*

*Bella: Cause I really don't care.*

*Darla: Has that changed since we met last time?*

*Bella: I don't know, maybe. I'm going through a lot of shit right now and I have my own shit to worry about. I'm gonna take off now, okay? (Conversation from meeting #6)*

Acknowledgement of how personal needs and struggles of women take precedence over aims of the project was noted in my reflections:

*The meeting went awry when Bella referred to women in prison as “fucking idiots”, told us that she doesn't care, and she doesn't want to do this anymore. When I asked why she felt that way she said that she is going through a lot of shit and has her own problems to worry about. She left and I found myself dumbfounded. I sensed that she wasn't in a great place tonight but I certainly was not expecting this to happen. When I think about it now, I guess I always felt like Bella might walk away from the group at any time, however, I figured it would be due to work and school commitments rather than a lack of interest in the project.*

*When women internalize the dominant ideology concerning the identity of women in prison and what they prison deserve it can be paralyzing not only to the women, but also to a project such as this. Of course personal struggles, such as the struggles Bella is now faced with, can be so consumptive of the women's time and energy that they may have nothing left to offer in terms of their participation in the project (Reflexive notes, meeting #6).*

Further insight around the hopelessness that lingered over this project came during follow up meetings held with Bella and Misha. These meetings were intended to better understand how women experienced their participation in the research group and to discover how the process could have unfolded differently. Women's comments were illuminating with respect to why the group did not follow through on some of its objectives and why the group experienced setbacks in getting the action component of the project off the ground. Bella's comments confirmed one of the earlier suspicions I had regarding women's fear of failure and feelings of powerlessness. She speculated the group lost momentum because women were not used to having people rely on them and were not accustomed to following through with structured plans:

*I was talking to my sponsor the other day and he said when you're on the street, people don't expect anything of you so you never disappoint. For a lot of people, expectations fall through because they're not used to following through. As an addict you say you're*

*going to do this and if you don't show up people forget because we're all high when we made the plans. Like for me with school and trying to get my papers done, I'm struggling because I'm not used to this formal lifestyle. And with work, I started slacking a bit at work and I got a talking to. I started as one of the strongest workers and I was really interested and my interested kind of trickled away (Bella, follow up meeting).*

Other comments made by Bella highlighted the hopelessness women may feel when they no longer believe they have power to make change. While Bella initially thought she could make a difference by participating in this study, she eventually started to feel that her efforts were futile. Our conversation also shed light on participation and the difficulty women with mental health and addiction issues can experience when they try to focus their attention and energy on something beyond their own health and recovery:

*Darla: What was your initial interest in the study?*

*Bella: That my opinion could add something and make a difference.*

*Darla: Did that change somewhere along the way?*

*Bella: Yeah, I didn't think I could make a difference. My depression kicked in, my mom got sick, and I crashed.*

*(Bella, follow up conversation)*

I spoke about my belief in the potential for women who have been incarcerated to be agents of change as I spoke to Bella about Boudin's (2007) work describing women in prison who were instrumental in initiating change within the institution. While Bella seemed to be intrigued by this example of resiliency, she informed me that an important difference existed between women mobilizing while in prison and women lacking the impetus to push for changes in a more complex world:

*First of all you're dealing with people who are very jaded and who don't hold much hope for change to happen. This (article) is an interesting example of change but you gotta remember, these women were still incarcerated so they had nothing better to do with their time (Bella, follow up meeting).*

Bella also distinguished between women who have hope-filled plans for their release while still incarcerated and women who enter community only to have these plans fall through and get sent back to prison. Bella suggested that if this study involved women who are still in prison the information collected would differ when compared to what women actually experience when back in the community:

*The stories you would get from people there would be much different because when you're there it's all about the plan for when you get out. This plan, that plan, and then you notice how many people end up going back* (Bella, follow up meeting).

Bella's comments illuminated differences between the realization of empowerment within a prison setting and within society. Since experiences of oppression and powerlessness originate in society, working to overcome oppression and powerlessness outside of the institution would be a much more challenging undertaking.

For Freire (1970) oppression is associated with a fear of freedom since freedom requires responsibility and constant pursuit. Freedom also requires collective action since the "situation of unfreedom" can only be transformed when it is also pursued by others who are similarly afflicted. Thus, human solidarity is a requisite for freedom from oppression (Freire). An important contrast to Freire's ideas can be found in this study since it is through disconnection rather than connection that some women are working to overcome oppression. Women described purposely distancing themselves from other women who spent time in prison in attempt to personally transform their oppressive situations. Referring to efforts to resist sharing an identity with other women who have been in prison, particularly women who remain disenfranchised, Bella explained: "*It helps me to think that I'm different because if I think I'm the same it means I'm going to end up the same*" (Bella, follow up conversation). With this comment Bella was describing how power can be derived from breaking away from others who share a similar history of oppression.

Reid (2004) described how women living in poverty would sometimes feel powerless when they identified with others similarly afflicted. When they distanced themselves they felt like they gained a sense of power. Women who participated in Reid's study referred to individuals who fit the stereotype of the welfare recipient as "bad apples" unmotivated to change their predicament and who disempowered other more *legitimate* welfare recipients. Women in this study also perceived they had more power to make change when they distanced themselves from other women who have been in prison. At times they tried to distance themselves from the stereotype, emphasizing roles and connections that made them like others in society. At times they distanced themselves through a process of othering whereby they referred to the negative characteristics exhibited by other criminalized women but refuted their personal conformity to the stereotype. For example Misha contrasted her determination to move forward when she left prison with the indifference exhibited by other women in her halfway house: "*When I was in the halfway house I saw so many women sit on their ass and watch TV*" (Misha, meeting #4).

Women seemed to feel most powerless and lost hope in the social change process when they adopted the identity of the other. Missing research meetings, not following through with agreed upon tasks, and eventually disengaging from the project altogether were all rationalized by conforming to stereotypes that suggested women who have been in prison are unmotivated and deserving of their plight. Paradoxically these feelings of conformity, hopelessness, and powerlessness were most evident when women worked toward collective change. Conversely, examples of individual empowerment were evident as women discussed making change in their lives by going to university, volunteering, working, and joining social networks. These individual change efforts suggested that while they attempted to negotiate their identities and

resist stigma both at the individual and collective level, resisting a collective identity with women in prison seemed more conducive to individual empowerment.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I examined ways that inclusion, participation, action, and social change can be lofty ideals for a FPAR project. Exploring the ways difference, power, and identity infiltrate the research process provided insight into the complexities of engaging women who occupy positions of oppression and powerlessness in the work of social change. The following chapter examines the extensive agenda placed on researchers who seek to conduct FPAR within an anti-oppressive research (AOR) framework. I describe my feelings and assumptions, as well as my interactions with women in the project through the story of Enigma. I seek to unravel ways ideals embedded in a research process bring about the emergence of Enigma by emphasizing and scrutinizing conundrums faced by researchers.

## **Chapter Six: Aspirations and the Often Forgotten Dark Side of being an Anti-Oppressive Researcher**

In this chapter I scrutinize the extensive agenda placed on researchers and participants who engage in feminist participatory action research (FPAR) guided by anti-oppressive research (AOR). I begin the chapter with a description of what it means to do AOR and discuss its propensity for advancing ideals of action, personal commitment, and social justice. Embedded in this examination is an admission about the ways personal circumstances and research relations impacted the realization of such ideals. I also discuss the paradoxical nature of power and privilege by introducing Enigma, a composite of women who participated in the project. Describing scenarios involving Enigma helps me to trouble assumptions around power and privilege and uncover ways that multiple identities enter the research process and become problematic when held up against the ideals of FPAR/AOR. Finally, I discuss how pressures associated with research ideals can bring about unintended consequences. Researchers who openly grapple with such consequences may help to relieve pressure felt by other researchers and further expand our knowledge of complexities associated with participatory research.

### **Ideals of Action, Commitment, and Social Justice**

To say that I aspire to be an anti-oppressive researcher seems a bit redundant considering the alternative appears to be an oppressive researcher. However, Potts and Brown (2005) reminded me that becoming an anti-oppressive researcher involves much more than just good intention. They wrote:

*Being an anti-oppressive researcher means that there is political purpose and action to your research work...it means making a commitment to the people you are working with personally in order to mutually foster conditions for social justice and research. It is about paying attention to, and shifting, how power relations work in and through the processes of doing research (p. 255).*

As a researcher committed to the ideals of social justice, I found this approach to research to be personally inspiring. In some small ways I felt like I already started to do the work of social justice prior to the research project. When the idea for this project was being developed I felt like I was completely wrapped up in the struggles women at GVI had to endure. As a volunteer and research assistant, I was involved with women's daily lives in various capacities. I was an active participant in Stride Night, facilitated programs for women in maximum security, supported women as they volunteered at a supper club program within a long term care facility, regularly visited women on a one to one basis, and provided support to women entering community as a Stride Circle volunteer. Additionally, most of my weekends were spent accompanying women on escorted temporary absences (ETAs) away from the institution for up to eight hours while they visited with their families or attended AA meetings, church services, and community events. I was also a regular attendee at celebratory events held inside the prison, such as Pow Wows and other cultural programs, family days, Christmas parties, and high school graduations. When not at the prison, I supported women's charitable efforts by selling Christmas CDs they had recorded and obtaining pledges for their various fundraisers. Outside of my volunteer involvement, I was conducting research at the prison as a research assistant and I was writing about prison-related topics in most of the papers for my graduate courses. In my leisure time, I regularly socialized with friends who were also connected to women in prison either through research or volunteering or both. Conversations with these friends often focused on issues of social justice related to women we knew in GVI.

I have described the extent of my involvement here not to put the spotlight on my volunteer contributions, but to explain that for a period of time that spanned approximately six years I had established deep relationships with women in GVI and I felt like I often walked beside them in their struggles. I was, as Potts and Brown (2005) described, making a personal

commitment to mutually foster conditions for social justice. Thus, the extensive agenda imposed by AOR seemed within reach.

For Potts and Brown, doing anti-oppressive research means they do not begin to collect data in a community until all the dogs know who they are. Guided by the same principle, I believed anti-oppressive research was possible in a situation where I had come to know many women entering community and, in some cases, had also come to know their family members (including pets). There were, however, three unanticipated factors that impacted the extent to which I could truly be anti-oppressive in terms of shifting power relations in the research process and making a deeply personal commitment to women with whom I was working.

### **. . . And then my own life got in the way**

The first unanticipated factor was that at the time this research project began I was caring for my daughter who was less than four months old. In the years leading up to this project I was dedicated to providing support I believed women needed to help them survive their time in the prison system, maintain connections to their families and communities, and uphold a sense of their self-worth. However, my daughter's feeding schedule meant that I could only be away from her for approximately two hours at a time so the eight hour ETAs I was doing had come to an end. In fact, limited options for childcare meant that I had to give up volunteering at the prison altogether.

While I believed my volunteer hours at the prison made a difference to women at GVI, I also believed my engagement with women in this project would contribute to broader social change. I did not initially realize that caring for a new born baby would prevent me from devoting the same amount of time and energy to this project that I had previously devoted to

my volunteer endeavours within the prison. A substantial personal investment on my part could not be made – at least not to the extent that I believe anti-oppressive research required.

### **... And the members of the community changed**

The second factor I had not anticipated was that women I developed relationships with while volunteering at GVI were not the same women who participated in the research project. Most women I knew from GVI had either been released and moved to communities outside of the region or had been released and subsequently returned to prison. With the exception of one woman who was part of my Stride Circle, I had little or no prior connection to women who participated in this study.

Trust is not something that is easily fostered with women who are involved with the prison system and it is even more difficult to establish trust when the basis for connection is research. If, as Potts and Brown (2005) suggested, researchers must develop meaningful relationships with participants prior to engaging in research, I did not fulfill the prerequisites for conducting an AOR project.

### **... And waning passion through women's disinterest and researcher's frustration**

The third factor that I had not anticipated was the challenge around women not showing sufficient interest in the research and not embracing the idea of sharing decision making regarding the direction of the project. This glitch made it difficult to truly shift power relations in the research process. While I was not expecting this research project to be free of challenges, I was expecting these challenges to come in the form of personality conflicts, heated debates, and situations where one or more participants would periodically dominate research meetings. In other words, I expected the research process to be infused with emotion rather than disinterest. Women's lack of emotional investment in the research project, grouped

with my lack of prior connection with them along with my preoccupation with my new role as a mother made it difficult for me to find the passion I had felt previously while volunteering and doing research with women involved in the prison system. I believe that passion is essential when a researcher commits herself to issues of social justice in research. Without the passion to ignite people's emotions, it is difficult to provide leadership necessary to facilitate a collective commitment to social justice.

Leadership seems to be critical in situations involving collective action. The mobilization of collective efforts is enhanced by passionate leadership (Gegas, 2000) since issues around which people mobilize are often emotionally charged (Hercus, 1999; McAdam, 2004). Open and honest reflection about the ways which my leadership capability, or lack of it, impacted the research process required me to think about particular instances when personal circumstances and frustrations compromised my ability to incite collective action and caused me to regret not undertaking a less time consuming and more linear research process. During these times my resolve was greatly affected by the extent to which interactions with women either diminished my enthusiasm or provided me with the much needed inspiration to forge ahead with the project.

Reid (2004) admitted to feeling conflicted about losing compassion for women with whom she engaged in feminist action research. She described getting frustrated with women who did not demonstrate her level of commitment and often did not do "their work". There were several key moments during this research project when I was similarly frustrated by working with women who did not always show up for meetings or follow through on their commitments. There were also key moments when I was encouraged by women who, despite at times being overwhelmed by their own personal struggles for survival, devoted their time and energy to the project with the hope that their efforts would make life better for other

women leaving prison and entering community. Added to the complexity of trying to make sense of these inconsistent feelings was the realization that I sometimes experienced these feelings during various interactions with the same woman.

