

**INTERPRETING MARGINALITY:  
WOMEN, TEACHING, AND MARGINALITY**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i.
Acknowledgments	ii.
Introduction	1
Methodology	6
Interpreting Marginalization	10
The Experience(s) of Marginality	15
The Public and the Private	17
The Rationalization of Marginalization	20
Making a Difference	26
In Retrospect	28
References	34

### ABSTRACT

Interpreting marginality with the help of seven female teachers is the focus of this research. The author interprets the experiences of these women as they relate their own and others' marginality in their teaching and their private lives. In this interpretive inquiry, the women in the study speak about how they have felt marginalized, the impact it might have on their students, and the responsibility they feel to help others understand their own marginality. The result is a blend of personal anecdotes and published works focusing on interpreting, defining and relating to marginality.

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I was named for my two grandmas, and, for the very first time, I want to say, I am proud to carry their name. While neither is still living, it is their strength and inspiration that has brought me to this point. This paper is dedicated to both of them - thank you for leading me on this journey.

## Introduction

I credit my grandmothers for helping me to arrive at what it was that I wanted to write about. It is through writing, reflecting, laughing, and crying at my memories of both of them that produced a strong desire to begin to understand more about women, how they survive from the margins, and the incredible impact such women have on us all.

My maternal grandmother, Margaret, came to Canada in 1929, leaving the comfort of her family and native Czechoslovakia, to meet up with her husband and begin a new life. I remember her with fondness and a sense of empathy, for I am aware of the years she slaved working in the family store and restaurant, raising a family of five, and serving her husband. Grandma Bubniak was a rather small woman in stature, standing perhaps five feet four inches. She wasn't particularly heavy either, but she was incredibly strong; she had to be. Grandma's native tongue was the language she was most comfortable with, even after living for over fifty years in Canada. As a result, in most public places she was very quiet and unassuming. My most vivid recollection of my grandma is the one that was repeated by her hundreds, perhaps thousands of times. She is sitting on a hard wooden stool in the back of the restaurant, peeling potatoes. She is stooped over, her forearms resting on her knees as the knife moves at lightning speed through a hundred pounds of potatoes in record time. Before she peeled the potatoes though, Grandma had to carry the hundred pound sacks up the steep steps from the basement. "Mama's strong as an ox," I can recall my grandfather saying time and again. "She's a good worker." "Ah, she likes to keep busy," he would comment, quickly dismissing suggestions of overwork. I remember her strength, both physically and spiritually. I remember her always working, never complaining, always serving.

My paternal grandmother, also Margaret, came from Czechoslovakia to settle in Alberta to begin a new and better life. Here she met and married my grandfather, a Polish immigrant. She also lived her life in this country being more comfortable with her native

tongue than English. I've been told she spent her time working in the home raising her seven children and serving her husband - she never worked outside of the home. If she wasn't working in her garden or climbing up and down those steep basement stairs, or mending clothes, she was walking to the hills to pick mushrooms, or sitting at the loom hooking rugs. She lived in a big house in Blairmore for almost twenty years after my Grandfather died. She lived without a refrigerator or phone or automatic laundry facilities. She, like my other Grandma, lived in silence. I remember her always working, never complaining, always serving.

Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984) in the book, Yours in Struggle, says,

When we begin to understand that we have benefited, for no good reason, from the lives and work of others, when we begin to understand how false much of our sense of self-importance has been, we do experience loss: our self respect. To regain it, we need to find new ways to be in the world, those very actions a way of creating a positive self. (Bulkin, E., Bruce Pratt, M. & Smith, B., 1984, p. 42 )

Does guilt draw me into this research? The guilt of a privileged granddaughter who has reaped the rewards of decades of pain. Or is it from my grandmothers' strength and determination that I draw my strength? I want my grandmothers to be able to finally put me down, to walk on my own. I would like to develop my self-respect by understanding their subservience. While I may only scratch the surface to this understanding, it is because of my two grandmas, Margaret and Margaret, that I have even decided to begin this process of understanding.

"Interpreting Marginality: Women, Teaching and Marginality," the title of my research, is intended as a study in which a collective of women define marginalization by reflecting and talking about their experiences of living in the margins. I entered the research with the expectation that, through the stories of some women, I might begin to understand, reflect upon, contemplate, and write about marginality.

When asked what my research focus was, I responded that I was researching the experience of feeling marginalized in teaching. Often the next question was, "What do you mean by marginalized?" My usual response to the question was that marginalized refers to 'being on the outside,' or 'not in the centre, but on the edge.' Should I be surprised that their questioning look remained?

I arrived at my definition by breaking down the word "marginal" and examining the etymology of the word "margin." The Etymological Dictionary of the English Language, explains that the term margin has many derivations, those most commonly from Latin, Old English, Icelandic, and Old English Saxon. Regardless of the geographic origin, the meaning is "boundary, confine" (Skeat & Litt, 1963, p. 361). In the end, I had to find a definition of marginal that I thought would best describe the meaning for the purpose of this research. The term that I am most comfortable with is that found in The Oxford Dictionary, Volume IX, which defines marginal as "Of minor importance, small, having little effect" (Simpson and Weiner, 1989, p. 367).

I began by separating what the intention of this research was compared to what the impact this research might have on me, the participants of this study, and those who choose to read it. Long before I began the process of the research, I was questioning the validity of attempting to explain other peoples' marginality. By who's authority could I speak for marginalized women? Certainly bell hooks has much to say about the privileged women who she feels live at the centre but attempt to speak and pretend to know what it is like to really be marginalized. hooks (1984) says, "White women who dominate feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group" (p. 3). Well, I did question that. Could I possibly speak or find representatives who could speak for all other marginalized women? Of course I couldn't, but that was not my intention. My intention was to attempt to understand the experience of some women who feel marginalized in teaching. By doing

so, I may begin to understand my own marginality as well as the marginality of others. It is my desire to regain a feeling of belonging that I have chosen to conduct this research. I am standing by a general premise that **all** women are oppressed. "Women have not been afforded the same opportunities as men in terms of economic, educational, or social" (Adamson, Briskin & McPhail, 1988, page 11). It is this general premise from which I gain a sense of credibility. It is from this premise that all women suffer some degree of marginality that I can begin my study.

