CENTRE FOR RESEARCH ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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Qualitative Methodology: Two Examples in Feminist Research

Women's Experiences After Leaving A Shelter
by
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Investigation of Self-Discovery in Abuse Survivors
by
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Donna A. Cunningham
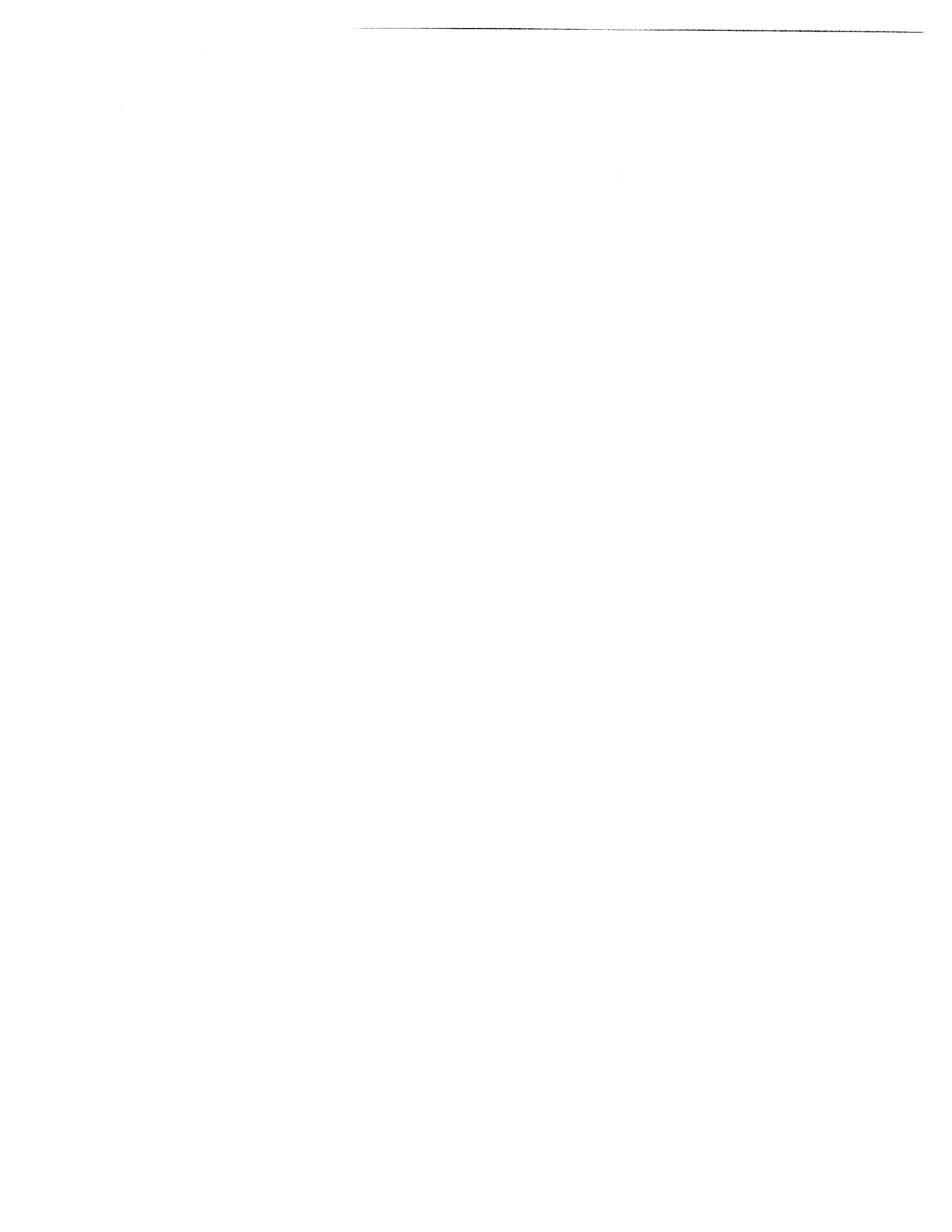Nursing Education Division, Fanshawe College
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QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGIES

By Olena Hankivsky

In grasping a feminist approach to research, it is important to have a clear understanding of the different methods available for collecting information and data. What is also important to keep in mind, however, is that there is no distinctively or uniquely "feminist" methodology that will unequivocally ensure against gender, class or race biases in research. Therefore, the key to a successful research project is to determine what methodological approach is best suited to answering a given research question.

Quantitative research methodology relies almost exclusively on collecting information, statistical data and/or numbers. Interview relations are often structured by a fairly rigid questioning and research agenda. Moreover, the results of quantitative research tend to be reported in very general terms. Quantitative research can be effective for feminist research. For example, gathering statistical information can allow a researcher to recognize the enormity of a widely occurring problem such as woman abuse. In addition, for women who have experienced abuse, it may be comforting for them to recognize that their experience is not an isolated individual occurrence, but one that has been shared by a significant number of other women. Thus, a quantitative approach to research may be a powerful tool for setting women's experiences in a larger context, grasping the commonalities as well as the differences in our experiences as women.[1]

Despite its methodological strengths, however, many participants and researchers find the quantitative research process coercive, constraining, and limited in its ability to fully uncover the complexity of sensitive issues. When compared to quantitative research, qualitative research methodology is usually considered a more descriptive and in-depth approach to collecting and analyzing data. In general, a qualitative approach may be most beneficial in a research project in which a topic or question(s) is not well-defined or easily counted.[2] The practices of qualitative research include focus group discussions, and in-depth structured and unstructured open-ended interview and observation. The process of qualitative research is also elastic which means that the design and direction of the project may change as the study proceeds.

Qualitative researchers employ methods that ground analysis in real life and this allows them to examine how social experience is created and given meaning. Often this includes a search for underlying themes or patterns which emerge during the research process. Qualitative research focuses on obtaining a truthful description of how a problem or situation is experienced by those

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[1] Lorraine Greaves and Alison Wylie. "Quantitative methods and feminist practices," in Sandra Burt et al. Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1995, p. 310.

[2] Alberta Health Promotion Research Centre, Dalhousie University, p. 12.

who live it. It is also concerned with the involvement of participating persons by privileging their experiences and striving to locate researchers and those providing information and data on an equal plane. In sum, "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them."[3]

The two projects featured in this publication, partially funded through the Small Grants Program of the Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, are examples of qualitative research.

The first, by Susan Gadbois, Women's Experiences After Leaving A Shelter, examines pre-shelter and post-shelter experiences of women and the issues and complexities of leaving an abusive partner and re-establishing in the community. The project uses two qualitative research orientations. The first is ethnography which refers to a social scientific description of a people and the cultural basis of their peoplehood.[4] Ethnography entails using unstructured interviews, participant observations and field notes to gather data. Gadbois also utilizes a feminist research orientation which gives primacy to women's perspectives, experiences and contributions in all stages of her research.