It is difficult to describe some of the key moments when tensions inherent in my interactions were most poignant without the perception that I am pointing a finger of blame at one woman while elevating the work of another. To alleviate this difficulty, I created a fictitious character, Enigma, who is a composite of women who participated in the research. By describing some of my relations with Enigma I aim to show how a participatory approach concerned with power differentials can expose paradoxes in the lives of researchers and participants. Each scenario captures the multiple identities we each bring to the research project and troubles the idea that the researcher automatically has power and privilege while marginalized participants are absolutely and always disadvantaged and powerless.

### **Arrival of Enigma: Troubling Assumptions and Deepening Understanding of Power and Privilege in the Hyphens: The Enigmatic Nature of Research Relations**

My intention in this section is to highlight the intricacy of power and privilege and challenge researchers to expand the way we think about these concepts. Current thinking seems to be dichotomous since it is often assumed that privilege and power is a status equated with researchers while research participants are always at a disadvantage in the research relationship. By discussing aspects of my relationship with Enigma I reveal how privilege and power can sometimes be fluid and ambiguous.

Potts and Brown (2005), suggested it is important for white, middle-class, able-bodied researchers to recognize our privilege and work “to dismantle the unjust systems that keep us in that privileged space” (p.258). I question whether it is fair to assume researchers automatically have privilege because there were certainly times throughout this project when I

did not feel like I was in a privileged space. Enigma's comments about her financial freedom would sometimes remind me that if privilege is equated with advantage, it is not a status I currently hold as a student. Enigma's references to material possessions were perhaps her way of distancing herself from other women in prison and aligning herself with members of middle-class society. However, whenever I heard about her extravagant trips and saw pictures of her beautiful house, it was difficult not to scrutinize the assumption of privileged researcher and disadvantaged research participant.

Various forms of privilege that exist can further complicate the dichotomous nature of privilege in research relations. This project, for example, brought to light privilege associated with status, economic freedom, and the privilege afforded to citizens deemed to be part of mainstream society. These forms of privilege show how privilege can be fluid and fluctuate as circumstances change. For example, economic freedom can be gained or lost and a change in circumstance can move someone from a marginalized status to a status of prestige.

Researchers working with populations who experience marginalization and oppression tend to reflect on how their relative privilege sets them apart from their participants (c.f. Reid, 2004; Trussell, 2010). This is considered to be sound reflexive practice helping us better understand who we are in relation to those we study (Fine, 1994). However, the literature pays little attention to situations where ideas of privilege become muddled and the impact this can have on research relationships.

A conversation with Enigma made the assumption of researcher privilege more unclear. In this particular conversation Enigma spoke to me about her plans to go to graduate school. At the time I remember feeling quite energized because I felt a sense of relief over a realization that her involvement in this research project did not diminish her desire to engage in future research. More notable, however, was my belief that Enigma would excel in graduate

school and her life experiences would help guide a transformative research agenda. Thoughts of Enigma as a future researcher add to ambiguity around assumptions of researcher privilege and give me cause to wonder: Would a graduate degree suddenly cast a woman out of oppression and into a life of privilege?

Reid (2004) contemplated the ways her privilege enabled her to easily do her work in a feminist action research project while women living in poverty experienced daily struggles that compromised their ability to participate. I assumed a similar disparity in terms of ease of participation would become manifest in this study. When I was writing the proposal for this research I thought about the need to provide assistance for childcare and transportation to minimize barriers for women to participate. Often these and many other barriers need to be addressed when women are faced with material scarcity (Ponic & Frisby, 2010). As it turned out I was the only person who seemed to struggle with issues around childcare and transportation. I was constantly worried that members of the group would decide they wanted to meet on days and times my partner was working and I would not have access to a car or childcare. Since meetings were being held in a central location women who did not have access to a car were easily able to walk. However, since I was living on the other side of town if I had not had access to a car, my only option would be to get to the meeting by bus. I was often concerned that if I ever had to travel by bus I would have been forced to cut the meetings short in order to ensure I would be back home in time for my daughter's next feeding. Issues around transportation and childcare caused me a bit of anxiety when it came to getting to one meeting in particular. I considered trying to re-schedule the meeting but I knew it would be difficult to find another day and time that worked for everyone. Besides, there were things Enigma agreed to follow up on from our last meeting so I felt it was important for this meeting to proceed as planned. I arrived at the meeting only to find out that Enigma did not follow up

on what she had previously agreed to. Not only had she not followed up, she also seemed a bit indignant about me asking her to do something she clearly viewed as my work.

Gatenby and Humphries (2000) found participation in feminist participatory research to be dependent on what is going on emotionally for women involved and how they see the research integrating with their own lives at particular times. One meeting in particular provided me with a glimpse of how Enigma's participation in the project was influenced by her emotional state. She arrived at this meeting looking like she on the verge of tears and contributed very little to group discussion. After suffering in silence for most of the meeting, Enigma left early and indicated that her personal problems were hampering further participation in the project.

While Enigma seemed to be grappling with issues of powerlessness around her own life circumstances, one way for her to maintain a sense of power in this research project was to determine her level of engagement and when to stop participating. However, when Enigma exercised this power, it rendered me powerless over the research process. This experience highlighted the difficulty of 'sharing power' throughout a participatory process. As Chataway (1997) discovered when she engaged in a PAR project with a Native community, sharing power is not always operationalized according to the ideal involving a mutual process of negotiation; rather sometimes acts of power by participants diminish a researcher's power rather than share it.

Unexpectedly, my unsuccessful attempts to share power with Enigma throughout the process meant by the end of the project I was left with an uncomfortable feeling of having too much power. Without her involvement in the analysis of the data, I control the aspects of Enigma's life that get written about in my dissertation and other public spaces. Indeed, whatever I may write in an academic journals or present at an academic conference will be

offered from my vantage point. She does not have the same opportunity to make her voice heard. Thus, ironically, the times I felt most powerless by not being able to engage Enigma more fully in the research project were the times when the power - power over interpretation and dissemination remained in my hands.

The idea of power is seldom examined from the perspective of personal power researchers may derive from participants who demonstrate acts of resilience in their lives. As I discuss below, some of the interactions I had with Enigma provided the impetus I needed to continue with the project at times when I experienced a sense of powerless most profoundly.

Before heading off to our meeting at Tim Horton's I was trying to feel optimistic about the way things were going but a feeling of self-doubt was more pronounced. The ideals I had for this project were not being realized and it seemed like nobody could envision the potential for this project to have any kind of impact. Looking back, I realize I was also going through a phase where I was getting down about not being able to invest myself in the project to the extent I had initially intended. Juggling responsibilities at home while engaging in collective research was proving to be a daunting task and I was filled with doubt that I would be able to persevere.

As we sat in Tim Horton's chatting over coffee, Enigma discussed some of the challenges she was faced with in terms of managing her addiction, gaining full custody of her children, and finding an affordable place to live that would be suitable enough for her children. She spoke about times when she barely had enough money to pay her rent yet she would find ways of ensuring her children had access to healthy meals. She also spoke about how her boyfriend who had upscale accommodations in another city wanted her to move in with him but she chose to remain in an apartment that seldom had running water so she could spend time with her children before and after they went to school. Perhaps without even

realizing it, Enigma illuminated for me the extent of sacrifices she made so her children would be comfortable and happy. Interspersed between her personal stories she conveyed her enthusiasm for this research project and described how she hoped women coming out of prison would benefit from our collective efforts.

This conversation with Enigma was like a wakeup call that I had better find some of the altruism and determination that she was demonstrating in order to forge ahead. I was deeply moved by Enigma's willingness to be involved in a project she saw as benefitting others when her own struggles seemed so overwhelming. When she spoke I knew she really believed in the project's potential and she provided some clear direction on how to get other women on board. I started to feel ashamed that before our meeting I allowed myself to wallow in self-pity over the challenges I was experiencing – challenges which in no way compared to those of Enigma.

Each of these experiences with Enigma provides insight into the ways that identities and experiences of researchers can shift throughout the research process in relation to the identities and experiences of participants (Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). Fine (1994) argued for researchers to critically locate themselves in their research process when she discussed “working the hyphen”. When we engage in transformative efforts with people who are marginalized we are working the hyphen:

By working the hyphen I mean to suggest that researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that are all multiple in those relations (p. 72).

Underscoring the importance of working the hyphen in participatory research, Reid (2000; 2004) argued for the researcher to move beyond researching only others and also research ourselves in order to understand our relative power and privilege within the context of the research. Trying to understand issues of power and privilege through my relations with Enigma not only captured the ways multiple identities can surface throughout the process of

doing research, but how these identities can be problematic when held up against the ideals of FPAR/AOR.

### **Participatory Ideals Increasing Research Pressures and Propensity for Blame**

Discussing the ideals associated with participatory research, McGuire (1987, p. 127)

wrote:

The literature is full of the rhetoric of revolutionary change and social transformation and outlines an extensive agenda for the novice. I paralyzed myself with doubts about my ability to meet the agenda.

Like McGuire, I was both inspired and intimidated by the ideals embedded in this research project. Such ideals and the pressure they place on researchers and participants can bring about the emergence of Enigma in the research process. Times when researchers and participants meet expectations and times when we fall short of these expectations withstand less scrutiny when the methodology is less idealistic. Reid (2004, p. 227) reflected about the expectations placed on researchers and participants and wrote:

I was seduced by the promise of these lofty ideals – collaboration, social change, emancipation from poverty and powerlessness. But what is really being asked of the researcher, the researched, and the research process? And when such massive expectations are unmet, who's held to blame?

When an extensive agenda is established to guide a research project before it even begins it is easy to understand how pressure to meet the agenda may cause one to feel a need to assign blame when things do not go as planned. However, I suspect blame is less likely to rear its head in research when such lofty ideals are not imposed.

Despite having an awareness and appreciation for the turmoil some women were experiencing, there were times in this project when my anxiety over the challenges associated with scheduling meetings and frustration around women not following through on meeting expectations started to foster feelings of blame. During these times it felt like some women's

actions (or inactions) were preventing the project from moving forward. Blame was also directed inward when I felt like I could not demonstrate the leadership necessary to facilitate collective action.

Feelings of blame, which were both uncomfortable and extremely unfair, had never before arisen for me while engaging in qualitative research. Yet, there were other times when I experienced research complications that were not vastly different from those experienced in this project. For example, setbacks caused by participants not showing up for previously arranged interviews have occurred in previous qualitative research projects. While these complications may have caused some minor inconvenience, they did not cause anxiety or frustration in any way comparable to what I experienced during this project – and they certainly did not result in a tendency to assign blame.

One important difference between this project and previous qualitative research projects is that in previous projects I did not feel pressured by the same daunting level of expectations. I endeavoured to adhere to sound research practices and obtain rich data while engaged in other projects. With this project, however, my expectations were much higher – I was in search of social change and I hoped collaboration with women would begin to foster that change.

Pressure that comes from lofty ideals may lead researchers to struggle with issues of blame, possibly resulting in them blaming themselves or blaming others when lofty ideals fall short. While blame is undoubtedly an unintended and unfair consequence of such lofty ideals it should not be a deterrent for conducting research intended to foster inclusion, participation, and social change. As more researchers grapple with balancing high research expectations and share their experiences, others may look to these experiences to help guide ambitious and idealistic research projects. Each time researchers write candidly about the challenges

encountered while engaging in participatory research, we are contributing to a shared understanding of the complexities inherent in the research process. Knowledge acquired from one project that did not go as planned can be used to guide another project toward a more inclusive process. Each time we discuss our tensions, expose our vulnerabilities, and share our rewards and challenges we contribute to a collective movement toward social justice.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I discussed how the ideals of action, personal commitment, and social justice place a heavy agenda on FPAR guided by AOR. I introduced Enigma as a way of troubling assumptions around power and privilege and uncovering ways in which multiple identities enter the research process. When as researchers we grapple with the pressures associated with research ideals and share our experiences; we may support others in developing an appreciation for their own research complexities and help to relieve some of the pressure they experience. This chapter and the previous chapter have highlighted the challenges around inclusion that are inherent in an idealistic process. Chapter Seven focuses on the contested nature of community that is often idealized and implications for women who are seeking inclusion in community after release from prison.

## **Chapter Seven: The Contested Nature of Community and Ambiguity of Inclusion for Women Leaving Prison**

I was essentially concerned in this study with how women experienced social inclusion and social exclusion in community. I posed questions during Phase One of the project to spark dialogue and arrive at a shared understanding. Questions pertaining to feelings of belonging and the ideal community provided insight into women's experiencing being in community before and after incarceration. Further insight came from photovoice. Women took many pictures that provided the basis for discussions around community. When I analysed data from our group meetings, photovoice, and follow up conversations, I found that women's descriptions of their actual and ideal community differed from idealized notions of community that exists in the literature.

The ideal of community is associated with the perception that being part of a community can meet a number of our fundamental needs; specifically our need for mutual association and belonging (Christenson & Robinson, 1980). However, it has been recognized that while we may want and need a sense of community, growing numbers of people do not have access to adequate social supports and experience difficulty feeling like they are part of a community (Brown & Hannis, 2008). This chapter explores the contested nature of community and how idealized and normative it can be at times. This ideal is compared to and contrasted with the kind of community women experience before and after a period of incarceration. Women described times when they felt they were being pushed out of community and times when they were being pulled into community. They also highlighted tensions around the necessary supports and resources for personal change and growth as they negotiated issues of

responsibility. These themes reveal the ambiguous nature of social inclusion for women who have broken the law and raise critical questions about social justice.

### **Feeling Pushed out of Community: Vulnerability to Exclusion and Stigma**

In this section I describe complexities associated with seeking to belong while faced with insufficient supports and resources, threats to independence, and feelings related to difference and stigma. At first glance, the ideal of community may seem to offset this complexity, suggesting that as women become part of a community they will share in its promise of inclusivity and belonging. However, it has been argued that the ideal of community, offered as a response to prevailing conditions associated with alienation and fragmentation, provides a totalizing perspective of community that denies difference (Young, 1995).