It can be argued that some women are in a sense more oppressed than others. As a white, middle class, educated woman, I have many privileges that other women do not. In most of the literature that I have encountered in preparing for this study, the question of who is marginalized, by whom and to what extent, were issues in question. (c.f. hooks (1984), Bulkin et. al (1984)) The concept of privilege was one theme that emerged in discussion with the women who collaborated in this research, and will be discussed at length later.

What I quickly discovered though is that I was not only researching teaching in the margins but I was actually researching **from** the margins. I felt marginalized in teaching and chose a style of research that was conducive to doing so from that place. The explanation I must give regarding where I am researching from, stems from the feeling that I cannot, or at least would not, be comfortable researching about marginalization, or about the experiences women have had being marginalized if I were not myself in that position. The interest I have in completing this research stems from the fact that I have often felt that much of the educational research that is carried out is done so from a distance, without actually experiencing what the research is. Kirby and McKenna (1989), in their book, Research from the Margins, explain, "Most of us have not had the opportunity to research, to create knowledge which is rooted in and representative of our experience. We have been excluded from participating in, describing and analyzing our own understanding of reality."



(p. 16) I **could** not separate myself from the women I was researching. Actually, I **chose** not to separate myself because "Research from the margins is not research on people from the margins; but research **by, for, and with them**" (Kirby and McKenna, 1989, page 28). I am acutely aware that I am not a spokesperson for all marginalized people, nor for all women. Some women do not feel marginalized. It is as Michelle Fine (1992) would explain, a matter of perspective. Many women today feel more liberated and privileged than they did twenty years ago, even though their wealth, income, and status remain virtually unchanged (Fine, 1992). I have no intention of making judgments about the status of one's marginality, for that is not for me to judge. I am interested in how women define marginality, their own and others; their experiences of marginality, and the impact it has on them and their teaching.

Early in this study I was questioned about the exclusion of men from my research. While I had strong feelings about it, I was almost apologetic about not including men who felt marginalized in teaching. The reason for excluding men is that "the male experience has been so powerfully articulated that we believed we would hear the patterns in women's voices more clearly if we held at bay the powerful templates men have etched in the literature and in our minds" (Field Belenky, McVicker Clinchy, Rule Goldberger & Mattuck Tarule, 1986, p. 9). It was after one particular meeting with other graduate students that I realized that my tendency to be apologetic was reason enough to exclude men from this research. I did not want any of the women in the study to feel that they had to apologize for their thoughts or their feelings. Peggy McIntosh's (1984) article, "Feeling Like a Fraud," comes to mind here. She explains how women are often silenced around men, even when what they have to say is worthwhile and valid. In any case, I did not want to present an atmosphere in which even one woman thought she could not say what was needed to be said because of the audience to whom she was speaking. What the

women in the study have to say is important and I chose not to jeopardize their participation in any way.

I began to take ownership of this research shortly after that final confrontation. I decided then that I would like to collaborate with a collective of women who would share their experiences. The end result would be that I would be privileged to the information they chose to share. I would then have the task of reflecting on their experiences, finding common themes and differences, and, hopefully, developing an understanding of their marginalization. It turned out that some of the women felt that they were given the opportunity to speak, something that is not often possible in their workplace. I would be comfortable in saying, for a very brief moment in time, the women who collaborated in this research gained a voice that they may not always have had. Field Belenky et al. (1986), explain this as a kind of silencing in that "in everyday and professional life, as well as in the classroom, women often feel unheard even when they believe they have something important to say" (p. 5).

### Methodology

Arriving at a methodology was in many ways an adventure, but one that contained many roadblocks, barriers, and pitfalls. I considered everything from a survey to an autobiography, from a thesis to a one-credit project. I have always felt that, in order to conduct research, one must have a passion for their topic; a special tie to the question, whether it be experientially, academically, or both, but a passion nonetheless. I very easily ruled out a survey as I felt that this method of study could end up being too clinical and impersonal. Although harder to do, I next ruled out an autobiographical account of my own marginality. If for no other reason than political, I felt this was ultimately not a method of research with which I would be comfortable. While it is autobiographical work that has brought me to the question for this research, it is not that which I write about now.

I was in search of a method that would "enable people to identify and examine how living on the margins affects their lives, their opportunities, the way they think and act" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 64 ). I decided that interviewing women would be the best method of gathering my data. Because the term "interview" seemed too clinical, I began to call my methodology a collective, a gathering of ideas and experiences. Our interview would be a united effort of understanding and interpreting marginalization. Conscious of the varying degree of people's perceived marginality, I asked women to participate in a collective but also afforded them the choice to speak to me in private, within the safety of a private space. Forty-three invitations were sent to women who taught within Southern Alberta. I received a response from seven. I would suggest that the number of respondents could have been the result of many factors including time commitment, lack of interest or understanding, fear, or timing in terms of the time of the year. I was prepared to conduct the study with as few as two other women and with as many as forty three so I was not disappointed with the few number of respondents.