The second project by Patricia L. Patterson, Bonnie M. Jarvis and Donna E. Cunningham: Investigation of Self-Discovery in Abuse Survivors takes a phenomenological approach to explore the research question of how survivors of abuse experience the Women of Courage program offered by Outward Bound. A phenomenological approach examines how human beings construct and give meaning to their actions in concrete social situations — the "lived experience" from the point of view of the person involved. In this case, it was used to gain an in-depth reflexive description of abuse survivors who had gone through the experience of a wilderness challenge. Using a phenomenological approach, data is gathered through written anecdotes of personal experiences and audiotaped conversations.

Qualitative research such as the projects described in this publication often focus on small samples of participants. Consequently, research findings derived from such studies are often dismissed as anecdotal and not generalizable. The value of qualitative research, however, lies in the diversity and depth of the data collected and analyzed and the complex understanding attained of the context and conditions under which particular findings appear.[5] Moreover, qualitative research using small samplings is often very useful for identifying future research questions and directions.

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[3] Denzin, N. et al. Handbook of Qualitative Research, London: Sage Publication, 1994, p.2.

[4](Peacock, 1986)

[5] Kim Luton, Sharing Connections -- Shared Values: Assessing the Integrated Model of Delivering Woman Abuse Services in London, Ontario, London, Ontario: Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children, 1996.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES AFTER LEAVING A SHELTER

By Susan Gadbois

INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen the unveiling of a critical problem which affects the lives of thousands of women in Canadian communities every day: woman abuse. This veil of secrecy began to lift when women who were suffering abuse disclosed their experiences to other women. As a result, women joined together to participate in consciousness-raising and mutual support groups, to educate and lobby various levels of government for assistance, and to inform their communities about the problem. In concert with this work came the birth and growth of the shelter movement. One of the outcomes of this movement has been the establishment of shelters in every province in Canada.

Shelters provide women and their children with short-term alternatives to staying with an abusive partner and in an abusive home environment. Shelters are an important link for many women: a stepping stone from one lived experience to another. Information about these lived experiences has increased as women shared their stories through numerous quantitative and qualitative research investigations. A number of issues, such as women's experiences of abuse and the effects of violence on children, have been the focus of exploration. As data accumulated, a broad picture began to develop of women's experiences prior to entering a shelter. Their journey through the shelter system, however, has been investigated to a lesser degree. Women's post-shelter experiences have received the least amount of study, and are the focus of this exploratory research.

The purposes of this study are:

> 1) to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of women who leave an abusive partner, reside in a shelter, and re-establish in the community separate from their partner;
> 2) to explore the ways in which women's pre-shelter and shelter experiences affect their efforts to re-establish in the community;
> 3) to learn about the issues and challenges women encounter in this time of transition;
> 4) to discover the strategies women use in order to manage the issues and challenges;
> 5) to understand the roles and relationships, and the resources (internal and external) and supports (formal and informal) that women access which contribute to a perception of themselves as valued and capable members of the community.

This short paper is based on a longer research paper, <u>Women's Experiences in the Community After Leaving a Shelter</u>, produced as a Master of Social Work thesis at Wilfrid Laurier University.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provided an overview of the research as it pertained to women's pre-shelter, shelter, and post-shelter experiences. The work of four researchers contributed to the conceptual framework of this study: the model of social support developed by Cameron (1985; 1992); Beaudry's (1985) shelter typology and the assumption that shelter type affects women's shelter and post-shelter experiences; the concepts of human and community capacity (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993); and the notion of network ties as personal communities (Wellman, Carrington & Hall 1983; Wellman & Worthy 1989).

Three assumptions were drawn from the review of the literature about women's pre-shelter, shelter, and post-shelter experiences. These assumptions shape the direction and focus of this research:

1) Women who access shelters are more likely to report a diminished social network as a direct result of the abuse. In addition to the trauma women have experienced, and the isolation and resulting decrease in resources, women also said they had less confidence in themselves.

2) Shelters play a critical role in the lives of women who seek to re-establish in the community after leaving an abusive partner. Shelters vary in structure and philosophical underpinnings, and according to Beaudry (1985) and Pahl (1985), both of these factors will directly affect service delivery and women's perceptions of the service, the ways in which women are connected to the community and, therefore, women's experiences in the community. Little information is available about the effects that women's shelter experiences have with regard to their experiences in the community. Given women's reports about diminshed resources, the concepts and typology of social support developed by Cameron (1985; 1992) offer a useful framwork for the exploration and discussion of their pre-shelter, shelter and post-shelter experiences.

3) A discrepancey exists in the research about women's pre-shelter, shelter, and post-shelter experiences. While some of the research alludes to women's strengths and competencies, insufficient descriptive documentation exists about these qualities, and most of the research is focused on women's needs, their "neediness', and their problems. An understanding about the complexities of leaving an abusive partner and re-establishing in the community is incomplete without:

   a) - a comprehensive exploration of women's strengths and the internal and external resources they access
   b) - information about the kinds of resources that women find helpful and useful

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology was qualitative in nature, and procedures and techniques from two research orientations were used: ethnography (Fetterman 1989); and feminist research (Reinharz 1992). The methodological choices made were guided by the following feminist research assumptions:

- Feminist research is action and change oriented.
- The construction of knowledge is a political process (Kirby & McKenna 1989).
- "...There is no one truth, no one authority, no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge..." (Spender 1985, p.7).
- Feminist research strives to represent human diversity (Reinharz 1992, p.240).
- Feminist research frequently includes the researcher as a person (Reinharz 1992, p.240).
- Meaning comes from women's experiences, their perceptions of experiences, and life stories (Rothe 1993).

Methods for coding, organizing and analysing data were adopted from Kirby and McKenna (1989), and Miles and Huberman (1984).

Overview of the Research Design
Interviews were conducted with women who had left their partners to reside in a shelter for a minimum of two weeks and who, at the time of the interview, had re-established in the community separate from their partners. Women were asked about their shelter experiences, their experiences with formal and informal supports within the community, their perceptions of what was going well for them and their recommendations for change. Several themes emerged and were documented. The characteristics of each theme, and the relationships between them, were noted. The themes, their characteristics, possible interpretations, and recommendations were discussed and confirmed with the participants in focus groups.

Recruitment of Respondents
A purposive sampling procedure (Seaberg 1985) was used in the selection of research participants. Twelve women were recruited, each of whom had resided at the shelter for a minimum of two weeks and were currently living in the community separate from their abusive partners. Six of the respondents had been out of the shelter for at least one year and the other six participants between three and six months. Because the purpose of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, recruitment was carried out with the aim of achieving diversity with regard to respondents' personal characteristics such as age, socio-economic background, ethnicity, sexual orientation and parenting status (childless; parent of preschool, young, teenage and/or grown children; grandmother).

These criteria were discussed with the shelter staff person who was selected to carry out the recruiting process. She was provided with a participant recruitment guide and asked to contact

possible participants by phone and give each an overview of the research. Women were told that the researcher would receive only the names and phone numbers of those who had consented to take part in the study. All of the women who were contacted agreed to participate in the study.

