LIFELINES:

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES AND DISCURSIVE PRACTICES IN MUTUAL AID GROUPS

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This thesis is dedicated to my family.

To my mother. Berthella Pedersen. who has deeply touched my life with her kindness. strength and generosity.

To the memory of my father. Steve Pedersen. who gave me the gift of laughter.

To my husband. Tim. who is my dearest friend and partner in life.

And to my children. Matthew and Carson. who fill my life with joy and meaning. You are my *lifeline*.

Abstract

This thesis research is an ethnographic account of how identity and a sense of community are discursively constructed and managed among participants in mutual aid groups. Research findings are based upon interview and observational data collected from two support groups located in a Canadian city. While members' accounts provide a basis for interpreting the meaning of support as experienced, researcher observations focus on discursive identification practices. My interpretation sheds light on the dynamic interplay between notions of community, symbolic boundary and identity. Participant stories, grounded in experiential knowledge, serve as critical connecting nodes in the construction and reproduction of community and as legitimate leverage to resist denied agency. These case study findings suggest how support, community and identity are collectively accomplished, in part, by managing symbolic boundaries through positioning practices. An understanding of these micro-processes has practical implications for the development of mutual aid groups to meet health and social needs.

Preface

The *story* about to unfold builds upon the theoretical ideas to be presented and emergent perspectives from ethnographic data collected in two social support groups. What can be said is determined in large part by the methodological choices made. This narrative is ultimately *about* the stories, actions and voices of others. As Riessman acknowledges, "we do not give voice, we record and tell the voices of others" (1993:8). Beyond the recording of voices and actions however lies an *interpretive* story. Observations of members interacting within the support group context and the subjective meanings that permeate this social setting provide the empirical basis for interpretation. This endeavor is a selective process and one that is inevitably orchestrated by the researcher, as Denzin (1994:50) would attest. As Stack so eloquently reminds us, "in the end it is the ethnographer who lays her fingers on the keyboard to play the final note in the chorus of voices" (1994:106). The analysis is therefore a creation, an interpretation and ultimately a presentation. My responsibility here lies in the distilling process of sifting, selecting and arranging pieces of the data into a story that says something meaningful about a slice of social life.

The interpretive findings presented are shaped by preliminary and emergent questions of interest, common-sense assumptions brought to the research and theoretical perspectives located in the literature. Notwithstanding these influences, priority is given to the data collected from field research conducted with two support groups. This focused attention to the data is in keeping with a grounded theory approach whereby emphasis is placed on description for the purpose of enhancing conceptual understanding (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:30). An effort was made to 'bracket' (Denzin, 1989:48, 128) the data

during the initial phase of analysis so as to hear the members' voices within before being interpreted through a frame of sensitizing concepts.

Interpretations are directly tied to the ongoing observations of support group members interacting during meetings supplemented with conversations from interviews conducted. My primary goal is to explicate how participants actively construct support and manage identity claims within these situated contexts. To achieve this end, I interweave moments of dialogue and action derived from members' participation in support group meetings over time. These selections are then arranged into an explanatory framework. This of course requires that only those segments of data most closely linked to the purposes at hand be brought forward while others remain in the background. Questions raised are subsequently addressed using empirical data to ground my interpretations.

In the telling, I deliberately use members' accounts and observed interactions to substantiate the interpretive findings. In this regard. I concur with Riessman: "persuasiveness is greatest when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts..." (1993:65). But even though the subjectivity of participants is essential if we are to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being probed. the critical distance established by the researcher holds the potential to challenge that which might appear self-evident on the surface. It is important to recognize that although participants' perspectives carry considerable weight and merit, certain constraining forces or motivations (Gottlieb. 1983:51) likely play a role in how members reflect upon experiences and subsequently present themselves to others. Perhaps the participants might even disagree with my interpretations, a possibility that others have also recognized (Denzin,1989:109 and Riessman,1993:67). Moreover, as Schutz (1970:199) would say, members' efforts and attention required to participate in ongoing

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interaction often precludes self-reflection beyond the immediate task at hand. This phenomenological perspective also acknowledges the difference of intent between the observer and participant:

> The constructs of the observer are. therefore. different ones than those used by the participants in the interaction. if for no other reason than the fact that the purpose of the observer is different from that of the interactors and therewith the systems of relevances attached to such purposes are also different (Schutz. 1970:199).

Perhaps then the value lies in the convergence between the participants' subjective accounts related to social support and my distinct role as researcher. As such. this work is an intersection between participants' understanding of support and my own.

It is important to note that these interpretations are not necessarily complete representations. nor are the accounts given by members. In fact. Riessman cautions against claims of 'true' representation. reminding us that assertions and interpretations are inherently incomplete:

> Investigators do not have direct access to another's experience. We deal with ambiguous representations of it – talk. text. interaction. and interpretation (1993:8)...By displaying text in particular ways. we provide grounds for our argument. just like a photographer guides the viewer's eye with lenses and by cropping images (1993:13)...All forms of representation of experience are limited portraits...All we have is talk and texts that represent reality partially. selectively. and imperfectly (1993:15).

Just as the researcher constructs a partial story. the actions and words of others are similarly limited. In other words. *all* stories are partial representations. Moreover. intimate ties to identity claims are reflected within the stories told to others (Riessman. 1993:2, 11. 64-65). My examination of observed interactions and conversations with support group members focuses on the identification processes of support and the

discursive positioning of self and others through the sharing of stories grounded in experiential knowledge.

The purpose here is to tap into the meanings, perceptions and expressions of social support. As others have recognized, attempts to distinguish between actual or perceived support is a rather ambiguous undertaking (Gottlieb. 1983:49-51). Concentrated efforts here focus on meanings attributed to support by the members themselves. how support is then accomplished to include the consequences of participation and the negotiation of identity claims within the context of mutual aid groups. In basic terms. the *processes* and *meanings* of support assume center stage. This 'story' is an interpretation of the perspectives. interactions and stories of others - a process of carefully selecting and weaving together the most salient strands.

Acknowledgments

I have not traveled this path alone, but with significant others at my side. To the members and facilitators of the two support groups studied. I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have learned from them. Their willingness to share personal stories and open the doors of their meetings to me was greatly appreciated, ultimately making this study possible. May they continue to find solace and happiness in their personal lives.

I would like to sincerely thank the members of my thesis committee for the freedom to explore different paths along the way and their infinite patience in allowing me to do so. The guidance provided by my co-supervisors. Dr. David Brown and Dr. Patricia Chuchryk, gave me the latitude to consider the possibilities, as well as the direction needed to contain my inherent desire to broaden the scope of this thesis. Dr. Chuchryk's expertise related to methodology and analysis was greatly appreciated not only for practical purposes, but also in heightening my awareness of the researcher's role in the active process of doing research. In particular, her guidance at a critical point during the analytic phase helped me to once again see the forest (and not just the trees). To my mentor, Dr. David Brown. I am deeply grateful for the privilege of working with him over the years. His profound theoretical vision and methodological insights have been a major influence on the development of my own critical thinking. I attribute my passion for sociology, in large part, to him. My heartfelt thanks to Dr. Menno Boldt for our many intriguing conversations related to notions of community and mutuality. His extraordinary insights in this regard were most inspiring and significantly influenced my guiding theoretical interest in questions pertaining to community and support. I would also like to

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Last. but certainly not least. I would like to thank my family for their endless patience. cooperation and understanding. This was a most significant sacrifice on their part. given that this thesis defined and consumed our lives for what sometimes seemed to be a very long time. They were always there for me. nurturing and sustaining me throughout. for which I am eternally grateful.

To those whom I met on this most interesting journey. and those who accompanied me at different points along the way. I am thankful for the role they played in making this a truly memorable and rewarding experience.

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Introduction

To bare our souls in the company of others has undeniably become a common occurrence in everyday life. The sharing of personal despair in some kind of public forum is by no means an anomaly that stands apart from other cultural forms of expression. Cultural images of individuals sharing personal trauma and despair abound. Traditionally, kinship networks and extended families were the primary source of mutual assistance. But as everyday lives extend across multiple social contexts in our contemporary social world, the social networks people draw upon shift accordingly. We are embedded in a culture that promotes self-disclosure, the telling of secrets and the implicit message that we want to take control of our own lives. As a recent commentary in the Globe and Mail attests: "we're living in a therapeutic culture where emotions are on the surface, and where confessions with an eye to redemption and rebirth are becoming common" (Campbell, February 28, 1998). One only has to momentarily browse bookstore shelves to be inundated with self-help literature. Perhaps even more prevalent is the current trend to reveal personal angst in the public forum of television talk shows, with the audience playing an interactive role. In this social context, participants expect a certain degree of interaction with the audience. Typically, however, the audience is not experiencing the same problem but still responds with some form of moral judgment (favorable or otherwise). An underlying premise of these trends is a desire to seek self-transformation and perhaps the need to connect with not only oneself but with others. Moral undertones permeate these exchanges as justifications for actions are presented for others to evaluate. Meanings of self are thus negotiated during the course of these situated interactions.

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Mutual aid groups represent a particular form of public response to otherwise personal dilemmas. Undeniably, these groups continue to secure a visible place in our social landscape with no indication of losing viable ground any time soon. Growth is evident on all fronts: number of groups; participation levels; and breadth of issues (Gartner and Riessman, 1985:17). To illustrate the magnitude of the support group phenomenon, Katz (1981:129-130) reports that approximately a half-million mutual aid groups, affiliated with North American national organizations alone[1], were accounted for with an estimated five to ten new groups surfacing per day. This estimate does not incorporate the vast array of independent (unaffiliated) groups[2]. The increasing presence of mutual aid groups in European countries, the United Kingdom and Australia attests to their international influence (Katz, 1984:234-241).[3] In specific reference to Canadian representation, the mutual aid 'movement' has gained momentum, following closely on the heels of the American experience (Gottlieb and Peters, 1991:652-653). The proliferation of self-help clearinghouses in Canada alone has experienced considerable growth since the early 1980's (Todres, 1995:129). These clearinghouses, located in major Canadian cities, are providers of information and referrals to a vast array of self-help groups (Todres, 1995:124). It is difficult, however, to accurately determine the range, magnitude and complexity of the support group phenomenon. According to Gottlieb and Peters (1991:651-652), the lack of large-scale and systematic sampling of mutual aid groups, complicated by imprecise definitions of what constitutes such groups,

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[1] Nationally affiliated groups would include such groups as Alcoholics Anonymous, the United Cerebral Palsy Association, the Muscular Dystrophy Association and the National Cystic Fibrosis Foundation (Katz, 1981:129-130).
[2] Although Katz (1981:130) does not specify beyond the term "ad hoc", it is inferred that independent groups refer to those groups that form at the local level as the need arises.

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has failed to offer a realistic number of participants and groups. Nevertheless, the increasing presence of mutual aid groups is not to be denied. Whatever the issue or problem we might confront in our daily lives, a support group has in all likelihood rallied in response.

Mutual support, in this situated context, hinges upon individuals relating to one another and sharing experiences, feelings and perspectives based on confronting similar life challenges that revolve around a pre-defined problematic or crisis. The focal problem, whether it be of an acute or chronic nature, encompasses everything from sexual orientation, addictive behaviors, parental challenges, perceived stigma, gender issues to a host of mental or physical health conditions. Whether governed by formal or more informal discourses, these groups address an exceptionally broad spectrum of issues as evident by the following: Alcoholics Anonymous; Toughlove, Recovery, Inc.; La Leche League; Parents Anonymous; Compassionate Friends; Overeaters Anonymous; Parents Without Partners; Reach to Recovery; Mended Hearts; Gamblers Anonymous; and Schizophrenics Anonymous. These examples acknowledge but a mere few of the support groups that have developed in recent years. Despite the fact that a plethora of mutual aid groups have surfaced in the Western world from the mid-1960's to the present day (Katz, 1981:129-30), empirical research in this area has been somewhat limited (Katz, 1981:132). This gap in the literature points to the need for more in-depth case studies (Killilea, 1976:78; Katz, 1981:132) to unveil the dynamics of these contexts of support[4].

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[3] Katz (1984:234-241) provides a comparative description of the differences between international mutual aid groups and those of the United States. He draws attention to funding allocation, political perspectives and research methodological approaches.

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In response to this empirical void in the literature. my thesis research has been guided by a desire to understand what *support* means to those participating in two mutual aid groups. how it is accomplished within these contexts. and the consequences that flow from these processes. This is an ethnographic account of the discursive transactions that transpired within two support groups. Given the exploratory nature of this study and its ethnographic orientation. the intent is not to test hypotheses derived from pre-given theories. Nor is it intended to make formal generalizations about a large population of support groups. Instead. the primary goal here is to explicate and interpret observed micro-social processes of these support groups. This may in turn lead to better questions about the contextual nuances of support groups in general. Nevertheless. while I primarily followed an inductive path of inquiry. certain theoretical concepts were drawn upon as a means to aid in my interpretation of how these two support groups worked. These concepts were used as sensitizing guides in the ongoing analysis.

Four central concepts are substantively drawn upon: symbolic boundary. positioning. community and identity. Specifically. I suggest that one way of understanding processes of support lies in the active construction of symbolic boundaries through the discursive positioning of self and others as reflected in the stories shared among group members. My interpretation points to the consequences that flow from these identification processes as being linked to a sense of community and the management of identity. In other words. discursive practices construct boundaries between self and other that in turn enable members to mutually create and sustain a sense of community. In the social spaces provided by these constructed boundaries. selves are

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[*] Increasing evidence of case study approaches have slowly begun to surface since the 1970's (Borkman, 1991:645).

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expressed as constrained or enabled. Of particular relevance is the interactive nature of the support group and, more specifically, the roles that members play. The responses by participants to each other's personal accounts have implications for both the groups' cohesiveness and the expression of each member's self as constrained or enabled. The experiential knowledge that is typically transmitted through the stories members tell is interpreted here as a key mechanism facilitating these identification processes. The changing positions of self and others, as reflected in the dialogue of members, point to a fluid process of boundary-making. In this regard, my developed framework may be conducive to capturing the dynamic and ever-shifting processes of social interaction in support groups and, potentially, in that of other social contexts.

Given this focus on the micro-processes of support, my interpretation is primarily situated in two related bodies of sociological theory: symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. Although sociological theories are predominantly drawn upon, the disciplines of Anthropology and Psychology also contribute but in a less substantive way. Despite the plethora of literature addressing social support, a preoccupation with the measurement of support from a psychological orientation (see Veiel and Baumann, 1992) has somewhat neglected the micro-processes occurring within the situated contexts of support groups. In other words, attention to the structural components of what constitutes support has superceded an in-depth understanding of *how* support is accomplished. It is my intent here to address this schism and to lift into view some of these less visible social processes within the specific settings of the two support groups studied. This necessarily requires a framework grounded in social science theories that address a micro-orientation.

My rationale for working with the concepts of community, identity, support and

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discourse (narrative) is tied to patterns that emerged from my analysis of data as well as my own theoretical questions of interest[5]. With respect to community perspectives. I substantively draw upon the works of Anthony Cohen, Kai Erikson, and David McMillan and David Chavis. Each of these analysts offers a somewhat different focus reflecting their scholarly roots (anthropology, sociology and psychology, respectively). Cohen's work on the symbolic construction of community, as a mental construct, resonates with this study's purpose and interests. In particular, his integration of boundary and identity as it relates to community is especially relevant to my focus on the concept of boundary. Although Cohen's theoretical premise lies primarily with symbolic referents that individuals draw upon to construct community, I extend this framework to more specifically address the social practices through which community is created in a specific site of situated interaction. Erikson's theoretical perspectives relative to deviance and community contribute to this study most significantly in terms of the identification processes that constitute a sense of belonging. Similarly, McMillan and Chavis offer a theory on the psychological sense of community that directly speaks to this research in terms of social integration and processes of inclusion.

The following scholarly works were drawn upon in certain parts of the analysis and less so in others. Erving Goffman's construct of stigma, for example, coincides with the interests of this research in terms of expressed identity claims and attributed cause. Other theorists such as Julian Rappaport, David Maines, and David Brown integrate notions of narrative and mutual aid groups. These works are drawn upon to aid in my interpretation of the role that narrative plays as a facilitating mechanism in this study.

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[5] A more detailed discussion of this interplay between emergent, current and personal theoretical perspectives and how it shaped the research is addressed in chapter two.

Also. Donna Eder's perspective on collaborative talk and the implications this has for the construction of social ties is linked to this study in terms of discourse. member response and notions of community. Identity theory is intentionally situated within a symbolic interactionist paradigm whereby an emphasis is placed on processes of self-construction as opposed to a more traditional psychological understanding of identity.

In terms of specific theories related to social support. the perspectives of Leon Levy. Morton Lieberman and Murray Levine connect past efforts interested in uncovering the micro-processes of support in mutual aid groups to the current goals of this research. Empirical studies that reflect an ethnographic orientation to study the contextual nuances of mutual aid groups also directly inform this interpretation (see Cain. Eastland. Hollihan and Riley. Karp. Maines. and Pollner and Stein). In terms of the specific practices related to the concept of positioning. I substantively draw upon the work of Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harre. These authors focus on the practice of positioning within a segment of conversation and the acceptance or resistance of the claims associated with constructed subject positions. While my interpretation does not focus per se on how individuals position each other in their talk and the immediate acceptance or rejection of those claims. it does conceptualize a similar process but primarily in relation to others who are not present. The participants typically provide the response to certain claims of self and others reflected in members' stories of shared experience (rather than those who are represented in the account). The positioning concept is therefore applied here in a similar way as used by Davies and Harre. but with somewhat of a different twist given the specific nuances of these situated contexts in question.

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The ongoing interplay between these theoretical influences and patterns perceived in the data resulted in a set of guiding research questions about *how* these groups work:

1. As individuals come together in the context of these two support groups to collectively struggle with a common problem, what processes are enacted upon to facilitate mutual identification? What does support *mean* to the members themselves and how is it *accomplished*? In other words, how is support expressed, constructed and managed among participants engaged in what we presume to be the intentional act of seeking help in some form?

2. If we can assume, at some level, that support groups embody a sense of community to include notions of belonging, acceptance and social ties that are connected in meaningful ways, can we describe how community is then created, managed and reproduced among participants? How might the social ties constructed among the members differ from relational ties formed outside of the mutual aid group context? What is the role and significance of discourse in these processes?

3. In extending the notion of community, how might the concept of boundaries be used to think about the discursive processes by which members distinguish themselves from others (the comparison of self in relation to both members and non-members)? What consequences flow from these constructed boundaries and how can they be linked to notions of community and identity?

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4.   How are the images of self as both sufferer and agent reflected in the stories members tell? How is storied telling linked to symbolic boundaries and community? In what ways do members respond to these life stories and what is the significance of this form of audience participation?