Five women responded positively to participate in a collective, while two desired a private meeting. All of the discussions were audio-taped and all but one of the tapes was transcribed. One of the women who spoke with me privately asked that the tape not be transcribed for fear of someone besides myself reading the transcription. While research from the margins should empower the people who are usually the objects of the research, it is also important that this type of research does not serve to oppress. If my research gave power over another, I would consider this a profound disservice to the people in the collective. In some instances, specifically within the private interviews, we discussed the 'fear factor.' It was decided that it is sometimes necessary to hide the parts of ourselves that marginalize us. Unlike some women who are visibly oppressed, some people are able to choose whether or not they will expose that part of them which might further marginalize them. I struggled with this aspect of this research. I felt the weight of the words as

women spoke of their own marginality. I found myself looking for hidden and obvious fears. I was sensitive to some of the women who said, "I really shouldn't be saying this but..." and found it difficult to justify putting their text into mine.

Each woman chose a pseudonym and the pseudonym was used in the transcriptions of the tapes and will appear throughout the study. We talked about the need to use other names, about the fear of retribution and exposure, and the need for assurances. In many regards, this recognition of not feeling safe reinforces the notion that we are marginalized. It saddens me to think that this one question would bring about so much dis-ease. During our taped sessions, we all talked about the feelings of not being able to say what we wanted without a certain amount of fear. We talked about confidence and safety, but recognized that the only way to ensure complete safety would be to not take this step in understanding our own marginality. For the women who chose to participate in this study that solution was not an option. We recognized the risks and carried on.

*Often I see myself as two different people depending on what environment I'm in. So, If I'm in an environment where I feel safe, I suppose, that I'm the majority, or I'm part of the majority, I feel very confident and I behave in a certain way. If I enter an environment that, where I feel I'm in the minority, for example if there were more men there,.....then I sometimes lose that confidence and don't behave in a way that I would if I was a part of the majority. So, I suppose, as far as marginality is concerned, if I'm in a minority situation, I feel very marginalized. If I'm in a majority position, then I don't feel that so much. (Ruth)*

We started each session with an explanation of the study and then one question was asked by me to start discussion. In all three sessions, I did not have to pose more than that one question and the collaborative process took off and worked itself. The question I

started with was, "What does it mean to be marginalized?" In the collective of six women we sat about the room and began to discuss the meaning that the term 'marginalization' held for each person. One woman's perceptions led to others recollecting situations and instances of their experiences of existing on the fringe.

My feelings regarding my participation in the research can be likened to my experiences in teaching in the Faculty of Education. In an effort at feminist pedagogy, I attempt to engage my students in participatory seminars with the intention of empowering the students in the class to take responsibility for their own learning. One of the difficulties I have experienced, though, is that much of the discussion seems to pass through me. While my students are actively engaged in discussions and decision making, I often have to remind them to talk to each other, not just to me. I feel somewhat like a radio receiver that receives the information, then bounces the signal to others. I felt a similar experience throughout this research. It was almost like the women participating in this study felt that they had to confirm what they had to say with me, the "expert." Reflecting on it now, I see that as the researcher, I was marginalized. While the women would ask for confirmation of their suggestions and experiences, they did not ask me to explain how I felt marginalized or how I would define marginality. So, while my intention of this method of research was to engage myself and others in a collaborative project, I felt more like I facilitated the collaboration of others, acting like mediator or facilitator.

Following the discussions with the seven women, I listened to the tapes. I remember placing the tape in my car tape deck after leaving the meeting, anxious to begin to relive the experience of each discussion. I listened to the tapes several times before they were transcribed. I wanted to be familiar with the conversations in order to prepare myself for interpreting the text and writing about the experiences of the participants. Following the transcription of the tapes, and much reflection, I read the transcripts several times looking for common themes, noticeable differences, explanations, definitions, and information

dealing with marginality. I literally saturated myself with the texts. Each time I re-read the transcripts, I felt that I found new insights. I began to highlight different sections, colour coding according to themes that were emerging. This experience was somewhat like a jigsaw puzzle. I felt that I had all of the pieces and that there was a place for them in the main picture. What I found, however, is that there are far too many pieces. While some of the pieces will contribute to the picture I am constructing now, other pieces must be left for another time in another picture that I choose to make.

Kirby and McKenna (1989) suggest stepping back from the data in order to reflect on it. In all honesty, this was a very painful time for me; it was only a matter of about three weeks, but it was very discomfoting. It seemed that the discussions never left me alone. I kept going through the transcripts time and again in my mind, drawing on key words or phrases, remembering the looks on the faces of my colleagues, and wondering if I could do them justice when I began to write. I think for me, it was a matter of accountability. Seven women chose to share some very important and dynamic interpretations and experiences with me and it was my job to 'make sense' of it all. I was worried about misrepresenting them, leaving some of the women out of the data, misinterpreting what they said, and choosing the wrong bits of the texts to interpret. I am not sure that I am yet totally comfortable with what I have done. What I have come to realize is that I have an obligation to tell the stories, to share the insights and interpret as best I can. The seven women in this research have trusted me; I must now trust myself enough to work through the process.

### Interpreting Marginalization

I began my research with the premise that all women are oppressed and therefore all women exist from the margin. To better explain this, however, it is sometimes necessary

to refer to that which oppresses us or keeps us in the margin. My interpretation of marginality can best be explained by the barriers I have felt and have seen as a woman. I am talking now, of sexism as the root of the female marginality. I am referring to the countless times that women have not achieved the same status as men only because they are women - for no other discernible reason. An example of this in education is the proportion of female teachers compared to male teachers, 63% to 37% respectively, compared to the percentage of female administrators to male administrators, 15% to 85% respectively (MacLeod, 1988). The implication in these statistics is that women are valuable classroom teachers but either do not apply for or are not considered for administrative positions. Madihi Didi Khayatt (1992) expounds this same concept in her book, Lesbian Teachers, when she says,

Women in education face inequities that are often invisible but that are reflected in the labor market in general. Recent feminist critiques suggest unequivocally that women and nonwhite peoples face unequal treatment in this field, that the white, patriarchal social organization discriminates against them, that their parity is concretized institutionally, and that the same ideology that operates to subordinate women and nonwhite peoples generally function in teaching to keep them hierarchically on a lower scale than their white, male colleagues. (p. 5)

Unfortunately, the hierarchy that exists in education dictates that status is achieved by becoming an administrator. The bigger the school one administers, the higher within the hierarchy one exists. That hierarchy, though, was challenged by the women in the study.