Exclusion, in the form of feeling pushed out, was experienced by women in several aspects of their lives and impacted the extent to which they could relate to notions of the community ideal. For all nine women, the ultimate form of exclusion was being sent to prison. Each woman who participated in this project identified with feeling pushed out of community when they were removed from their communities and subsequently incarcerated in a women's federal prison. Misha captured their shared experience of incarceration with her picture of GVI (see Figure 1) and explained, "*This is where I ended up. This is where we all ended up*" (Misha, photovoice).



*Figure 1: Grand Valley Institution for Women.*

It has been argued that the contested nature of community and its push toward shared identity and common values has a tendency to repress difference and exclude those who do not share in its commonality (Young, 1990). The exclusionary consequences of valuing community can be seen in descriptions of women's experiences. Women felt excluded because they were not participating in the types of activities they considered to be the norm and because they did not have access to the same standard of living enjoyed by other members of the community. Two commonly recognized indicators of exclusion: lack of participation in mainstream activities and deprivation of resources associated with an accepted standard of living (Taket, Crisp, Nevell, Lamaro et al., 2009) reveal the normative aspects of inclusion. Practices of exclusion disproportionately impact people who are unemployed, poorly educated, homeless, single parents, as well as people with disabilities, addictions, and criminal

records (Rose, 2000; Taket et al., 2009). These practices cause one to question whether the ideal of community creates any room for difference.

Exclusion was most evident when women invoked notions of the ideal of community and its attendant promises. The promise of community, as described by Bauman (2001), holds that when we belong to a community we can count on each other's good will. At times women spoke as though they believed that when they entered community they would receive much needed help and support from community members and this support would enable them to feel included. Missie, for example, explained that if there were sufficient resources in place for women entering community after incarceration they may start to feel like they are included upon release:

*(Lack of) housing has made me not feel included in the community. I feel I am being discriminated against because of my record. If I had more help from the community, from the resources that are supposed to be there to help you be part of the community, then I would feel like I belonged (Missie, photovoice).*

Feeling pushed out of community started long before women went to prison and persisted after they were released. This theme highlights challenges for women who do not feel a part of mainstream society because their experiences with poverty or addictions preclude them from measuring up to a normative ideal. Lucy described this normative ideal as having a family, money, social support, and good health:

*Sometimes I feel like I don't belong in society because of my past, because I don't have family, because I don't have money, because I don't have proper support, because I'm a drug addict, because of my health (Lucy, meeting #1).*

During one of our conversations Missie posed and reflected on the following question: "Where do we fit into society when we get out of prison?" This question not only gets to the core of this theme, it gets to the heart of the study. Some women in this study had a history of poverty and addiction which presented challenges in terms of fitting into society. These

challenges often led them to withdraw from society and not participate in conventional ways.

Liz contrasted people she considers to be part of normal society with people who have addictions based on the ability to participate in society:

*Because most of society aren't addicts. Most of society are normal, working people with children and they're working or going to school or whatever. They're participating. They participate in life. So part of being normal is participating. When you're an addict, you're not participating in society (Liz, photovoice).*

Bella also distinguished between a life characterized by addiction and homelessness and a life considered to be more in keeping with mainstream society. She explained her experience of incarceration captured only one aspect of her life that did not fit with society's standards:

*"I'm not coming from just being in jail for six months, I'm coming from living off the streets, selling drugs"* (Bella, meeting #2). Bella then discussed the idea that belonging to one fraction of society (e.g., a group of street people) necessitates being excluded from another (e.g., the big brother society):

*In terms of belonging for me there has to be an us to belong to and a them that's not like us. For me that's happened at different parts of my life. Like when I was on the street I felt like I belonged and I felt safe when I was around other street people and I felt like I didn't belong to them, the big brother society, you know, the man (Bella, meeting #2).*

Tina emphasized the difficulty associated with being included in a society when there are scarce resources available for women after incarceration. She stated: *"being incarcerated for a long period of time, people have a very hard time living in society. Trying to live on what society wants you to live on is hard"* (Tina, photovoice). To illustrate her point, Tina took several pictures (see Figure 2) capturing the extra assistance she required just to obtain such basic necessities as food and clothing:



Figure 2: Tina’s montage of needed support.

When Tina spoke about these pictures she explained it was necessary to have her history of incarceration exposed to qualify for support: “(We) get a letter from the (the halfway house) which we take to the Salvation Army...I took the picture of the sign because when getting released from jail we do not have much money so we need to find deals for clothing” (Tina, photovoice). Missie further emphasized stresses associated with becoming established in community when resources are scarce. She spoke about the challenge of re-gaining custody of her children while faced with limitations in providing for their needs:

*I’ve only been living here for a month and I don’t want to go to my landlord and tell him that I can’t afford the place. So I joined the food bank. I paid \$9/month so you can go through the food bank store. It’s good to a point but they only have certain things. I don’t want my kids to feel like they’re going to live with mom so they can’t have fresh fruit anymore (Missie, photovoice).*

Christie discussed the necessity for improved resources available to women after they leave prison. As she explained, there is unlikely to be positive change for women who return to an unhealthy environment without any transformation in circumstances:

*If I could change one thing I would change the resources that are available for establishing a new normal for everyday living. I'm not the only one who's seen women get out of prison and go right back to the environment that was unhealthy, unsafe, and problematic in the first place. How can someone change their life if they go right back to the same neighbourhood, the same friends, abuse, addictions? For a person to change their life, they need to have a change of fundamental circumstances (Christie).*

**Support as a threat to independence, sense of self, and difference.**

While women spoke about supports and resources necessary to achieve inclusion, they also expressed concern about what this meant for their autonomy and sense of self. For some, accepting the good will of people in the community meant losing their individuality and independence. In these situations women made choices to remain on the margins of community to maintain autonomy. Lucy, for example, attempted to live on her own when she was fourteen because she believed supports available in the foster system would rob her of her independence:

*They wanted me in foster care and they wanted to take care of me until I was eighteen but I wanted to be owner of myself. So I went to the courts and got emancipated at fourteen. The criteria to be emancipated is that you have to have your own place and a full-time job. Well that didn't last long. I was on the streets about half a year later. That's a lot of responsibility for a fourteen year old (Lucy, meeting # 3).*

Similarly, Sloan explained her need to be independent and take care of her own needs caused her to resist seeking help from available supports: “before I wouldn't reach out to any of my friends and I was not the type of person who would go to a food bank. It just wasn't me” (Sloan, meeting # 2). Bella described living on the street as an attempt to escape the need to rely on anyone else for support. Although her mother was able to assist her financially, Bella recalled how she was reluctant to accept it: “she didn't help me a lot. I don't know; I just

*didn't like to accept it*" (Bella, meeting # 2). Tina also expressed strong feelings about not wanting to accept help from family. She spoke about a lack of housing options available when she leaves the halfway house and explained she would rather be homeless than rely on family for housing support: *"Well, when I leave here [the halfway house] I am basically homeless. I can go live with my dad but I would rather go live on the street than live with my dad"* (Tina, photovoice).

Tensions between community and individuality were highlighted by Bauman (2001) who argued that community may promise security and belonging but it deprives individuals of their freedom. The dichotomy between individual and community can be seen in distinctions between liberalism, which views individuals as relatively autonomous, and some strands of communitarianism, which privilege the priority of the group and value collective responsibility (Delanty, 2003).

Arai and Pedlar (2003) have drawn attention to the communitarian belief that an individual's social self cannot be separated from the community to which she belongs. Self-identity is derived from the social self; developed within the contexts of mutuality, connectedness, and community ties (Arai & Pedlar). Thus, while women spoke of independence, the notion of the social self brings into question whether they can truly be independent from community since it is within community that they acquire and maintain their identity and sense of self.

Women also considered resources and supports available to assist with entering community to be counterproductive if they did not take into account their differences. There was discussion during one of our research meetings about plans for a halfway house in this Region. Everyone agreed this would be a welcomed resource for women planning to settle in this area. However, women also identified ways the halfway house, in its proposed form,

would not meet their reintegration needs since they perceived it would exclude certain spiritual beliefs and lifestyle choices. The following conversation between women during group meeting #5 describes how community supports intended to benefit women may unintentionally lead to feelings of exclusion:

Sloan: *This halfway house is going to be religious though, right? There is going to be prayer built into it.*

Bella: *What? Fuck that. I'm a Jewish Lesbian for Christ sake.*

Sloan: *Exactly.*

Misha: *Well you have other choices though.*

Bella: *Yeah, but what if you want to come here? What if your family is here?*

Misha: *I know. I don't agree with the religious aspect but you have the choice not to go to it. They can't force you to go there and pray.*

### **Stigma and exclusion.**

Women often described feeling pushed out of community because of the enduring stigma of incarceration. Bella, for example, highlighted difficulties associated with fitting in and belonging at university while psychologically carrying the label of inmate:

*In university I'm struggling with that. I hope this year I feel like I'm part of it, like I belong. But I have to admit last year it was hard for me. Sometimes you feel like you have a stamp on your head that says inmate. But I'm feeling like I do belong there. I have a right to my education (Bella, meeting #3).*

Karen explained a lot of fear is attached to trying to find a job when women perceive they are being stigmatized on because of their past: *"There are just so many fears. When you've been in for a long time and you come out there's the fear of looking for a job, fear of people looking down on you."* Feeling stigmatized also has a detrimental effect on sense of belonging. Missie pointed to a relationship between the ways women believe they are perceived by society and feeling like they belong in community. After moving from a place

deemed unlivable to a place she considered upscale and located in a nice community, Missie took a picture of her new place (see Figure 3) and explained, “*I never thought I belonged in a nice community like this*”.



*Figure 3: Missie's new accommodation.*

When I asked Missie why she felt this way she commented:

*because of the lifestyle that I'm used to, getting out of prison, still being on parole, not having a lot of money, not having my kids. So I wasn't very confident about where I should be and where I would fit in the community.... And if you look at the way society looks at criminals and people who have lost their children, they don't think we're good people, they don't think we deserve any better than what we have or we don't deserve as much as they have. So that's (previous accommodation) where I thought society thought that I belonged (Missie).*

Reid (2004) described women in her study as being stereotyped and simultaneously rendered invisible. They were stereotyped as *welfare mothers* who were lazy and resistant to change. These stereotypes concealed their real needs and experiences, causing them to feel invisible and excluded from the social fabric of community. Similarly, women in this study

described how their needs and experiences were invisible to others because as Missie described, they were stereotyped as not being “good people.”

Goffman (1963) defined stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (p.3). He explained that an attribute that stigmatizes one individual may validate the normalcy of another individual. Using an example of a middle class boy and a criminal entering a library, each with a different awareness about how they are being perceived by their actions, Goffman explained that stigma captures a “special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (p.4). In this case, the middle class boy would have no qualms about being seen by others as he enters a library while a criminal may prefer that his action goes unnoticed.

As Goffman’s example illustrates, feelings of stigma can result in self-regulated exclusion whereby individuals restrict their participation in community spaces based on how they think or feel they are perceived by others. Felt stigma has been found to strain social situations and constrict social networks (Cook, 2009). Women believed people they encountered in community automatically knew about their prison experience. These feelings effectively strained social relations and made it difficult to foster connections with others. Sloan, for example, described how feeling different and feeling stigmatized had a detrimental effect on belonging:

*Even with my family, who adore me when I’m there, I don’t feel like I belong. I feel like I’m different. I’ve been estranged for so long that it’s really hard to get connected again (Sloan, meeting #2).*

Isolation associated with a woman’s search for belonging while feeling different from others was echoed by other women. For example, Christie stressed how her love of learning and interest in science was a difference that caused her to feel disconnected from other women in the halfway house. However, since she was not in a position to connect with others who share her passion, Christie explained that a feeling of belonging was elusive:

*I feel like I belong when I'm learning about science, math, Shakespeare, formal logic... I hope to find other people who get passionate about these kinds of things when I go to University, because right now I often have a one-sided connection with authors and teachers. I feel like I don't belong a lot of the time when I'm in the halfway house or in program groups. I just have a different outlook, different values and different goals from a lot of the people who surround me (Christie, telephone conversation).*

Christie added that people often create a sense of belonging or inclusion within their particular social group. However, she also recognized the challenges for people to feel included within groups they did not choose. As her comments suggested, Christie would not likely choose to associate with women who are on parole if she was not living in a halfway house:

*I'd argue that groups of people make their own pockets of inclusion, such as within different economic classes, different ethnicity, the criminally active population, etc. Currently I'm surrounded by a certain kind of pocket of social inclusion and I don't fit in. Where are the nerds? They're not on parole, that's for sure (Christie, telephone conversation).*

Reid (2004) described that women she worked with who were living in poverty felt their stigmatization caused them to be culturally excluded; they were kept from fully participating in the culture of the dominant society. Similarly women who participated in this study spoke about feeling stigmatized because of the dominant discourse regarding what women who have been in prison deserve. Examples of cultural exclusion were evident when women indicated their participation was strained while attending university or when they perceived they did not belong while living in a nice home.

Although feelings of stigma were quite real for women, some women spoke about the perceived nature of stigma since it was something they carried internally. Liz described how women tended to believe everyone knew their history when this was often not the case: “*Yeah, sometimes you feel like everybody knows even though nobody knows and nobody cares*” (Liz, photovoice). A conversation with a support person helped Missie realize that despite how she

feels she is perceived by others, most people in society cannot detect anything about her past when they meet her:

*Well I mentioned to one of my supports that every time I went out I felt like I had 'crack head' written on my forehead and that everyone knew I used to use crack and I was in prison. And she said, "you know, if I didn't meet you in prison I would never have thought that". That one thing she said changed my whole perspective (Missie, photovoice).*

Bella reflected on the effect stigma has on women's feelings of acceptance and belonging. She concluded that while the stigma of incarceration is something that women carry inside, it is also something that exists in society:

*Stigma is probably the biggest thing that's both something within you, like the fear within you of what people think of you but it's also a reality because people do think of you differently if they know (Bella, follow up conversation).*

The contested nature of community has been criticized for its denial of difference and propensity for exclusion, prompting some theorists to call for a group differentiated understanding of community. Young (1990), for example, argued:

The most serious political consequence of the desire for community, or for co-presence and mutual identification with others is that it often operates to exclude or oppress those experienced as different (p. 234).