5.   To what extent do discursive practices of positioning self and others within shared stories facilitate a sense of inclusion among members, while excluding others located outside of the experience? And how might this discursive positioning of self and others in particular ways be considered a form of resistance to negative identity claims and a catalyst to expressed agency? How does the experiential knowledge acquired by these members function as legitimating leverage to resist denied agency and to convey a sense of self-efficacy?

Stemming from these questions I explain how four central concepts - community, boundary, identity and narrative discourse – are interwoven to form an interpretive framework that offers a more comprehensive picture of the support groups. In my effort to better understand some of the processes underlying the transmission of support in these two mutual aid groups, I closely examine the discursive means that serve as facilitating mechanisms. My findings are empirically grounded in the ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews. The joining of these two methods was critical to my research. Each method offers unique contributions to the analysis as well as inherent limitations. While observations alone preclude the participants' meanings of the situation at hand, sole reliance upon interviews blocks our view into the nuances of social interaction as it occurs. But when used in careful interplay, they can shed light on not

only the patterns but also the contradictions between what people say and do.

Organization of the Thesis

First, a few general comments about formatting will help the reader interpret my ethnographic story. Interspersed throughout the thesis are changes to the font (print-type) intended to reflect a shift in emphasis or substantive content. For example, italics are primarily used for emphasis. When applied to segments of data excerpts, the purpose is to highlight the section that speaks directly to the interpretive claim that I am proposing at the time. An additional change of font to a script-like style is used when I am reflexively writing myself into the research process. The rationale for choosing a print style that more closely resembles hand-writing is to convey the personal aspect of this account. Also, given my commitment to ensure that the anonymity of the participants (to include those represented in the members' accounts) is upheld, I have randomly used either "he or she" in some data excerpts.

The main purpose of Chapter One is to situate the current study within the larger context of support and to provide a review of the literature in this area. Tracing the historical roots of social support and, specifically, the development of mutual aid groups affords us the opportunity to see what has been learned from the undertakings of past research efforts and the direction that more recent inquiries have taken. Also introduced are the understandings related to support, in general, and those specifically associated with mutual aid groups. This includes a discussion of the definitional constructs located in the literature for the purpose of sensitizing us to the phenomena of support groups, but not to prematurely impose a theoretical framework onto the current research.

In Chapter Two, I provide a synthesis of the literature that is considered to be

most relevant in the development of my interpretation. Certain theoretical dimensions tied to the processes of support within the context of mutual aid groups are drawn upon from the literature and discussed in this chapter. Specifically, the identification processes of community (belonging and acceptance) are examined and how they conceptually link to notions of identity. As well, in ascribing to the notion that reflexivity is an important part of the research process, I locate myself in the research process by briefly discussing personal reflections that influenced the ways that I approached and thought about this research.

The methods that individuals use to construct and manage social contexts is the focus of Chapter Three. The theoretical perspectives that most closely relate to the means by which support is accomplished among group members and the emergent consequences of these discursive practices are discussed. Emphasis is placed on the relevant theories, that when interconnected to form a conceptual framework, aid in the description and explication of how individuals collectively engage in social practices intended to be supportive in some way.

In Chapter Four, the methodological choices made and the rationale for appropriating an ethnographic approach to study the micro-processes within the situated context of these two mutual aid groups are discussed. The merits of this approach are briefly examined for the purpose of situating this research into the broader context of methodological perspectives. Also discussed in this chapter are my attempts to locate myself in the research process, to reveal the methodological problems encountered along the way and to outline the steps taken in the analysis of fieldnotes and interview data collected. Outlined are the steps taken in the active process of developing my conceptual

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framework to understand the intricate linkages between notions of community, boundary, identity and narrative related to the two groups in this study. The main thrust of this chapter lies with describing how I actually went about studying these two groups and my rationale for doing so.

Chapter Five begins with an introduction to the setting, that is, a description and comparison of both groups studied. This more firmly grounds my research to an empirical base. A detailed description of certain key identification processes extracted from selected data further grounds my interpretation in the specific contexts of these groups. I focus on the elements of despair and tragedy that consistently surface in members' accounts and the dialogue that transpires within group meetings to contextualize the experience as observed. Attention is directed to the intersubjective meanings of support and how mutual identification leads to the construction of relational ties that embody notions of community – a sense of belonging and acceptance.

Chapter Six draws upon the concepts of boundary and positioning to explicate the dynamic and complex processes transpiring within the situated contexts of these two support groups. In particular, I set out to share my interpretation of how members construct symbolic boundaries through the positioning of self and others in their discourse, and the consequences of this process of boundary-making. I specifically focus on how the experience of suffering is expressed and managed among group members. This necessarily includes the discursive practices that members use to communicate a sense of denied agency and the mutual corroboration of a felt sense of powerlessness (alienation). Identity claims are thus embedded in the stories members tell. Attention is also given to the consequences of these boundary-making processes.

In Chapter Seven. I examine the processes by which members express a sense of agency at both the individual and collective level. Emphasis is again placed on how participants position themselves in relation to others within their stories and moral assertions. Portraying self in the role of agent is interpreted as a form of resistance to felt stigma and feelings of powerlessness. The significance of narrative in this process is discussed with attention given to how stories are linked to the expression of transformed selves and the reproduction of community relations. My interpretation also points to certain narratives as symbolic representations (evidence of gained self-efficacy) that is attributed by members. at least in part. to participation in these groups. Audience response in the form of mutual validation is also a critical factor that is examined in this chapter.

Finally, in the Conclusion I provide a synthesized version of my interpretive framework. A more specific interpretation is tied to the positioning of self and others within stories of lived experience that enable selves to be expressed as constrained or enabled. thereby. resulting in the felt sense of community. Some key theoretical. methodological and ethical implications that stem from this research are then presented. In closing, I discuss the potential applied value of this study for practitioners. policymakers or anyone wishing to participate in mutual aid groups in some capacity. Perhaps the interpretive findings from this study of two mutual aid groups will provide a comparative basis for studying other groups of this nature or possibly shed some light on the support group experience in general.

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Chapter I
Historical Context and Sensitizing Constructs of Social Support

A logical place to begin is to locate the current thesis research within the broader context of social support. In this chapter I direct my efforts to clearing a path through the maze of literature in the hope of highlighting the key points of interest along the way. Tracing the historical roots of social support provides a sense of why this phenomenon appears to have taken hold, capturing the scholarly interest of many. Tying the current research to past theoretical contributions and empirical findings reminds us that ideas of social support have not materialized out of thin air but are anchored to a larger framework. The concept of support has emerged out of cultural, political and economic factors that necessarily impact upon how it is conceptualized in general and, more specifically, within situated interaction. As social forces change, the shape of support assumes a somewhat different form. Understanding its origins leads to more complete 'ways of knowing' current and anticipated future trends.

A sketching of the literature in the main reveals what aspects of support have been probed in-depth and, conversely, what remains yet to be uncovered. In addressing the problematic of conceptual ambiguity and the subtle distinctions between 'self-help' and 'support', I draw upon general definitional constructs to situate the relevant concept more specifically within the support group context. Reweaving the central strands presents a general template that in turn frames the current thesis research. Various interpretations of group types, presented here as typologies, touch upon the range and diversity of structural parameters. In conclusion, I briefly highlight the central points thus paving the way for a discussion of the theoretical perspectives that explicitly inform this thesis research.

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Historical Context

Any effort to establish the ontological roots of a social phenomenon inevitably defies consensus. Establishing the moment when the concept of support became sociologically relevant hinges, to a certain degree, on individual scholarly orientations and interpretations. My intentions here are to synthesize early perspectives on social support and to trace the general direction taken over time. That which was extracted from the literature for the current purpose has undergone what Killilea refers to as a "filtering process of selectivity"(1976:39). The selected pieces taken from multiple stories have been sewn together to form a particular pattern – a recreation of the past to capture current images of support.

I begin with a frequently cited source of origin traced to the nineteenth century: the observations of Petr Kropotkin whose critique of the Darwinian theory of evolution drew attention to the salience of mutuality (as cited in Gartner and Riessman, 1977:4; Katz, 1981:132, 150-51; Killilea, 1976:40). From prolonged observations of animal life, Kropotkin (1914) noticed that collective efforts, as opposed to individual struggle, were largely responsible for sustaining life. In his seminal work, *Mutual Aid. A Factor of Evolution*, Kropotkin posited the social act of mutuality as fundamental to survival itself:

> The animal species, in which individual struggle has been reduced to its narrowest limits, and the practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development, are invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous, and the most open to further progress. The mutual protection which is obtained in this case, the possibility of attaining old age and of accumulating experience, the higher intellectual development, and the further growth of sociable habits, secure its extension; and its further progressive evolution. The unsociable species, on the contrary, are doomed to decay (1914:293).

He extended his hypothesis to the human sphere, focusing on the relational ties that bind:

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It is not love to my neighbor – whom I often do not know at all – which induces me to seize a pail of water and to rush towards his house when I see it on fire; it is a far wider, even though more vague feeling or instinct of human solidarity and sociability which moves me. But it is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind [sic]. It is the conscience – be it only at the stage of an instinct – of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man [sic] from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependency of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity, which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own (1914:xiii).

This line of thinking falls into step with Emile Durkheim's commentary on the perceived loss of social ties as a result of changing economic times. The ushering in of the Industrial Revolution was considered a major catalyst in this regard (Brownell and Shumaker, 1984:1). Social relationships were deemed to have undergone a profound transition from social ties informed and guided by predominantly similar belief systems to ones of marked diversity (Gusfield, 1975:8). Durkheim's coined terms - mechanical and organic solidarity – represented his interpretation of observable shifts in the social order (as cited in Abercrombie, Hill and Turner, 1988:79). Mechanical solidarity mirrored the close-knit, intimate social ties of early societies that were bound by a commonly prescribed belief system while, conversely, organic solidarity referred to social relations perceived as fragmented and tied to the highly specialized division of labour indicative of contemporary society (as cited in Abercrombie et al., 1988:79; Gusfield, 1975:7-9).

A general perspective that emerged from these changing times depicted an insidious breakdown of social order, relational ties and psychological well-being, as reflected in the following statement:

Industrialization, a money economy, the growth of vast structures of business, industry, government – all these have led to familiar specters:

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the depersonalization and dehumanization of institutions and social life; feelings of alienation and powerlessness: the sense, for many people, that they are unable to control the events that shape their lives; the loss of choices; feelings of being trapped by impersonal forces; the decline of the sense of community, of identity (Katz and Bender, 1976:3).

Social relations once perceived to be bound by affective ties were now regarded as fragmented and governed by rational orientations (Gusfield, 1975:4-5). Reflected in scholarly accounts, this perceived loss of social ties assumed mythical-like proportions:

Much writing on the subject suffered from the pastoral syndrome: analysts nostalgically compared contemporary relationships to those in the supposed good old days when villagers danced around maypoles, family groups brought in the hay, and artisans whistled while they worked together (Hall and Wellman, 1985:24).

In contrast, more recent scholarly critiques describe social ties as enduring relationships manifest within various contexts (Hall and Wellman, 1985:23-24). Social ties are defined here as having two dimensions: psychosocial and instrumental (Morgan, Patrick and Charlton, 1984:489). The former denotes an emotional level comprised of validation, belonging, encouragement: the latter constitutes instrumental (tangible) support such as advice, practical aid and monetary assistance (Morgan et al., 1984:489). The benefits of social ties are twofold: to mediate adversity and enhance one's capacity to cope (Morgan et al., 1984:490). Perceived self-efficacy emanating from these supportive dimensions are somewhat individually specific, however, and vary along a continuum of one's capacity to cope (Morgan et al., 1984:489). The mutual aid group represents a contemporary forum wherein individuals can engage in the active construction of social ties.

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Past efforts. however. to combat the felt pressures of shifting economic times often resulted in individuals banding together on one level as a means to survival itself (Withorn, 1994:443). According to Withorn (1994:443), this 'survival' response marked a sharp distinction between past and current manifestations of mutual aid. Katz and Bender (1976:268-270) specifically point to the emergence of the Friendly Societies in England as a collective formed by those who found themselves disadvantaged by an industrialized economy. Acts of compassion and kindness were put into motion: "meager resources were pooled to provide burial and family insurance. limited food. clothing and economic support in times of ill health. disability and family crisis" (Withorn. 1994:442). In line with this image of collective efforts geared to protect the disadvantaged from adversity we see a similar response in North America:

> By the mid-nineteenth century most of the ills associated with the Industrial Revolution in England were manifest in the United States: long working hours. low wages. child labor. chronic illnesses among the working classes. and overcrowded. unsanitary cities. Revulsion and revolt took a number of forms. One was to create utopian cooperative villages or communes (Katz and Bender. 1976: 273).

Trade unions. as well. are cited as safe havens for workers who found themselves in a powerless position (Katz and Bender. 1976:273). Similarly, with a marked increase in the number of immigrants entering North America there is evidence of numerous mutual aid networks of ethnic origins. These *helping* collectives were established to ease the transition to a new and unfamiliar culture where cultural differences sometimes divided social relations. carving a deep schism along ethnic lines (Katz and Bender, 1976:275, 276; Withorn, 1994:442). Feelings of alienation and exclusion associated with an unfamiliar or inhospitable environment are viewed as precipitating factors in the act of

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joining together as a united front against the perceived denial of self - a concerted effort to foster a sense of belonging (Erikson. 1994:231; Katz and Bender. 1976:276). This collective response held the potential to enhance self-efficacy that in turn empowered many to seek social change (Katz and Bender. 1976:268. 270).

The mid-twentieth century marked a time when collective responses such as politicized reactions toward military intervention. racism and women' role in society challenged the status quo in a highly visible manner. The civil rights outcry, the women's movement and youth resistance were just some of the collective efforts that formed in response to social institutions perceived as unjust or dehumanizing (Katz and Bender. 1976:4. 266. 277). For example. Withom (1994:445-446) sheds light on the historical connection between the feminist movement and women's efforts. highlighting the instrumental and visible role women played. Although acts of sharing and assisting others have a longstanding place in the history of women's activities. these mutual efforts have come to the forefront since the latter part of the 1960's. embodying feminist principles of practice ever since (Withom, 1994:445-446).

This overview of support practices over time envisions social change as a major catalyst to the emergence of self-help collectives (Katz and Bender. 1976:277). Underlying the aforementioned examples is the premise that protection is actively sought from social forces perceived as adversarial. ethically unjust or otherwise inadequate in meeting personal and even primary needs. In response to felt pressures. it was observed that at various times individuals would respond by *connecting with* others. Through their mutual efforts they would actively set into motion practices intended to facilitate coping and to bring about personal and/or social change. In a metaphorical sense, the impression

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we are left with is one of individuals who perceive themselves as somehow marginalized, shielding themselves from the winds of adversity under a protective cloak that they themselves have sewn.

Concerted efforts to penetrate these barriers (perceived or otherwise) were therefore mobilized to seek personal and/or broader social change. Katz and Bender (1976:266) also note that this insider-outsider dimension coincided with a general shift toward *consumer* control in the latter part of the 1960's and early 1970's. A number of factors appear to have played an instrumental role in this ideological shift. Partially responsible was the vast array of multi-disciplinary research efforts that publicly advocated the salient role of the consumer/patient/client in self-care (Katz and Bender, 1976:265, 266). This translated to the basic belief that individuals needed to be more autonomous and in control of their own lives (Withorn, 1994:443). Perceived inadequacies of institutional practices also played a part in this move toward self-initiated change (Borkman, 1991:645; Katz and Bender, 1976:265-267; Maines, 1991:191). In addition, the reality of dwindling economic resources (Withorn, 1994:447) coincided with these factors, implying that the relationship between fiscal constraints and an ideological shift to consumer control might be more than a mere coincidence. Taking control of one's situation meshes with the view that self-help crusades seek alternatives to the mainstream or otherwise traditional sources of helping often perceived to be falling somewhat short of the mark. Levine (1988:168) notes for example that traditional medical care, as a resource, is monetarily inaccessible to some while culturally incongruent for others.

This general perception of self-help as an *alternative* care provider is a prevalent

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theme found in the literature (Borkman, 1991:645; Katz, 1981:133; Katz and Bender, 1976:265-267; Killilea, 1976:38; Levine, 1988:168; Maines, 1991:191; Rappaport, 1993:241). In particular, the mutual aid group context - comprised of others experiencing this common sense of alienation and isolation - is frequently viewed as an alternative resource and care-provider for the participants involved (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:274; Karp, 1992:158-161; Katz, 1981:133; Katz and Bender, 1976:265-266; Levine, 1988:170; Maines, 1991:191; Rappaport, 1993:241; Katz, 1981:133; Levine, 1988:170; Levy, 1976:319; Rappaport, 1993:241; Eastland, 1995:306). These groups also provide a site whereby individuals collectively cultivate effective coping skills and a sense of agency (Abel, 1989:224-225; Coleman, 1987:87,90; Eastland, 1995:305-306; Hollihan and Riley, 1987:274; Karp, 1992:161-163; Levine, 1988:168,175-176; Levy, 1976:318-319). To those confronting health-related challenges, some members perceive the traditional medical model governed by rational knowledge claims as judgmental, insensitive, indifferent and/or incongruent with personal belief systems (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:274, 276; Karp, 1992:151-152, 158-161). By extension, Levine (1988:168) intimates that perhaps the search for community is the driving force behind individuals collectively engaged in efforts of mutual aid.

A less adversarial stance intimates that self-help is an *additional* resource to be drawn upon. In this regard, self-help is perceived as an adjunct to institutionalized practices given that the medical model in contemporary society is equipped to handle acute rather than chronic care (Levine, 1988:168). Reflected in either interpretation, the image is one of individuals jointly responding to social forces that impact upon their personal lives in some restrictive way, thereby constraining their sense of agency. On

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one level, the public programs and assistance developed over time has enabled collective efforts to move beyond support as a means of survival to the potential for an improved existence (Withorn. 1994:443). But as Withorn (1994:447) cautions. these institutional practices hold the potential to mask the social inequities occurring at a broader societal level.

Notwithstanding the barriers and judgments imposed by others (perceived or otherwise). the stance that those outside of the group are "the enemy" so to speak is perhaps somewhat of a sweeping generalization. Should we rightfully presume that those located outside of the problematic experience have responded to "all" members of support groups in a harsh manner? Perhaps a more accurate view is that members have experienced moments of resistance *and* acceptance outside the context of the group. Does the support group provide a forum for expressing, negotiating and managing these two types of experience? My research findings, for example, suggest that a blend of both positive and negative experiences constitute the support group setting. The role and functions of framing and constructing personal experiences (positive and negative) in particular ways within the support group setting is discussed later in the thesis.