*That's a really key point that you just made in the sense of seeing administration as what we should all aspire to rather than taking value in what we choose, where we choose to have our talents best displayed. It still relates to that whole hierarchical way of thinking. So, it shows how deeply engrained the whole lineage is. (Kate)*

Much of the ideal of being marginalized or not rested in the concept of what choices one makes regarding her own place within the field of education. To not be bothered by not desiring administration, or to strive to become an administrator, is all a matter of choice. It is when the choice is not ours that a conflict arises, and a sense of marginalization occurs. Whether we choose to stay home with children, work in the home, work as a classroom teacher, or work as an administrator, who makes the choice for us is the key issue for many.

*In the early 70's, the principal had to choose a person to be the new vice principal. And the person he chose was a tall, young man. But, there was one woman in particular who would have been the logical choice for her experience, and just the way she handled herself. But, she didn't have the choice of even being considered for the job. (Simonne)*

bell hooks (1984) defines marginality as "the absence of choices." To her it is the "primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor." (p. 5) hooks goes on to explain that women in this society do have choices. Often though, they are inadequate ones. There is a fine line between having no choice and having inadequate choices. The concept of choice and the limitations some women felt surfaced early in the collective. Sara related a story involving herself, as a supervisor, and a male colleague:

*And then, myself, I have one fellow, and he has a hard time having a female supervisor because in his hierarchy of thought, that doesn't happen. (Sara)*

Given the authority, Sara felt she was not listened to or taken seriously - there was a gender conflict. Kate, the nursing educator, suggested that perhaps it wasn't a gender conflict but



it was more about women having the right to be in positions of authority but, with limited power. Having limited power impacts our confidence and as Kate explained:

*When we're in the minority we lose that confidence and I wonder if it's so much whether we lose confidence or whether we lose the ability to know how to proceed to still be authentic to how we think things should happen. It's a type of illiteracy. You aren't sure that you can do what's socially accepted or required in that role so, therefore, you marginalize yourself. (Kate)*

Do we marginalize ourselves or do the limited choices we have marginalize us? Women can serve in an administrative position but, as Jane, explains:

*If you get into an administrative role, as a woman you're in the minority so you're having to try a lot harder to do the job because you're going to be looked at a lot more closely. I think that keeps women out of administration because it's not worth the added pressure of having to do better. (Jane)*

Linda Carty (1991) says, "I do remember getting fairly disgusted with the subordinate roles I saw women either willingly take or being forced to occupy. However, I did not have the tools to help me in articulating or analyzing this" (Bannerji, Carty, Dehli, Heald & McKenna, 1991, p. 39). Comments made during the conversations like "I think we marginalize ourselves" frustrated me. It reminded me of women who are victims of violence and blame themselves for being violated. I was expecting the women in this study to articulate their anger and frustration at having limited power. What I found, however, was the acknowledgment that we did indeed have limited choice but, that maybe, it was not so bad. A conversation to that effect ensued and Sara said the following:

*I also think that if you're a teacher with children, and you're a female, some of those things are not sought after (administration) because you don't want them - you just can't handle one more thing. It's a choice we make. (Sara)*

Kate was concerned with the idea that we are the ones that make the choice and said, "As long as you know the choice is freely there that you could or could not choose to do that." Relating the decisions we make compared to the choices we have, can best be explained by Mary Cayton (1991). She explains:

Marginalized can be like entering a conversation after it has begun. First you attempt to catch the drift of the conversation, then you might engage in the conversation. It is easier to enter the conversation if: you are suitable status or position; a concrete sense of audience - needs, beliefs, of those already in; clear interest in the topic of conversation in the first place. What child, for example, has a realistic chance of participating as an equal in the conversation of adults. (p. 655 )

What choice do many women have if the rules of the contest are determined before they have had an opportunity to contribute to the process of determining the rules? In the case of some women who are aspiring to administration, it is often difficult to ever enter in a dialogue regarding the rules or the strategy because all of that is discussed behind closed doors, or on the golf course, or in the sauna at the men's club. In our collective, Jane spoke of the "old boys' network" and explained how it has served to isolate her from other administrators.

*Like the "old boys 'network"--that's probably the biggest force that I ever encountered. And I don't know that they don't get together with the express intent of isolating any other group. (Jane)*

Jane's comments elicited a lot of conversation and nodding of heads. It is almost as if we were waiting for that comment to be made, knowing that someone in our group was an administrator and must have experienced the "old boys' network." Regardless of what feedback that comment initiated, it is seldom refuted today that a network of this nature does exist. It has come to be a symbol of that male stronghold.

bell hooks (1984) writes, "To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body" (hooks p. 28). This statement, in relation to Jane's experience as an administrator, indicates that although she has equal status as an administrator, she is still left out, existing on the fringe of administration - almost like an associate member of a golf club; Jane is a member but with limited playing privileges.

#### The Experience(s) of Marginality

Early in our collective dialogue, as well as the individual conversations, it was suggested that, as teachers, we experience marginality differently and for many different reasons.