Women's experiences were in accordance with Young's critique. This section highlighted how feelings of exclusion appeared to be most pronounced for women when they viewed community as relatively homogenous and recognized ways their social status and life experiences made them different and susceptible to stigmatization. The next section describes ways women were pulled into community and found inclusion from social supports and judgment free spaces.

## **Being Pulled into Community: Social Supports and Judgment Free Spaces**

This section captures support women derived from groups, sponsors, volunteers, helping professionals, and reassuring family members. Women considered social support essential for establishing connections in community. This theme also captures the comfort found in judgment free spaces where women were not made to feel different.

In meeting # 2, Bella highlighted the need for women entering community from prison to have people available and willing to welcome them:

*We're talking about getting us involved in community. Well, the word community comes from the word communal – to share something. So it's not a community unless we're in it and we're sharing it with others. And we can't get into it unless we have people who are already on the inside pulling us into it, helping us.*

With this comment, Bella acknowledged the sharing aspect of community and suggested that for community to be shared, people must help others be included.

Women described having access to various forms of social support pulling them into community when they were released from prison and they attributed this support to helping them feel included. However, such support can be contrasted with idealized notions of community because it often did not develop from mutuality and shared experiences but rather help for their disenfranchised circumstances. Social support is often conceived as psychological and material resources intended to help people manage adversity and cope with stress (Cohen, 2004; Thoits, 1995). Researchers have often emphasized the importance of social support for women entering community. Richie, Freudenberg and Page (2001), for example, explained that supportive relationships are essential for providing women with the strength they need to resist being pulled toward substance abuse, familiar yet abusive relationships, and past criminal behaviours. Similar acknowledgement of the importance of supports was made by women in this study when they explained that volunteers, family

members, support groups and social groups were integral for helping them get re-established and resist the pull of addiction.

Lucy explained that having a support group in the community was critical for helping her make the transition to community, particularly in the absence of family:

*They drive me places if I need to go places, they do one on one counseling, they give me vitamins and bus tickets. They've just been there for me and I don't have family so having that has been huge. So my support group is something that I really leaned on. If I feel like putting a pipe to my lips I call them and they talk me out of it or they come and get me and we go for coffee (Lucy).*

Being able to call people in a time of need helped Lucy manage her addiction. She admitted she would be struggling to be in community if it were not for her support: *"If I didn't have the support I have, I don't know. I couldn't even imagine"* (Lucy, meeting # 1).

Christie described difficulty meeting new people while she was in the halfway house. With limited opportunity to develop meaningful relationships, she explained she was especially grateful for the time spent with members of her Stride Circle. As She commented, *"Challenges include making positive connections with others (due to a) limited ability to meet anyone. Things that have gone well include being in touch with my Circle"* (Christie, telephone conversation).

Sloan considered support from her Stride Circle to be integral to settling in a new area:

*So I decided to come to Kitchener and I went into transitional housing. I had huge support from my Circle. I was new to this city and they helped me. They went above and beyond the call of duty. I reached out to people that would help me (Sloan).*

Family members supported and helped pull them into community. Missie, for example, credited her family for giving her the strength to overcome whatever adversity she experienced since being in community. Almost every picture she took for the photovoice project featured her fiancée and children. She happily explained, *"The main message in all of these pictures is that I am very fortunate I have a family of support"* (Missie, photovoice).

Missie also credited close relationships with family and community supports for enabling her to feel she belonged in community: *“I feel like I belong because of the people I surround myself with, like my kids, my supports... I feel like I make myself belong. I have the strength and confidence to do that now”* (Missie, photovoice). Missie attributed her achievements since being back in community to the sense of determination that grew from being reunited with her family. She presented a picture of herself with her children in their newly acquired accommodation and explained: *“This is me (and my kids) in our new place. It’s the first place I can call ours in four years so it’s quite an accomplishment for me”* (Missie, photovoice). In this picture Missie had on a smile that could light up a room as she held her children closely.

Tina also expressed the importance of family for helping her feel a sense of comfort and connection to community. She showed me a picture she took of her standing arm in arm with her daughter and explained: *“Here is a picture of my daughter and me. I get comfort from being with my family”* (Tina, photovoice).

Missie recognized not all women coming out of prison have family to depend on and she doubted whether some women would find the strength and resilience needed to make it on their own in community: *“I’ve been very fortunate that I have been able to do this but what about the women who aren’t as strong and don’t have support? They’re not going to make it”* (Missie photovoice). She also pointed to the need for women to have supports in community that extend beyond family and explained her Stride Circle volunteer made it possible for her to make inroads into finding employment:

*This (picture) is of me and my Stride support. She is also my Christian mentor. I met her through a Chaplaincy program at GVI and then she took the Stride training so she could support me in the community and she’s just been amazing. Since I’m struggling right now financially I made up a flyer to do some cleaning and she’s given it out at church so I’ve gotten a couple of odd jobs that way* (Missie, photovoice).

With this picture Missie captured the closeness and caring she shared with her Stride support as they were hugging each other and laughing.

### **Mutuality and connection beyond stigma.**

Women described their relationships with social supports as empowering since they provided the strength needed to overcome adversity. It was unclear from our conversations whether these relationships were also mutual. Women talked about what they derived from these relationships but did not talk about what they gave back. In other research, women who left prison with support, for example the support of Stride Circles, discussed having the type of relationships that were mutually enhancing and based on reciprocity (see Fortune, Thompson, Pedlar, & Yuen, 2010). Lack of discussion about mutuality and reciprocity in this study may have meant that supportive relationships described by women had not yet grown into something beyond a volunteer-recipient arrangement.

The very thought of receiving support without giving it back appears to be counter to normalized notions of community rooted in mutuality. However, this contradiction may be indicative of differentiated opportunities for people to offer support. In the absence of authentic relationships and when women's need for support is high, their connections with others may have been, by necessity, based on superficial interactions. References to social support were, for example, usually described in terms of "what others do for me". Thus, while women are being pulled into community through forms of social support, supports may be insufficient for women to feel belonging or inclusion in the idealized community if they are not based in mutuality and reciprocity. The association of mutuality with an ideal has been made by Baumeister and Leary (1995) when they explained mutuality may be desirable rather

than essential for satisfying one's need to belong. Arguably, for women to move beyond being recipients of social support there must be equity in social relations. Yet for women leaving prison with insufficient resources and feelings of disconnection (Pedlar et al., 2008; Pollack, 2008; 2009), equity in social relations is difficult to achieve.

Women can feel alone when they enter community in the absence of family and community supports. Misha's experienced of loneliness during her transition phase and identified a need for women who have already transitioned to support other women entering community:

*I think it would be great if women who come out and are successful could help other women come out and be successful. You know, give them information on housing and information on jobs, that kind of thing. Like a support group that meets once a month. When I came out I felt like I was totally alone and it would have been nice to have someone to talk to (Misha, follow up conversation).*

Pollack's (2009) research highlighted the importance of peer support and friendship for women who enter community after incarceration. She explained that when women get released from prison they are often unfamiliar with community resources; have difficulty forging new relationships, and ultimately feel disconnected and *othered*. Women in Pollack's study considered connecting with other women who shared the lived experience of a prison sentence imperative for minimizing feelings of isolation and stigma. While Misha identified a need for women who transitioned from prison to community to support others going through this phase, other women in the study indicated they preferred to distance themselves from women who have been in prison, opting instead to seek assistance from volunteers and support groups. These associations seemed to help women disconnect from the prison population and feel more connected with others in community.

Misha eventually found some of the support she needed to be pulled into community by joining a social group. She took a picture of women in her social group, The Red Hat Society,

and explained, “*(We are) women over fifty who want to get together. (We) wear red hats and purple outfits and we really don’t give a shit what people think of us*” (Misha, photovoice).

While Misha joined the Red Hat Society to find connection in community, a reading of Goffman’s (1963) work suggests she will not truly find belonging within this group.

According to Goffman, people who are part of a stigmatized group can only be their authentic selves within this group. He further argued when a person is stigmatized, he or she can be part of other groups but can never really be considered as one of them. Not only does this idea offer little hope for women in this study to move beyond their criminalized identities and make meaningful connections with others in the community, it also suggests stigmatized individuals can be pulled so far into community but cannot belong. This idea also suggests that individuals and groups are stigmatized when community, holding to normative ideals, tries to renounce difference.

The mission of the Red Hat Society emphasizes building relationships with other women and, beyond the requirement of being female; there are no restrictions on who can join (Son, Yarnal, & Kersletter, 2010). Thus, it appears to be a group to which any woman can conceivably belong. It is also considered to be a group from which women can access social support in a non-judgmental environment (Son et al.). However, a strict dress code and a busy social schedule would likely preclude women who are not financially well off from either joining or feeling a sense of affiliation with other members.

The Red Hat Society is just one example of a group women may choose to join as a means of finding connection to people beyond their stigmatized group of formerly incarcerated women. Yet if Goffman’s argument holds true and women in this study can never truly belong to a group which does not share their experiences of stigma, it follows that women may continue to find themselves in superficial relationships with people in helping

roles where they find some form of social support but will unlikely feel any true sense of inclusion.

**Need for formalized supports.**

In addition to social supports, women also felt they were being pulled into community through formal support systems offered by community organizations. For example, Tina took a picture of a methadone clinic (see Figure 4) and described it as a place that provides a much needed service for women entering community while struggling with addictions: “*(This) picture is of the methadone clinic; they are there for us to help us in our addiction*” (Tina, photovoice).



*Figure 4: Methadone Clinic.*

Tina also took a picture of the Ontario Disability Support Plan (ODSP) Office (see Figure 10) and explained they provide financial support to women with a criminal record who cannot find employment:

*This is what all (women) who are on parole should go for. They would not have a hard time getting it...it is very hard for a parolee to get hired because they are not bondable. It's way better than just welfare 'cause you get more money (Tina, photovoice).*



*Figure 5: Ontario Disability Support Plan (ODSP) office.*

Tina captured the need for places in community where women would be welcome to work despite having a criminal record. She took a picture of McDonald's (see Figure 6) and described it as a place that contributes to a sense of belonging because it does not discriminate in its hiring practices by doing criminal record checks: *"They don't do a CPIC on you and you don't need a grade 12....if you are hired here you get benefits which would help a lot"* (Tina, photovoice).



Figure 6: McDonald's

**Judgment free spaces.**

In addition to relationships with people in community, women described their relationships to community spaces. Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon and Foster-Fishman (2006) found the meanings assigned to community spaces can have substantive implications for individuals' sense of self and sense of belonging. Women discussed the importance of having community spaces that were judgment free where people either did not know about their criminal past or if they did know, treated them no differently than anyone else. When describing the ideal community Lucy stressed: *“Feeling comfortable in your surroundings, non-judgmental, like, I’m not going to look down at the kid with the Mohawk. Everyone is different and that’s okay. It takes all different people to make a community”* (Lucy, meeting #1). Liz and Karen also recognized the value in having organizations in community that are judgment free and make them feel comfortable. They took a picture of Dundas Community Services (see Figure 7) and Liz described it as: *“(one of the places) where I feel most welcome. They don’t judge you”* (Liz, photovoice).

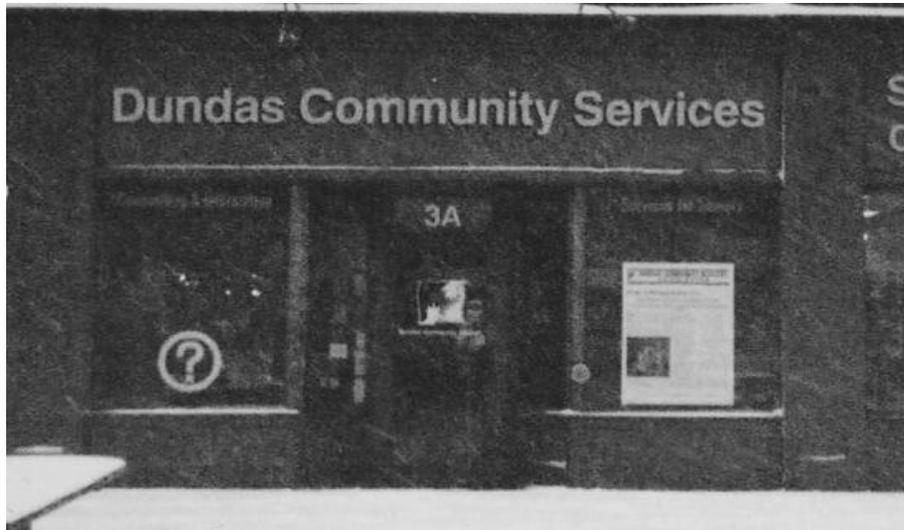


Figure 7: Dundas Community Services.

Liz expressed her appreciation for services and amenities available to assist women as they enter community when she said, *“I think this community is doing a pretty good job with having the halfway house here. Dundas is very close to that ideal community. People here are friendly”* (Liz, photovoice).

The need for judgment free spaces was also found to be prominent for individuals who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless (Trussell & Mair, 2010). Similar to participants in Trussell and Mair’s study, women in this study valued spaces where they were accepted without having their various stigmas exposed. Tina, for example, took a picture (see Figure 8) of the place where she attends Home of the Heart meetings. She considered it to be a place she can belong and not feel the stigma of incarceration: *“This is where I go for my Home of the Heart meetings. They don’t make you feel like you’re a criminal. They’re there to help no matter who you are”* (Tina, photovoice).