Nevertheless. despite the reasons for individuals banding together to collectively address their private troubles, we need to look more closely at the methods they draw upon while engaged in mutual aid practices to shed some light on the micro-dynamics of support processes occurring within a given space in time. Patterns depicting linkages between support group formation and social change over time provides a historical context – a sense of how mutual aid activities developed into collective units over time – that in turn reminds us that contemporary support groups are part of a developmental

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process. Research that focuses on measuring the relationship among variables from large samples of support groups points to predominant patterns of participation, perspectives and perceived outcome that help us understand a certain dimension of these groups. But studies of this nature (such as survey analysis) are unable to probe into the processes of social interaction within support group sites. Ethnographic research, however, carries with it the potential to tap into the social processes and mechanisms of support within situated interaction. In this way, the support group *experience* is the primary focus.

With more concerted and organized efforts to engage in practices of mutual aid continuing to gain momentum (Katz and Bender, 1990:26) we begin to see current manifestations of support splinter into more specialized contexts. In other words, the practices of support over time have become increasingly linked to specific social issues (Borkman, 1991:643). Not surprisingly, this transition to specificity mirrors the historical shift to a more diversified and specialized social world. In contemporary society, the nature of support is viewed as distinct from traditional forms in its specialized focus, shared purpose and collective problem-solving grounded in lived experience (Borkman, 1991:643). The role that *social ties* played in times of rapid social change, however, captured the interest of early scholars and thus contributed to current research efforts related to social support (Brownell and Shumaker, 1984:1-2). In general, social ties were increasingly viewed as a vital link in buffering stress as individuals sought to cope with social change.

This increased focus on the correlation between health status and social relationships can be traced to the scholarly works of epidemiologists John Cassel and Sydney Cobb (as cited in Brownell and Shumaker, 1984:2-4; Gottlieb, 1983:20-22; House

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Umberson and Landis. 1988:294-295) and has intensified since the 1970's (Cohen and Syme, 1985:3; House et al.. 1988:295). In short. social ties were deemed instrumental in the maintenance of health and thus critical for protecting against ill effects from potentially life-threatening conditions (Brownell and Shumaker. 1984:2; Gottlieb. 1983:21). Support. according to Cobb. equated to 'information' comprised of empathy. validation and belonging (as cited in Turner. 1981:358-359 and Gottlieb. 1983:22). Caplan extended this construct to include the nature/form of support. the various social contexts surrounding supportive interactions and the potential applied value for purposes of intervention (as cited in Brownell and Shumaker. 1984:2; Gottlieb. 1983:22:). Caplan's (1974:19-20) contribution laid further claim to the protective dimension of supportive relational ties that enabled the efforts of others to better cope with adversity by providing different forms of assistance (instrumental, practical, affective and informational). This *buffer* theory viewed support as a protective shield against stressful and health-compromising events (Brownell and Shumaker. 1984:3; Gottlieb. 1983:34; House et al.. 1988:295).

These scholarly findings led the pursuit in a somewhat different direction whereby the consequences of supportive social ties were thought to have had a *direct* effect on promoting health and well-being (in the absence of stressful conditions) (Brownell and Shumaker, 1984:3-4; Cohen and Syme, 1985; see Gottlieb, 1983:34-49 for a review of theories and empirical studies of buffer and direct effects). Yet some took a less dichotomous stand, arguing that support held the potential for both protective and direct (main) effects (Thoits, 1982:148-150). Still others pointed to the uncertainty of either claim (Gottlieb, 1983:48-49). Indeed, the lack of consensus implies a certain

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sense of futility or lack of confidence in determining perceived/ actual outcome of the relationship between social support and health. Nevertheless, drawing attention to past research trends and findings as somewhat inconclusive is not to suggest that scholarly efforts along these lines are in vein but, instead, to provide a sense of the debate that has surrounded the topic of social support. Building upon what others have discovered potentially leads to new theoretical, practical and methodological contributions. By concentrating on the development of the support concept over time my intention was to provide a sense of how contemporary research fits into the larger story, that is, to recognize that current stories necessarily have a past.

Recent and Current Perspectives of Social Support

Undeniably, a vast array of research activities spanning the past twenty-five years has been conducted under the rubric of social support. To give a sense of the types and range of social issues covered, the following reflects just some of the research conducted along various topical lines: substance abuse (Cain. 1991: Eastland. 1995: Epstein and Sardiello. 1990: Petrunik. 1972: Pollner and Stein. 1996: Trice and Roman. 1970): sexual abuse (Bohmer. 1995: Winton. 1990); life stress (Abel. 1989: Barrera. 1986: Lopata. 1986: Thoits. 1982): family/domestic challenges (Chesler. Chesney and Gidron, 1990: Chesney. Rounds and Chesler. 1989; Coleman. 1987: Hollihan and Riley, 1987: Kazak. 1987: Lieber. 1984: Trojan. Halves. Wetendorf and Bauer. 1990: Winton, 1990): life change events (Barrera, 1981: Bell. Charping and Strecker, 1989; Lopata, 1986); behavioral or life-style challenges (Goldner, 1984; Humm, 1984); the physically challenged (Ablon, 1981; Kazak, 1987; Kutner, 1987; Morgan et al., 1984; Silverman and Smith, 1984); and a bevy of mental and physical health-related issues (Chesler, et al., 1990; Chesney et al..

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1989; Gray, Fitch. Davis and Phillips. 1997; Gubrium. 1988; Karp. 1992; Levine, 1986;

Maines, 1991; Raiff. 1984; Roberts. Luke. Rappaport, Seidman. Toro and Reischl, 1991;

Taylor, Falke, Shoptaw and Lichtman. 1986; Trojan. 1989; Veiel and Baumann, 1992).

The attention directed to the specific problem or crisis has enabled research efforts to

move from the analysis of social network ties *across* multiple contexts (Cohen and Syme.

1985; Hirsh and Rapkin. 1986; House et al.. 1988; McPherson. Popielarz and Drobnic.

1992; Morgan et al.. 1984) to examining social relations *within* the group context of

individuals rallying around a common social issue.

Social networks of support relationships in general have long been the focus of

scholarly attention. A network refers to "a set of *nodes* that are *tied* by one or more

specific types of *relations* between them" (Hall and Wellman, 1985:25). Social network

analysis systematically addresses the "composition, structure. and context of

interpersonal ties" (Hall and Wellman, 1985:25). Although evidence of this structural type

of analysis permeates the literature on social support. Cohen and Syme (1985:11) contend

that research inquiries have also probed the *functions* served by interactions of social

support, albeit to a lesser degree. The particular measurement of support drawn upon is

thus contingent upon the orientation chosen (Cohen and Syme. 1985:11). Nevertheless.

this emphasis placed on the frequency, quantity and density of network ties has

overshadowed the particular functions served by individuals engaged in practices of

support and the underlying social processes deemed responsible (Cohen and Syme.

1985:11, 13, 15). In recognizing that a shortcoming of network analysis lies in its

propensity to ignore the dynamic social processes of support (Barrera, 1986:416; Katz,

1981:139), Katz notes:

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...social network analysis may be merely one means of describing an individual's, a group's or a community's resources. It does not come to grips with the quality of the interactions depicted, or with processes of stability and change, or with psychological factors such as motivation, but may attempt to account for qualitative aspects in quantitative terms (1981:139).

Moreover, the characteristics, core dimensions and typologies of the various types of social support are proportionately 'over-represented' in the literature relative to the underlying social processes. And, finally, the support literature lacks a distinct sociological perspective in comparison to psychological and clinical orientations (House et al., 1988:294; Katz, 1981:132-134;). So although these factors have contributed substantively to a particular kind of understanding of support, the *processes* of support continue to remain somewhat concealed from view. Many have advocated the need to take this critical next step (Borkman, 1976:452-453; Depner, Wethington and Ingersoll-Dayton, 1984:38; Hirsch and Rapkin, 1986:396; Killilea, 1976:80; House et al., 1988:299, 301, 314; Powell and Cameron, 1991:803; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:32; Thoits, 1995:65-66). This shift in focus takes us from 'what' constitutes support to 'how' it is accomplished (or not) in the context of support groups. The support group context itself is an accessible site from which implicit social processes can be probed.

The focus on the relationship between stress, health/well-being and support fuelled research efforts in the 1980's, dominating subsequent research pursuits (Cohen and Syme, 1985:6; House et al., 1988:295). In assessing the outcome/effects of support relationships an imminent problem lies with determining how to establish valid measures and how to distinguish between 'perceived' and 'actual' benefits. Yet despite the argument that the measurement of social relationships lacks specificity and depth, or that

individual characteristics are responsible in part for particular outcomes, there is evidence of emergent patterns from numerous studies that strongly intimate a link between social relationships and health (House et al., 1988:296, 299-300). In the absence of substantive or conclusive evidence to the benefits of either buffering or direct effects, House et al. (1988:295) contend that we must now chart a different course to probe deeper into the structures and processes underlying relationships of social support. The ongoing buffer versus main effects debate appears to have subsided somewhat in light of diversified research endeavors to uncover more specific components of social support as it transpires within situated interaction.

Proponents of mutual aid have continued to advocate the positive health-related effects to the public by professing it to be an interactive and empowering mechanism of "health promotion" (Gottlieb and Peters. 1991:653). Because the perception of support groups as a vehicle to enhance well-being and/or buffer stress prevails (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:4) they continue to be touted as a viable solution to the adversities of social life (Gottlieb and Peters. 1991:653). It is this perception, coupled with the current fiscal challenges confronting individuals and social institutions (Withorn. 1994:447; Gartner and Riessman, 1984:17), that has contributed to the interest in support groups as an effective intervention strategy (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:4-5). But as Shumaker and Brownell contend, this stance deflects attention from the macro-level structures that might be partially responsible:

> This intervention focus is consistent with today's political climate in which people are encouraged to help themselves and attention is diverted from the sources of adversity - sources which are often complex, are resistant to change, and may entail costly interventions (1984:4).

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Withorn (1994:447) goes on to say that mutual aid groups serve, in part, as a band aid solution by temporarily masking the flaws inherent in a social world fraught with power inequities. In addition, she draws attention to the temptation of welfare state rhetoric to boast of altruistic accolades (Withorn, 1994:447). Moreover, to embrace social support as a grandiose master plan is deemed somewhat over-zealous given the lack of consensus and specificity regarding theory and method (Brownell and Shumaker, 1984:5). We are dually forewarned against the uncritical acceptance of mutual aid groups as the magic formula for solving personal troubles and any temptation to romanticize their efficacy.

I now turn my attention to the task of introducing a working construct of 'support' and, by extension, that of mutual aid groups to provide a preliminary framework for understanding the empirical findings of this study. In accordance with Weber's terminology, these defining characteristics are 'ideal types': "...hypothetical constructions, formed from real phenomena, which have an explanatory value" (as paraphrased in Abercrombie et al., 1984:117). The discussion begins with a general conceptualization of support and then shifts to one that is anchored specifically to the local (group) context.

Uncertainty Surrounding the Concept of Support

At some point in our lives, during times of uncertainty or adversity, each of us has likely had occasion to *yearn for support*, to *feel supported* or even *feel unsupported* in some fashion. The basic connotation of the term support embodies the notion of *holding up* a structure of some kind for the purpose of ensuring *stability*. If we extend this interpretation to the social realm, individuals in search of support seek to *lean* on that which holds the promise of a secure foundation. In this desire to turn to another for

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assistance. Pearlin (1985:52) acknowledges that support is a process that occurs in the transactions of everyday life at a tacit level. while support tied to a specific concern or problem is more explicitly manifest. Support groups[6]. for example. provide a context for individuals experiencing a common problem (acute or chronic by nature) to come together for the purpose of seeking some form of assistance. This explicit act might be construed as an overt attempt to stand more securely on ground perceived to be otherwise unstable. But what exactly does support mean to the participants? Even in a single group. does their understanding and experience of support defy generalization because of diverse individual needs. the nature of the problem/challenge or the unique circumstances surrounding their different locations in the social world? Or are some common elements of support shared to a certain degree? Although the term 'support' is bantered about in everyday interactions as if its meaning is universally understood. perhaps that which constitutes supportive acts might reveal some common patterns (and contradictions) that could be analyzed from ethnographic inquiry.

Consensus in the research literature points to the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the concept of social support (Abel. 1989:214; Barrera. 1986:414; Brownell and Shumaker. 1984:5; House et al.. 1988:294; Thoits. 1982:145-146; 1995:155) coupled with a seemingly atheoretical framework (Brownell and Shumaker. 1984:5; Veiel and Baumann. 1992:317-318). Veiel and Baumann comment on the dilemma researchers

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[6] For the purposes here, I draw upon a basic construct of the social group as provided by John Turner: "A social group can be defined as two or more individuals who share a common social identification of themselves or, which is nearly the same thing, perceive themselves to be members of the same social category. This definition stresses that members of a social group seem often to share no more than a collective perception of their own social unity..." (1982:15).

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confront when attempting to operationalize a concept that encompasses such a broad

spectrum of social phenomena:

> The apparent lack of explanatory power of the support concept is largely a
> consequence of its atheoretical nature and of its globality: there is no
> differentiated conceptual frame of reference from which specific meanings
> could be derived and within which inconsistencies could be resolved
> (1992:317-18).

With this tendency toward inclusiveness, the concept of support falls prey to a "glossing

over" of the details and complexity of its *meaning* as experienced by those participating

in the active processes of seeking or receiving support. As a result, the meaning of

support becomes increasingly blurred. In responding to this dilemma, Barrera (1986:414)

advocates for specificity of conceptual parameters. Moreover, constant and pervasive

application of the term "support" (and "community" as yet another example) strips the

concept of its intrinsic meaning. In fact, Veiel and Baumann (1992:3, 4) suggest that the

trend to diversify and specialize research in this area has emerged in reaction to the

ubiquitous application of the support concept. Employing multiple measures has further

contributed to the absence of a comprehensive analytical framework (Barrera, 1986:414;

Gottlieb, 1983:49-58; House et al., 1988:299; Morgan et al., 1984:490; Shumaker and

Brownell, 1984:5). These critiques point to the problem of defining and operationalizing

"support" (Gottlieb, 1983:49-50; Thoits, 1982:145-146) and the subsequent synthesis of

research findings (Veiel and Baumann, 1992:3). The goal then becomes one of bringing

the fragmented pieces into a more coherent whole (Veiel and Baumann, 1992).

But it might also be argued that this conceptual ambiguity mirrors the complex

and dynamic nature of support (associated with the micro-dynamic processes of social

interaction). If the local context is deemed most relevant for a better understanding of

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support and its multiple manifestations (Pearlin, 1985; Pollner and Stein, 1996:206; Rappaport, 1993:253; Roberts et al., 1991:717, 735; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:29-31; Tebes and Kraemer, 1991:747, 753; Thoits, 1995:65; Veiel and Baumann, 1992), then perhaps our efforts are best directed to rich and detailed contextual understandings of the meanings held by participants, with limited potential to generalize across contexts. Although common patterns potentially transcend the situated context of interaction, they do so only to a certain point. More comprehensive understandings are inextricably tied to interactions occurring within local contexts. To ignore the nuances of context is to miss the essence of the phenomenon we wish to understand.

The Role of Concepts as Guiding Frameworks

The task of unraveling the key elements of a working definition to assist us with possible ways of thinking about support, within the situated social context of mutual aid groups, begins with general interpretations of the support concept as discussed in the literature. Frequent application of the term in everyday life implies that it speaks *to* and *through* individuals in a way that is meaningful and relevant. In terms of my thesis research (given that the groups are defined by the facilitators as "support groups" and referred to as such by both the facilitators and members alike), it is implied that the term itself holds a degree of meaning and common understanding to all parties involved. This provides the basis for focusing on 'local knowledge' (Geertz, 1973) and everyday discourse[7].

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[7] Gusfield (1975:xiii) reminds us that the concepts used by sociologists are rarely the same as those used by the actors we study. A further distinction between two different kinds of concepts is offered by Giddens (1984): "first-order concepts" refer to those meanings that are held by actors as part of everyday interaction whereas "second-order concepts" are merely analytic constructed used by the researcher to classsify social actions under study. In this regard, Giddens (1976:162; 1984:284) refers to sociologists as being engaged in a double hermeneutic.

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'Support' as a Sensitizing Concept

My intent here is to situate the research in the literature, but only for the purpose of providing a guiding framework for approaching this study[8]. This is in keeping with the grounded theory approach used in this study, whereby emergent theoretical ideas from the data take precedence over the application of pre-existing theories for the purpose of testing hypotheses[9]. But this should not deter us from drawing upon existing theoretical perspectives since they can provide a historical context for the understandings that have already been mapped out, as well as offering a comparative base for the current study.

Under these premises, I draw upon Shumaker and Brownell's broad definition of support as an overarching construct: "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient" (1984:13). The key dimensions to highlight here are *mutual exchange* (to include the process of giving and receiving), *resources* as the means of the exchange and the *positive intention* governing the interaction. As reflected in the literature, mutuality and reciprocity (as opposed to contractual exchange) constitute the foundational basis of social support (Borkman, 1991:644; Caplan, 1974:15-16; Gottlieb, 1983; Kazak, 1987:184-185; Maton, 1993; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:13-14). House et al. define the resources of support as "instrumental aid, emotional caring or concern, and information" (1988:302). Emphasis by some has been placed on the role of information as a means to validate self (Lavoie, 1990:85) and as a means to gain access to a network of assistance (Cobb as cited in Turner, 1981). Other constructs include social

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[8] This more open-ended approach to defining concepts is borrowed from Blumer's (1969:147-150) notion of 'sensitizing concepts' (see chapter four for further discussion).

companionship as a key element of social support (Abel, 1989:217; Coleman, 1987:87; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:23 and Willis, 1985:72). From this general description, the dimensions of support are steeped in positive qualifiers.

In the constructs presented thus far only the positive dimensions are apparent with no explicit reference to the potentially negative aspects that might flow from the transactions of support. Although these constructs embody positive connotations based on the *intention* of those participating, it does not necessarily preclude the potential for moments of conflict or tension to erupt during social interaction, nor the potential for contradictions within the processes and structures that constitute social support. It also does not exclude the possibility of negative consequences emerging from the support relationship. House et al. specifically address this issue by categorizing the concept of support as "relational" and defining it as "the positive, potentially health promoting or stress-buffering, aspects of relationships such as instrumental aid, emotional caring or concern, and information" (1988:302). The antithesis of this relational dimension is the negative connotation of social relationships, which they define as demands/conflict and regulation/control (House et al., 1988:302).

Although evidence of the term's negative dimension is sporadically situated in the literature (Abel, 1989:226-227; Coleman, 1987:88-90; House et al., 1988:305; Pearlin, 1985; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:28-29), it warrants a moment of consideration here. In Abel's (1989:226) study of adult daughters caring for elderly parents, for example, it was discovered that members of one's support network can be a potential source of conflict. Shumaker and Brownell (1984:13) and Pearlin (1985:57) acknowledge the 'reality' of an inequitable distribution of resources transpiring between individuals in the

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[9] See chapter four for a more comprehensive discussion of method.