*I'm on the outside because I teach special ed and I teach students with learning problems. (Sara)*

*When I first started teaching I taught in a Junior/Senior high school, and the way I felt marginalized was because I was an art teacher..... And, it didn't matter how many kids they stuck in art either, because we didn't do anything of consequence. It was just art. So, I guess it was my subject area that kind of held me apart. (Simonne)*

Simonne and Sara felt marginalized because of the subject area in which they worked. Both women felt that their discipline lacked credibility, and as a result, they were treated as 'others' or as of secondary importance. It makes me think of the language we use to explain the curriculums of our schools. We teach the 'core' courses such as English, Social Studies, Science, Mathematics, and Physical Education. Core, meaning, "the most important part" (Guralnik, 1987, p. 140). And we teach the 'electives,' such as Art, Drama, Woodworking, meaning, "optional" (Guralnik, 1987, p. 197). Even the term Special Ed., although it carries a meaning of its own, is still outside of the 'core.' Somehow, the core courses take on more serious overtones - they are of great importance, while the electives are almost fill-ins to our daily schedule.

We discussed not only the subjects we teach, but the materials we use when we teach. Our discussions reflected on the absence of women from the curricula we teach and from the references that we use.

*We're (women) not only marginalized being teachers in the classroom, but we're also marginalized within the subjects themselves. Within our course materials, we are marginalized because we are not very visible. We're not in the pages. (Deb)*

While we talked, we opened doors for each one of us to peer in and see if there was anything similar within. The familiarity of our stories and experiences began to blend together. Our dialogue would move from one person to another to another, sharing similar anecdotes and finding the common words and experiences that made us so much the same. Kate, a nursing educator, recognizes the absence of nurses' own knowledge base as a source of marginality within her discipline.

*Within nursing we're marginalized because we've got very little theoretical development that is strictly nurses--like strictly from a nursing philosophy. We've been deprived of the education of how to do research, so we've relied on theory and a knowledge base from other disciplines. .... You always read about other people and then see how that relates to you as a professional. (Kate)*

### The Public and the Private

We found it very difficult, in fact impossible, to speak only as teachers. Our personal lives are intertwined with our public lives. To separate the two would be speaking of only one part of our lives. This has been a major source of discomfort for me for many years. I always believed that not only was it possible, but it was necessary, to separate oneself into the appropriate place at a particular time. Perhaps this is a reflection of the way that I saw my grandmothers separating the private and the public. I looked at them and saw them in two different ways. In private, I saw the pain in their eyes, the aches and pains of hours and hours of hard physical labour. When they left their homes, however, or people came into their homes, they put on a different face, perhaps it was a mask. They served, they pleased, they put their energy at the disposal of others. But I remember my maternal grandmother crying in the privacy of her bedroom. I remember her, sitting on her bed, rocking back and forth, wringing her hands over and over, willing the pain to go away. I remember her wincing in pain, but ever silent.

Unlike me or my grandmothers, Alice was able to blend her private and public life, and she claimed to have little difficulty doing so. Her awareness of her aboriginal culture as the centre of her being brought her back and forth between teaching and her private life. She spoke of the elders, and she spoke of the children, and how they all learned from each other without building a hierarchy or feeling ashamed of their culture. Initially, we talked about the struggle of finding oneself on the outside.

*I was never taught that being Native was a wonderful thing. In the 50's and 60's when I was in school, they never talked about it. It was like I didn't exist, like I felt invisible. Going through public school they never asked me a personal question, to write any essay of what I thought or what I felt. (Alice)*

And later, when talking about her classroom, Alice reflects on the value of her culture and how she has come to work with the people within her culture to ensure that the problems she encountered growing up need not happen to her students.

*I brought elders who told stories, and made them feel important. I try to bring out how important we are, how important we are as an individual and collectively as a tribe and a culture. (Alice)*

bell hooks (1984) writes, "Struggle is rarely safe or pleasurable" (p. 28). We are drawn to the realization of marginalization when we examine the things in our lives that do not bring us pleasure. Initially Simonne said that she wasn't marginalized. She conceded that perhaps she was "marginalized because she wasn't marginalized." (Simonne) As our discussion continued, however, Simonne began to recognize that some of her displeasures are a result of someone else's power or attempt at exerting power over her. Now, having her 'consciousness raised,' and given the audience to which to speak, Simonne expressed her anger and her frustration.

*I'm tired of being attacked all the time because I don't go to church every Sunday. I don't believe that my husband is lord and master in our house. It makes it hard and I don't feel like spending my free time arguing with them either. (Simonne)*

Simonne lives in a city in which some strong fundamentalist religious groups exist. She, nor her family, belong to any specific church, and as a result, they are often criticized for their 'lack of faith.' As a collective we addressed the anger and frustration that Simonne was experiencing. We attempted to help her deal with her marginality by putting in perspective why she should not have to argue with them (the fundamental religious people in her neighbourhood). We focused on what we perceived to be the agenda of the fundamentalist religious group and its concern to Simonne. Ruth found a perspective on the issue and summarized it as:

*It's much more comfortable if everybody's doing the same thing. You could look at this in a bigger picture. All so called margins and the minorities that have gotten together to try to become more powerful is a threat to those that are in power. To see all of these little factions that are becoming visible, and voicing beliefs as to how they should function in society and so on. (The fundamentalist religious groups) don't feel comfortable with all of these different things because they may lose some power. So, the strength of the majority is trying to squelch the minority.... they're (fundamentalists) reacting even more violently to keep the margins hidden. (Ruth)*

The above may be interpreted as an attack on the fundamental religions but my perception was that we were trying to help Simonne understand her frustration. We acknowledged that there is resistance to those in the margins and by those in the margins, and were able to explain it as that. We also expressed belief that once in the margins, we can lose confidence in ourselves and be further marginalized. We struggled with belonging and with being authentic. Kate, the nursing educator spoke of that lack of confidence:

*When we're in the minority we lose that confidence and I wonder if it's so much whether we lose confidence or whether we lose the ability to know how to proceed and still be authentic. It's almost like it's a type of illiteracy, where you aren't sure that you can do what's socially accepted or required in the role so, therefore, you marginalize your silence yourself. (Kate)*

### The Rationalization of Marginalization

*I think the marginalization comes from our socialization. I don't know that it comes from within. I would have a hard time believing that someone would voluntarily put on handcuffs. It's not something that you would voluntarily do, but I feel handcuffed. (Michelle)*

Michelle's metaphor gives marginality life-like characteristics. It brings oppression out of the abstract and into the lived experience. She speaks of a violation; one that we should not blame ourselves for--it is a product of socialization. Michelle is one of the women who spoke to me in private and asked that I not transcribe our conversation. Michelle says that, "at this point of my life, it would not be wise for me to speak out - I could lose my job and then what would I do?" She very much feels the confines of existing on the fringe.