Description of the Research Participants
The 12 women who participated in the study ranged in age from 22-57. All of the respondents had at least one child. At the time of the interview, three women were not residing with their children. Their children were either grown and living on their own or living with a support person other than their ex-partner. Two of the participants had grandchildren.

All of the women had been in heterosexual relationships. Of the pool of possible participants, none had openly declared a lesbian or bisexual orientation during their shelter stay. Two of the women were from racial minority groups. One had immigrated to the community six years ago and indicated that she belonged to an ethnic community. The other, who had returned to the community from her country to marry her partner, did not want to be identified with any one ethnic group. One other respondent had been a member of a religious community prior to leaving her partner.

For eight of the participants, their recent shelter stay was the first time that they had left their partners. Three had accessed a shelter once before as a result of abuse from the same partner. Three had left their own communities to come to the shelter; one came from another province, and two came from nearby rural communities.

Eight of the participants were studying to complete high school or university qualification, or were involved in a training program to gain additional skills for their field of work. One participant was working full-time and five were employed part-time. Each woman was receiving some form of government financial assistance. Mothers' allowance was the sole source of income for five of the participants. One received workers' compensation and welfare, another received survivors' benefits and welfare, and four women had their part-time wages deducted from their mothers' allowance. At the time of the interviews, two participants were receiving irregular support payments from their partners. One was in the process of re-applying for welfare. Three women had been directed by social services to take their partners to court for support payments or risk losing their benefits. Seven of the participants were living in subsidized housing units.

Pre-interviews
Prior to the interview, a pre-interview was conducted with each participant to review the research project, answer any questions and sign the consent form. Women were given the option of receiving the research questions at this time, and most requested a verbal outline. Two women decided to wait until the interview to learn what the questions would be. During this time, the date and location for the interview was negotiated.

Pre-interviews lasted approximately one hour. All of the participants, who had met the researcher while they lived in the shelter, spent the bulk of the pre-interview updating the researcher concerning their current situations.

The Interview Process

Nine of the 12 interviews took place in the participants' homes. Of the three remaining interviews, one was held in a co-operative housing community centre and the other two in the office of the agency associated with the shelter, after working hours.

Each interview began with a request for demographic information such as the participant's age, number of children and financial situation. The questions which followed were open-ended and permitted women to discuss that which was most relevant to them about their shelter stay, their transition to the community, and their experiences in the community. A series of probes were used to help broaden the extent of the researcher's understanding concerning women's thoughts and feelings about their experiences.

The interviews ranged from one to three hours in length. After each interview, notes were made on both the content and process of the meeting. Emerging themes and the researcher's impressions were documented. The tapes were transcribed, with the average document consisting of approximately 50 pages of text. Each participant was identified with a code symbol. The symbol was changed in each chapter of the final document to protect the identities of the participants.

Participants received a copy of their transcript and were asked to read through it in order to add and/or clarify information. They were also encouraged to red-circle any passages which might identify them. Five participants provided additional information and one woman made two additional tapes to add to her interview. The content of the last tape was a summary of her thoughts and feelings regarding the impact of the interview process. Her reflections echoed comments made from several of the other participants: the act of reading a portion of one's life story has a powerful impact upon the participant.

Data Analysis

In addition to the notes made after each interview, each transcript was reviewed many times, and themes, patterns and insights were documented. When this process was completed, similar ideas and themes were grouped and given a conceptual label. The conceptual plan for the thesis also served as a source for potential code names.

Once the conceptual codes were established, the coding process began with the assistance of Ethnograph (Seidel, Kjolseth & Seymour 1988), a qualitative data analysis package. When this stage was completed, the data from all 12 interviews had been sorted in files by code names. Subsequently, the data within each file were reviewed and both the subthemes and the relationships between subthemes were identified and summarized. Data that were unique, markedly dissimilar or contradictory were also noted within each summary.

Communication of the Findings: Discussion Groups

Two group discussions were conducted in order to present preliminary findings and the researcher's perceptions to the participants. The groups were organized based on the amount of time that had passed since women had left the shelter. One group consisted of four women had been out of the

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shelter for at least one year, and the other group was comprised of three women whom, at the time of the interviews, had been out of the shelter between three and six months. Women who were unable to attend cited illness and unanticipated events as their reasons, and efforts were made to contact them for feedback. One woman had moved to another province and could not be reached.

Group discussions, which were held in the group room of the agency, lasted approximately three hours. Women were asked to sign confidentiality forms prior to introductions. Permission to audiotape the discussions was granted by both groups. It was explained that the tapes would not be transcribed verbatim, however, some of the content would be used in the final analysis and report.

The discussions began with an introduction to the rationale and methodology for the study. Outstanding themes were presented accompanied by an interpretation from the researcher. Feedback was invited at the end of the presentation of each theme. The meeting continued in this manner until all themes were discussed, pausing in the middle for a refreshment break. Before the meeting ended, the women were asked for their recommendations.

Boundaries of the Study
The choices that are made in the selection of any research focus and methodology result in necessary restrictions. This study had several limitations which should be acknowledged.

This study was qualitative and provided in-depth, rich data regarding women's experiences in an urban community after leaving the shelter within that community. The results can be generalized only to the extent that qualitative data can be; that is, the results will comprise expressions of life experiences that may benefit women who have had similar experiences (Rothe 1993).

Repeated interviews that are longitudinal in nature are often preferable and necessary for gathering information about deeply felt experiences and/or life transitions (Kirby & McKenna 1989). It was not feasible to conduct repeated interviews due to time and financial constraints.

These constraints also influenced the researcher's ability to be as collaborative as desired. Kirby and McKenna (1989) stress that it is essential for researchers "to collaborate with those who may benefit from or who may be affected by your research. The insights and direction they give are invaluable" (p.28). The initial plan to work with an advisory group of former residents had to be modified. Consequently, the social action potential of this research was greatly diminished.

Finally, the focus of this study did not permit any comprehensive investigation of the differences in women's experiences as they related to race, culture, social class, age or ability. This is an area that warrants further extensive research.

Strengths of the Study
The key strengths of this study are the understandings and insights that emerged with respect to women's pre-shelter, shelter and post-shelter experiences. Several factors contributed to these outcomes, the first of which is related to the experiences of the researcher. The researcher had

worked in the shelter for five years, participated in a 1992 research project pertaining to violence against women, had experienced single parenthood for five years and, in 1987, experienced the death of her sister, who was murdered by an ex-partner. This information about the researcher was shared with the participants.

Research methods were chosen that would afford as much control as possible to the participants. The pre-interview procedure included a discussion with the participants about control over the research process. Women were informed that they could withdraw from the research at any time and were given the opportunity to learn more about the researcher, the study and the research questions. Thus, the pre-interview helped to alleviate anxiety and encourage openness in the interview. Control over the research process was shared and this, too, created space for vulnerability and straightforwardness. Women were instructed about the operation of the tape recorder and were encouraged to shut it off as they deemed necessary. Women were invited to add to, and/or clarify, any information contained in their transcript, and to red-circle any passages in their transcript which they feared might identify them or inadvertently harm themselves or others.