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act of exchange. This differential is substantiated by the empirical findings of Abel's (1989:213) research that portrays supportive actions as disproportionately given or received, with the divisiveness falling along gender lines. The implications are that reciprocity shifts in ways that perhaps have un/intended (positive or negative) consequences. Moreover, the outcome of supportive actions might be construed by either the recipient or the provider as less than positive, perhaps even detrimental (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:13). Pearlin (1985) sheds light on the potential for a dependent relationship to ensue from inequitable interactions between participants. Shumaker and Brownell (1984:28, 29) point to both the costs and benefits associated with providing support noting that positive and negative consequences shift over time. To remain cognizant of the potential for conflict, inequitable transactions and non-supportive outcomes is to portray a more complete picture of social support.

Although the negative aspects or consequences of the support process are not the focus of this thesis per se, it would be misguided to imply that support is only positively manifested simply because of its intention or purpose to be so. Despite what appears as an incompatible fit with the connotation of social support as an ideal type, the negative dimension of support is not to be disregarded as a possible emergent by-product or as a consequence of supportive interactions. In fact, at times, conflict might indeed play an instrumental role in the process of constructing, managing and fostering support. My interpretations of the findings from this research, for example, suggest that a perceived lack of support, expressed as such, actually served to enhance a sense of connection (community) among the members (to be discussed further in Chapter 6). Additionally, some perspectives shared by members during interview conversations reveal that support

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was sometimes lacking in relation to participation in the groups studied. In spite of recognizing this dimension of support, it is beyond the scope (and purpose) of this research to examine the perceived benefits or outcome of support associated with the mutual aid group context.

The general definition of support appropriated for this study makes room for exploring social processes thus acknowledging the giver-receiver relationship that is sometimes excluded from meanings of support. Cohen and Syme (1985:4), for example, provide a somewhat limited one-dimensional vision that accentuates the receiving of support as the most salient aspect. The definitional constructs that I have used for the purpose of this research are therefore not closed to the potential contradictions, conflict or negative dimensions of the support relationship. This general template paves the way for a more detailed description and explication of how support is accomplished in situated interaction. For the purpose of this thesis research, appropriating the core dimensions of the concept cited above opens the doors to explore the myriad social processes occurring within the specific context of support groups.

Taking into account the connecting nodes of support within a broader social field is Caplan's (1974) general construct of a *support system*:

> ...a kind of island of stability and comfort in the turbulent sea of daily life (1974:6). Support system implies an enduring pattern of continuous or intermittent ties that play a significant part in maintaining the psychological and physical integrity of the individual over time (1974:7).

In cautioning against reification in this regard, Gottlieb insightfully comments:

> ...there is no such *thing* as a support system; rather, individuals are embedded in a social network composed of close associates who are

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important in the individual's affective life and who generate both support and stress at different times and in response to different life demands (1983:29).

Thoits specifies the nature of the resources in a social support system as a "subset of persons in the individual's total social network upon whom he or she relies for socioemotional aid. instrumental aid. or both" (1982:148). Again. we see emphasis on the provision of resources for the purpose of helping an individual through a difficult time. If we extend this notion by anchoring it to a specific context. the concept shifts from an individual orientation to one that is collectively situated. It is this construct of support. applied to the support group context. which assumes particular relevance here. We might consider the mutual aid group as one of the relevant and meaningful connecting nodes in an individual's support system. Caplan's metaphor cited above - *a kind of island of stability and comfort in the turbulent sea of daily life* - seems to capture the idea of individuals seeking refuge as they reach out to others in anticipation of finding a sense of calm and strength in the 'eye of the storm'.

A 'Sensitizing' Construct of Mutual Aid Groups

A general image of mutual aid groups portrayed in the literature is that of individuals responding to a common problem by coming together in a setting that cultivates the social act of sharing. The following definitions convey a sense of how mutual aid groups are described in the literature. noting a slight variation in emphasis:

> The core idea is that peers who have a common predicament or illness come together to provide emotional and other support through sharing their personal lived experience as well as exchanging other resources (Borkman, 1991: 644).

> Individuals who share a common problem or life situation come together

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in a group context to receive help, provide help and influence laypersons
and professionals in the larger community (Maton, 1993:273).

The generic feature of this process is one of people with some kind of
shared or common problematic situation coming up against a set of
societal institutions which are defined as not responding adequately to that
problem (Maines, 1991:191).

Emerging from these constructs is a common thread: the shared or common

challenge that brings individuals together to collectively respond through the mutual

sharing of resources and lived experience. The latter two constructs however imply subtle

distinctions. Maton (1993) extends the definition to include a sense of agency, implied

by the reference made regarding the aim of influencing others in external social contexts.

In the definition provided by Maines (1991), attention is more overtly directed to notions

of exclusion and resistance. Points of resistance, a felt lack of acceptance and adversity

are not new dimensions of the support experience, as I touched upon earlier in tracing the

historical roots of social support.

Of these three definitions, Maton's (1993) construct more closely captures the

central idea of *mutuality* that embodies the reciprocal flow of exchange among

participants, coupled with the intimation of empowerment. The shortcoming of this

definition, however, lies with its rather mechanical connotation that neglects the key

dimension of sharing personal lived experience. Borkman (1991) more adequately

addresses this notion of mutuality but fails to explicitly acknowledge the receiving

dimension of supportive exchanges. Also, the term 'support' is couched within the

definition itself thus presuming its taken-for-granted meaning. And, finally, the

definition provided by Maines (1991) implies a blanket assumption that external social

institutions have not provided adequate assistance to each group member. In light of this

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critique I draw upon elements from these contributions, coupled with my own interpretations from field experiences, to offer a preliminary map that we might follow to reach our destination of coming to a better understanding of how support groups 'work':

> The common problem or issue that initially brings individuals together is the pivotal point from which interactions intended to facilitate coping, personal and/or broader social change ultimately turn. A central premise of mutual aid (social support) groups lies with the mutual sharing of experiential knowledge, practical strategies and/or professional knowledge. From the acts of sharing concrete strategies, advice and/or encouraging (empathetic) words/gestures, an enhanced sense of self-efficacy is enabled for the provider and/or the recipient. In comparing self to others and identifying with those in like circumstances, members potentially cultivate a sense of validation and legitimation. The un/intended consequences emanating from this process of mutuality seemingly reduces a sense of isolation as a sense of belonging (community) and acceptance are gained. The chaotic is rendered more coherent and meaningful as shattered identities appear to be restored or transformed over time.

Posited as an ideal type, this synthesis of interpretations does not profess to accommodate all support groups. Instead, it offers a more descriptive and inclusive working definition that points to the key dynamic social processes thought to be involved (or perhaps at least partially) in the support group experience.

Conceptual Differentiation: Self-Help Groups versus Support Groups

Upon perusing the literature it becomes readily apparent that the concepts of support, self-help and mutual aid (as they pertain to the group context) frequently intersect. This overlay further confounds conceptual clarity. Although the concepts embody similar ideas, some tacit differences set them apart. Borkman (1991:643-644) posits a subtle distinction between 'support' and 'self-help'. She notes that both are sometimes used in reference to 'mutual aid groups' with the concept of 'support groups'

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as the generic term frequently used to include *all* types of mutual aid collectives.[10] This interchangeable use of the terminology (Levine, 1988:167), however, tends to mask the subtle distinctions between the concepts. The predominant difference lies with who in fact orchestrates the formation and subsequent interactions of the group (Borkman, 1991:644).

Support groups are primarily viewed as being initiated and governed (albeit to different degrees) by those with professional status whereas self-help groups are often considered more autonomous since the members themselves create and orchestrate control (Borkman, 1991:644; Levine, 1988:167). Self-help groups are predominantly portrayed in the literature as icons of efficacy and empowerment. Groups with professional intervention and facilitation are frequently viewed as undermining the agency or dignity of the individual. According to Gottlieb (1983:28), professional influence and control contribute to an insidious breakdown of mutuality - the glue that binds individuals to one another during times of personal need. On the other hand, professional involvement is perceived by some to potentially enhance the viability and longevity of mutual aid groups (Levine, 1988:179-180). With respect to the desire for or resistance to professional input, the nature of the problem itself is obviously a critical factor.

The self-help concept places greater emphasis on peer-control and the act of exhibiting agency (Borkman, 1991:644). A self-help definition provided by Katz and Bender is perhaps one of the most comprehensive:

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[10] Detected in the literature is a subtle shift from the self-help terminology to that of mutual aid/assistance intended to more adequately reflect the mutuality dimension of supportive practices; emphasis is thus deflected from the *receiving* aspect of supportive exchanges to make room for the act of *giving* (Killilea, 1976:37; Levine, 1988:167).

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Self-help groups are voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose. They are usually formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem, and bringing about desired social and/or personal change. The initiators and members of such groups emphasize face-to-face social interactions and the assumption of personal responsibility by members. They often provide material assistance, as well as emotional support; they are frequently "cause"-oriented, and promulgate an ideology or values through which members may attain an enhanced sense of personal identity. Such values imply objectives and practices that are broadly beneficial and not harmful, both to the welfare of member/participants, and to the wider society, in terms of principles of social justice, morality, and concern for one's fellow humans (1990:23-24; revised from 1976).

Although other definitions of a similar nature can be located in the literature, the aforementioned construct covers substantive ground[11]. From this definition it is clear that the essence of self-help and support is remarkably similar[12]. In identifying the common strands between the two concepts, Lieberman states:

All such groups share some basic elements: the needs of the individuals joining them; the requirements, no matter how banal, to share something personal; and the real or perceived similarity in their suffering, whether it be behavior, roles, life crises, or the need for growth or change (1979:220).

Remaining cognizant of certain distinctions however paints a more complete picture, bearing in mind that the conceptual disparities fall along a continuum of diversity.

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[11] Borkman (1976:452) provides a general definition that places emphasis on personal experience as a particularly relevant knowledge form that governs and embodies the self-help group: "self-help groups can be redefined as voluntary human service organizations of persons sharing a common problem who band together to resolve the problem through their mutual efforts, with experiential knowledge being a primary basis of authority in decision making." An additional working definition presented by Levy (1976:311-312) includes purpose, origin, source of assistance, composition and leadership control. I would add, however, that the emphasis on face-to-face interactions fails to take into account the recent emergence of mutual aid accessed via computer-mediated communication.
[12] Given that the members engaged in the mutual sharing of experiential knowledge during a major portion of the meetings (a main tenet of the self-help construct), I draw upon the self-help literature as part of the guiding analytic framework for this thesis.

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The groups participating in this study fall more clearly under the umbrella of 'support groups' given that they are initiated and facilitated by individuals occupying a professional position[13]. I contend, however, that the distinction between 'self-help' and 'support' is more conceptual than practical. In others words, in actual practice the degree of control executed in support groups likely defies rigid categorization. Some have noted that leadership styles or meeting formats vary from group to group, even among those affiliated with national organizations or those governed by an explicitly formulated ideology (Levy, 1976:314). Although the external facilitators might technically direct group meetings (or portions thereof), the governing philosophy would perhaps encourage member-control and ownership. In some groups where professional input plays a role, the format of the meetings might conceivably be conducted on a continuum of professional control, with the potential to fluctuate both within and between scheduled meetings. In the two groups studied this is precisely the case even though, technically, an external professional facilitator directed both. This casts some light on the inevitable disjuncture between theory and practice.

Taxonomies of Social Support Groups

To provide some background context on the spectrum of support group types, a basic synopsis is outlined to serve this purpose. Previous research endeavors have developed typologies of support groups along various lines. Certain elements of these groups have been packaged into a more manageable form, contributing in part to our understanding of the phenomenon. To provide a sense of the many perspectives and the

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[13] For this reason (combined with the fact that both the members and facilitators of the groups studied refer to the groups as support groups) I retain the support group concept. I also use the designate of *mutual aid* given that the format of the meetings reflects both a degree of professional input and self-help practices.

subtle distinctions that differentiate the vast array of groups. I briefly sketch the general

parameters. A more comprehensive treatment is clearly beyond the scope of this thesis.

A therapeutic typology is posited by Lieberman (as cited in Killilea, 1976:76-77)

reflecting membership and leadership criteria. The four categories constitute (a) group

psycho-therapy and professional leadership; (b) self-help groups with specific

membership criteria and facilitated by peers; (c) encounter groups with universal

membership criteria and professional or non-professional leadership; and (d) self-help

groups of more open membership that are peer-facilitated and rally around general issues.

A second taxonomy provided by Katz and Bender (1976; revised 1990:27) distinguishes

types based on primary focus and purpose: (a) groups of a therapeutic nature; (b)

advocacy groups that cultivate a sense of agency, often at a collective level (c) groups

that assist with lifestyles seen to be on the fringe of broader cultural contexts; (d)

providers of safe environments for those who are virtually excluded from the larger social

world; and (e) groups that embody attributes of more than one of the above categorical

distinctions. Levy (1976:312-313; 1979:241-243) outlines a third classification scheme

which cuts across lines of purpose and function: (a) behavioral modification with the

intent to alter or dispel a behavior that is generally deemed socially unacceptable; (b) the

acquisition of effective coping strategies geared toward alleviating stress that flows from

a shared problem; (c) goals that revolve around validating and legitimating the

activities/behaviors regarded as deviant in many other social contexts; and (d) the

collective aim to foster personal growth and self-efficacy. And, finally, a more recent

construct by Schubert and Borkman (1991:769-770) categorizes five group types along

the lines of authority-based criteria and particular knowledge claims: (a) unaffiliated; (b)

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federated; (c) affiliated; (d) hybrid; and (e) managed. In other words, these groups are positioned on a continuum ranging from highly autonomous groupings (minimal or non-existent professional influence) that are grounded in experiential knowledge, to groups that are predominantly organized and facilitated by professionals utilizing professional theories and knowledge claims to manage the group. The authoritative control subtly shifts from the member to the professional. In this regard, the egalitarian and democratic ideal of autonomous self-help groups is supplanted by a more centralized locus of control as reflected in the transition from unaffiliated to managed groups.

Categorizing groups according to the criteria presented most certainly provides heuristic insight into some of the similarities and differences. A classification scheme sifts through the various dimensions to provide a snapshot, an image of discerning features, derived from applying a particular lens. Although distinctions drawn along structural lines enable a degree of conceptual clarity, the picture remains somewhat static. Moreover, I suspect that although some support groups might theoretically fit the parameters outlined in the typologies above, others defy categorization. The *real* world seldom fits as neatly into the boxes we so carefully construct.

Within these various 'types' of mutual aid groups, common structural (organizational) features include the propensity for more autonomous leadership, democratic participation and somewhat more informal formats of communication in the mutual sharing of experience and information (Katz, 1981:141-143). Despite these commonly defined parameters, however, primarily heterogeneous membership and demographic characteristics are represented (Katz, 1981:135; Levy, 1984:169-170). This diversity of organizational structure and demographic characteristics of mutual aid groups

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is depicted by Katz: "self-help organizations embody an extraordinary variety of types, purposes, structures, and ideological features, tap a large variety of motives, and appeal to a vast range of members" (1981:135). Moreover, each person enters the mutual aid setting at a different location with respect to their affliction (Levy, 1984:170), perceived or otherwise. Given the rather heterogeneous nature of support groups, concerted efforts have been made to sort through the diversity to uncover the common elements. Gottlieb and Peters (1991:659-660) provide a general demographic profile based on Statistics Canada 1987 Data that depicts more female participation than male, a predominant age range of twenty-five to forty-four years, and average economic status with only a small segment extremely disadvantaged economically.[14]

As we can see from the typologies presented, coupled with variations in the structure of individual groups, mutual aid groups resist an imposed monolithic framework. The significant variation among mutual aid groups on a number of levels problematizes efforts to draw universal conclusions from research findings. This includes elements such as: format; nature of the problem; organizational structure (Katz, 1981:135); individual differences related to skills of coping and personal competency (Gottlieb, 1983:33); and the diverse stages of the individually experienced common problem among participants (Levy, 1984:170). Moreover, the formats and approaches used *within* one group might fluctuate at any given time, thus, resisting a monolithic and rigid analytic framework. In light of these factors, the aim to understand the 'local' support group context takes precedence over generalizing 'across' contexts. The exploratory nature of this project and the limited sample size provide additional rationale

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[14] A cited reason for higher participation rate in the western provinces is the social problems arising from economic setbacks in the oil industry and agriculture (Gottlieb and Peters, 1991:665).

in this regard. Perhaps certain elements of what has been discovered in the context of these groups can be generalized to other milieus of support, carrying with it the potential to be of heuristic value, but I caution against uncritical application.

While some common strands are evident in the emergent patterns uncovered, scholarly efforts directed toward the structural components of support groups (such as leadership and format of meetings) preclude the relevant social processes of support that transpire within a local context. This lack of attention to social processes is consistently acknowledged in the research, as is the recommendation to redirect efforts along these lines (Borkman, 1976; Depner et al., 1984; Hirsch and Rapkin, 1986; House et al., 1988; Maines, 1991; Powell and Cameron, 1991; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984; Thoits, 1995). We are beginning to see more concerted efforts in this regard (for recent studies see Cain, 1991; Eastland, 1995; Hollihan and Riley, 1987; Karp, 1992; Levine, 1988; Maines, 1991; Rappaport, 1993; Roberts et al., 1991). Yet still this shortcoming is highlighted by Thoits (1995) in a recent review and critique of the literature. Given that our understanding of how social support is accomplished in situated interaction is limited, the goal appears to be one of linking what we know to that which has yet to be uncovered in any substantive way. A step in that direction begins by tying relevant theoretical strands, already identified from previous research efforts, to the micro-processes of social interactions in ways that might tell us what makes these support groups 'tick' in meaningful ways.

Despite the magnitude of literature addressing social support, the goal here is not to extrapolate findings with universal applicability but rather to pay heed to the nuances, patterns and contradictions that transpire within a particular setting. This is not to say,

however, that some general conclusions cannot be drawn from the local context to reflect some common patterns that hold the potential to transcend contextual boundaries. Given the scope of the mutual aid phenomenon, an ethnographic approach is deemed an especially effective means to assess and compare variations within context before extending relevant findings to a broader framework (Levy, 1984:170). From empirical research of support processes flowing within a specific context we can begin to compare how other contexts might resemble and/or contradict the findings derived from a single context. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of support processes within one context has practical implications for practitioners, policymakers, group facilitators and participants of various support groups.