This metaphor opened the door for me to examine ways in which we could 'break free' from the handcuffs. In the collective, we talked about not taking the blame for being marginalized. I have been able to relate Michelle's conversations to the collective as we spoke of the responsibility we feel to others to make sure they do not experience what we have experienced, or that the cycle is not perpetuated. We seemed to speak of two different



issues when we addressed our responsibilities; learning to operate from the margins, as well as redefining the margins.

*Maybe there are benefits from being marginalized. Maybe it's something that we don't want to eliminate. ( Ruth)*

*I'd say my working environment is very positive because I can do a lot of things because I am on the periphery of things. I can go on and everybody just hopes that things are going fine. (Sara)*

*There is a certain privilege with being marginalized, don't you think? (Kate)*

Are we rationalizing existing in the margins? Kirby and McKenna (1989) feel that "focusing on the world from the perspective of the margins allows us to see the world differently and, in many ways, more authentically." (p. 33). It makes sense to see people in the margins as having an ideal vantage from which to see the world. Marginalized people have to be able to operate from both places--the centre and the margin, and therefore, have come to understand what is expected in both places. I have attempted to see the benefit of existing in the margins. I think of what is written in the margins of papers I get back from professors and the significance their feedback has on the overall value of the paper. Michelle though, challenges my analogy and brings me to think that I have just 'bought in' to being content with existing in the margins.

*If it stays in the margin though, what is the point? We have so much value in the margins and could change so much. We're forced to stay in the margins for reason of job security and socialization and backlash. So, society will never learn from the*

*margin. If the suffragists had just hung out in the margins, women would have never gotten the vote. There is a point when you have to come out of the margin, as scary as that can be. (Michelle)*

I felt a distinct difference in the conversations of the women in the collective and the women in the separate interviews regarding the existence from the margin. While the collective seemed quite content to operate from the margin, the other two women felt frustrated there and felt it was necessary to address this. Just as Michelle challenged the point of staying in the margins, Alice related experience after experience of existing from the margin and the injustice of it all. When speaking of her experiences of living in a particular community Alice relates the following:

*And they turn around and they treat us badly, and here they're supposed to, like if they really believed in their religion or whatever, they would treat us like human beings. Instead they treat us badly and say things that are unkind and unfair..... And getting back to it, I never found any Mormon people who are genuine. It was like they were trying to win our souls or something, it was all put on. And so, I don't feel comfortable. (Alice)*

I have a sense that the two women who participated in the individual interviews feel very marginalized and have experienced blatant discrimination and marginalization. The fact that they felt that they could not participate in the collective indicates to me that they may feel marginalized even within a group of other women. Their marginality is linked to things other than their gender and that is not always easy to relate to those who are not in that situation. Both women could be described as being in a 'double bind' sort of marginalization. They are not only marginalized because they are women, they also feel

marginalized for another reason. Alice could speak of her 'other' marginality as being an aboriginal person. Michelle would not permit me to relate her 'other' form of marginality.

Whether we stay in the margins or struggle to move to the centre, we felt an obligation to others, especially our youth, to try and work for change. We felt a responsibility to those who, we felt, did not have the same opportunity to understand marginalization. Field Belenky et al.(1986) speak of these women and their relationship to authority. "The inability of silent women to find meaning in the words of others is reflected in their relations with authorities. While they feel passive, reactive, and dependent, they see authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering" (p. 27). We defined the silent women as those who have been caught in a situation where they are struggling for survival. They may be single mothers, uneducated women, or less privileged in various other ways. I challenged the women in the collective to look at others less likely to have voice.

*But, what about some groups who become invisible because they're in the margins, and there's no one who will speak for them and no one who will operate with them to exist outside or trying to get inside. I guess I feel we are privileged (referring to the collective) but, what about others?(Deb)*

Sara, an instructor at a community college, referring to her particular teaching situation was able to validate what I said with an example of her classes.

*I deal with upgrading students, so I have single moms, who are uneducated. They really have a tough go in class, trying to get into a system to survive. And, it's not all right to be marginalized because they have to, if they want to develop*

*self-esteem, control their life, they kind of have to fit into the system. They have so many people dealing with them that marginalize them. So, it isn't all right to be marginalized. (Sara)*

We began to speak of making a difference. We thought of ways that we could best help others to recognize their own marginality, or to even "fix it." But, we were concerned that such actions might be patronizing, a position none of us wanted to assume. Not to deny our responsibility, or our desire to make a difference, we were, nonetheless, attempting to understand a role in which we would be perceived as the oppressors, or the holders of power.

*To be not marginalized has to come from within the individual. It goes back to confidence. And, so, another group, marginalized women that feel some sort of power, it's tremendously patronizing for that group to say, "Here's an invisible group that we need to hear from so we're going to fix it." (Ruth)*

*I guess I believe in Freire's philosophy of 'you can't reach the margins.' There's no way you can give power to anyone. Power is something that people have to take and develop for themselves. Anytime someone gives you power, they also have the authority and the ability to pull it back anytime. (Kate)*

Not only did Freire (1974) believe the oppressors could not give power to the oppressed, he also stated that, "The important thing is to help men (sic) (and nations) help themselves, to place them in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation" (p. 16). To return to the responsibility that we have as educators to our students we might think of aiming to "validate voices from the margins--

voices, both heard and unheard, that have for too long and too often been excluded from curricula" (Herrington & Curtis, 1990, page 496). We are not giving power, nor are we taking it. We were authenticating that there is an existence in the margins that can be spoken of. As we spoke of validating the voices, we constructed ways in which this could happen.