Shared control of various aspects of the research process extended to the report of the findings. Participants were given the opportunity, through discussion groups, to verify, embellish and/or refute the researcher's perceptions of the data. This procedure also served to substantiate the understandings and insights described by the researcher in the final report.

FINDINGS SUMMARY

As women shared their stories over the course of the nine-month research process, several significant insights emerged.

Isolation
The majority of the women experienced severe isolation both pre-shelter and post-shelter. Nine women reported that, because of their abusive partners, they were unable to have or maintain friendships, and seven women could not rely on family members for assistance. Consequently, the majority of the participants entered the shelter with a very limited network of support.

The absence of a broad, stable social network had a negative impact on women's efforts to re-establish in the community. In most situations, the abusive behaviours of participants' ex-partners did not cease. Eight of the women feared further violence and experienced verbal harassment, and three women were stalked. Isolation increased the risk of violence for these women. Shelter workers must begin to recognize and address the crisis of isolation that women experience in conjunction with the crisis that occurs as a result of the abuse.

Value of Social Support
Women's stories indicated that social support, particularly social integration support (Cameron 1985; 1992) was critical during this major time of transition. The majority of the women deeply valued the social support they received from other residents and shelter staff during their shelter stay. Many of the women, particularly those who reported that their social network had been minimal prior to entering the shelter, referred to their experience at the shelter as akin to having "a big family" and a "sense of community".

Abandonment
The majority of the women identified that feelings of abandonment were associated with the act of leaving the shelter. They described the leaving process as a severing of relationships, and said that shelter supports diminished significantly, or ended, at this time. The feelings of abandonment were exacerbated by a two-year, no-contact policy which prohibited staff from developing friendships with former residents/service users. One participant indicated that she felt locked into a "client identity" as a result of this policy.

Drawbacks to the Social Service Model
The descriptions that women provided of their shelter and post-shelter experiences suggest that there are outcomes to a legal protectionist (Beaudry 1985) or social service model of shelter service delivery that may be counterproductive to the outcomes that sheltering is trying to attain, particularly with regard to helping women re-establish in the community.

A study by Jan Pahl (1985) proposes that women residents who are more actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the shelter are more successful at re-establishing in the community separate

from their abusive partners. The findings from this research would indicate that the study by Pahl (1985) warrants replication.

Discrimination Based on Income
Women recounted numerous experiences of overt and covert discrimination, from both the formal and informal sectors of the community, which were directly related to their poverty and status as welfare recipients, subsidized housing residents and/or single parents. Poverty and discrimination were notable barriers in women's efforts to re-establish themselves as valued and competent members of the community.

Inconsistent Community Service
Women related that many community services and resources were inconsistently available, difficult to locate and poorly coordinated.

Work Undervalued
Women's helping work within the shelter and the community tended to be undervalued and overlooked. The "helper" therapy principle, which states that those who help are helped the most (Riessman 1965), acknowledges the power that exists within the act of giving assistance, and therefore supports the notion that relationships based on reciprocity are crucial to our sense of self-worth. Current shelter service delivery practices, in which professionalism has become firmly entrenched, consistently place staff in the role of the "helper" and residents in the less powerful "one who is helped" role, a process which functions to minimize the visibility of the residents' helping work.

Untapped Experience
The wealth of experience, creativity, expertise and insight that women have regarding this major transition remained largely untapped due to their exclusion from the work of shelter and, as a result of poverty and discrimination, from the larger community.

CONCLUSIONS

The women in this study spoke of the many ways in which the shelter helped them and hindered them in their efforts to re-establish in the community. The information that they shared about their experiences in the community repeatedly confirmed the importance of having access to concrete educational, emotional and social integration support (Cameron 1985; 1992).

Women also revealed a wealth of experience, expertise and insight concerning the challenges of re-establishing in the community, the kinds of supports that were respectful and useful, the strategies that helped them to manage the challenges, and the changes that are needed to make the transition a more positive one.

Unfortunately, their expertise has remained substantially untapped. One of the reasons for this oversight is rooted in the changes which have occurred in sheltering. After two decades, the shelter movement has gradually become assimilated into the social service system, a process which has erected a barrier between women who access shelters and those who work there. This barrier has been built upon the false assumption that the positions of resident and service provider, as they exist within the context of women helping women to escape abuse, are mutually exclusive.

It is time to take apart this barrier, and acknowledge that the expertise that all women have about the process of leaving an abusive partner and re-establishing in a community must be shared and recognized on a continual basis if the goals of ending and minimizing the effects of wife abuse are to become attainable.

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INVESTIGATION OF SELF-DISCOVERY
IN ABUSE SURVIVORS

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AUTHORS' NOTE

INTRODUCTION

Health promotion is the work of nurses. As nurse educators we are acutely aware of the importance of health promotion for educating students who become nurses and for the clients they will eventually serve. Our research team consists of three teachers in a nursing diploma program at a community college. Shortly before we began our project, we had become increasingly concerned with a number of observations we had shared about our student population. Many of our students have poor physical health practices, and particularly noticeable was neglect of physical exercise. A second concern was that a number of students had disclosed to us that they had been victims of abuse.

Our increasing uneasiness about these issues seemed to converge with our becoming aware of the Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School and its Women of Courage program. We were impressed and intrigued by this aptly named group. We had long believed that women who survive abuse have a great deal of strength, although they might not view themselves that way. We understood that the Women of Courage program was one way that women could become aware of their own competence and strength. We wondered why Women of Courage participants, who had experienced unimaginable personal hardship, had elected to participate in this physical challenge. Could they identify a link between a physically healthy body, the commitment to the choices required to achieve it, and inner strength?

Context
The mission of the Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School (1994) is "to promote self reliance, care and respect for others, responsibility to the community and concern for the environment" (p. 5).

The seven-day Women of Courage program is intended both to assist and challenge survivors of abuse to take control of their lives and bodies. Participants learn outdoor survival skills through physical challenges such as canoeing, rock-climbing and portaging. As a therapy for abused women, this program is unique in that the challenges are at once physical, cognitive and emotional.

The objectives of Women of Courage program are:

- to enhance the effectiveness of the therapeutic experience
- to improve the participants' self-concept and increase self-esteem
- to measure the effectiveness of an experiential component as part of a traditional counselling program (COBWS, p.3, 1993)

The research question we posed for ourselves was: how do survivors of abuse experience the Women of Courage program? Our research assumptions included the following:

1) Abuse survivors have many strengths, of which they may or may not be aware.
2) The Women of Courage program assists abuse suvivors in the process of discovering their inner strengths.

3)   Health is part of inner strength.
4)   Life practices that promote physical as well as psychological and social health also promote inner strength.