*Figure 8: Space used for Home of the Heart meetings.*

Liz expressed a similar appreciation for a program where she felt welcomed each time she attended:

*We love our program at Woman Kind. They are always so positive. It is really comforting to be there. I look forward to going there on Wednesdays. That probably is a place where I feel most welcome. They don't judge you (Liz, photovoice).*

Similar to the study by Trussell and Mair (2010), women found opportunities to be in the community, surrounded by others, and still maintain a sense of privacy. Women sometimes experienced a certain degree of anonymity while visiting commercial establishments. Tina, for example, took a picture of Tim Horton's (see Figure 9) and explained: *"I enjoy going there because no one knows who I am and they are not judgmental. Besides, it's always nice to have a Timmies every now and again"* (Tina, photovoice).



*Figure 9: Tim Hortons.*

Women also expressed appreciation for public spaces in community where their history of incarceration was revealed but they were not made to feel any different than everyone else who used the services. For example, Liz took a picture of the library (see Figure 10) and explained she did not feel looked down on by library staff even though they could tell by the address on her library card she lived in the halfway house:

*Like going to the library, they know when you're from the halfway house but they don't treat you any different. I often have a problem with the machine to sign things out and when I tell them that they are right there to help just like I was somebody else. I don't feel looked down on when I'm there (Liz, photovoice).*

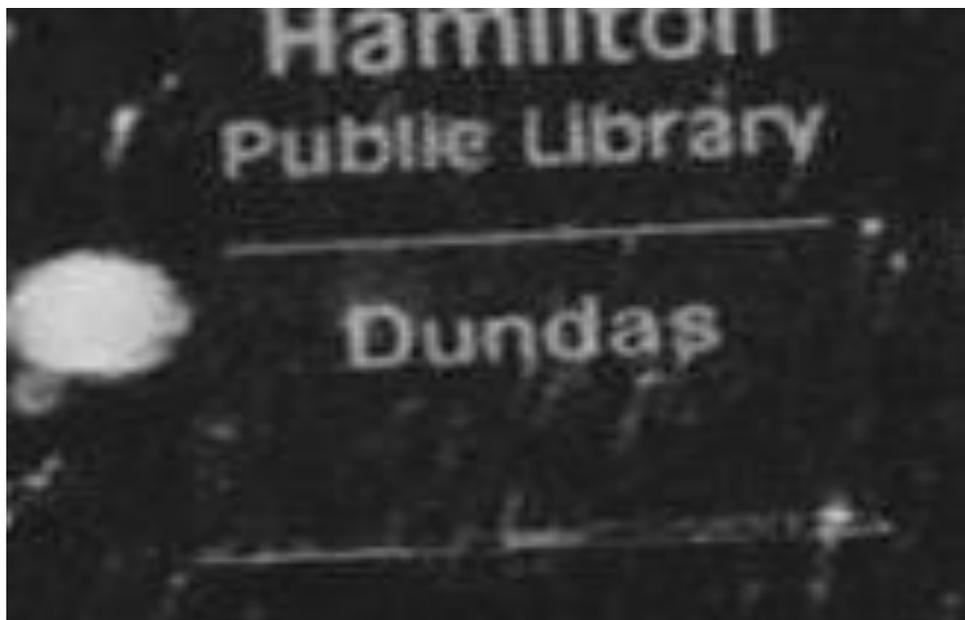


Figure 10: Hamilton Public Library.

Similar to Liz, Karen's view of acceptance was tied to the idea of not feeling judged. She explained she gets this kind of acceptance when she visits her mother in a nursing home: *"I go visit my mom in the nursing home every day...I feel comfort there because they don't know (about my past) and they don't care. They don't look down on you. They just accept you for who you are"* (Karen, photovoice).

While a central theme in Trussell and Mair's (2010) work was the participants' need to connect to the broader community in ways of their own choosing, women in this study often did not explicitly seek out connections with others while in community spaces. However, when women feel comfortable and confident enough to be themselves in community, the stage is set for connections to be forged based on acceptance and natural affiliation.

As a departure from the ideal of community and its propensity for identifying with others based on commonality, judgment free spaces seemed to remove pressure for women to conform to dominant expectations of behaviour to gain acceptance. Young (1990) described a normative ideal of city life as an alternative to the ideal of community. She explained, "In the

city persons and groups interact within spaces and institutions they all experience themselves as belonging to, but without those interactions dissolving into unity or commonness” (p. 237). Social differentiation without exclusion was possible in spaces where women felt they could be themselves, be anonymous, be different, just be.

Acceptance and judgment free were widely considered by women to be the cornerstones of the ideal community. For example, when asked about her ideal community, Karen quickly answered with: *“Acceptance. Acceptance of everybody. Like don’t judge people because of the way they look”* (Karen, photovoice). Liz gave a similar answer in response to the question about the ideal community. She took pictures of Shoppers Drug Mart and Blockbuster (see Figure 11) because these were places she frequently visited and felt welcome. When I asked about the significance of these pictures she said, *“I’ll go back to what I said about being non-judgmental. So you know, whether it’s Blockbuster or Shoppers Drug Mart or wherever, it’s about feeling accepted and not judged”* (Liz, photo voice).



*Figure 11: Welcoming spaces.*

The sense of belonging women found in commercial spaces was not surprising given what we know about the potential for third spaces to be inviting, social spaces. Oldenburg (1999) used the term “third places” to describe settings which host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16). In these settings people have the option to choose whether they want to be anonymous and whether they want to be social. Elements of choice and voluntary association seemed to be particularly important for women in this study as they sought welcoming, comfortable spaces in the community where they determined their level of interaction. Being free to choose the nature and extent of one’s interaction is considered to have positive implications for belonging. Cheang (2002), for example, studied older adults who frequently spent time in a fast food restaurant and discovered that because these adults could congregate on a voluntary basis they were able to find a sense of belonging in an environment that enabled them to simply be.

When considering the notion of third places and their potential to foster a sense of belonging through non-obligatory social interactions (Cheang, 2002), it is easy to see the value these places may have for women whose lives are often scrutinized through formalized control networks. It is also difficult to ignore the potential for exclusion that exists in commercial spaces, such as fast food restaurants, where the only requirement for entry is the exchange of money. As we have seen in the previous theme, feeling pushed out of community, women's limited access to the financial means necessary for fully exercising choice impacts the opportunities they have to spend time in some of the judgment free spaces they identified.

### **Comfort in nature.**

The feeling of comfort women derived from certain public and private spaces in community extended to spaces in the outdoors where they could spend time in nature either alone or with their families. For example, Karen and Liz showed me a picture of Liz smiling and looking peaceful as she was standing in front of a waterfall and explained, "*We like stuff like that, nature trials and stuff like that*" (Karen, photovoice).

Tina considered her enjoyment of nature to be something she shared with other women at the halfway house. She took a picture of a snow-covered tree and described it with great enthusiasm: "*(This) is just a beautiful tree with snow on it. We enjoy the nature and its beauty, the calmness of things; we find peace in stuff like that*" (Tina, photovoice).

Missie's appreciated the outdoors for its positive memories and connection to her family. She had her picture taken at a park where she has spent a lot of time with her children and explained this park is a place she still enjoys being with her children:

*Ever since my kids have been young we've gone there. We've gone fishing with the kids, there is a walking trail and (my daughter) was really infatuated with the geese so that's why we have this picture (Missie, photovoice).*

This section highlighted a sense of belonging and affirmation women found in community when they had social support and access to judgment free spaces. However, as I suggested throughout this section, a sense of belonging and affirmation may be fleeting in the absence of authentic relationships. Social support provided through service recipient arrangements and judgment free spaces void of any real connection raises doubt about whether women will experience social inclusion in community. This idea is explored further in the next section as women discuss issues of responsibility in community entry as they relate to social inclusion and social justice.

### **Negotiating Issues of Responsibility in Community and Insights on Social Justice**

This section sheds light on where responsibility should lie when it comes to social inclusion. Dominant discourse assumes that social inclusion for women who have been incarcerated means they must enter community as responsible citizens. In this section I reveal tensions in the way women think about responsibility as they waver between change as conformity and change as a process of cooperation.

The idea that women should take responsibility for making changes in their lives after incarceration has been critiqued by Pollack (2007). She explained that as a consequence of living in an individualistic society, women who do not self-reform will be unlikely to experience social inclusion upon release from prison. As Maidment (2006) and Pollack (2008)

have argued, notions of self-reform remain unchallenged as long as neo-liberal policies shape the way society responds to issues affecting members of society who are most marginalized.

### **Change as conformity.**

Women in this project identified things that needed to be changed when entering community and often suggested it was up to the individual to take responsibility to enact this change. Bella effectively captured women's proclivity for individual responsibility when she explained: "*You gotta fall in line. So either you're in society or you're outside society*" (Bella, meeting # 2). Misha was also quick to acknowledge that if she wanted to be part of community she had to make it happen:

*I'm the one who has to make the step because for the longest time I sat home waiting to go out but being afraid that everybody knew what I did. You know, how do I explain where I've been? Now I'm more into going out and shedding that past so I'm more into my community now* (Misha, meeting # 2).

In a conversation with Bella, Lucy indicated that despite changes needed in the environment to which women are entering, focusing solely on external factors undermines women's resiliency and capacity to re-direct their lives away from crime:

*Bella: Some people think the consequences aren't harsh enough to stop people from going out and committing crime. I don't think it's that the consequences aren't harsh enough; I think it's that the environment hasn't changed enough for these people to have a good reason not to commit crimes.*

*Lucy: Well we have a good reason not to so what's any different? It's because we **want** to change. I'm making myself have a good life. I want better for me. I want to end the cycle. My mother was the same – my mother was me. Her mother was her. I'm just stopping the cycle. I refuse to be the victim* (Conversation from meeting #3).

Lucy argued that responsibility for self-reform should start while women are still incarcerated. She provided examples of opportunities available for women to improve themselves and suggested prison offers women a new start in life.

Lucy: *Well, you know if you want to take that negative situation and let it be a negative situation or you can take that negative situation and turn it into a positive situation. Get your grade twelve, do all the courses, take the college courses that they offer and then become a better person. It's an opportunity to start clean with a fresh slate, right?*

Darla: *So you think prison does work on some level?*

Lucy: *I think the two of us are proof of that. (Conversation from meeting #3)*

I reflected on how the idea of accepting personal responsibility became a main topic during meeting # 3 and how this effectively diminished any focus on changes needed in the community to which women were returning:

*The conversation around their individual life circumstances was illuminating for me. Bella and Lucy both emphasized the importance of taking personal responsibility for making change. Initially Bella spoke about changes that are needed in the environment, an idea which I had very much wanted to pursue. However, when Lucy acknowledged she had overcome much adversity to make positive changes in her life, the conversation moved toward one of personal responsibility. It seemed as though Bella and Lucy believed if they could turn their lives around, other women entering community should be able to do the same. (Reflexive notes, meeting #3)*

There were times when I also struggled as I tried to balance personal responsibility with the need for social change. In meeting # 3, I caught myself accepting normative constructions of responsible citizenship as indicators of women's achievements in community. In this meeting, for example, I really wanted to explore changes needed in the environment because I believed this conversation would help us find an issue for our collective focus. However, as I described in my reflexive notes, I also appreciated how a focus on positive changes Lucy and Bella made in their post-prison lives enabled us to put a spotlight on individual achievements and recognize their capacity:

*Women seem to have a paradoxical view of their experiences in community. They recognized that changes to the environment are needed and expressed interest in addressing things that will improve the environment to which women are entering (such as discriminatory practices, access to housing, and need for support). These changes were identified based on their personal experiences with discrimination and housing issues. Yet they have both accomplished a lot since they have been back in the community – they are working, volunteering, and going to school. Acknowledging these*

*accomplishments was a way to bring their knowledge and skills into the study. While I was hoping we could delve deeper into what changes are needed in the environment, steering the conversation in this direction may have minimized the value of their accomplishments (Reflexive notes, meeting #3).*

I discovered that while there was value in recognizing women's personal achievements and capacity, it came with the risk of holding other women who have been in prison solely accountable for making similar positive changes in their lives. This risk played out during a meeting when Bella and Misha both described women coming out of prison as being unmotivated and unwilling to help themselves. As I wrote in my reflexive notes, I was concerned about how this depiction can easily lead to victim blaming:

*There were a couple of comments made tonight that had me concerned. First, Bella explained that I am dealing with women who are not very motivated. It was like she was offering me this insight as her excuse for not putting effort into the project. The second comment that concerned me was Misha's. She explained that it is important to keep things simple and easy for women in prison. She then spoke about being in the halfway house with women who just sat on their asses all day watching television and took no initiative to find housing. I can't help but wonder, if this is the opinion they share will there really be a commitment to improving the housing situation or will we just end up speaking in a way that places blame on women entering community for their lack of housing options (Reflexive notes from meeting #4).*

Women acknowledged certain changes had to be made before women entering community could really belong. Changes identified were individual in nature and suggested a desire to conform to normative standards. For the most part, these changes pertained to the way women presented themselves in public. Bella, for example, described changes she felt she had to make pertaining to her manner of dress:

*When I got arrested and I was on bail living with my mother she said, "You can't continue to dress the way you dress. You have to start to dress like you're a member of society." I used to wear those baggy pants and I looked like a wannabe black boy. Over time I've come to terms with it but every now and then I still like to put on my comfortable clothes and I don't care what people think of me because I look good and I feel good. I had to change that to become a part of society and I had to look a certain way to fit in (Bella, follow up conversation).*

Similarly, Karen identified the way she dressed as the first thing she would have to negotiate to fit with others and find a job: *“I’m not a dress up person so what if I have to dress up to go for an interview? I don’t like to dress up. But do I have to change that? Maybe a little”*

(Karen, photovoice). Misha explained that perception plays an important role in finding a job and emphasized this as an area where women need the most help to conform to society’s expectations:

*Maybe what has to be done is to go to the halfway houses and this is where you start teaching them how to do a resume, this is where you teach them time management, this is where you teach them how to dress for an interview so they’re not going to an interview with their jeans hanging half way down their ass. So teach them etiquette because it’s all about perception. That’s how society works, it’s all about perception (Misha, meeting # 4).*

Misha viewed attempts to make society more accepting of women who had been in prison as futile. For Misha, effort needed to go toward changing women. She explained:

*Well I think one of the things that has to be done is women have to lose their prison persona when they come out. You’re not going to be able to change society’s mind so you have to change the women. You know make them more approachable. I don’t know what it is. Like people look at me and they don’t think I’ve been in jail. People look at (name of another woman in the group) and they think she’s been in jail. It’s all about image (Misha, follow up conversation).*

Some women willingly embraced taking individual responsibility for making changes they deemed necessary for inclusion. Liz, for example, acknowledged changes she made in her life that helped her participate and feel she was part of society. She spoke about these changes in a positive way:

*Darla: One of the main ideas I want to explore in the study is the idea of inclusion. What does that mean to you?*

*Liz: I think it means being part of society again. Doing normal, everyday things and being part of the community.*

*Darla: What would be an example of a normal, everyday thing?*

*Liz: Going to a movie, going out to dinner, going to the grocery store. All the things I wouldn't do before because I felt like an outsider. These are all the things that I'm doing now and I'm enjoying being part of society again.*

Similarly, Bella gave herself credit for maturing and taking positive steps to mend relationships with her family which were strained during her self-described younger, more rebellious days. She captured these changes with two pictures and explained:

*These [pictures] are just two different stages of my life. [In this picture] you got this kid and [in the other picture] you got this woman. [In this picture] I'm fifteen and I'm actually giving the finger to my Dad who is taking the picture and this picture is of me with my arm around my father (Bella, photovoice).*

In Bella's first picture she is sitting on the street among other youth and they are all looking defiantly at the camera and Bella is holding up her middle finger toward her father. Bella's second picture suggests a feeling of contentment as she is standing close to her father, smiling brightly, and has her arm around him.