*I think that's where teaching styles and methodology and the kind of climate you create within the classroom (comes in). (Kate)*

Teachers that change the curriculum to better reflect the needs of their students help us gain an appreciation of our own histories. It may follow then, that we could understand our own experiences better. Rakow (1990) suggests, "to combat marginalization we could use material that has some chance of speaking the lives of all members of the class, if not everyone all of the time, then everyone some of the time" (p. 11).

*I guess when I became a teacher I thought this is one of the ways I would teach; I would talk about what it is like to be Native. And, it's all right, we have many beautiful things that happen in our culture that we ought to acknowledge and be proud of. If we push it away, we totally become assimilated then it's hard to reconnect. And, a lot of older people now want to reconnect and they come back to the reserve and they find out what they missed....finding their roots. I thought, I'm going to make it better for these children. My experiences at school of being oppressed and being taught in the way that I was taught; I thought, "I'm going to make it different for these children." (Alice)*

### Making a Difference

Women typically approach adulthood with the understanding that the care and empowerment of others is central to their life's work. Through listening and responding, they draw out the voices and minds of those they help raise up. In the process, they often come to hear, value, and strengthen their own voices and minds as well. (Field Belenky et al., 1986, p. 48)

Through the process of this research, the women who participated in it have all gained voice and have come to reflect on their own marginality and their existence within it. More though, as a group, we began to examine the marginalization of others and their existence within it. Every woman related aspects of her life that placed her apart from everyone else. As a group, we began to understand and appreciate that the differences between women exist and in some instances, are vast. The following excerpts of dialogue show five different women, three separate dialogue times, and one central message. Recognize and appreciate difference. Doing so will support individuals in their quest for understanding of themselves and their own marginality.

*So, in this classroom I got to know this little girl and when I got to know her, the more I'd include her. She was never acknowledged by anyone else, so I did.*

*(Alice)*

*We need to know more about each other, and tolerate our differences but realize that we are more like each other than we are unlike each other. I feel a responsibility as long as I can be safe about it. (Michelle)*

*It almost comes down through that confidence and feeling good about yourself and that sense of personal self esteem. (Kate)*

*I think that our goal, as teachers, is to convince them that as individuals we are all important, and to an equal extent no matter what career they choose, that shouldn't make a difference if they have that confidence in themselves. (Ruth)*

*Let's explore the way that people see, and the ways that people may be different. And, not that different is bad, different is different. And really, that's what it's all about. (Jane)*

Addressing the differences and, teaching tolerance and understanding, may be two important steps in moving toward a more egalitarian society. Michelle, who maintains that marginalization all comes back to education has this to say about what we can do to teach tolerance:

*We've been educated about the disabled that they're really more like us than they are unlike us. They've been integrated into society, into our classrooms; we teach tolerance for those disabilities. Maybe we need the education about Native women so that the stereotypes can get broken so that they are not marginalized as well. I think that fundamentally everything comes down to education and if society is not willing to, or puts the blinders on about a certain issue, then we're always going to have oppression, we're always going to have intolerance, violence, all of it. (Michelle)*

### In Retrospect

We are faced with a major dilemma in trying to understand the place from which we feel we should exist. At a conference I attended recently, sponsored by the American Alliance of Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance, women spoke of marginalization and of the status quo. There was a consensus of the women in a session on "Sport and Marginality" that it is not desirable to be in the margin, nor is it desirable to be in the centre. The centre, and those who operate from there, are the reason we exist in the margin in the first place. To attempt to leave the margin and operate from the centre does not address the root of the silence and invisibility of minorities.

As marginalized persons, where do we wish to exist? If not from the margin and not from the centre, then from where? Perhaps a transformation of society, as it is presently defined, must occur in order for those of us marginalized to feel comfortable and safe in a new society. We did not address this issue in the research except from the point of view that we feel a responsibility to educate those in the margins to be aware of their marginality. In turn, they might then search for a new way to live, a new place in which to exist with others more and less fortunate than themselves. Michelle suggested a restructuring of our society when she said:

*I wouldn't want to be a part of the status quo because I don't agree with the status quo but I don't know that being marginalized is where we want to be either. Why can't we have a dynamic society? Everyone is growing individually. Why does society have to remain static when we're all dynamic? (Michelle)*

To conceive of a wholesale change in the educational system brings promise of a society that will see changes everywhere. That is particularly true if we feel that the connection between institutions, methodologies, and social structures actually exists.



hooks (1984) speaks of oppression having many forms and suggests that "since all forms of oppression are linked in our society, one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact. Challenging sexist oppression is a crucial step in the struggle to eliminate all forms of oppression" (p. 35). To carry that agenda further then, every small step is a worthwhile one. This helps me to understand my relation to other marginalized people. I was concerned that I could not represent or pretend to speak for others. In speaking and collaborating with others though, I have come to understand that the various ways that we feel oppressed are actually the threads that join us--the letters us that help us form words and sentences. While listening to others speak of their marginality, I was able to more clearly understand that our value to ourselves and to each other is what allows us to share a common voice. I respect the anger of those who are frustrated at the "system." I respect the desire for some women to exist in both worlds as best they can--that is where they feel they belong. I respect the woman who, like myself, feels that she is not yet ready to speak of that which keeps us marginalized. Speaking with other women provided me with insight into (an)other's marginality.