Our goal was to use a phenomenological approach to explore the research question. Our objectives were to identify themes and patterns related to the Women of Courage experience, and to obtain insights into characteristics of the experience which might be useful in helping professional efforts to promote the health of survivors of abuse.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Wilderness challenge programs were first established in the United States in 1945 (Powich 1994). Wilderness therapy has been applied to clinical populations since 1960. "Its efficacy, particularly in work with adolescent populations, is supported by a solid body of research. Its therapeutic application to survivors of incest, rape, spouse battering is however, very recent" (Powich, p. 11). Because wilderness therapy for abuse survivors is a fairly recent application there is not yet a great deal of research in this area.

The Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School started its Women of Courage program in 1988, and sponsored research to evaluate the program that was completed in 1992. Like most of the previous work done with Outward Bound participants, it was a quantitative study designed to measure changes in self-esteem. The results did show such an increase but the study was not published. Ruth Goldman (1992), in her report on the results, suggested that simply measuring self-esteem does not measure the effectiveness of the experience because it does not reflect all of the goals or themes of the course. She commented further that the standardized questionnaire was seen to be based on male-centred values. Her comments support the belief that a qualitative method is more likely to give information on the nature of such an experience.

One closely related quantitative study done through the YMCA in Regina (Cook 1992) consisted of a two-day outdoor challenge preceded by group therapy. The researchers also looked at self-esteem and concluded that there was a statistically significant positive change on all four measurements used. In an earlier study, Henderson and Bialeschki (1987) used participant observation in their qualitative evaluation of a week-long camp experience for women and concluded that such outdoor experiences "meet some of the needs for self-understanding, personal growth and recreation" (p. 28). The informants in this latter work were not necessarily abuse survivors, and the camp experience, while outdoors, did not provide the wilderness challenge of the Women of Courage program.

In 1994, a special issue of Women in Therapy was devoted entirely to the topic of wilderness therapy for women. The entire issue was also released as a book called Wilderness Therapy for Women: The Power of Adventure. This collection consists of 18 papers describing and critiquing wilderness therapy experiences with supportive anecdotal testimony from participants. In one of these papers, Mitten (1994) discussed the need for more qualitative and quantitative research to determine how such therapeutic changes occur and points out that there is not yet conclusive evidence that the programs are as helpful as therapy.

METHODOLOGY

The Phenomenological Approach

This approach aims to describe a phenomenon as it is lived and experienced, the "lived experience", from the point of view of the person involved. It is understood that the description is subjective. The approach aims to explore not what is, but what is perceived to be (Oiler 1982, p. 178). Van Manen (1994) describes the process as "discovery oriented" (p. 29). The objective is not to answer or solve, but to gain a deeper understanding. The individual descriptions are examined for commonalities or themes and for differences. There is no attempt to establish cause and effect but rather to find "what it is that renders this or that experience its special significance" (van Manen 1994, p. 32).

Phenomenological research requires the researchers to engage in "bracketing" throughout the data collection and analysis. Previous assumptions and knowledge are put aside to allow the researcher to observe without preconception (Massey 1991). For this reason, it is recommended that the literature review be conducted after data collection and analysis. We completed a cursory literature review for the purpose of the research proposal and a thorough search after data collection. The sample is kept deliberately small because a great deal of data is generated and "qualitative analysis is an exceedingly laborious and time-consuming enterprise" (Polit 1989, p. 275).

Study Design

A phenomenological design was used to explore the research question. A single interview was conducted with each informant, with the informant determining its length. Interviews ranged from one to two hours and were conducted approximately six weeks following the completion of a Women of Courage program. Researchers used non-directive and open-ended questions to encourage informants to "tell their story" as it related to the meaning and experience of the wilderness challenge.

Sample and Setting

The sample was obtained from two groups of women who had completed a Women of Courage program. Five women from each group of 10 volunteered to be interviewed. All informants had attended a counselling program at the Battered Women's Advocacy Centre in London or at Denise House in Oshawa, a shelter for battered women.

Data Collection and Protocol

All participants were informed of the research project by Outward Bound at information sessions held at the Battered Women's Advocacy Centre and Denise House. Letters of information and consent forms were given to participants at the completion of the Women of Courage program. Those wishing to participate in the project completed consent forms and returned them to the researchers. Interviews were conducted at the Battered Women's Advocacy Centre, Women's Community House in London, and a drop-in centre for former residents of Denise House in Oshawa. Informants were assured that they could withdraw at any point during the study and that counselling was available should it be required following the interview.

Limitations

Qualitative research does not lend itself to eliciting generalizable findings. However, the understanding and insights derived from this approach may have applicability to all helping professionals.

FINDINGS

In the description of their lived experience during the seven-day Women of Courage program, all 10 of the informants reported an increased awareness of their own power or strength, a sense of having done something they did not know they could do, and a strong feeling of achievement. All 10 reported a profound sense of acceptance and group cohesion, and the development of affection and friendships that they anticipated will continue to be part of their lives.

However, while eight of the 10 informants spoke very positively about the entire experience, two spoke very negatively. Most interesting was the extremity of the viewpoints. Those who enjoyed the trip were effusive in their description of the experience. They talked of fun and laughter; about feeling good, great, strong, empowered, accepted, supported and safe. They described emotion stirred by the connectedness with, and the kindness of others. There were personal moments of peacefulness, insight and even joy. When they spoke of difficult or unpleasant incidents, they described a positive resolution or valuable outcome and saw the hardship as necessary in order to gain the benefit.

The two informants who did not enjoy the trip were equally effusive, however they used the words angry, unfair, hated (it). They likened the trip to their abusive situation. They felt lack of control and that they were ill prepared and unsupported by the leaders. They saw the challenges (portaging, solo, etc.) as punishment and unnecessary work. The general perception of two of the informants was the polar opposite of the other eight. It is important to note, however, that even the two informants who described strong negative feelings reported many positive aspects of the experience and felt it ultimately had been of benefit to them.

We were able to identify three significant themes related to the experience of these 10 informants:

- insight into self and self in relation
- achievement
- use of metaphors and symbols.

We had hoped to find some insight that would point to a link between a physically healthy body and inner strength, but we were not able to do so.

Self and Self in Relation
A significant theme of self and self in relation emerged from the data. All informants described the development of self in relation; that is interpersonal interaction within the group, as the primary focus of the experience. Five described development in both areas of the inner self and the self in relation to others.

Self
Carol (for the purposes of confidentiality, all names of participants have been changed) summed up her experience of inner self development: "Although the group was important, there was a lot more that went on within me, I haven't had a chance to really be myself ever but now I can." Dana too,

reflected this idea of inner growth. "I let myself lean on people and not feel bad about it. . . . I learned survival techniques, if things get hard, I can do it. . . . I figured out a lot of things about myself."