Tina's participation in photovoice captured her need to change to avoid stigma and be accepted. Tina explained that to feel comfortable enough to take pictures for the project she pretended to be a student: *"I felt part of it. I enjoyed taking pictures and I told everybody that I was working on something for my school project"* (Tina, photovoice). Her decision seemed to reflect dominant societal assumptions about productivity and acceptable social status. Tina understood that a student is likely to be more favourably looked upon by members of community than a woman living at a halfway house.

It is not surprising that women in this study bought into notions of responsibility since this idea is privileged in the correctional system. As Hannah-Moffat (2000) explained, CSC's rhetoric around shared responsibility and empowerment has been used to make female offenders responsible for their own rehabilitation. The discourse of empowerment adopted by CSC highlights the need for changes in structural inequities experienced by female offenders

and the need for changes in female offenders (TFFSW, 1990). Hannah-Moffat argued, however, a model of empowerment for women who are federally incarcerated can be more aptly termed a model of individual responsibility. Empowerment is considered to be a process which supports women to gain insight into their situation so they can take positive action to assume control over their lives. The state is no longer responsible for women's rehabilitation; rather women are now expected to rehabilitate themselves (Hannah-Moffat). If a woman is not able to change her circumstances, it is believed she lacks the ability to make choices necessary to guide this transformation. Pollack (2004) has been quick to point out, however, that a lack of consideration is given to the idea that the same choices are not equally available to everyone (Pollack, 2004).

### **Individual responsibility for change versus cooperative approaches to change.**

Conversations with women during this project mostly focused on the ways they needed to change. Change was often not considered within the context of limited choices. Insufficient attention was also given to the ways community may need to cooperate with a woman's push for change and help open up access to additional choices.

Missie stressed the role community ought to play in supporting women trying to make changes in their lives: "*The community and people around us have to help us make that change. If more community got involved in the transitional phase, accepting us and being more of a support*" (Missie, photovoice) Bella also emphasized the need for support to change but as her comments suggested, she felt conflicted about the extent to which this support is already available:

*I think the person needs to change but society needs to give them opportunities to change. The problem is I want to say that but the reality is that there are so many opportunities out there, like free resume writing workshops, free social services. There is a place for everybody to go out and get support. I want to say that society needs to*

*change but at the same time there is a lot of help available (Bella, follow up conversation).*

Despite feeling ambiguous about supports and choices they had available, women generally agreed that changes in public perception were needed when it came to women entering community. These perceptual changes were deemed necessary to move closer to a community of acceptance and judgment free space. Public awareness and knowledge were identified as necessary ingredients for change. As Karen explained, people's perceptions about women entering community might change if they had more knowledge: *"We're not all bad people. So I think that stereotypes are something that I would like people to get knowledge about and maybe it would change their perception"* (Karen, photovoice). Similarly, Liz considered education and knowledge to be necessary to curb judgmental attitudes and behaviors toward women. She believed if people acquired knowledge, they may have a different point of view about people whom they would ordinarily judge as the *other*:

*People who don't know and don't know what to expect will judge but if you give them knowledge and educate them they might start to look at it from a whole new perspective. You know, it's like now that I talked to you, now that I know you as a person, I might have a totally different outlook. So it's education and knowledge (Liz, photovoice).*

When I asked women what they wanted to accomplish with this research project they indicated they were most interested in bringing knowledge and awareness to the public. Missie captured this interest with the following comment:

*Just to bring awareness to the struggles we have coming out of prison; the struggles we have fitting into society... I think there has to be more awareness from the general public that women getting out of prison are in an unfortunate situation (Missie, photovoice).*

Some women also voiced skepticism, however, about how much potential there is to change societal perceptions of women entering community after incarceration. For example, in our

follow up conversation Misha spoke about people living with adversity who she felt would and should receive societal support before women who have spent time in prison:

*Misha: Why should society support someone who is living off society when they can support a single mother who is out working and needs child care? Why should my money go toward that person instead of someone who needs it? My sympathies don't lie with – my sympathies don't even lie with myself.*

*Darla: Do you think society has a responsibility here at all?*

*Misha: Yes, but a lot of women coming out of there don't take responsibility for themselves. So you can understand why society has that fear. I mean they already spent \$90,000 rehabilitating that person or thinking that they're being rehabilitated, not knowing that there isn't any rehabilitation in there. Maybe society needs to be educated and the doors need to be open and it needs to be shown that there is no rehabilitation in the system*

(Follow up conversation).

While Christie did not seem to believe such a community could exist, she described wanting to live in a community where there is shared responsibility among citizens; in which there is equity in resources and support available to people facing adversity. For the community described by Christie to be a reality, deep seated changes are needed at the societal level:

*I don't know how this could be possible, but I'd also like a community with well-developed resources available to all for dealing with life's problems. I believe ending up in prison comes after a descent down a long slippery slope, and an ideal community would be able to intercede and help before things got bad with at least a large amount of the current incarcerated population (Christie).*

Women who participated in this study suggested that support from community may not always be forthcoming when it comes to helping address challenges women leaving prison face as they enter community. Some women spoke about not being able to find or access community resources they thought should be available to help them find connection to community. Other women questioned whether people in the community would or should care about women getting out of prison and speculated about where the responsibility lies when it

comes to women getting re-established in their post-prison lives. Christie's comments about prison being the end of a descent down a slippery slope which signifies community's failure to intervene earlier highlighted the sheer absence of support available from the community before a woman enters prison.

The breakdown of community resources for women who go to prison is a trend that can be seen elsewhere in the literature. Women who participated in Pollack's (2008) study, for example, referred to situations where they felt their communities had failed them before they entered prison. Indications of inadequate levels of community support for women who end up in prison can also be observed by the overreliance on the penal system to manage social problems (Wacquant, 2001). Wacquant referred to the international trend of prisons for women becoming *prisons of poverty* since persistent cycles of poverty and dependence are often precursors to women entering the prison system.

An interesting parallel exists between the perceived decline of community and the observed increase in society's use of discipline. Jacobs (2004), who lamented over the loss of community in her book *Dark Age Ahead*, described the enormity of functions that must be performed by today's family and determined that belonging to a functioning community is the only thing that can make performing these functions possible. Sadly, as Jacobs argued, loss of community is marked by a decline in personal encounters between diverse groups of people who share in the needs of community. According to Jacobs, when community does not emerge to help meet the needs individual families struggle to meet, we begin to see an increase in the use of punitive measures targeted towards those who cannot fulfill their responsibilities.

Women in this study expressed ambivalence regarding where responsibility lies when it comes to a woman being included in community. They held two opposing beliefs: women leaving prison should be ultimately responsible for making personal changes that contribute to

their inclusion, and also women cannot do it alone. Recognition was given to the notion of an ideal community where, as Christie described, there is shared responsibility among citizens; a community in which there is equity in resources and support available for people in the face of adversity. For this ideal community to be a reality, a shift is needed, away from individualism, and toward a more socially just society.

**A shift away from individual responsibility toward social justice.**

Women in this study realized they were culpable for offenses that brought them to prison and expressed wanting to make positive changes in their post-prison lives. At times they conveyed a sense of powerlessness and desperation in the face of such overwhelming life challenges. Exposing their vulnerabilities, some women held fast to a belief that members of the community were an integral part of their quest for change. Other women held firm to the belief that women leaving prison should be responsible for making personal changes that would ultimately contribute to their inclusion.

As women negotiated issues of responsibility, there was an underlying tension around whether the ideal community, social inclusion, and movement toward social justice can ever be a reality. Indeed the idealized community and its assurance of inclusion may seem like a fabrication for individuals who have broken the law (Pedlar et al., 2008; Pollack, 2008). As Foucault (1975) pointed out, the act of breaking the law means the criminal is seen as having offended all of society and must be punished so society may obtain retribution for the crime. The resulting exclusion can be difficult to overcome.

The challenge of overcoming exclusion associated with offending society is most evident in dominant language around notions of self-reform and “redeemability” (Maruna & King, 2009). Uncritical acceptance of reformation and redemption suggests individuals who

have been convicted of crimes are in constant state of flux where their acceptance is always impermanent and fragile. One example of an *offender's* constant search for redemption involves the use of pardons. Sealing a person's criminal record by way of a pardon is considered to be a significant step in the reintegration process and official acknowledgement of society's forgiveness (Ruddell & Winfree, 2006). According to the National Parole Board (NPB) of Canada (2003), a pardon is a "formal attempt to remove a stigma for people found guilty of a federal offense who, having satisfied the sentence imposed and a specified waiting period, have shown themselves to be responsible citizens" (p.1). While setting aside a criminal conviction is intended to remove stigma and reduce barriers to employment (Ruddell & Winfree, 2006), the very notion of a pardon makes it difficult to imagine how social inclusion for individuals who have broken the law is even possible. Can individuals ever really feel included when they are considered to be part of a group that despite having served time and having made retribution, still need to be pardoned for what they have done? Worrall (1997) provides a discouraging response to this question:

While the term [community] may appeal to a warm, nostalgic sense of "belonging" among the self-proclaimed law-abiding citizen, its promise of inclusivity can be interpreted in contradictory ways when applied to those who break the law and are criminalized. Far from demonstrating that it is resourceful, tolerant, and healing, the community is then rejecting, excluding and intolerantly punitive (Worrall, 1997, p.47).

If we view social inclusion as a goal of social justice we begin to see the ways shared responsibility is required for women's inclusion in community. Reid (2004) explained, "(social) injustice is how people are excluded, the depths to which they suffer, and the obligations we bear in this regard" (p. 245). From this statement we can infer that social justice is how people are included and the obligations we also bear in this regard.

Inclusion for women who have offended may seem unconscionable in a society that prides itself on the strengths of individualism and an ability to overcome adversity. However,

crime does not occur in a vacuum (Fortune, Pedlar, & Yuen, 2010). Rather, as Christie previously described, crime usually arises out of social conditions fostered in society. Thus, it seems a society that accepts and nurtures these conditions ought to share part of the responsibility for the adverse effects created and help to take steps that lead to social change.

Women in this study needed to make changes and they recognized this need. After enduring years of social and personal betrayal within community (Fine et al., 2004) they predictably found it difficult to accept that community suddenly has a role to play in supporting these changes. However, if we can admit to social injustices present in society, we must also admit that inclusion, as a measure of social justice, is a social and therefore shared responsibility.

## **Summary**

In this chapter I described the complex and ambiguous nature of social inclusion in the lives of women entering community after a period of incarceration. While women in this study acknowledged how support from community helps them feel included upon release from prison, they also discussed personal experiences with feeling pushed out of community when they did not have access to resources they considered necessary to be part of society. This chapter also captured opposing views regarding personal and shared responsibility for inclusion.

A common thread running through the past four chapters revolved around the notion of an ideal. In Chapter Five I wrote about the ideals of inclusion, participation, action, and social change inherent in feminist participatory action research. Chapter Six focused on the ideals of action, personal commitment, and social justice embedded in anti-oppressive research. Consideration in Chapter Seven was given to the contested nature of community and its

idealized notions of ideal of mutuality and belonging. Chapter Eight brings the learning from these chapters together and suggests a way of providing support in community that acknowledges difference and inclusion and acknowledges the need for broader systemic changes. By offering alternative approaches of working toward inclusion, a vision of inclusion, and ideas for future projects, it conveys a message of hope around continuing to work toward an ideal.

## **Chapter Eight: Insights into Negotiated Identities, Difference, and the Move to Collective Action**

In this chapter I build on the previous discussion of identity, difference, collective action, and community, and explore these ideas in the context of the social movement literature. When I developed the proposal for this study I believed bringing women together who share similar histories of oppression would result in a shared understanding of their experiences and lead to the pursuit of a collective solution to problems of exclusion. From relationships I previously developed with women at Grand Valley Institution I was aware of some issues they experience upon release from prison and the critical insight they have about these experiences. I was also quite familiar with women's agency and their potential to resist oppressive structures; however, I have also come to understand it can be very difficult for women who have been involved in the correctional system to stop the prison experience from being an ongoing and defining characteristic of their lives. Women who have been incarcerated are frequently perceived by the public as evil, exploitive, bad or mad and this perception makes it difficult to "envisage a collective response in the formation of a social movement such as other oppressed groups have managed to forge in seeking to end their oppression and domination" (Fortune, Pedlar, & Yuen, 2010, p. 1983).