Concluding Remarks

By tracing both the historical background of social support as a sociological concept and the development of mutual aid groups over time, my intention here has been to *contextualize* the current research within a broader theoretical and historical framework. A discussion and critique of definitional constructs enabled a sifting through of conceptual perspectives that ultimately resulted in the formulation of a provisional, sensitizing definition. In discerning the similarities as well as the subtle distinctions among mutual aid constructs, a better understanding of the inherent complexities and unique characteristics of this social phenomenon was sought. A brief discussion of the structural parameters of social support provided a sense of the different types of social support groups and the variations in organizational structure along certain constructed lines. Although this structural emphasis organizes multiple parts into a manageable form, the social mechanisms that enable and constrain social support are overshadowed. For a

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more comprehensive understanding of support groups as a social phenomenon we must continue to turn our attention to the processes occurring *within* the context of situated interaction. More specifically, this might include examining not only how individuals engage in the social processes of mutual aid but also the unintended consequences of these social practices. In the following chapter I discuss the main theoretical perspectives that have informed this research.

Chapter II
Theoretical Perspectives (Part One)

In this chapter I provide a synthesis of the literature deemed most relevant in shaping this research. Included are my reflections of a personal experience that I consider to have played an influential role. From these various sources. a guiding analytic framework is constructed for the eventual interpretation of empirical data collected from the two support groups studied. The conceptual ideas that contribute to developing this framework were drawn upon before. during and after completion of the fieldwork. I wish to emphasize. however. that the perspectives presented are not to be regarded as determinate but rather as possible 'ways of thinking' about the interactions occurring within mutual aid groups. Or as Blumer contends. concepts used to *guide* empirical studies toward a meaningful yet comprehensive understanding are referred to as "sensitizing" in lieu of "definitive" concepts that assume prior understanding (1969: 148-150: emphasis added). Following Blumer's lead. the concepts appropriated for this research are heuristic tools to aid in our understanding of the dynamic and complex nature of the support groups studied. In familiarizing ourselves with the theoretical ideas that have come before, the presentation of findings from this research can potentially stand on more solid ground.

The concepts or themes considered *most relevant* to the initial and emergent questions guiding this inquiry are proposed in conjunction with findings from various empirical studies. While the social support literature contributes in part to the analytic framework, other generic perspectives are drawn upon to enhance our understanding of (a) how individuals experience social support as meaningful: (b) how perceived support is accomplished through discursive practices and: (c) how identity claims appear to shift

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in response to participation in mutual aid groups. General theories of symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology inform the basic framework while theoretical perspectives specifically tied to notions of social support, community and narrative discourse contribute substantive content. I touch upon certain dimensions of the mutual aid group experience, as depicted in the literature, to probe the meaning of support from a process perspective and to provide a context for further discussion. An intentional shift in focus moves toward the potential mechanisms that enable these processes of support within the mutual aid group setting. Emphasis is thus placed on theoretical perspectives that embody the meaning of social support as it is experienced within the context of mutual aid groups and, more specifically, on the processes (and consequences) of its active construction. Given my interest in the interactional processes that occur within a mutual aid group setting, priority is given to theories of this nature. Certain scholarly works are drawn upon more extensively than other perspectives regarded as less relevant for the purposes of this research[15].

Establishing the linkages and interrelationships among concepts is the key to unlocking the dynamic social processes occurring within context. In Chapters 5, 6 and 7, I arrange the conceptual frames presented here in ways that will enable me to describe and explain the flow and consequences of enacted social support within the groups studied. But, first, I begin by introducing an experience that directly influenced my

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[15] In reference to community theories, Cohen (1985), Erikson (1976, 1994) and McMillan and Chavis (1986) were drawn upon substantively. Within the social support literature, the scholarly works of Levy (1976, 1979), Lieberman (1979), Levine (1988), Cain (1991), Eastland (1995), Karp (1992), and Hollihan and Riley (1987) played a major contributing role in developing the analytic framework (especially in terms of emphasis on social processes and empirical insight). Goffman (1963) and Erikson (1966) offered perspectives on stigma and deviance. The narrative theoretical perspectives of Eder (1988); Linde (1993), Maines (1993), Brown (1997), Davies and Harre (1990), Rappaport (1993) and Pollner and Stein (1996) informed the analysis and interpretation in relation to the mechanisms (or practices) involved in the enacted processes of social support.

thinking about support groups, the questions brought to the research and my observations in the field.

A Personal Source of Influence

Early in the research process questions related to community surfaced as a result of initial readings from the literature and a public presentation I attended on the evening of November 9, 1995 entitled "Laura Evans Expedition Inspiration". Evans proceeded to tell the audience her story of adversity and triumph: the initial shock and fear experienced upon being diagnosed with advanced breast cancer; the horror of receiving a bone marrow transplant (considered at the time to be a radical form of medical intervention); a near-death experience while undergoing treatment; and the determination not only to survive after the relentless procedures inflicted upon her, but the desire to make a difference for others confronting a common struggle. Despite the harrowing experience and overwhelming fear encountered, she came to view the adversity as a gift over time. Survival took on a new meaning that translated to reaching outward to those confronting a similar challenge. While watching a slide presentation of women stricken with breast cancer banding together to embark on a physically demanding and challenging mountain climbing expedition, I found myself wondering how the experiences of these women might relate to the support groups under study. I became intrigued with the notion of how individuals who come together under a cloud of adversity create a collective sense of solidarity that at the same time seems to set them apart from others located outside of the experience. Is this distinction that separates some individuals from others an integral (or perhaps even necessary) part of creating and sustaining social ties? Are sustained relations that revolve around a common struggle somehow linked to notions of

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community? How do individuals generate a social bond of significance and what purposes are served as a result? What are the implications for identity claims? Is the process of creating boundaries between the afflicted and those located outside of the experience somehow tied to negotiating a sense of agency and self-efficacy? And, finally, are these constructed symbolic boundaries necessary on some level to initially nurture the social ties among individuals who exhibit damaged selves, but perhaps problematic over time if restricted from reaching beyond the constructed set of relations? I then considered whether these questions posed some theoretical relevance to the support groups participating in this research. Although at times questions of this nature played an ancillary role in the field research, they most certainly contributed to my working construct and the direction ultimately taken. From ongoing fieldwork observations and reviews of the literature, related concepts to the questions posed above resurfaced time and again, each informing the other. As the research progressed over time, further inquiry along these lines provided the initial building blocks to the framework constructed for the analysis and interpretation of research findings.

Although other moments encountered in everyday life often resulted in reflecting upon their possible relevance for this study, the event portrayed above stands apart from others as having had significant impact upon generating certain kinds of questions. Moreover, in conjunction with conceptual ideas encountered in the literature, this experience provided me with a particular lens from which I observed (and subsequently analyzed and interpreted) members' interactions. From this angle, certain elements were brought into sharper focus while others eventually receded into the background.

Mapping the Theoretical Terrain

Upon reviewing the literature it becomes apparent that social support perspectives frequently intersect with certain components of community theory. These linkages also coincide with my community-related questions that emerged during the initial stages of field research. In extending these ideas further, additional themes are drawn upon to help explain the mechanics of how social support is accomplished, how negative identity labels are resisted and how transformed identities are expressed within the support groups studied. Certain concepts are heuristically useful in relation to the focus of the current research. In this regard, the primary concepts considered most relevant include: a) sense of community (emphasis on belonging); b) symbolic boundaries; c) discursive positioning; and d) identity. Additional identifiers within these core components - belonging, acceptance, mutuality, social comparison, validation/affirmation, experiential knowledge, narrative, powerlessness and resistance - yield a more comprehensive understanding of the meanings and processes of social support. Each conceptual frame is discussed further in this chapter and the ones to follow.

Given that I have already alluded to the theoretical relevance of community in the context of this research, this conceptual framework serves as a critical point around which the other concepts/themes are organized. This arrangement is not coincidental but intentional. The community concept is used as a means to understanding support as experienced by those participating in mutual aid groups, how it is accomplished and the consequences that flow from the interactional processes within the group setting. As Gusfield (1975:11) contends, the concept of community is an analytical tool, not an

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empirical reality. As many have insisted, the value of the concept lies in how it is applied or used (Cohen, 1985; Gusfield, 1975; Ladd, 1959).

General theories of community boast a long-standing tradition, having covered considerable yet diverse ground.[16] From the multiple meanings of community, Gusfield (1975:xv.xvi) distinguishes between two distinct forms: geographical and relational. Given the mobility that characterizes modern life and the perpetual movement between multiple social contexts (Scherer, 1982:15,25), we begin to see a shift away from emphasis on community as "place" (Cohen, 1985; Jones, 1995; Ladd, 1959; Scherer, 1972; Stein, 1960; Warren, 1966). Along similar lines, Lyon (1987:56-58) describes community as an interactional field wherein social aspects (as opposed to spatial) and reciprocal action are key elements. By placing social *relations* at the center, it then follows that community can be regarded essentially as a social process. This process is accomplished within a structural (contextual) frame that contains the set of relations occurring within. It is this emphasis on social relations that assumes certain relevance for the purposes of this study. This relational component of social interaction that operates within a meaningful context (Scherer, 1972:19,113; Stein, 1960:112) can be appropriately applied to a specific setting such as the mutual aid group. The aim is to capture the "substance" of community (with emphasis on process) as opposed to the premise that support groups constitute "a" community per se (with emphasis on place).

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[16] It is perhaps the ubiquitous application of the term community in everyday life (Scherer, 1972:1), coupled with a comprehensive (or seemingly exhaustive) coverage of community, that threatens to obscure its theoretical relevance. But the constant usage of the term implies its salience for those who draw upon its meaning (even though images of community conceivably differ among individuals).

Community as Process

For the purposes here, the *psychological sense of community*, as a subset of community theory, is of particular interest. As a leading proponent in this area, Sarason provides the following description:

> The perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure – these are some of the ingredients of the psychological sense of community (1974:157).

A similar interpretation is offered by McMillan and Chavis:

> Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members needs will be met through their commitment to be together (1986:9).

From these descriptions, the emergent features of community can be categorized as social identification, mutuality, a sense of belonging and the fulfillment of needs. McMillan and Chavis (1986:9-14) identify four key dimensions that embody this sense of community among individuals: (1) identification based on shared experience or the common struggle; (2) consensual validation and mutual influence; (3) membership/sense of belonging; and (4) fulfillment of needs. Potentially, each of these points can be theoretically situated within the context of mutual aid groups. For the purposes of this research, however, emphasis is placed on the processes of identification, mutual affirmation/influence and belonging.

Processes of Collective Identification

At a most basic level. community embodies some degree of connection. identification and sharing among individuals. In a general sense, according to Rochberg-Halton (1986). the term is intended as a symbolic representation: "to unite people" (1986:192). It involves the exchange of meaningful communication on the basis of sharing some common interest or value (Cohen. 1985:12: McMillan and Chavis. 1986:11; Sarason. 1974:2) within context (Scherer. 1972:113). As Moore (1991:4) contends. it is through meaningful interaction that community can be realized. Individuals create their own community in relation to the meanings attached to relationships that are generated from individuals engaged in an ongoing process of interaction and interpretation (Cohen. 1985:17,28). Social interaction can be viewed as the interplay of symbolic[17] meanings between individuals – an ongoing process of efforts to portray, interpret and assimilate meanings given and received (Sanders. 1966:346).

Emphasis is thereby placed on community as an active process of individuals engaged in coordinated interactions that render the relational ties to be personally meaningful. Again, the interactional processes enabled by discursive practices emerge as a baseline for constructing relational ties. Meanings are actively and symbolically constructed. negotiated and managed in a collective context (Cohen. 1985:9. 38. 108). In other words, it is through the meanings constructed among individuals that the relationships assume particular relevance to those participating in the interaction. This process of meaningful identification emerges as a prevalent theme in the community literature (Gusfield, 1975:24; Kaufman, 1966:97; McMillan and Chavis. 1986:13). And

as Cohen (1985:18,21) notes, despite room for individual variation in the meanings collectively constructed, some common referent points serve as connecting nodes. In other words, that which individuals perceive to be a common ground in relation to others is considered to be a critical point of connection. Moreover, if the basis of commonality is to be meaningful and salient, individuals must collectively regard it as such (Gusfield, 1975:35). According to Cohen (1985:12) and Moore (1991:2), this process of common identification is the 'glue' that binds individuals together.

In extending this premise further, Cohen (1985:21) argues that the degree of shared commonality operates in conjunction with the inherent diversity among individuals. Cohen's (1985) theoretical perspective focuses on this dialectic of sameness and difference as it is managed among those engaged in the process of actively constructing community. The perceived differences among those engaged in constructing community are temporarily suspended in order to present an image of unification – a connecting node that defines others as outside of the values or issues established as salient (Cohen, 1985:35-39). On the surface, the illusion is one of sameness that in turn veils the diversity among those cultivating community ties (Cohen, 1985:76, 114). According to Kaufman, this perceived commonality embodies acts of "...coordination, integration, and unity" (1966:95). Implied is the collective effort to create and sustain a relational connection to serve some purpose. Some interesting

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[17] In reference to the term 'symbolic' I appropriate a symbolic interactionist perspective that defines symbols as "...*social objects used to represent* (or 'stand in for', 'take the place of') whatever people agree they shall represent" (Charon, 1989:39, emphasis in original).

questions then arise. From those who have gathered together on the basis of a common yet valued interest, what actions or practices are undertaken to distinguish themselves from others outside this defining point? Moreover, what un/intended consequences flow from these practices that simultaneously bind and separate? What purposes might be served from a set of individuals collectively creating and sustaining social ties through discursive practices while, at the same time, constructing others as excluded from the 'circle' of bound relations? These questions inform the discussion of findings from this research presented in Chapters 5 and 6.

A Critical Point of Identification

If we extend this aspect of the community perspective to the context of mutual aid groups, the initial connecting node can be logically traced to the problem or situation that draws the members together in the first place. It is this 'common' experience that sustains interactions in a way that connects members to each other on a level that is unique and distinct from relational ties occurring outside of the mutual aid group context. The common problem initiates the development of social ties (Coleman, 1987:83; Killilea, 1976:67; Levine, 1988:174) and is the focal point around which feelings and experiences are shared (Levine, 1988:171). The idea that individuals come together for the purpose of sharing a common challenge with others who 'understand' is a key dimension of the support group experience (Abel, 1989; Ablon, 1968; Borkman, 1976; Caplan, 1974; Coleman, 1987; Eastland, 1995; Gottlieb, 1983; Katz, 1981; Killilea, 1976; Levine, 1988; Levy, 1976; Lopata, 1986; Pearlin, 1985; Pollner and Stein, 1996; Romeder, 1990; Roberts et al., 1991; Shumaker and Brownell, 1984). It is this mutual understanding of the defined problem and the subsequent sharing of related experiences that are

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precipitating factors in the formation of affective social ties. Levine contends that the process of sharing enhances a "sense of solidarity" among the group members (1988:174) as does the approval received by peers (Lieberman, 1979:222). The sharing of similar life experiences fosters a connection – a social bond – that nurtures and sustains relational ties (Abel, 1989; Coleman, 1987; Erikson, 1994; Gottlieb, 1983; Levine, 1988). This connection, however, forms under the implicit premise of denied feelings, perspectives and selves.

The collective building of relations that are meaningfully connected (and self as repaired) is part of the "healing" process within mutual aid groups. This collaborated effort and shift in self-perception is thus acknowledged:

> Bringing people together who share the same problem, feelings, and experiences overcomes the tendency to ostracize one's self. The negative value placed on the uniqueness of one's situation is reduced when the individual discovers that others have been there (Levine, 1988:171).

Goffman (1963:36) contends that when an individual encounters "others like me" it is at this point that social identification occurs. This connection is formed on the basis of a heightened sense of perceived similarity (Lieberman, 1979:200, 221). Discovering that "you are not alone" in confronting obstacles, which otherwise might appear overwhelming, is a familiar part of the mutual aid group experience (Coleman, 1987:87; Karp, 1992:166). In an ethnographic study of an affective disorders support group, for example, Karp recognized that there was "...something very powerful for individuals in learning that others shared their confusions" (1992:166). Upon identifying with others, members are reassured that they are not alone and that their own situation is perhaps not as dismal or hopeless as they had once surmised (Levine, 1988:171; Levy, 1979:254-255;

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Lieberman. 1979:224). Moreover. this process of identifying with others engaged in a common struggle seemingly reduces a sense of isolation (Eastland. 1995:303; Levine. 1988:171; Lieberman, 1979:200) while simultaneously enhancing a sense of community (Levine. 1988:171; Levy. 1976:319; 1979:254). Substantiated by the observations of various self-help groups. Levy (1976:319; 1979:254) contends that as members reveal some aspect of their own difficulties with those who have experienced similar traumas (with the accompanying feelings of despair. self-blame and/or apprehension) these discursive practices appear to reduce a sense of isolation. desperation and powerlessness. And it is perceived isolation. according to Sarason (1974:8). that is the antithesis to a sense of community.

Processes of Social Comparison

Yet this basis of established commonality is but one dimension of the identification process. As individuals identify with others they engage in a process of *social comparison*. Members thereby assess and evaluate their own situation in relation to that of others facing similar life challenges. recognizing apparent differences. This selective practice of comparing one's own situation with that of others. that is. how self is the same and yet different (Borkman. 1976:450; Killilea. 1976:67) is linked to Cohen's (1985) premise that individuals not only have a need to see themselves as similar but also as somehow distinct. Although Cohen's (1985) perspective is primarily geared toward differences that separate a set of individuals from external others, we can specifically extend this idea to the interactions among participants within a group. This notion of difference can be identified as serving an evaluative role within the support group context. The tendency to perceive others embedded in a worse situation (Abel, 1989:223;

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Coleman. 1987:83; Lavoie. 1990:81; Levine. 1988:171) has been reported by participants as somehow restorative to a sense of self (Coleman. 1987:83; Lieberman. 1979:224) or as a catalyst to altering identity claims (Lieberman, 1979:224). From an empirical study of daughters as caregivers for elderly parents. Abel noted that members were consoled by "finding out that others were even worse off than themselves" (1989:223). Perceiving one's own situation as somehow better than that of another confronting similar hardships seemingly offers one a glimmer of hope (Coleman. 1987:83). Lieberman's observations of various support groups revealed both the restorative and transformative effects that evolved from practices of social comparison among support group members: "...hope. cognitive restructuring. info about new approaches to coping with painful dilemmas. and solace through seeing that others may be in worse conditions" (1979:224). As individuals compare experiences, they come to an understanding of self (Levy. 1976:319; 1979:252) in relation to emergent alternative frames for living (coping) (Lieberman. 1979:224). Members formulate a basis to redefine self from the diversity of experience presented by those participating (Killilea. 1976:73; Levy. 1976:320; Lieberman. 1979:224). Sharing these experiences intimates a new vision to individual members - one that offers hope to otherwise personal dilemmas (Levy, 1976:318; 1979:251; Lieberman. 1979:224, 230). Personal troubles at the individual level are reworked in a collective context to 'strengthen' those who have 'lost their sense of self along the way'.