As caregivers, women often deny themselves the pleasure of caring for their own physical/emotional selves. For the woman in an abusive situation this is even more evident as she struggles to maintain equilibrium so her body will not be abused by another. Grace verbalized this idea: "We tend to always be worried about everyone else except ourselves and making sure everyone else was okay. . . . That was one of the big things that came out of the whole program, to identify our own feelings and how they work within the group." For some of the informants, the solo experience was an opportunity to look after the physical self. Beth noted, "I spent the whole day just taking care of myself. . . . I lay in the sun in the nude for awhile. I think we all did that . . . like it was very isolated and it felt great. . . . I learned that everyone takes care of themselves." Fran found the trip a negative experience and expressed her inability for self-reflection: "I didn't really get any time for myself. I needed time for me and it was too much work."

Self in Relation
For each informant of the Women in Courage program, both the group as a whole and her relationship to the individual members were very positive and significant components of the experience. Yalom (1995) describes eleven "therapeutic factors" (p. 1) or mechanisms of change that are present in therapeutic groups. Although not all were evident, our data clearly illustrate the presence of three: group cohesiveness, universality, and catharsis.

Group cohesiveness is defined as a feeling of attractiveness to the group with a sense of "we" ness (Yalom 1995). This was evident in Dana's remarks: "The group was a really close circle, and I think that's why it made it possible to do some of the things we did." For Fran, her feeling of acceptance was remarkable: "There was total acceptance, I was able to accept whatever and whoever they were, and they were able to accept whoever I was." Being accepted for who they are means feeling trusted and respected. It means feeling safe to state feelings. It is a necessary ingredient when taking physical risks in the environment.

All informants described feeling safe and being able to trust the members of the group. Ann reflected, "I noticed that absence of conflict. . . .We didn't have any. . . . People were giving each other lots of room to make mistakes and learn, so that built trust." Carol stated that, "Trust is an issue for me. . . . All of us respect each others' level of ability . . . because everybody knows that everybody was doing the best they could." Grace was amazed at the strength of the group support: "I think we were all supportive to each other throughout the entire week for whatever seemed to be your fear. . . . It was just amazing to see women reaching out to one another and supporting one another." She named group strength as a high point of her trip: "Seeing the strength of the group day after day, the group growing, the bond that was happening throughout the week and the sense of accomplishment." Eva reiterated this idea: "Every one of them is important to the group structure and if one of them is out of the circle, it feels like something is missing." Informants described the group as being free from the gender roles of their own families and community. Eva reflected "the

group was taken out of social roles and you are just a human being for a while together." This strong sense of "group" provided individuals the support and encouragement to cope with adverse physical conditions experienced on the trip.

Individual feelings of isolation were dissipated easily because all informants were survivors of abuse. As a result, a cohesive supportive group developed fairly quickly. Grace reflected, "the sharing of a similar past helped develop acceptance." Joyce believed that the commonality of life experiences helped cement the group. "I think we were sensitive to each other and we all had a common bond. . . . We have all been in abusive situations." These experiences reflect the concept of universality, a disconfirming of the individual's sense of uniqueness or aloneness (Yalom 1995).

Catharsis, the ability to express both positive and negative feelings, was reported by participants as part of the sharing and supportive nature of the experience which provided an opportunity for frank and open discussion. Beth reflected that there were "a lot of tears and every time we grouped, we got out the toilet paper, that was good too because we knew it was okay. . . . It was kind of saying to me, it's okay to be emotional and feel things." The atmosphere of safety and comfort created by the group allowed for relaxation and fun. All informants described laughter as an integral part of the experience, even during difficult situations. Joyce described "Bug Wednesday" when she went to help Fran who was stuck in the mud: "I went to help her . . . now we are both stuck . . . but we both broke down laughing. The bugs were eating us, and here we were on the portage from Hell, but we all started laughing and couldn't stop."

Achievement
A significant theme of achievement, both physical and psychological, was clearly evident in discussions with all informants, even those who felt negatively about the trip overall. Informants spoke not only of the obvious outward physical accomplishments of rock climbing and portaging but also of less obvious inner accomplishments. Dana summed up what many informants expressed: "I expected to come back and be this strong person and have all these wonderful changes happen and [instead] I came back with the tools."

When asked about highs and lows of the trip, virtually every informant talked about the highs in relation to a physical achievement. This is congruent with Miles' (1993) conclusion that "what we do in wild places is as important to healthful outcomes as the physical qualities of the place" (p. 10). Carol made the comment: "Women often don't think they are physically strong" and yet physical strength was demonstrated constantly throughout the trip. Joyce had never viewed herself as a physically strong person but managed to "pull (her) own weight." Both Dana and Heidi said they learned to push their limits. In reference to backpacking, portaging and rock climbing, Dana observed, "we did stuff we never dreamed we could do. . . . It was almost like accomplishing the impossible." Ingrid set her own goals during the rock climb: "I decided where the top was for (me) and was satisfied with that."

Of interest to the researchers were comments made about psychological achievements, most often reported as what informants felt they had learned both during the trip, as well as upon reflection

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after the trip. Grace made the interesting observation: "We all had our own little mountains to climb that week." It wasn't just physical accomplishment for her but rather the "meaning of all those experiences." She arrived for the interview armed with a list of 20 things she had learned while on the trip. Her comments were echoed by the others. For Dana, it was "more than just a camping trip." The trip gave her a sense of hope for the future. For Beth, the trip was "affirmation by action" or as stated by Grace "attaining a sense of confidence through achievement." Carol felt the Outward Bound trip "was almost like a reminder . . . you can do anything." She also noted that the trip allowed her "to see the beauty of women's energy."

Ann and Beth reported that they were able to transfer some of the confidence they felt they had gained to their lives at home. They both sensed an acquired peaceful calm feeling and a renewed feeling of strength that they were able to call upon in troubled times. Joyce identified hidden inner strengths and was surprised when others commented that they had gained strength from her perseverance. Ingrid identified a need to set goals "rather than just drifting along." Grace commented that each group member had respect for the others as individuals with unique strengths and weaknesses. Those who were able to survive the one-night solo trip felt they could survive anything. Most informants agreed that making it through the one-week trip gave them a strength they didn't realize they possessed. "I came home with so much calm...I lose it sometimes but then I think back and I just feel more calm as a person."

Several informants felt they had dealt with incidents from the past on the trip and were able to "leave a lot behind . . . out there in the trails." Beth reported a new sense of confidence and hope and an excitement about getting on with her life. She and Grace reported their increased ability to trust in themselves and others and the development of a feeling of safety while on the trip, feelings they thought they had lost forever. As Beth put it: "If anyone had told me it was going to be like this, I would never have believed them...it's such a big deal for me, like to feel safe again in a group, and I don't know if I'll feel that way again but I know there's a chance." Dana felt "the whole world had opened up" to her.

Even the two informants who felt generally negative about the trip had some positive things to say. Heidi said the trip made her feel stronger physically but not psychologically. Fran said she was glad she had gone on the trip and had been strengthened by it although she would not consider doing it again.