This research project was not necessarily intended to spark a social movement but it was an attempt to collectively imagine alternatives to exclusion for women entering community and the experiences of oppression described by Freire (1970) and Young (1990). It was also an attempt to explore with women possibilities for acting collectively from a strengths-based perspective to create change. Freirian principles involving the acquisition of group knowledge for purposes of transformation that guided this project are principles that guide many social

movements. Thus, comparisons and contrasts to the literature on social movements helped illuminate some of the reasons why movement in the form of collective action did not occur in this research project. In this chapter literature on social movements is explored with particular attention given to ways identity and difference can belie collective action. Alternative approaches of working toward inclusion are considered and a vision of inclusion that supports difference is offered. This chapter concludes with a hopeful note that suggests a continued commitment to work toward the ideal of women *in community*.

### **Negotiated and Fluid Identities: Impediments to Collective Action**

Identity is a central aspect of collective action; however, as I discovered during this project, when women's identities are in a state of negotiation and change they may not be ready for collective action around an identity they are trying to move beyond. According to Weeks (1990) "identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others" (p. 88). Polletta and Jasper (2001) defined identity as an individual's emotional and cognitive connection to a broader group. This connection, they explain, is usually accompanied by positive feelings for others in the group. Women in this project shared emotional and cognitive connections resulting from common experiences of incarceration; however, these connections did not translate into positive feelings for each other or other women who spent time in prison. Part of women's dissent toward their mutual association came from their desire to establish new identities that would provide them with a sense of individual legitimacy.

Calhoun (1995) discussed the fluid aspect of identity and recognized that to some extent identities are always changing. Identity changes for people as they seek to transform themselves. Calhoun also acknowledged tensions and inconsistencies among individuals'

various identities and group memberships. Such tensions become evident when people, not tied to any strong identity claims or communality, opt for individual solutions to problems rather than working collectively for social transformation. What I found deeply concerning in this project was that women could not often see beyond notions of self-reform so they worked toward changing themselves and searched for inclusion and acceptance by adopting pro-social identities. Women spoke about making individual life changes such as going to university, joining the Red Hat Society, volunteering, and starting a home-based business. While these changes helped women embrace new identities and find acceptance, they also placed each individual woman at the centre of the solution to social problems related to exclusion.

For women to move beyond seeking individual solutions to problems, they must develop a common understanding of their experiences (Taylor, 2000). Collective agency is believed to be dependent on whether individuals in a group achieve a shared social identity (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1995). The assumption is that shared identity is considered by members of the group to be a positive identity since motivation to participate in collective action is linked to a desire to be part of a valued group (Klandermans, 2004). Linking collective action with positive group identity is not always helpful if the goal is to invoke collective action among members of groups who are stigmatized. Stigmatized or subordinate group identities can be disempowering (Bell, 1997) and feelings of powerlessness are typically associated with inaction (Kelly & Breilinger, 1995).

Reid's (2004) work highlighted how an identity of a poor woman can have a major impact on the extent to which she feels a sense of power. She explained that poor and unhealthy women are often depicted as *the other*. When women who participated in Reid's research most closely identified as the other they felt powerless. Conversely, when they distanced themselves from this depiction, they gained a sense of personal power. Similar to

Reid's research, this research project showed how women can find personal power by detaching from a stigmatized group identity. Unfortunately, for some women, personal power came at the expense of developing critical consciousness about the systemic oppressions that keep them in the subjugated position as the other and contribute to their exclusion. As Britt and Heise (2000) suggested, "it is hard to see one's stigma as deriving from social oppression when one lacks appreciation for anyone else being in a similar predicament" (p. 261). In other words, the more individuated the response to oppression, the more difficult it is to find collective agency.

Identity politics help explain how collective action is possible when women develop critical consciousness. Engaging in identity politics involves claiming an identity as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group and celebrating that group's uniqueness as well as analyzing its oppression (Woodward, 1997). Polletta and Jasper (2001) described that membership in a marginalized group brings with it a distinct political voice and efforts to frame an identity around oppression and inequality are intended to spark collective agency toward changing those conditions. McAdam (2004) explained that identity politics are used for purposes of collective action when people who claim an identity as a member of an oppressed group "feel both aggrieved about some aspect of their lives and optimistic that, by acting collectively, they can redress the problem" (p. 204).

Identity politics are central to social movements, particularly since the aim of many social movements is to replace shame with pride by altering social responses to and definitions of stigmatized attributes (Britt & Heise, 2000). Polletta and Jasper (2001) identified changing a group's identity as a primary movement goal and Bernstein (1997) explained that people use social movements to either search for acceptance of a previously stigmatized identity or to deconstruct categories of identities. Social movement activities suggest that people who

experience stigma are members of a definable plurality who recognize their commonality when they get together (Britt & Heise, 2000).

Literature on social movements and identity politics highlights the potential to mobilize women by bringing them together to analyze their collective experiences of oppression and exclusion. However, this literature does not help explain women's hesitation to form a collective around the stigmatized identity of formerly incarcerated women. I suspect that one reason for their hesitation may be resistance to having their identities defined by others. The fluid aspect of identity (Calhoun, 1995) and the association of one's identity with a sense of belonging (Weeks, 1990) and connection to others (Polletta & Jasper, 2001), makes it clear to me that women in this study do not necessarily benefit from identity politics that encourages them to claim an identity as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group, particularly when this shared identity is being constructed by others (Polletta & Jasper, 2001).

Young (1989) explained that when a marginalized or oppressed group is defined by others, members of the group often find kinship in their oppression. However, when participants in social groups do not have an identity imposed on them they have more freedom to engage in the construction of who they are (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This point seems to be particularly salient for women involved in this research. While in prison, women may think of themselves as a collective, particularly since collectivism emphasizes "common fate, distinction from out-groups, and shared norms and standards" (Deaux & Reid, 2000, p. 186). Women in prison share the common fate of a prison sentence and a criminal record as well as norms and standards associated with living in an institution. "Distinction from out-groups" is evident by the restrictions imposed on them and the loss of freedom they must incur while incarcerated.

As I discussed in Chapter Five, Boudin (2007) provided an example of women in prison embracing a sense of collectivism to address common issues experienced within the institution. However, once women enter community their issues and experiences are likely to be different. This study, as well as previous research (e.g., Pedlar et al., 2008) highlighted shared problems such as poverty, addiction, abuse, and mental health issues. The extent to which each woman experienced these problems varied and influenced what they would consider the more defining experience – experiences of poverty or addiction, or the experience of incarceration. If poverty were a precursor to time spent in prison, it is conceivable to think that a woman who wants to initiate change would more closely identify and align with a group tackling issues relating to poverty than a group addressing broader reintegration issues. Similarly, a woman whose path to incarceration was paved by struggles with addiction may be more apt to identify with others who share a similar experience. This fluid aspect of identity helps explain why some women who participated in this study attended AA meetings with more regularity than they did research meetings. Throughout this project I found myself wondering with whom they would choose to join forces if they wanted to change some aspect of their lives or confront experiences of oppression. In other words, what would foster a sense of solidarity for women who participated in this research project?

Hunt and Benford (2004) explained that participation in collective efforts emerges out of a sense of solidarity which implies both loyalty and emotional interest. Considered to be a manifestation of “willed affiliation” (Hollinger, 2006), solidarity is closely linked to values we share or wish to share with others. Since a multitude of identities can be shaped by our social belongings, Weeks (1990) argued that the identity we bring forward influences our expression of solidarity.

Notions of shared values and “willed affiliations” help to illuminate reasons why solidarity may not be generated within groups of people who have little or no control over their affiliations. While in prison, women have little control over their affiliations and by extension little influence over the group identity being imposed on them. In community, they are able to exercise considerably more agency over their affiliations and personal identities. It is not surprising that women who participated in this study tried to distance themselves from stigma they associated with their imposed group identity. Nor is it surprising that women who seemed to detach most from this identity spoke of finding power and acceptance through new identities. Similar efforts to detach from a stigmatized identity have been taken by women who live in poverty (Reid, 2004) as well as people with disabilities (Watson, 2002). Watson, for example, found some people with disabilities do not identify with being disabled and he determined that there was power associated with self-construing an identity and negating impairment as an identifier. For Watson, agency exhibited by self-construing an identity is individual in nature but it is also a political act that signifies the rejection of an identity others created; however, rejecting and distancing themselves from other people with disabilities can also be construed as reinforcing a stigmatised image of disability and further adding to the oppression of people with disabilities. Similarly, Reid (2004) explained that by actively refuting personal conformity to the stereotype associated with people receiving welfare, women who participated in her study were further perpetuating this stereotype of others. Stereotypes of women who have been incarcerated were also perpetuated in this research project when women rejected the identity of a formerly incarcerated woman and effectively cast this identity in a more negative light. For example, while highlighting ways they were different from the stereotype, women in this study portrayed other women who spent time in prison as unmotivated, unwilling to change, and deserving of their plight.

In the above examples, the act of rejecting a particular identity was centered on difference. There was recognition that certain stigmatized identities are different from other more socially acceptable identities. According to Moosa-Mitha (2005b) experiences of inclusion and exclusion often result from normative social beliefs that construct difference as less than. My involvement in this research project convinced me that we have not yet found ways for people to be both different and included and this must happen for inclusion to move beyond conformity and assimilation. The real challenge for collective action is to find ways for difference, fluid identities, and inclusion to co-exist.

### **Difference *and* Inclusion: The Challenge for Collective Action**

Bernstein (1997) once wrote social movements have two paradoxical functions since they seek inclusion and celebrate difference. We cannot shift our view of inclusion toward one that supports and values difference until we stop considering these functions to be paradoxical. This new view of inclusion decreases the need for collective action to be driven by collective identity.

Collective identities not only provide a sense of we-ness and collective agency, they also “create a sense of other via boundary identification, construction, and maintenance” (Hunt & Benford, 2004, p.450). In attempts to avoid being *othered*, women in this study resisted forms of collective action that were guided by collective identity. For women to be included, they deemed it necessary to have their identities shaped by normative social constructions that undermined their differences. When Bella spoke of giving up her swagger and dressing like she was a member of society she suggested her difference from others would counteract inclusion. Similarly Misha expressed a need to suppress difference when she internalized her husband’s remarks about society not caring about women who have been in prison.

Difference in social movements tends to be either celebrated or suppressed depending on whether the goal is freedom from constraints associated with the norm (Woodward, 1997) or policy reform and equality (Bernstein, 1997). Women acknowledged that as a group they were different from the mainstream population and they recognized ways their differences created disadvantages in terms of accessing resources in community such as safe and affordable housing. Bella highlighted difference as freedom when she spoke about deriving a feeling of belonging while living on the street where she was not beholden to big brother society. However, when women wanted to garner support for housing they underscored their similarities to others in society. They believed the best way to garner public support for issues around housing was to emphasise ways they were the same as, rather than different from, others in community by highlighting normalized aspects of their identities through roles as students, volunteers, and family members. Women's attention to similarities suggested they viewed difference as constraining to inclusion efforts. Bernstein further emphasized how difference impedes inclusion when she explained that social movements seek inclusion of oppressed groups by denying these groups are essentially different from the norm or affirming that existing differences create a disadvantage when applying equal treatment. Young (1989) referred to the challenge of whether or not to recognize difference as the dilemma of difference.

The dilemma of difference seems to be a question of whether difference can be constraining or enabling when it comes to inclusion. However, inclusion should not be based on whether individuals and groups can conform to normative identities or use their differences as leverage for acceptance and equal treatment. Rather inclusion should be rooted in a search for connection across differences with recognition that identities are fluid and often in the process of being negotiated.

As individuals, we are all different and our differences become most apparent when we are part of a social group. As Weeks (1990) reminded us, we are part of a particular group because we are the same as some and different from others. Unfortunately, as much as group identity can be a source of nurturance and pride, it can also be a source of victimization when the dominant group's characterization of a subordinate group keeps members in positions of subordination (Bell, 1997). The struggle for people in subordinate groups to escape being defined by their social status makes me realize how important it is to honour ways women in this study sought to be recognized for their individual attributes. However, the way this research project was structured made it difficult to frame women's strengths and capabilities – which are many – in an individual way. Alternate approaches may have better supported women's individual legitimacy as well as their differences by providing opportunities to come together with others interested in fostering inclusion to share their critical insight and experiences. This approach could have involved a variety of individuals who either experience exclusion or are concerned about how constructions of difference lead to exclusion.

### **Recognizing Difference While Working Toward Inclusion**

Difference-centred theorists describe a politics of solidarity where individuals who experience multiple and intersecting oppressions (e.g., class, gender, and race) come together to resist common oppression (Moosa-Mitha, 2005b). Lister (2003) suggested that the more multi-faceted the experience of oppression the more important it is for groups not to be alone in their struggle. Lister referred to a *politics of solidarity in difference* to describe a commitment to solidarity based on recognition of difference involving an acknowledgement of common interests among different identity groups. She described countless examples of women forging bonds of solidarity across their differences to advance shared goals.

If women in this study came together with other groups and individuals, their focus may have been on common issues without constant reminders of their status as former inmates. However, I did not see it as my role to identify other groups with which solidarity in difference could have formed. Striving to do research that was truly anti-oppressive suggested it would have been inappropriate to invite other groups or individuals to be part of the project prior to the research group determining the issue they wanted to address and how other groups' interests are complimentary and can help advance common goals.

Anti-oppressive researchers are concerned about whose interests are being served by a study. Thus, while I wanted to engage women in dialogue around inclusion, I felt it was imperative for them to determine the direction this dialogue and any subsequent action would take. I tried to ensure women had the power and freedom to define issues for themselves since as Potts and Brown (2005) described, there is power in naming the issue to be studied and determining why it is worthy of study. There is also a degree of power that comes from inviting other groups and individuals to participate in the research. Potts and Brown suggested that rather than the outsider/researcher being the only person to issue invitations to participate, it is best to have the insiders/participants do the inviting and including.