Although differences are recognized as an integral part of the support group experience 'within' the context of the group, the emphasis placed on that which connects members together serves to accentuate the differences that distinguish the group from

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those located 'outside' of this setting.   As Lieberman notes, this dialectic of similarity

and difference is a common characteristic of mutual aid groups:

> The high level of cohesiveness, perceived similarity, and the perception
> that they are 'different' from others outside of the 'refuge' creates in many
> self-help groups a strong influence on the saliency of being a participant
> (1979:221).

From this statement, subtle undertones of implied 'difference' and 'protection' being

somehow tied to a perceived lack of belonging or acceptance rise to the surface.

Although this interplay between perceived commonality and diversity is acknowledged in

the literature, scant attention has been given to the practices members drawn upon to

construct and manage these two elements of social interaction. Moreover, we might ask

what purposes are served as a result of the active shifting of emphasis between the

common strands that bind members together and the differences that symbolically

separate them from either each other or from those outside of the group.   Pointing to the

actual practices and mechanisms that individuals use in the context of mutual aid groups

moves us from theoretical abstraction to a more concrete basis for understanding how the

processes of support are constructed and the consequences that flow from their

enactment.

The Principle of Mutuality

The connection that is fostered from these identification processes is premised on

the principle of mutuality. The term mutuality assumes an exchange at some level among

individuals engaged in interaction. Although this general sense of obligation or

expectation (Killilea, 1976:68) is similar to the frequently drawn upon concept of

reciprocity, the nature of the exchange differs. The latter intimates a certain expectation

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that something will be received in return for something that is given (Boldt, 1995; Hewitt, 1984:172). This interaction is deemed more formal or contractual such as described by social exchange theory. Mutuality, on the other hand, embodies the dynamic process of giving and receiving under the guiding principles of a shared moral ethic (Benn, 1982:58; Boldt, 1995). Practices of mutuality embody "reciprocal sympathies and concerns which people feel for one another" (Benn, 1982:59)[18]. References to mutuality in the community literature, whether in traditional or contemporary form, are imbued with moral connotations. Erikson describes this sense of collective morality created among individuals: "the private sentiments of many separate persons are fused together into a common sense of morality" (1966:4). This actively constructed bond of social significance enabled by practices of mutuality is reflected in the following statement: "the words common, community, and communication are related around the same root, 'munis', meaning a gift exchanged" (Rochberg-Halton, 1986:192).

This premise of mutuality – the mutual exchange of social resources – emerges from the literature as a key dimension of mutual aid groups (Abel, 1989; Borkman, 1991; Brownell and Shumaker, 1984; Caplan, 1974; Gartner and Riessman, 1984; Gottlieb, 1983; Killilea, 1976; Levine, 1988; Orford, 1992; Pearlin, 1985; Romeder, 1990; Wills, 1985). Gottlieb draws attention to the critical link between the concepts of mutuality and support within mutual aid groups: "social support is an

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[18] Benn (1982) includes the term 'comradery' as yet a further distinction in relation to processes of exchange. In this case, the concern for other is tied to the degree of shared commonality, that is, the connections among individuals are based on interactions of a casual nature (Benn, 1982:59,60).

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expression of the ongoing interdependence between people; mutuality is its cornerstone" (1983:28). A generic definition of mutuality is the "helping of any kind that takes place between persons who are regarded as both potential help-givers and potential help-seekers" (Shapiro, 1990:169). Shapiro specifically locates the concept in the context of mutual aid groups:

> Mutual helping, and its sub-type, self-help, provide an approach whereby persons can share personal perspectives and feelings arising from their life experience, special skills and talents, a bond of common concern and sense of common fate (1990:171).

But as Shapiro contends, the common problematic shared by group members does not necessarily guarantee reciprocal relations: rather, mutuality evolves from the *cultivation of* giving and receiving among individuals interacting (1990:173). Emphasis is thus placed on the coordinated inter/actions of group members.

It is this emphasis on giving as well as receiving that plays a critical role in the mutual aid group context. On this point, the support literature is clear. The interchangeability of roles as both recipient and provider of resources is a key process transpiring within the mutual aid group context (Killilea, 1976:69; Levine, 1988:174-175; Levy, 1976:320). This dialectic of giving and receiving that I refer to here must, according to Shapiro (1990:176), encompass elements that reflect both the commonality and diversity among individuals to suffice as both a resource to draw upon and a means to sustain interaction. In other words, mutuality requires some element of commonality on the basis of which individuals can relate; however, to remain viable the mutual premise depends to a certain degree on the diversity of experience as a resource that members can then draw upon.

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Levy depicts the uniqueness of this relationship as it relates to self-help: "each member occupies a dual role...serving both as an agent in its operation as it affects the behaviors of his peers and as a target as it affects his own behaviors" (1976:316). Riessman coined the term "helper principle" to account for this dynamic within the mutual aid group setting (as cited in Gartner and Riessman, 1984:19-20; Killilea, 1976:69). In this regard, attention shifts to the member as a provider of aid and the sense of agency and competency that emerges as an unintended consequence of this role. It has been suggested that the effects of helping others who are confronting a common predicament is especially beneficial in terms of fostering a sense of agency and personal competency at the individual level (Coleman, 1987:84-85; Killilea, 1976:69; Levine, 1988:174-175; Levy, 1976:316;). For example, these altruistic tendencies are reflected in the findings from Coleman's (1987:84-85) study of support groups for families of the mentally ill whereby the members considered "providing" aid an especially meaningful activity. As Katz and Bender recognize, individuals participating in mutual aid groups "need to live, to be valued, to experience, to give, to share with others, to transcend the boundaries of their own egos – to give "and" take in a social communion" (1976:3). The rationale for convening under the premise of mutuality, according to Levine (1988:168), is partly due to the individual need for a sense of community. Emphasis is clearly placed on the inter/active process of individuals engaged in the meaningful exchange of resources that they deem to be of significant value.

Enabling Mechanisms of Identification

The processes of identification are thus enabled by the practices, mechanisms or activities (as Levy, 1979:244 would suggest)[19] of individuals discursively engaged. In Levy's (1979:260-263) analysis of the social processes and activities in various mutual aid groups, the following activities were considered most prevalent: *"empathy, mutual affirmation, explanation, sharing, morale building, self-disclosure, positive reinforcement, personal goal setting, and catharsis"* (1979:264, emphasis in original). These activities are considered to be "...noncoercive, nonthreatening, and likely to foster group cohesiveness" (Levy, 1979:264). Other studies have substantiated this tendency toward positive (non-threatening or confrontational) interactions within the protective enclave offered by mutual aid groups (Levine, 1988:171; Kirschner, Dies, and Brown, 1978 as cited in Levy, 1979; Yalom, 1975 as cited in Levy, 1979). Empirical studies have shown that empathetic listening (Coleman, 1987:83) prevails across many group types (Lieberman, 1979:230), as opposed to any overt challenge to expressed value claims. Shumaker and Brownell (1984:23) note that the feedback received from members leans toward self-affirmation. Furthermore, Levy (1979:246) suggests that actions taken by members are positively reinforced (praise, encouragement) if perceived as adhering to the group's espoused ideology. These positive responses validate actions taken and associated identity claims as expressed by the members (Levy, 1976:319; 1979:253). This validation process is linked to an increased sense of personal value and self-efficacy (Shumaker and Brownell, 1984:23) whereby self-interpretations and

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[19] Levy (1979:244) posits a distinction between 'processes' and 'activities': "to speak in terms of *activities* involves some degree of abstraction but requires considerably less in the way of inference than it does to focus on *processes*, which by their very nature are inferential and theoretical" (Levy, 1979:244, emphasis added).

actualizing strategies realized from "mutual affirmation" aids in transforming felt powerlessness to an increased sense of empowerment (Levy, 1976:319; 1979:253). Mutual affirmation, in this regard, is the reassurance members give and receive regarding self-worth (Levy, 1979:262). This collective response of affirmation has been theoretically and empirically linked to facilitating self-validation (Coleman, 1987:83; Levy, 1976:319; 1979:253). Undeniably, that which is shared varies in form, content and emphasis both across and within groups of this nature.

As established above, the points of identification realized among individuals engaged in a mutual endeavor to fill a common void are the conduits through which other social processes flow: locating self within a meaningful framework, self-validation, fostering a sense of community (belonging), agency and shifting identity claims. Although emphasis is placed on personal change at the individual level it is accomplished through the coordinated interactions with others. That is, the social processes of social comparison and identification that occur as individuals collectively struggle with a shared problem are viewed as primary contributing factors to acquiring a new level of self-understanding, self-acceptance and self-transformation. Intimated are the coordinated efforts or, as Levy would describe the "systematic way" (1979:265) that expressed identity transformation is emphasized in self-help groups as opposed to that which might occur in other social contexts (1979:265-266).

A 'Sensitizing' Construct of Identity

The interpretation of identity drawn upon here is understood most basically as a socially constituted sense of self(ves). In a general sense, this understanding falls within a social identity approach as discussed by Hogg and Abrams (1988:17) whereby

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emphasis is placed on the social aspects of interaction and the processes of social comparison. The premise here being that groups play an instrumental role in terms of self-perception given that how we see ourselves hinges on the processes of identifying with others in a collective context (Hogg and Abrams, 1988:7) and not solely from self-typification based on certain attributes (Brown, 1994:272-275; 1997:110; Hogg and Abrams, 1988:7). Similarly, from a social phenomenology perspective, the self is always at some level a public self that is constructed intersubjectively (Schutz, 1970:163). Endorsing these understandings, Berger and Luckmann state: "Identity is formed by social processes. Once crystallized, it is maintained, modified or even reshaped by social relations" (1966:173). As well, the identity concept derived from the perspective of symbolic interactionism is generally framed as the Self (or as self-concept/perception). Within this body of social theory, the concept of self is extensively used but, as Hewitt (1984:89) acknowledges, its meaning and application varies. Nonetheless, a basic understanding alludes to "process" and "object" as primary reflections of self: "In the final analysis, self is observable in behavior (both covert and overt) and nowhere else" (Hewitt, 1984:91). The concept of self and identity are similarly viewed as socially defined, constructed and changed as a result of ongoing interactions with others (Bruner, 1990:109; Charon, 1989:65-73, 80).

The possibility of a changed sense of self is attributed to our capacity to look upon ourselves reflexively (as social objects) and to realize potential futures (Bruner, 1990:109-110). According to Charon, a basic understanding of self-concept as a reflexive process is "...what we *see* as we look at ourself. It is our "picture" of ourself" (1989:73; emphases in original). Of particular relevance to this research is the attention

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directed to "self-judgment" as an evaluative dimension of one' self-concept that is grounded in the perceived responses/judgements exhibited by significant others, noting that negative judgments can adversely impact upon one's sense of self (Charon, 1989:74-76). In his own words, Charon elaborates upon this aspect of self-concept:

> What we think of ourselves and what we feel about ourselves, like all else about the self, results from interaction: Self-judgment is a result, to a high degree, of judgment by others It is *our perception* of other people's judgments that is important: it is how we define their views that matters (1989:74, 75, respectively: emphasis in original).

Charon (1989:76, 83) locates identity within self-concept, defining it as the process of self-categorization – the labels or identifying tags used to define the self that ultimately arises in social interaction. Attesting to the saliency of this dimension, he states:

> Identity is an important part of self-concept. It is who the individual thinks he or she is and who is announced to the world in word and action. It arises in interaction, it is reaffirmed in interaction, and it is changed in interaction (1989:80).

Although these distinctions are briefly mentioned to clarify their application to this research, my intention is not to delve into identity theory per se but rather to focus on the active construction, negotiation and modification of self-perceptions as they are expressed with (and about) others. Drawing upon this general understanding of identity or self-concept as a consequence of our interactions with others coincides with the social processes involved in collective (relational) efforts to manage contrasting self-perceptions of victim (sufferer) and resistor (agent). In other words, to borrow from Brown's stance that self-understanding is "...not merely relative to others, but *in relation to others*" (1997:110; emphasis added) is to draw attention to the relational aspects of identity that are deemed most relevant for this research.

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Identity and Social Support

How identities are expressed in the support group setting vary in both form and content. Studies have demonstrated that members exchange a range of resources with the intent to affect personal change (Killilea, 1976:73; Levy, 1979:248-249), that is, to enhance a sense of agency or self-efficacy (Levy, 1976:318; 1979:255; Lieberman, 1979:217). At times the information shared is of a practical/instrumental nature (Levine, 1988:173; Levy, 1976:318; 1979:250-251) while at other moments various concrete strategies derived from lived experience are offered (Coleman, 1987:85; Killilea, 1976:72; Levine, 1988:176). When individuals disclose some aspect of themselves it frequently takes the form of testimonials (Levy, 1976:317; Levy, 1979:247-248). These disclosures can surface spontaneously or as a formalized expectation such as one would encounter in an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, for example. Moreover, according to Levy's (1979:251) observations of various mutual aid groups, experience is granted legitimation by the members and is a critical resource that is continuously drawn upon. Members legitimate knowledge claims derived from lived experience (Borkman, 1976:453; Killilea, 1976:67; Levine, 1988:176; Levy, 1979:251). Borkman (1976) explicitly addresses the role of experience as an especially salient form of knowledge that pervades the mutual aid group setting. This 'experiential knowledge', as defined by Borkman (1976), is grounded in the practicalities of everyday life experiences (Borkman, 1976:449; Levine, 1988:176). Because others have experienced similar hardships and members identify with the struggle, their own experience and knowledge are legitimated as they come to accept and understand their sense of self (Borkman, 1976:450).

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Although experiential knowledge operates as one of the guiding templates for these groups (Borkman, 1976:445), this does not preclude other forms of knowledge from permeating the group setting. The degree of formal or informal knowledge disseminated depends, of course, on the nature of the affliction, the extent of reliance upon professional intervention, the needs of the members and the format of the meetings followed (to name but a few contingency factors). As numerous studies have illustrated, an implicit or explicit ideology frames the interaction and thus provides a definition of the situation as a viable template for action (Lieberman, 1979:217.219; Levine, 1988:172; Levy, 1979:250). Upon observing a number of mutual aid groups, Levy makes the following claim:

> Self-help groups vary in the extent to which they have an explicitly articulated body of precepts concerning the problems they are dealing with and in the extent to which indoctrination in these views plays a substantial role in their meetings, but we have found no group in which some kind of ideology could not be found that was imparted to its members, albeit at a very implicit level in some instances (1979:250).

Levine further acknowledges the interplay between ideology and experience: "the axioms of the ideologies of mutual assistance groups are supplemented by corollaries in the form of conceptual tags tied to concrete experience" (1988:173).

Nonetheless, a number of case studies have focused on support groups that espouse an explicit ideology such as the two familiar examples of Alcoholics Anonymous (Cain, 1991; Eastland, 1995; Pollner and Stein, 1996) and Toughlove (Hollihan and Riley, 1987). For the most part, these efforts have examined how explicit (formalized) ideological frameworks influence identity transformation. For example, Cain's (1991:220) case study findings from an Alcoholics Anonymous support group suggest

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that the internalization of a new identity is generated through symbolic meanings grounded in the ideology informing the group interaction. As depicted by other case studies, ideological frameworks provide an explanation of one's experiences and actions that lend some coherence to otherwise perceived chaos (Eastland. 1995:293. 300-302; Levy, 1976:318) and thereby offer an alternative framework for personal change (Denzin, 1987:181; Eastland. 1995:302; Levy, 1976:317,320). Derived from Cain's (1991:216,233,244) study of Alcoholics Anonymous discourse, it is suggested that this explanatory template for making sense of lived experience is attained by inserting personal stories into the collective narrative (Alcoholics Anonymous) over time. Recovery ideology, according to Eastland (1995:293), is viewed as a template that provides a different frame from which to make sense of lived experience and thus to come to a new understanding of self (Eastland, 1995:293). In other words, one's current state of affairs is evaluated against an alternative frame of reference that in turn provides new meanings and understandings.

It has been proposed that one can reformulate identity claims based on a rationale tied to the new template (Cain, 1991:244; Denzin, 1987:179-181; Eastland, 1995:311; Levy, 1976:320). Empirical findings from myriad case studies suggest that reconstructed understandings from these alternative frameworks enables one to see self in a different light (Cain, 1991:244; Denzin, 1987:179-181; Eastland, 1995:309; Levy, 1976:319). These empirical findings substantiate Suler's (1984) analysis of self-help group ideology as a process of conversion. Less attention, however, has been directed to exploring identity shifts in mutual aid groups that do not espouse an explicit ideology but instead are implicitly or periodically drawn upon. Although it has also been recognized that

members construct their own frame of references through interaction (Levy, 1976:320; Shapiro, 1990:176), efforts to trace the steps involved in this process are less apparent in the literature. An exception to this, however, is found in Karp's (1992) analysis of an affective disorders support group. He affirms that this active process of constructing a meaningful framework is generated through ongoing and sustained interaction thus enabling members to make sense of personal lives (Karp. 1992:141). Perhaps one way of conceptualizing this process is that of moving from a state of perceived chaos to increased coherence as a result of collective corroboration.

Emerging from these perspectives is the underlying message that the sense of community in personal lives is somehow lacking. In turn, the self is devalued in the process. To share lived experience, to identify with others engaged in a similar struggle, to receive affirmation (validation) from others and to offer assistance in some form suggests that these needs are otherwise not being met. This brings us to yet another dimension of community and one that is intentionally placed at the forefront of this research: the *sense of belonging* that flows and builds from the initial social bond constructed among individuals interacting in particular ways. This theme resonates throughout the literature on both community (Cohen, 1985:15-16; Erikson, 1976:204; Gusfield, 1975:24; McMillan and Chavis, 1986:9; Moore. 1991:1) and social support (Coleman, 1987:83; Levy, 1979:221; Lieberman, 1979:221). Thus far I have laid the foundation for using the community concept as a means to better understand the processes of social support in a collective context. The following discussion accentuates this theoretical linkage. I begin by examining the concept of belonging (and the lack thereof) within a community framework before situating it within the social support

literature. This transition from theoretical abstraction to concrete application is in anticipation of presenting the empirical findings from this study.

The Dichotomy of Inclusion and Exclusion

In *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, Cohen (1985:15) conceptualizes community as a mental construct imbued with a sense of belonging that transcends geographical space. [20] It is perhaps this perception of belonging (Gusfield, 1975:24; McMillan and Chavis, 1986:9; Moore, 1991:1) and the cultivation of an intimate bond among individuals (Lieberman, 1979:221) that emerges most prominently within both community and social support perspectives. Silently lurking below the surface, however, are the notions of exclusion - a sense of powerlessness and disconnection from others. Intimated is the need or desire for acceptance on some level that is otherwise denied. How support group members discursively negotiate these elements among themselves and between the group and others on the 'outside' are central to this research. How is this perceived powerlessness and disconnection then articulated and managed during support group meetings, either among those interacting or when referring to individuals (or institutions) on the 'outside'? What are the repercussions of this collective accomplishment?