Use of Metaphor and Symbols
It was the use of metaphor that seemed to allow the best glimpse of the deeply personal meaning of the lived experience. This was the way the women made sense of the experience for themselves, and how they were able to bring it home to be of use in their day-to-day lives. "I expected to come back and be this strong person, and have all these wonderful changes happen and I came back with the tools to get to that point. . . . That's going to be more important than just changing." To have gained something that will help get the job of living done, something that can be used over and over, is surely an affirmative outcome for the program, and shows real insight into the way human beings learn and change.

It is not surprising that the informants in our study used metaphor to process their experience, since "Instructors consciously explore with students the ways in which Outward Bound activities apply in the 'real' world and at home" (Copeland Arnold 1994, p. 50) and the use of metaphor is encouraged. When one reflects upon an experience using word symbols, one makes sense of it by relating it to what is already known or understood.

Each group had a shared metaphor that not only helped them through their wilderness challenge and was an important memory to bring home, but also served to promote a shared identity and group cohesion. One group named themselves "Spirits of the Wind" after a song that they shared around their campfire. It became a sort of talisman for the group as a whole and also for the five individuals. Dana volunteered, "our group name was Spirits of the Wind, and that comes from the chant. We adopted that chant as ours, you know, we sang it every day, we sang it a lot, and I sang it on my solo, it was on my mind the whole time." Beth mentioned it too: "The first time I heard it sung, I cried a lot, there was a part in there . . . that referred to the rain and how the rain could take away the pain . . . and for some reason that part was always really hard every time I heard it. . . . It was very emotional. By the time we sang it on the way back to Toronto, I was singing it and I was saying the words, and I wasn't crying any more, and I've sung it to myself since I've been home."

The chant had a soothing sound and an important message.

Refrain

> Spirit of the Wind, carry me.
> Spirit of the Wind, carry me home,
> Spirit of the Wind, carry me home,
> To myself.

1.
> Spirit of the Earth, mother of birth,
> Spirit of the Land, hold me in your hand.

2.
> Spirit of the Storm, help me be warm,
> Spirit of the Rain, wash away my pain.

3.
> Spirit of the Sun, make us all one,
> Spirit of the Light, give us clear sight.

4.
> Spirit of the Moon, let my visions bloom,
> Spirit of the Night, give us free flight.

by Starhawk as recorded by Ubaka Hill
in the song, Nightflight.
Lady Slipper Inc.

The song very movingly combines the nurturance of reconnecting with nature and the need to heal ego boundaries ravaged by abuse. As a theme for Women of Courage, it couldn't be more appropriate. Dana put it this way: "It felt like something that was, what we had all been talking about . . . and going through." Eva, who introduced the group to the song, said that to her, "that song represents my spirituality or my core so much and so I sang the song as kind of a reclaiming."

The metaphor shared by the other group was not a song, but a statement they considered a truism, that grew out of one of their challenges. "'Life is like a portage became one of our little mottos." Sharon went on to tell of a time when the group was faced with a choice of two portages. One woman elected to go ahead and scout out the situation. When she came back, she said it didn't matter. "It's like life you know. We, if we knew what lay ahead, no way would we do it. . . . When you're drawn into life, you just gotta do it, and that's part of the challenge. . . . We basically have to analyze the route and go with it. . . . Life is like a portage, you never know what you're going to get. That was our Forrest Gump statement."

A great many ideas were shared during their adventures, and in the evenings as they reviewed their day. One concept that appeared in both groups was related to the rock climbing. Sharon, reading from her journal said: "The face of the rock is like a metaphor for life." She elaborated, "your approach to life is mirrored in your needs and style of climb." Eva, in the other group, said, "classic, classic re-enactment of life." We don't know if the informants articulated this idea for themselves, or if it was introduced by the instructors. "Outward Bound uses risk-taking activities such as rock climbing and rappelling as metaphoric experience. This is based on the assumption that the way you climb the rock may tell you something about the way you live life" (Copeland Arnold 1994, p. 50). Some named the rock for a personal demon and thus marshalled the energy to conquer both. One woman said "I named it the Night and I got halfway up . . . big obstacle, big fear, big everything, you know." Another called her rock "Bullshit", on her first try, and "More Bullshit" on the second. Carol said "I called my rock 'the Phoenix' a kind of mythical bird that rises from the ashes of its destruction and is reborn again. . . . Climbing the rocks (is) a kind of like, no more shit." Joyce called her mountain, "last chance . . . because I knew it was, and I made it!"

Personal stories were touching, in the things that individuals noticed, and how they made from them a meaning of their own. Ingrid used a metaphor when she gave this example: "I had a very tall rock, and at the top of the rock was a turtle's nest. . . . I could see that the turtle had not come up the easy way, like along the edges and through the ledges and around trees, she'd come straight, bulldozin' up the side of that, thank you. She wanted to go to the top, and that's where she was going to lay her eggs, and got there. . . . That's one of the main things that I learned on the trip, that I do need to set a goal, even though I've no idea and there's so many barriers in the way that I normally just say, well that's not possible. . . . Just set the goals and start, and somehow things (I need) seem to fall in my way."

Eva said, "I felt the energy of the earth wrapping around me and holding me, like a mother holds a baby." Joyce volunteered this comparison: "I went into the woods a girl, and came out a woman." Beth drew the name of her counsellor in the gift-giving exercise. "I decided I was going to find her

the best rock I could find, and wash it and everything, because she had been a rock to me." Several women recounted dreams that connected personal meaning to the environment: "There was these two people speaking to me in the dream and they were giving me these wonderful messages about change and power," . . . "it was a pretty awesome, pretty powerful feeling in the dream. . . . As the dream ended . . . a loon called right off the end of my rock."

The two women who had described so many negative feelings did not report such analogies, comparisons, symbols or metaphors, except in relating their treatment to punishment, unfairness, lack of control, or to their abuse experience.

Contrasts

Our discussion would be incomplete without addressing the experience of the two women who reported strong negative feelings. It is important to note that both were in the same group. In one group, the five informants reported a predominantly positive experience, while in the other group, three of the five were positive and two were negative.

When Fran was invited to talk about the trip, she mentioned that her experience was probably different than some of the others. She said "I hated it. . . . it was awful. . . . I wanted to go home every day. . . . I'm still dealing with some of the anger." She explained that she had attended all of the orientation meetings, and felt she had gotten all the information she could before she went, but she felt she hadn't been prepared for how really difficult it was. Heidi had similar feelings. "Certain things were held back from us. . . . I think if I had known a lot of this, I don't think I would have gone." She used the word anger, angry or bitter 45 times in a 34-page interview.

Fran related much of her bad feeling to expectations she had that were not met by the instructors. "I thought we were going with two guides, who were fully knowledgeable, who would help us, and I didn't find that was what it was at all. . . . They are just not there to help us, but watch us get through. . . . I just felt the attitudes that I was dealing with, with the people I felt were in control, who were going to look after us, I felt that they weren't." She went on to say that she had been told before the trip that she wouldn't have to do things she was not able to do, but that no consideration was given for this. She felt that the three instructors, being experienced, could have helped "pick up the slack", but they did not. "They made it clear, it's nine women and we're over here. We're separate. . . . I just felt abandoned." She also said that one of the leaders had "no respect for the way I was feeling" and described incidents where one instructor gave direction about what seemed to be unnecessary rules. "It was like being away with the principal for the whole week."