*That goes back to what you talked about before. You said your sensitivity to being marginalized gives you a greater insight into how other marginalized people would feel and react, but coming from your position of marginality with the confidence that you have, you can deal with it on a certain level. (Ruth speaking to Jane)*

Jane's response to Ruth opens up the possibility of searching for solutions to the problem of being oppressed. She speaks of not necessarily eliminating marginality, but reacting in a better way to those that oppress us.

*Rather than react, act. Rather than react, say, "I have to regain power here," or, "I'm not going to let this person deal with me this way." It's your greater perception of what is going on that allows you to deal with it better. (Jane)*

While engaged in this dialogue I think we came to appreciate the differences in our experiences and the differences in the way in which we deal with them. Listening to others speak of their own marginalization began to give mine relevance. Where I once feared that my experiences were less significant because they were not as oppressive or as exploited as the experiences of others, I now was reminded to acknowledge all of our differences.

I entered this research with a preconceived thought that everyone was oppressed, some to greater degrees than others. I still maintain that premise to a certain extent, but I must admit defining degrees of marginalization is a dangerous and defeating premise. Dangerous because it could serve to alienate us from each other. One of the major problems with feminist theory has seemed to be the inability of one theory to represent all women's thought. There is much unease throughout the women's movement with various groups unable to endorse and support others. In the United States the women's movement has been powerless to stop the in-fighting and the backlash. Again, I turn to bell hooks (1984) where, in her book, From Margin to Centre, states, "Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the centre, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin" (preface). While I feel that all women are marginalized, hooks is suggesting that there are many privileged women who, though in a position of power, cannot speak for others because it is the privileged women who serve to oppress. I certainly respect bell hooks and her representation of marginalized women. I have not been able to argue that some women are more or less marginalized than others. I prefer to recognize those differences, and attempt to work together to make change.

In Yours In Struggle, Minnie Bruce Pratt (1984) writes of her desire to connect to those less privileged than she. Pratt writes, "I groped toward an understanding of injustice done to others, injustice done outside my narrow circle of being, and to folks not like me, I began to grasp, through my own experience, something of what that injustice might be, began to feel the extent of pain, anger, desire for change" (p. 35).

I have begun to unravel the secrets of my own marginality. What is of most significance is that I feel that I have not been alone in this process, rather that many women have helped in my endeavor to understand. By hearing about their voice and their silence, I have gained views of the world I never had before. Field Belenky et al.(9186) found that: interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self. (p. 26)

The women who collaborated in this research have taken me from isolation to the centre of marginalization.

Writing about other women's experiences, and blending their texts with others, has been much more difficult and painful than I had anticipated. The strong, rich collection of stories and anecdotes have been, in a way, trivialized in order to fit into the pages of this paper. I have attempted to catch the essence of each and every anecdote. I have endeavored to represent the words of the women in an authentic and valuable way. I liken this experience with that of my paternal grandmother when she worked on weaving a rug.

Symbolically, each word is simply a scrap of material. Alone, the word is lost on the frame of the loom. Combined and woven with other words, a picture begins to emerge. The words, if arranged carelessly, might produce a product of little appeal, and of limited use. A rug that has been given a loose weave may not keep the dirt and mud off of

the floor. But, if the words can be blended with other words, carefully placed and planned, what results is a "life experience" that can be understood and heard by all.

I have endeavored to produce a piece of research that not only comes from the hearts of the women who collaborated, but speaks of their desire to make a difference. I have attempted to catch the sincerity of their words. Minnie Bruce Pratt captures the essence of my struggle of not only writing this final product, but going through the process of finding the question of my research, bolstering the courage to proceed with the question, and engaging in feminist research. Pratt (1984) says,

I have learned that as the process of shaping a negative self identity is long, so the process of change is long, and since the unjust world is duplicated again every day, in large and small, so must I try to recreate, every day, a new self striving for a new just world (p. 46).

I am finding it difficult to find a place to end this work. Maybe it's because my inquiry doesn't necessarily end when I complete the Master of Education program and turn off the computer. I am feeling somewhat empty, not without hope, but empty just the same. Maybe I was hoping that once the words were blended together, the piece of work would really be "a piece of work." Perhaps I was hoping that there would be an answer to "that question that keeps me awake at night." (Chambers) I have discovered that the final product is a very small piece of the total process that I have experienced. In a way, it almost seems insignificant compared to everything that has led up to this final paper. Each woman's presence in this final paper is only a snapshot of her total contribution.

I have also struggled with the question of ownership. As soon as I began receiving feedback from colleagues and my project supervisors, I began to feel that this final product might not be the authentic representation of my understanding of marginalization. But I realize now that this is not the case. I realize that the suggestions were made to help me connect some areas or more clearly explain various sections of this document. I understand

that the feedback will make this paper more readable, which has been a major concern of mine throughout the process.

What have I learned? What do I want the reader to know at the conclusion of this project? First, I have become acutely aware of the diversity of marginalization, as it is interpreted. I hope that the reader can capture some of this diversity in this text. I have also come to believe that, given the opportunity, it is possible to **begin** to interpret and understand one's own marginalization. While some of the women began by saying they did not feel marginalized, as the discussion progressed, they began to relate experiences they have had to the concept of marginality. I hope that the reader will have the opportunity to relate to some of the stories and experiences and, in turn, see their own marginality, or that of others, in a new way.

The greatest impact this research has had on me is the desire to continue to research, reflect, and understand marginalization, both my own and others. Going through the entire process of researching marginalization is somewhat like throwing a pebble into a pond. The ripple effect has begun, and while I began with a single question, I am now faced with several. And, like the effect that throwing a stone has on a still pond, I realize that the ripple effect of my initial inquiry--"Interpreting Marginality," has begun, and will continue to expand, like the rings formed from the stone that was initially cast.

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