While Lister (2003) is familiar with examples of women forging bonds of solidarity across their differences, there are very few examples involving women entering community after incarceration uniting with other groups to achieve common goals. Examples that do exist involve women coming together with church and community organizations through a shared affirmation of their faith (e.g., Parsons & Warner-Robbins, 2002). In their study, all research participants were part of Welcome Home Ministries, a community faith-based for women released from prison in San Diego. Parsons and Warner-Robbins reported that women who participated in the research reached mutually agreed upon goals around the need for programs,

transportation, housing, and community awareness. Mutuality seemed to be in keeping with the notion of solidarity around common interests among different identity groups (Lister, 2003). Common interests developed between women released from prison and volunteers from the community which seemed to be based on a shared faith and a desire to improve personal living conditions and overall community health. Similarly, Clitheroe (2007) in her edited book, *Women Rising*, included stories written by women involved in the prison system who transformed their lives through their faith. *Women Rising* provided examples of solidarity across different social identities. Women working in solidarity with Welcome Home Ministries and Prison Fellowship Canada showed that power can come from breaking away from a marginalized identity and embracing an identity that provides nurturance and acceptance – in this case, an identity that is based on faith.

When inclusion is tied to the extent that individuals from marginalized groups transform to adopt the beliefs and values that are deemed acceptable by dominant groups there is the risk of an uncritical view of inclusion that overlooks the intricacy of social difference and the fluidity of identity. An anti-oppressive approach, by contrast, would involve recognizing the coexistence of social differences and positioning people who are marginalized at the centre of inclusion discourse (Sin and Chung Yan, 2003). The above examples provide insight into complexities of inclusion, identity, and difference. On the one hand, these examples illustrate how inclusive space can be created among difference. On the other hand, they suggest that women involved with the prison system may have had to earn their inclusion through personal transformation and conforming to a Christian faith.

I discussed how inviting members of different social groups to participate in this research project may have undermined women's power and influence over the process. However, when it comes to achieving inclusion, I agree with Sin and Chung Yan's (2003)

assertion that “the challenge for society is how to share power, relegate privileges, and give space for people at the margins to define and locate the centre as a strategy of anti-oppressive struggles” (p. 33). Embedded in this challenge are multiple and intersecting struggles around power and difference. Power for people who are marginalized can be increased when resources and space are provided for them to reframe the margins as centres (Sin & Chung Yan). In this sense the margins can be sites for resistance and creative spaces that encourage new perspectives. Some women who participated in this project took pictures indicating they valued spaces in community where their differences did not impact how they were treated by others. With their pictures they suggested they did not necessarily want to move from the margin to the centre by conforming to mainstream society and pretending differences did not exist. Rather, for some women in this study inclusion was about the creation of a space where people who are different from mainstream society are not made to feel less than.

The notion of inclusion as an undesired goal did not receive sufficient attention in this research project. Sin and Chung Yan (2003) asked whether social inclusion is necessarily good for those who are excluded. It is more in keeping with anti-oppressive practice, they argue, for individuals and groups to determine how to position their differences rather than seeking a common identity. This argument supports the need for a new view of inclusion that moves us beyond conformity and toward accepting and valuing difference.

### **A New Vision of Inclusion that Values Difference**

Women who participated in this research project were diverse and had varied experiences prior to their incarceration and when entering community. Yet, feelings of exclusion were common as they spoke of entering community with insufficient support networks, resources, and acceptance from others. They articulated how the stigma of being an

*offender* tends to persist long after a prison sentence is complete and can impact the extent to which they feel connected to community upon release. Women had a heightened awareness of their culpability for offenses that brought them to prison and expressed wanting to make positive changes in their post-prison lives that would enhance their feelings of inclusion. Importantly however, embedded within their views of inclusion were distinctions between the choice to change and conformity.

The element of choice was inherent in the descriptions of the ways they embraced change on their own terms. At times they spoke about choosing to participate in aspects of community life in which they had not previously been involved (e.g., going to the movies, going out to dinner, and shopping). Being with people who accepted them and supported their efforts to change and spending time in spaces where they felt accepted and free from judgment not only augmented their change efforts but also set the stage for inclusion. When conformity was at the forefront of discussion, women perpetuated the belief that inclusion is antithetical to difference and will remain an aberration for individuals who do not adhere to dominant expectations.

In Chapter One I wrote about how women I met at GVI often expressed interest in having a program such as Stride happen in community so they could continue to connect with volunteers and maintain supportive relationships. My experience with Stride and insight gleaned from this research enables me to imagine what Stride in community might look like. This would be a judgment free space but it would also exceed women's expressed expectations about judgment free spaces because it would be a space where they are not only free from judgement, but a space where they are connected and valued. In this space Bella would not have to lose her swagger or change the way she dresses to fit in and Misha would not have to endure comments about how interests of women in prison do not matter.

Building on FPAR and AOR principles helped me consider a framework that can foster community spaces where difference and inclusion are both valued and guide research processes that are open and inclusive. My hope is that this framework can serve as a methodological guide for other researchers wishing to conduct PAR informed by a critical feminist and anti-oppressive framework. Varcoe (2006) discovered that existing PAR literature provides very little direction for anyone conducting research with women whose lives are characterized by abuse, who have mental illnesses, and who have chronic drug and alcohol problems. These issues were a reality for women who participated in this study and illuminated the complexity of women's lives as well as the complexity inherent in the process of working together. I also hope this framework can nurture open and inclusive spaces in community. To this end, I propose an inclusion framework which:

- **centres difference** - The notion of difference is central when women are oppressed and excluded because their differences are devalued. Difference also becomes apparent in ways women internalize or resist oppression and the ways they negotiate identities. This research showed how important it is for difference not to dissolve into unity. By centring difference, we can keep the focus on how constructions of difference can be altered and our capacity to value difference increased. In community and in research, space needs to be created for people to come together across differences and connect over shared interests. Health enhancing aspects of human connection and belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) should be available to everyone regardless of our differences.

- **promotes social justice** - Social justice is promoted when dialogue focuses on our collective obligation to end oppression and social injustices. As this project brought to light, change must not be conceptualized as a matter of individual responsibility. There is also a need for social change that identifies the role of community in supporting personal change and

growth by addressing systemic inequalities. If social justice guided inclusion efforts, we would be dubious of normative structures that privilege the dominant class and question attempts to integrate individuals on the margins into the centre. Social justice would also entail constant negotiation that leads to individuals and groups who have been traditionally marginalized realizing they have agency to redefine the centre.

- **values different forms and levels of participation** - Both FPAR and AOR suggest participatory strategies that involve participation in all phases of the research including design, implementation, and analysis (Potts & Brown, 2005; Reid & Frisby, 2008). This project revealed how idealistic notions of participation can place undue burden on women who choose to participate in participatory research. Different forms and levels of participation in research create opportunities for women to share knowledge in ways they are most comfortable and have their participation valued. When this principle helps shape spaces in community, people are free to participate in ways that do not undermine their sense of self and their differences.

- **acknowledges relationships grow and change over time** - Relationships are central in participatory research and with AOR there is an assumption that relationships between researchers and participants should be established before the research begins (Potts & Brown, 2005). However, relationships take time to develop and change over time (Getenby & Humphries, 2000). My relationships with women in this project changed and evolved as we moved farther away from our original connection around a dissertation. When there is less pressure placed on relationships to be established at the beginning of a project, there is space for relationships to grow naturally and organically. Similarly, in community spaces that foster connectivity, we can learn to appreciate how our identities are shaped through our experiences and relationships with others.

• **interrogates taken for granted assumptions of power and privilege** - This project challenged the duality of power and privilege that exists between researchers and participants. While it is generally believed that power relationships should be made explicit (Reid & Frisby, 2008) it can be constraining to assume that researchers have power and participants do not. If we recognize ambiguities of power and privilege exist in all relationships, we are better positioned to seek ways of enhancing our collective power.

• **emphasizes dialoguing through difference** – As I discovered in this project, there can be discomfort in group settings when differences such as social class and other injustices are acknowledged. However, discomfort creates room for dialogue aimed at confronting injustices and lead to policy level change that can happen from the ground up. When connections between women and others in community are based on developing mutual understandings and when we do not shy away from differences rooted in inequalities, we make room for policy discussions that avoid prescriptive notions of inclusion and incomplete descriptions of the causes of exclusion (O'Reilly, 2005).

### **Closing Thoughts and Future Possibilities**

Many issues raised throughout this study are specific to women who are entering community after incarceration. The deep exclusion experienced by people placed outside community and sent to prison is arguably unparalleled. However, this project is ultimately concerned with society's tendency to exclude people based on difference. Thus, future research will focus on tackling issues of exclusion and fostering conditions that promote the co-existence of inclusion and difference.

The demographic composition of women who participated in this study provided some understanding of how difference can permeate participatory research processes. However, if

differences among women in this study better reflected differences found in our federal prisons in terms of gender, race, disability, and sexual orientation it would have opened up space to analyze oppression from the perspective of multiple social identities. For example, if more women in the study identified as members of racialized groups, our conversations might have acknowledged more complex power dynamics. Various social locations and power positions would have pushed the group to confront different and intersecting forms of oppression, creating a more multifaceted critical analysis that moves beyond the simple duality of the powerful and oppressed.

Through this research process I have gained a greater understanding of the challenges inherent in participatory research. Coming to terms with the limitations of inclusion, participation, action, and social change helped me strive to develop a more flexible approach. This process deepened my appreciation for the learning that can be gleaned from working through complexity. More traditional research approaches would not have demonstrated so powerfully, if at all, how inclusion can be an ambiguous concept for women who are typically believed to occupy positions of oppression and powerlessness and for researchers who attempt to understand how inclusion can be facilitated. Future research projects will build on this learning to further develop open, flexible, and inclusive processes.

It is necessary to stop researching and writing at some point to produce a finished dissertation. However, I continue to connect with some women who participated in this study and I hope further research and action will result from these connections. Women who left the project have re-initiated contact. A renewed interest in project goals occurred for some women as they gained a sense of power over their lives. I continue to have conversations with several women about issues relating to inclusion and have started to collaborate on public speaking engagements in education and other community venues. Being true to the process means this

project does not necessarily end with a completed dissertation. Therefore I remain open to continuing the work started in this project and working with women in ways that promote our mutual learning. This work will aim to further conceptualize and create ways for difference and inclusion to co-exist. It will be guided by the proposed framework that builds on FPAR and AOR principles.

A common thread running throughout much of this dissertation was the notion of the ideal and how it places pressure on researchers, on participants, and on community to meet lofty expectations. Young (1990) defined an ideal as unrealized possibilities of the actual. For me, inspiration for future research comes from a belief in possibility. With the goal of inclusion and social justice for all being both an ideal *and* a possibility, more conversations need to happen, more participatory processes need to be developed, more critical insights need to be shared, and more action needs to be taken. I see this project as a starting point for what I hope will be a lifelong research endeavour aimed at developing a more critical understanding of inclusion, re-imagining ways for inclusion and difference to co-exist, and ultimately contributing to a more inclusive society.

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## Appendix A: Information Letter



### **Participatory Approaches to Exploring Women's Social Inclusion after Federal Incarceration in Canada: An overview of my proposed study**

My name is Darla Fortune and the outline below provides an overview of the research for my doctoral dissertation at the University of Waterloo. My interest in this research stems in part from my volunteer experience at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI). For the past five years I have been a volunteer with Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) as both a Stride Night volunteer and more recently, as a Stride Circle member. I am also a volunteer citizen escort and have accompanied women on escorted temporary absences to visit their families, attend meetings and church services in the community, and participate in community programs such as Supper Club.

The purpose of my study is to examine social inclusion from the perspective of women who are entering the community after their release from federal prison. The study involves a participatory action research approach; it is collaborative and builds upon the perspectives and knowledge of the women who are experiencing community reintegration. I believe women have invaluable knowledge to share on the experiences of inclusion and exclusion upon entry into community and if we work collaboratively, this knowledge can be used to overcome challenges associated with stigma and lack of support.

My dissertation builds on research conducted at GVI under the direction of Dr. Alison Pedlar and Dr. Susan Arai. This research examined the issues facing women as they plan for and begin the process of community entry after incarceration. The resultant report entitled *Uncertain Futures: Women leaving Prison and Re-entering Community* (2008) highlighted the many differences among women who are incarcerated, including their experiences and access to the determinants of health upon entering the community. This report focused on the women's perspectives while in GVI, and my study seeks to explore the women's experiences after release into community. Together, with the women we will explore differences in experience and identify strategies aimed at creating change in terms of the way women are accepted in the community and the opportunities available to them upon release.

In keeping with the participatory nature of the study, I will be inviting formerly incarcerated women who now live in the Waterloo region to come together in focus groups to explore ways of fostering a more socially inclusive environment. Key questions that will help guide this study include:

- a) What are the meanings and experiences of difference, social inclusion and social exclusion for women who are entering the community upon release from prison?

- b) How can the women's perspectives on social inclusion and difference be used to (re)shape their environments?

Since all women currently living in the Waterloo region will be invited to participate in this study, it may be that some participants are on parole while other participants have passed their warrant expiry. I expect that this study will involve between six to ten participants. This study will provide the women with opportunities for capacity building as they engage in dialogue and re-imagine what social inclusion means for them. It is my hope that findings from this study will be used to help make recommendations for creating a more inclusive environment for women entering community after incarceration.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about your participation, please contact me at (519) 747-4138 or by email at [dbfortun@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dbfortun@uwaterloo.ca). You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Susan Arai, at (519) 888-4567 ext. 33758 or email [sarai@healthy.uwaterloo.ca](mailto:sarai@healthy.uwaterloo.ca).