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[20]This shift from viewing community as inextricably bound to space has implications for understandings of community in a contemporary milieu whereby social life is increasingly more mobile and dependent upon technology as a basis for communication. Upon addressing the concept of community in a computer-mediated social world, Jones (1995) argues against the 'loss of community' perspective. Rather, he suggests that social interaction is still guided by broader cultural directives even though communication is increasingly mediated through computers. In this regard, community is not lost but instead is manifest in a different form. Dunham (1986: 399, 402) counters these claims contending that the shift toward computer-mediated interaction and a reduced affiliation with geographical space is problematic for sustained community because of the emphasis placed on cognitive processes. That is, a community response tied to individuals interacting in a specific locale is activated by emergent conflicts that, in turn, sustains shared values.

The sense of powerlessness (perceived or otherwise) experienced at the individual

level represents a certain level of contention, discordance or inequity. Community

theorists have suggested that various forms of conflict play an instrumental role in the

construction of community. Conflict, in this context, might refer generally to some

element of contention, crisis, struggle or even perceived hostility. Erikson (1976:255)

posits two types of trauma – acute and chronic – that would logically fall into this

category. Despite the nature of the trauma, emergent symptoms reflect a numbness of

spirit - a sense of utter helplessness (Erikson. 1976:255). Depending on the nature of the

trauma, however, the level of intensity experienced would vary considerably.

Nonetheless, some conflicts or shared traumas seemingly serve a valued purpose:

> Indeed, it can happen that otherwise disconnected persons who share a
> traumatic experience seek one another out and develop a form of
> fellowship on the strength of that common tie...a gathering of the
> wounded (Erikson, 1994:232).

In this regard, contentious moments are viewed as potential catalysts to re/create

community (Erikson, 1994:231-232; Gusfield, 1975:36; Moore, 1991:2; Scherer,

1972:68; Sarason, 1974:157). Moreover, conflict is perceived to *intensify* a sense of

community among individuals faced with adversity (Sarason, 1974:157; Scherer,

1972:68). Conceptualized in this way, conflict is critical to the active processes of

constructing community. Despite the positive attributes that characterize the community

'ideal type' (to borrow Weber's terminology), conflict and tension not only surround and

permeate community as it is symbolically constructed[21] but these elements can be viewed as a necessary part of that process. Sarason recognizes the dynamic nature of community and the role that conflict plays: "the psychological sense of community is at best a transient experience preceded and at some point followed by some kind of tension or threat to the sense of community" (1974:11). Conflict (or the perception thereof) is thus considered vital to the construction of community among individuals.

But conflict alone does not catapult a sense of community into action. As Erikson (1994:237) notes, the trauma itself is not the binding agent among a set of individuals but rather the shared experience is the 'glue that binds'. Therefore, the feelings and experiences that flow from discordant moments can be viewed as key initiators to the community-building process. A loss of connection among individuals – a lack of belonging – exemplifies the fall-out from traumatic lived experience. Erikson describes this sense of being disconnected from others in his observations of individuals' responses to disasters of human and natural origin: "when survivors say they feel 'adrift', 'displaced', 'uprooted', 'lost', they mean they do not seem to belong to anything..." (1976:204).

Within a broader context, one of the catalysts in the construction of community is *the common struggle* (Moore, 1991:2). In narrowing the scope to mutual aid groups, the common struggle fosters a sense of belonging among the members (Coleman, 1987:83: Lieberman, 1979:221). Being heard and understood by others experiencing similar life dilemmas are considered contributing factors that facilitate a felt sense of belonging

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[21] For the purposes here, I appropriate Gusfield's interpretation of symbolic construction: "By symbolic construction we refer to a process of creating and signifying the existence and character of persons and objects by the ways in which human beings conceptualize, talk about and define them" (1975:24).

(Coleman. 1987:83) and acceptance (Lieberman. 1979:200) otherwise perceived as absent[22]. It follows that these individuals view their experiences, perspectives and selves as frequently denied. negated or even ignored by others located outside of the common problem. The conjectured image is one of both exclusion and inclusion (voices denied in one context but heard in another). This of course hinges upon the participants' perceptions and interpretations of the claims (judgments) expressed or implied by others. In analytical terms. we might think of drawing a symbolic line that separates the concept of belonging from its oppositional referent.

The Role of Boundary

A less obvious but integral part of belonging (and by extension that of both community and social support) is the notion of boundary. Despite the rather abstract terminology. the boundary concept is useful heuristically as a means to explain the identification and transformation processes transpiring within situated interaction. The term 'boundary' is not posited as a 'real' or physical marker in any sense. but rather as a means to conceptualize how individuals construct themselves in relation to others.

It is through social interaction that symbolic boundaries are accomplished. As Erikson notes. "...the only material found in a society for marking boundaries is the behavior of its members – or rather. the networks of interaction which link these

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[22] Although the terms 'belonging' and 'acceptance' are often used interchangeably I contend that both can be better understood in terms of their oppositional referents. Belonging more adequately reflects a lack of fit/isolation whereas acceptance is not only interpreted as perceived isolation but also as a sense of powerlessness, exclusion and marginality.

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members together in social relations" (1966:10). Thus, boundaries are socially and symbolically constructed (Barth. 1969:15; Cohen. 1985:91-92, 118; McMillan and Chavis. 1986:9-10) to provide meaning, offer protection, foster a sense of belonging and by extension develop a basis for identity (McMillan and Chavis. 1986:9-10). As Cohen contends, "people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (1985:118).

The boundaries constructed through social interaction serve as symbolic markers that enable one group to be distinguished from another (Cohen. 1985:12, 35; Gusfield. 1975:35). The meanings or values that drive this process are deemed relevant and salient to the individuals involved (Cohen. 1985:16, 21, 98; Gusfield. 1975:35). The implication here is that some purpose is served from concerted efforts to sustain relational ties in a particular social setting in ways that construct others as outside of the 'circle'. As dynamic constructions. Erikson acknowledges that boundaries are "...always shifting as the people of the group find new ways to define the outer limits of their universe, new ways to *position* themselves on the larger cultural map" (1966:12; emphasis added). As individuals come together over some common referent point, they establish a connection based on experiences, values and meanings that are given priority at the time.

Practices that draw certain individuals together around a common referent point, however, necessarily exclude those on the other side of the constructed social ties. This exclusionary aspect has been critiqued by some as antithetical to the premise of community. Young, for example, provides a recent critique of what is interpreted as a negative dimension of community boundaries: "The desire to bring things into unity generates a logic of hierarchical opposition. Any move to define an identity, a closed

totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure" (1995:235). As a rebuttal, McMillan and Chavis advocate that understanding "positive benefits" offered by boundary implementation warrant further consideration (1986:9). The concept of boundary is therefore useful to focus on the interactions occurring within a specific social setting and how experiences derived from other social contexts are drawn upon. Does the active process of constructing boundaries around a set of relations serve a particular purpose? Finally, how are these notions of boundary expressed in the context of mutual aid groups? Questions of this nature are reintroduced in Chapters 6 and 7 at which point the analytic findings of this study are discussed.

One way of illustrating how the concept of boundary might be useful in understanding the processes that transpire in mutual aid groups is to focus on notions of inclusion and exclusion (insiders and outsiders). This necessarily includes an adversarial position of sorts. In this regard, some theorists have drawn attention to the social tensions that challenge the lives of individuals in a way that is perceived as somehow threatening (Ainlay, Coleman and Becker, 1986; Cohen, 1985; Erikson, 1976; 1994; Goffman, 1963). Although these contentious moments assume multiple forms in everyday lives, attention is directed here to the notion of stigma or deviance. In a general sense, stigma reflects a socially constructed negative judgment formulated within a moral paradigm (Ainlay et al., 1986:3-4). As Goffman (1963:128-129) suggests in his frequently cited work, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, cultural norms are shared to a certain degree and provide a tacit framework to guide social inter/actions accordingly. He states that "the general identity-values of a society may be

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fully entrenched nowhere. and yet they can cast some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily living" (Goffman. 1963:128-129).

To 'not measure up' in some way against this tacit social template impacts upon the perception of self as unworthy (Goffman, 1963:128-129). As a result. the self is denied or devalued, leaving behind a tarnished self-image. To a certain degree everyone has experienced stigma, that is, falling somewhat 'short of the mark' (Goffman, 1963:128-129). Goffman defines stigma as "...possessing an attribute that makes him [sic] different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable kind....He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (1963:3). This exclusionary process alludes to notions of *boundary:* the social construction of *insiders* and *outsiders.*

Within the community and social support literature, the concept of stigma (or deviance) and boundary are both implicitly and explicitly introduced. Kai Erikson (1966) and Anthony Cohen (1985). for example. discuss the role of deviance and stigma. respectively, as they pertain to community. As Erikson (1966:4-5) notes. deviance is not inherent but is recognized as the response others give in terms of certain selected behaviors. These actions are judged according to the tacit understanding of some implicit or explicit moral code. In his own words. "the deviant individual violates rules of conduct which the rest of the community holds in high respect..."(Erikson. 1966:4). Cohen (1985:59, 62) suggests that stigma is used in different ways to solidify the bond that separates one set of individuals from another: "...people draw the conventions of community about them, like a cloak around the shoulder, to protect them from the elements. The conventions become boundary through their re-investment with symbolic

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value" (1985:63).   Similarly, McMillan and Chavis (1986:9-10) acknowledge that

symbolic boundaries foster a sense of belonging among a set of individuals engaged in

purposeful interaction. In other words, the boundaries constructed from a sense of

becoming a member with like others provide a protective barrier from the harsh realities

of everyday life (Cohen, 1985:63; McMillan and Chavis, 1986:9-10). This enables

individuals to acquire a sense of acceptance perceived as otherwise denied and to

cultivate intimate social ties within a context perceived as 'safe'. (McMillan and Chavis,

1986:9-10).

In Protective Arms

Also evident in the literature pertaining to mutual aid groups is the safe haven

connotation. The support group provides a site wherein feelings and experiences can be

expressed (Abel, 1989:223; Coleman, 1987:82; Lavoie, 1990:81; Levine, 1988:171)

within a context perceived as 'safe' by the participants (Levy, 1979:264-265; Lieberman,

1979:220-221). Because of the members' common perception that others located outside

the defined problem deem their status to be marginal, coupled with the collective

understanding of those actually experiencing the common struggle, the support group can

be considered a safe haven of sorts.   As noted by Lieberman, the collective sense of

common suffering, in addition to the shared perception of marginality, facilitates the

active construction of meaningful (cohesive) social ties within a context of

"unconditional acceptance" (1979:221).   Lending empirical evidence, Hollihan and

Riley's (1987:276) study of a Toughlove Parental Support Group describes the group as a

safe place wherein the members' actions, perspectives and identities were accepted and

not adversely judged (in any overt way). From field research findings of various mutual

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aid groups coping with problems ranging from mental illness (Coleman, 1987:86; Karp, 1992:149-150) to teens' disruptive behavior (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:275), the interpretation is that of the support group as a site wherein anger and frustration in relation to experiences encountered with professionals, for example, can be expressed. What I refer to here as a form of resistance - the articulation of perceived injustices – is especially apparent in Hollihan and Riley's (1987:275) study. Emerging as a prevalent theme in the stories shared among members, this process of framing others in particular ways is evident in the following excerpt:

> The professionals became *villains* in the story...the parents claimed these professionals were too quick to blame them for the failures of their offspring...these "experts" were portrayed as naïve – "book smart" but "experience dumb"...(Hollihan and Riley, 1987:275; emphasis added).

> Shamed by the reactions of friends, relatives, and child care experts, and resentful of a system that could not help and only blamed them for allowing such a disgraceful state of affairs to exist....The experts' story, which blamed them for their children's conduct, denied their own experiences... (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:279).

While these comments paint a rather descriptive picture of felt powerlessness and victimization, a theme of resistance to this denial of voice and self emerges. A sense of indignation associated with the perceived injustice of both denied agency and experiential knowledge is expressed amongst those who presumably concur with the assessment. So although an image of victim is acknowledged, resistance to this subjugation underlies this moral claim as revealed in the expression of denied agency. Participants therefore view the support group as a forum wherein feelings that might be denied or devalued in other social contexts can be freely expressed. Lieberman draws attention to the consequences

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that flow from this perception of a shared marginal status and constructed boundary markers:

> Another factor creating a high sense of belongingness, especially in self-help groups composed of the similarly afflicted, is the perception by the afflicted of their deviant status in society. The feeling of being stigmatized leads frequently, in small groups, to the creation of a feeling of *we-ness* and a sharp boundary line between them and us, the *us* usually referring to the rest of society (1979:221; emphasis in original).

These empirical findings point to the salient role that symbolically constructed divisions[23] (or boundaries) play in encapsulating the bound set of relations within the group by simultaneously excluding those outside of the support group context. That is, the constructed boundary serves a useful purpose in creating a *desired* sense of belonging and cohesiveness among the relations within the group. As Goffman states, the stigmatized often discover that others are in a similar boat and potentially receive empathy from those who share the affliction:

> Knowing from their own experience what it is like to have this particular stigma, some of them can provide the individual with instruction in the tricks of the trade and with a circle of lament to which he can withdraw for moral support and for the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person" (1963:20).

In this regard, Goffman (1963:22) points to the self-help group as an illustrative example.

Wounded Identities

A common theme of a "lost" and "wounded" self resonates throughout the social support literature. The need to belong, to be accepted, to be understood and ultimately to be validated as a worthy person are recognized as fundamental needs (Katz and Bender, 1976:3; McMillan and Chavis, 1986:11). Levy's comment on the role of mutual aid

groups as inextricably linked to unmet social needs and the desire for positive change

brings together many of the elements discussed in this chapter:

> ...self-help groups are not only trying to help their members deal with
> their identified personal problems but are also serving to meet their
> members' most fundamental needs – needs for empathic understanding,
> for enhanced self-esteem, for meaning, and for an opportunity to express
> their feelings and share their experiences with another (1979:271).

Unmet needs that elicit feelings of isolation/exclusion, the sense of being judged

by others and the perceived denial of a legitimate voice (and self) are part of the stigma

experience. The conjectured image is that of one standing on the outside of social life. As

Romeder (1990:26-27) notes, suffering is the impetus behind mutual aid; the goal

becomes one of shedding the victim status to abolish the suffering.   Conceivably, to

combat the feelings associated with the common struggle and felt exclusion individuals

initially join together on the basis of this shared struggle. Lieberman notes that mutual aid

groups are comprised of individuals "...banding together against a perceived hostile

external world" (1979:221).

To briefly summarize the central theoretical strands discussed in this chapter thus

far, certain activities were presented for consideration of their role in how support group

members construct meaningful social ties (belonging/acceptance) and subsequently resist

negative concepts of self.   First, the common struggle enables mutual understanding that

is grounded in shared experiences. Second, mutual identification is enacted by processes

of social comparison that reveals how members are the same and yet different from each

other, and from others outside of the lived experience. Third, a felt sense of stigma and

powerlessness   is   reduced   from   mutuality   processes   that   include   mutual

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[23] This constructed distinction between relations is an abstract one and not 'real' in a concrete sense.

affirmation/validation. empathy. positive reinforcement/encouragement and the exchanging of resources. From the enactment of these processes, a sense of belonging and acceptance is generated within the protective boundaries constructed. The perceived injustice of the situation is acknowledged by members, shared experiences are verified and selves begin the process of healing. And, fourth, experiential knowledge is the legitimating leverage that members use as evidence of their expressed efficacy and agency. Lived experience that is shared and revealed as exhibiting common patterns is drawn upon as the 'weapon of choice' to challenge the perception that others outside of the defined experience bestow negative judgments upon the members' view of self. A few comments along the lines of shifting identities provide the transition to the next chapter where I present the theoretical perspectives relevant to the mechanisms that enable the processes just summarized.

The dynamic interplay between stigma, boundary and a sense of belonging (community) alludes to the re/construction of identity claims. In basic terms, self-identity is realized from interacting, relating and connecting to others (Cohen, 1985:109), with selfhood considered to be attainable only in communicative interaction (Tinder, 1980:34). According to Tinder, identity, interaction and community are inherently part of an active process of construction: "Entering into community is not linking a completed self with others; rather, it is forming the self in association with others" (Tinder, 1980:34).

Again, from a community perspective, Cohen (1985:107) contends that the process of constructing community is set into motion when individuals view it as a vehicle for representing and expressing identity claims. In the event of a perceived threat

to identity, mechanisms are enacted to maintain claims of selfhood (Cohen, 1985:44).

Cohen (1985:53,58) goes on to say that symbols are initiated by the participants to

preserve identity. The role of boundary is part of the process:

> ...the efficacy of symbolism in boundary maintenance: it creates a sense
> of belonging, of identity – and, by the same token, of difference from
> others (Cohen, 1985:53). Boundaries enclose elements which may, for
> certain purposes and in certain respects, be considered to be more like
> each other than they are different. But they also mark off these elements
> from those which differ (Cohen, 1985:14).

We might then ask *how* members go about creating symbolic boundaries and how this

collective endeavor contributes to intensifying a sense of belonging among the

participants in ways that lead to identity transformation? What symbolic mechanisms or

social practices are employed to reframe identities within a specific social context? In

other words, how are negative self-perceptions resisted on a collective level? These

questions are of particular interest in relation to the current study.

Cohen's (1985:115) discussion of community and identity suggests that the

definition of self is grounded in the comparison of self to 'significant others'. It is

through contrast that we can 'see' or understand self; identity is thus rendered meaningful

(Cohen, 1985:117). Individual members 'see' themselves in relation to those situated on

the other side of the constructed boundary (Cohen, 1985:109). But as previously

discussed, individuals also compare themselves to others within a group context,

evaluating their own situation in relation to that of others. Overall, this suggests that

symbolic boundaries serve an underlying purpose in relation to how we manage our

identities. But what is the significance of the collective response as members

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symbolically construct boundaries during the course of a group meeting? This question implies that audience participation plays a role in the process of identity management.

Processes of Identity Transformation

Several recent case studies have addressed the notion of identity transformation in mutual aid groups (Cain. 1991: Eastland. 1995: Karp. 1992). The basic premise of these findings suggests that a new identity emerges from disregarding the 'negative' self-concept (Cain. 1991:218,244) vis-à-vis redefining the latter to one that is imbued with positive connotations (Karp. 1992:152). This process can be viewed as a form of resistance to the perceived stigma (Karp. 1992:152). Studies that have focused on identity change in relation to explicit ideologies governing the interactions among support group members reveal that new identities emerge from reinterpretations of past behaviors and understandings couched within a new framework (Cain. 1991:244). Within support groups that tout an explicit ideology such as Alcoholics Anonymous experiences are reinterpreted accordingly (Cain. 1991:233: Eastland. 1995:309).