Heidi said that she felt angry with the instructors because "they didn't help." She repeated that she felt "pushed" and was given no time to rest or to make her own choices: "Some nights we weren't allowed to have a swim. . . . Just always being told what to do and being pushed." Both women drew a parallel to the abuse they had experienced from their respective spouses. "It was like me working hard at home, and my husband with his feet up. . . . I thought, if I wanted to be abused, I might as well go home. . . . I felt we were not treated the same as maybe a trip that went to Outward Bound that paid for their trip."

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The other informants in that group either did not comment on the leaders, or if they did, spoke positively. "Outward Bound guides that were there with us were excellent, and they, you know, walked us through. They were wonderful." Why did two of the women have such a different perspective on the same situation? It is possible that the other informants had such feelings, but did not mention them, or perhaps, they had them, but were able to resolve them in the structured debriefing sessions. These opportunities are purposefully planned to deal with issues as they arise. Joyce mentions that the instructors "encouraged everyone to discuss difficulties" and said that they "clarified Outward Bound's self-reliance objective to those having difficulty."

Another possible explanation for the two predominantly negative perceptions of the experience, is the notion of risk readiness. Perhaps the women who had positive perceptions had progressed farther in their healing. They were then freer to concentrate on their own responses and did not attach as much importance to any of the behaviour of the instructors. Outward Bound is certainly aware of the need to assess applicants regarding their readiness for wilderness adventure. They also acknowledge the complexity of making such an assessment. Unlike the healing of a physical wound which shows observable signs of progress, no such measure is available for abuse recovery. This idea is speculative only, but could be the seed for further study. We have listed the concept in our end thoughts.

Both Heidi and Fran acknowledged the strong personal component in their reaction to the experience. This isn't surprising. "As in all therapy, what comes up for people in an adventure therapy situation is personal and person specific" (Mitten 1994, p. 82). Heidi said, "I'm realizing what made me so angry at the wilderness and stuff had a lot to do with my childhood issues. I mean, I think for everybody the mosquito bites were really bad, everybody talked about it, and you know, *my scars are still there and I don't know how to get rid of them*" [italics added]. Fran also showed she was still trying to come to an understanding of the events of the trip: "I realize that I need control, and want control, and out there on that trip, I wasn't." She mentioned a time when the instructor complimented her. "I just wasn't accepting. And that's my . . . I know that's my problem. It's not hers."

Not everyone enjoys wilderness challenge. Heidi stated clearly that she did not think it necessary to work so hard: "It was just too physical." She had expected to have fun, and did not enjoy the physical part. "It's not something I enjoy doing. Like some people enjoy rock climbing. I don't, you know."

Fran and Heidi's negative feelings can be clustered into three categories. These are, the feeling of not being properly prepared, of not being treated as they wanted to be by the instructors, and personal issues. It is, however, important to remember that they both had a lot of positive things to say, and both described positive personal results. An important result for Fran was having a pool of nine friends to call upon. She also described a very concrete example of being able to drive into Toronto alone, something she had been afraid to do before her Outward Bound experience. "Because it was so difficult it strengthened me. . . . I'm better able to make decisions and stick to them." She talked of the feeling of "total acceptance" within the group, and said that she was "tending to hug

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more" since she returned home. Heidi offered this: "I got a lot out of the trip you know. Things I thought I couldn't do I was able to do, and just everybody being able to communicate, I got a lot out of it personally. . . . I felt safe with the group." When asked what she had learned, Heidi said, "My kids survived. I didn't have to be there and . . . I'm a strong person."

Was the Women of Courage program worth it for these individuals? Does the positive outweigh the negative? Although these questions were not asked directly by the researchers, the following comments were volunteered. Heidi said, "I don't think I'd ever go back again on a trip like that one." Fran reflected, "I'm glad I did it. . . .The friendships with the women, just to be out there was good. . . . I would never go on that kind of trip (referring to the philosophy of self-reliance of the students). . . . They were that bad, but that's not what I'm gonna allow to outweigh the whole experience. I want to remember the good."

END THOUGHTS

We have titled this section "End Thoughts" rather than "Conclusion" because according to van Manen, a phenomenological study differs from other types of research in that conclusions cannot be drawn because:

> Results cannot be severed from the means by which the results are obtained. That is why, when you listen to a presentation of a phenomenological nature, you will listen in vain for the punch-line, the latest information, or the big news. As in poetry, it is inappropriate to ask for a conclusion or a summary of a phenomenological study. To summarize a poem in order to present the result would destroy the result because the poem itself is the result.
>
> (van Manen, 1994, p. 9)

The findings of this study document support for the goals of the Women of Courage program. In her own personal story, each informant gives testimony to the positive effect of the wilderness experience and in particular to the individual growth that can occur as a result of group interaction. "Women together, in any circumstance, can create a powerful bond." (Cole, Erdman & Rothblum 1994, p. 2). Here in this unique and unusual setting, a special combination of factors serve to enhance and ignite that natural process. Brought together by similar experiences, facing challenges in a wilderness setting, free of role responsibilities and externally imposed gender expectations (it takes more than seven days to be free of internal gender role expectations), these women formed supportive and cohesive units that enabled them to recognize their own personal strength, increase their self-awareness, and to take pride in their own achievement. Added to this was the very real benefit of making new friends who would be a part of their lives after the adventure.

When we began our project, we bracketed four research assumptions. In our data we found confirmation for two of the four. These women did have many strengths, and each reported self discovery and an increased sense of competence gained through physical achievement. However their stories did not reveal a conscious awareness of their own health as strength or any change of their convictions about a healthy lifestyle. We continue to be interested in these ideas and consider them suitable for an action research project.

Although not in our original plan, it has been interesting for us to study two groups of women. This allowed us to have a somewhat different perspective on the data. The overwhelming positive reactions of the informants lead us to conclude that this program is a valuable adjunct in the healing process of abused women. We applaud the Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School for establishing the program and for making it possible for abuse survivors to attend at no cost to themselves. Initiatives that continue to make the program available should be encouraged as should efforts to promote public awareness.

At the end of this project we remain, as in the beginning, impressed and intrigued by this aptly named group, the Women of Courage. The data was rich and thought provoking. The work that we

have done has, more than anything, served to elicit several areas for further investigation:

- effects of wilderness challenge on health awareness and the promotion of a healthier lifestyle
- body image and wilderness challenge
- changes in attitudes towards other women
- hardiness concepts and abuse survivors who elect wilderness challenge
- progress of healing and "risk readiness"
- long term effects of a Women of Courage program
- orientation methods that best prepare women for wilderness challenge
- leader/participant relationships

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