In Karp's (1992) case study of an affective disorder support group, for example, the members take a more active role in expressing negative and positive identity claims. Interpretations from observations of group meetings depict the use of two predominant discursive methods to negotiate meanings and an understanding of self: the "rhetoric of victimization" and "positive thinking rhetoric" (Karp, 1992:154. 156-157). Basically, the former reflects expressed feelings and experiences that displace blame from oneself to something else such as the illness itself (Karp, 1992:154). The latter is comprised of sharing strategies of a practical nature to foster a sense of agency (Karp, 1992:156-157). The experiential knowledge shared among the members serves to legitimate their status

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as 'experts' (Karp, 1992:163-166). In other words, experience with the common struggle seems to provide evidence of the 'reality' of lives fraught with uncertainty, confusion and helplessness. Mutual affirmation of lived experience seemingly contributes to a validated and renewed sense of self as a result of interacting with others who have struggled and endeavored to cope with similar problems. Perhaps this perspective can be extended beyond the point of generating meaning and of coming to a level of self-understanding by appropriating this theoretical perspective as a partial template for understanding how members collectively resist negative identity claims. In other words, how do members engage in the multi-faceted processes of corroborating a felt sense of stigma/powerlessness, cultivating a sense of belonging and transforming identities to reflect a sense of agency? Attention is thus shifted to the connecting nodes of (a) identification; (b) stigma; (c) mutual affirmation/validation; (d) experiential knowledge; (e) belonging/acceptance; (f) symbolic boundaries; and (g) identity transformation.

Framed within a community perspective, these social processes are highlighted for the purposes of this research. Some of the un/intended consequences that flow from these interactional processes are an increased sense of belonging/acceptance (reduced isolation), resistance to negative self-concepts and identity transformation within an enclave of safety. Although these concepts are discussed and presented as if they are mutually exclusive, it is solely intended for analytic purposes. In effect, they represent processes that are inextricably connected. And, as Sanders (1966:347) notes, social processes are viewed as a continuous ebb and flow of action[24]. By focusing on social processes, we are interested in "the examination of 'how' individuals (singly and

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[24]The researcher's challenge becomes one of retaining this ebb and flow in the portrayal of the interpreted data. Undoubtedly some elements are likely 'lost in the transformation'.

collectively) concretely behave" (Hewitt, 1984:6). These behaviors or inter/actions are systematically enacted for the purpose of affecting change at some level (Levy, 1979:266). Lieberman (1979:198) recognizes that any individual or personal change might be attributed in part to the ideologies framing the interaction, social comparisons made and/or the various forms of information exchanged. In other words, to intimate that personal change is solely linked to one process, to the exclusion of others, is clearly misguided (Lieberman, 1979:198).

Concluding Remarks

With emphasis placed on both the processes and activities (practices) involved, the next step is to focus on some of the enacted mechanisms that aid in the construction of support within the context of mutual aid groups. This naturally leads to a more concrete examination of how support is accomplished. In this regard, some questions warrant further consideration. By what means does a sense of community become manifest among individuals collectively engaged in a common struggle? How do identities shift in accordance with the meanings created, negotiated, interpreted and modified in this context? What contributing factors affect shifts in self-perception expressed in the support group setting? Given that individuals tend to enter the support group setting with a damaged, denied or uncertain sense of self, what actions are taken to resist a felt sense of powerlessness? In observing the interactions of support group members what social mechanisms mend otherwise tattered images of self? How do individuals articulate the constraining dimensions of lived experience (powerlessness and despair) as well as the enabling aspects of collective identification and collaboration? These questions inform the theoretical perspectives drawn upon in the next chapter where

I concentrate on the ideas surrounding concrete social practices applicable to mutual aid groups. Attention is thus directed to the discursive methods individuals draw upon to construct a sense of community, to resist a felt sense of powerlessness and to present self as empowered.

Chapter III
Theoretical Perspectives (Part Two)

While the previous chapter addressed the theoretical understandings relevant to the social processes of constructing support (community) and transforming self(ves), this chapter introduces the conceptual ideas surrounding the enabling methods or discursive practices individuals employ within the context of mutual aid groups. Questions to bear in mind here pertain to how these mechanisms might generate a sense of community (belonging) and resistance to negative identity claims. The focus is directed to the theoretical perspectives related to various discursive practices deemed useful in understanding how social support is accomplished and the consequences that emerge from these social processes. General perspectives related to social (symbolic) interaction, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, discourse and narrative are presented in conjunction with the specific concepts of positioning and boundary. Together, these conceptual ideas act as a guiding conceptual framework for the upcoming analysis and interpretation of empirical findings discussed in the following chapters.

A 'Sensitizing' Construct of Discourse

The social practices that individuals engage in during encounters with others provide an initial starting point. Social practices, in general, are viewed as part of an intricate system of shared meaning: "these baseline practices are intersubjective and form the most general level of shared meaning" (Rabinow and Sullivan, 1979:6). Grounded in a social phenomenological perspective, intersubjectivity simply refers to the commonly understood meanings shared among individuals interacting in everyday life (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:23; Schutz, 1970:319). Rabinow and Sullivan (1979) go on

to say that social practices constitute "...the basis of community, argument, and discourse" (1979:6). Given that the interactions in mutual aid groups constitute various forms of communication it would seem logical that the term discourse would be an appropriate concept in this instance. Along with the concepts of community and support, however, the term discourse assumes multiple meanings. To clarify the meaning of this concept for the purposes here, I draw upon a general sociological understanding of discourse:

> ...a domain of language-use that is unified by common assumptions...although discourses may overlap or reinforce each other, they may also conflict...Within a discourse, there are literally some things that cannot be said or thought....can rule out alternative ways of thinking and hence preserve a particular distribution of power (Abercrombie et al., 1984:71).

In critiquing this concept's reification, Perinyanagam offers the following thoughts:

> ...discourse has become "depersonalized", autonomous with the linguistic form itself becoming an autonomous entity hermetically sealed from the world of selves, interaction, conflict, and suffering" (1991:xii).

Perspectives that uphold this focus on the interactional aspects of discourse draw attention to the social nature and elements of discursive acts (Perinyanagam, 1991:xii). Discourses provide us with categories to objectify and subsequently talk about a social world (Parker, 1992:5). In this regard, discourses are frameworks for dialogue (Parker, 1992:5). Other perspectives focus on the functions and consequences of discourse and how categories function to achieve certain ends, that is, accusations, assertions and/or legitimations (Potter and Wetherell, 1987:116). Specifically, Potter and Wetherell (1987:137) posit that categories are used to legitimate actions while Davies and Harre (1990:45) contend that discourses can emerge in regard to particular topics or issues. In

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this regard. Perinyanagam places emphasis on the topics of discourse and their relevance for micro-social processes:

> Topics of discourse are not mere pegs on which interactions are hanged, but rather are the very basis on which people come together and are the means by which selves are meshed. Because of topics, lives can become connected. and it is on the basis of such connections that lives are lived and sustained (1991:103).

These perspectives point to the critical role discursive acts play in the processes of identification and the construction of social ties that embody a sense of belonging. By extension. the topics of discourse facilitate membership to groups and feedback from others while also enabling the presentation of self (Perinyanagam. 1991:103. 106). In conceptualizing discourse in this way. it assumes certain relevance in the study of the discursive mechanisms that initiate and sustain the social processes that transpire within support groups.

Patterns of communication necessarily surface within the context of mutual aid groups as the members gather together to share experiences. feelings and perspectives that evolve from interactions occurring in other social contexts. As previously established, the support group provides a site whereby personal experience. feelings. thoughts and/or concrete strategies are discursively exchanged (Abel. 1989: Borkman. 1976; Suler, 1984) to collectively generate and construct meaning (Karp, 1992) within a 'safe' environment (Abel. 1989:223; Coleman. 1987:82; Lavoie. 1990:81; Levine. 1988:171; Levy, 1979:264-265; Lieberman. 1979:220-221; Roberts et al., 1991). One of the key mechanisms used to facilitate these social processes is narrative (Maines, 1991). As a particular mode of communication, narrative has caught the attention of various scholars interested in understanding the nuances of social life. Stories are not only

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anchored to experience (Hermans and Kempen, 1993:17) but are the medium through which they are expressed (Bruner, 1987:12; Pollner and Stein, 1996:219) and a vehicle to present self in particular ways (Perinyanagam, 1991). I would add that the practice of *presenting others* in certain ways is part of the process and one that I draw attention to in my analysis of the findings from the two support groups studied.

A Narrative Link to Social Support

Explicit efforts to link narrative and the interactions occurring within mutual aid groups are reflected in the works of Cain (1991), Maines (1993), Pollner and Stein (1996) and Rappaport (1993). Other general perspectives of narrative are drawn upon to provide a generic framework within which to locate this research. In basic terms, Rappaport states that "in its simplest form, the narrative approach means understanding life to be experienced as a constructed story...Stories order experience, give coherence and meaning to events and provide a sense of history and of the future" (1993:240). Similarly, narratives embody meaning systems within social contexts (McCall and Wittner, 1990:50). They are used as a means for constructing meaning (Bruner, 1990:97), to make sense of social life (Bruner, 1991:4; Epston and White, 1992:123; Kohli, 1981:64; Maines, 1993:26; Rappaport, 1993:240; Riessman, 1993:4; Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:111-112; Widdershoven, 1993:4, 9) as well as to reflect upon experience (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:114). According to Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:120), reflecting upon experience in context helps actors understand and operate competently. Narratives yield an understanding of some aspect of social life to others that, in turn, generates meaning to self and others (Leiter, 1980:161). In other words, stories render experiences meaningful (Epston and White, 1992:80, 123; Maines,

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1993:26). The story is thus viewed as "...a unit of meaning that provides a frame for lived experience" (Epston and White, 1992:80). It then follows that a narrative approach unveils the meanings and processes that constitute social acts (Maines, 1993:17-20, 32). Moreover, this approach necessarily depends upon the perspectives and meanings held by the individual (Rappaport, 1993:248-249).

It is through *telling* stories that attempts are made to connect the salient strands to lend coherence to one's life (Gergen and Gergen, 1984:174). According to Smith (1981:225), it is *only* through narration that social life appears connected and coherent. It is through interaction and the exchange of discursively produced meaningful accounts that individuals engage in an ongoing attempt to understand their place in the social world (Bruner, 1991:4, 20-21; Epston and White, 1992:80, 123; Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:111-112). The act of storytelling molds experience into categories (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:113) thus converting lived experience to a tangible and manageable form for communicating personal lives from one person to another. Although these perspectives, with their emphasis on 'meaning', stem from various streams of social theory – symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and narrative analysis – they are conceptually linked.

A 'Sensitizing' Construct of Narrative

In an effort to avoid glossing the term 'narrative' by assuming its meaning, a few comments are warranted regarding the concept itself. Amidst multiple definitions Robinson and Hawpe (1986) provide a construct relevant to the purposes here. Acknowledging that although there is "...no rigid recipe of what counts as a story" the following constitutes a common understanding:

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A prototypical story identifies a protagonist, a predicament, attempts to resolve the predicament, the outcomes of such attempts, and the reactions of the protagonists to the situation (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:112).

In other words, a general consensus regarding narrative structure includes: (a) an introduction to a situation; (b) a conflict or central theme; and (c) sequentially ordered events of temporal and causal linkage that culminate in a resolution (Leitch, 1986:8-9; Linde, 1993:69-71; Maines, 1993:21; Rappaport, 1993:249; Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:112). Given that the focus of this research is on the social processes of *how* discursive acts (often in storied form) are constructed by individuals within a specific context, and the purposes served as a result, the structure and content of the narrative is considered less relevant. Rather, how self and others are positioned or framed in particular ways (couched within the stories told) assume center stage.

Stories are interwoven into the fabric of everyday lives (Maines, 1993:32). The narrative itself is inherently social (McCall and Wittner, 1990:84) in at least two interrelated ways. First, stories are socially constructed in relation to others, that is, narratives are about the interactions with others (Gergen and Gergen 1984:184; Maines, 1993:21, 23) and are always contingent (Cain, 1991:242; Maines, 1993:23). Second, the *telling* of stories is accomplished through social interaction. In this case, the focus lies with the act of telling – the interactional process (Cain, 1991:216; Smith, 1981:222, 232; Ochberg, 1994:113) anchored to a social context (Smith, 1981:222,232; Rappaport, 1993:253). Simply, individuals narrate to, with and about others. As Rappaport states: "Narratives are continuously constructed, and the process of storytelling is an active one from the viewpoint of both the teller and the listener (1993:253). The implications of this active interplay between teller and audience is especially relevant to this research.

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The Inter/active Process of Storytelling

Emphasis is placed on the interactional processes that transpire within context and the consequences that flow from the collectively constructed stories. As Eder (1988:228) contends. a more active role by the audience yields a collaboratively produced narrative. This collective construction of a story reflects a joint process of describing and evaluating a story (Eder. 1988:228). Eder (1988:230) suggests that this interactive process yields increased solidarity between teller and listener. How the listener responds plays a supportive role in evaluating the story as important (Eder. 1988:228). The affirmation of a story told facilitates a process of sharing that fosters the development of relational ties (Eder. 1988:230: Robinson and Hawpe. 1986:117). According to Robinson and Hawpe. the stories that are affirmed by the listener(s) cultivate "...mutual understanding and social cohesion" (1986:117). In this light, the salience of 'storytelling' does not rest solely on the teller but rather on the response of the listener as well. Emphasis is thus placed on the social relations constructed within situated interaction.

Discursive Positioning Practices

By focusing on some of the discursive practices that occur within the group setting, we can begin to trace the patterns of how a sense of community (and support) is constructed and how identities are managed accordingly. In recognizing the central role of communication in the construction of community and anticipated futures Scherer states:

> Sociologically speaking, communication is the means by which the shared perspectives of the group, the agreed upon understanding that permit existence, bind men [sic] to each other, reflect current social behavior and actually mold future actions (1972:104).

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Stories shared collectively in situated interaction provide the means by which intimate social ties can be realized (Maines and Bridger, 1992:367). Or, as the findings from Cain's (1991:222) case study of Alcoholics Anonymous support groups suggest, stories provide evidence of a shared common problem – a point of identification. Analogous to Cohen's (1985) community perspective that differences among individuals are suspended to create an aura of commonality, Cain (1991:227) suggests that stories connect members together on the basis of perceived sameness, temporarily homogenizing elements of diversity. Similarly, as Brown (1997:115) notes, a degree of commonality must be established before identification with the group and its members can occur. Narratives are thus perceived as a critical mechanism that connects self to others in meaningful ways that foster a sense of belonging – a sense of community. Belonging in this sense extends beyond a mere assessment of common attributes or characteristics accrued among individuals but rather on the basis of a salient identification realized through the sharing of similar stories that ring true for those participating (Brown, 1997:116).

For those exchanging 'recognizable' stories in a group situation, it appears that the effects of collaborating and corroborating narratives tend to increase levels of community (belonging) among the participants. Moreover, when the subject of a story revolves around a non-group member(s) (and the perception is jointly expressed and shared), a sense of solidarity is enhanced among the group members (Eder, 1988:230). This collaborative process between storyteller and listener(s) unfolds as a strategic device that fosters a shared perspective for the purpose of establishing relations of solidarity (Eder, 1988:232, 234). Hence, these interactive processes provide a conceptual

framework for analyzing how the discursive exchanges affect the construction of social ties among members of mutual aid groups.

An additional means to understanding how a sense of cohesiveness is generated among members who desire to belong, to be accepted and to be validated lies with the concept of *positioning*. Although reference to this concept is not specifically encountered in the social support literature. it is drawn upon here to help explain the relational connection actively constructed among individuals gathered together in a collective context. Davies and Harre (1990) use the term to explain how individuals position themselves, and others, discursively. Discursive practices refer to "...the ways in which people actively produce social and psychological realities" (Davies and Harre. 1990:45). By extension. "positioning...is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines" (Davies and Harre. 1990:48). A further distinction is made between "interactive positioning" and "reflexive positioning" (Davies and Harre. 1990:48). The former refers to the teller situating an individual in a certain way while the latter is in reference to situating self (Davies and Harre. 1990:48). Emphasis is thus placed on the dynamic aspects of communicative interaction as opposed to reliance on social roles to explain identity claims (Davies and Harre. 1990).

In commenting on this interactive process. Davies and Harre state:

With positioning, the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions (1990:62).

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From this statement, room is made for agency and shifting notions of self. Attention here is directed to the active process of discursively constructing/altering identity, and not solely the content of the discourse per se. Both dimensions, however, are conceptually intertwined. In other words, by virtue of positioning self and others in certain ways, evaluative claims are presented that are necessarily contingent on the nature or content of what is being said.

Moreover, the positions expressed in verbal exchanges might reflect changes in "power, access, or blocking of access, to certain features of claimed or desired identity" (Davies and Harre, 1990:49). In this regard we might include expressions of denied selves or a sense of felt powerlessness. According to Brown,

> We are capable of action, yet our agency and intimacy may be suppressed or dominated by the action of others. Suffering is the experience of denied agency or intimacy. One suffers when enduring the denial of one's capacity to act in a manner that one would consider full and authentic in relations with social others (1994:281-282).

How others are positioned may serve to encourage the consensus by participants to sustain the 'story' being shared (Davies and Harre, 1990:50). As the authors note, this practice of positioning during conversation leaves residual effects (intended or otherwise). That is, how subjects are positioned in the dialogue is either corroborated or negotiated based on the participants' interpretations (Davies and Harre, 1990:50-51). These subject positions are necessarily shifting during the course of interaction and their interpretive meaning varies among participating actors (Davies and Harre, 1990:60-61). Although the authors are employing this concept of positioning primarily in the context of jointly produced conversation, I am drawing upon the term primarily as a framing device to shed light on the evaluative (value-based) claims being made, about self and

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others, and the implications for social relations and identity. Davies and Harre (1990:52) argue that the concept of positioning is less restrictive and rigid than the concept of 'role' thereby allowing space for agency to be expressed. Subjective understandings grounded in experience are incorporated into the telling that reveal the relational dimensions of social life (Davies and Harre, 1990:32) – a contextualizing process.

These perspectives provide a useful template to aid in our understanding of how support group members might engage in the repair of damaged (or uncertain) identities. Two empirical examples of how this concept might be applied are Karp's (1992) study of an affective disorders support group and Hollihan and Riley's (1987) findings derived from a Toughlove mutual aid group. In both cases, field observations reveal that during the group discussions members frequently describe others located outside the parameters of the group as 'adversaries' (consisting primarily of medical/child care professionals) (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:275, 279; Karp, 1992:159-160, 162). Karp (1992:159-160, 162) notes that frequent reference was made regarding the perception that professionals exhibited a lack of understanding, insensitivity and limited knowledge about the problem itself even though contacts with professionals in the medical field were also discussed in a positive manner. The study conducted by Hollihan and Riley (1987:275, 279) reveals a predominant pattern of framing others (in this case child care professionals) as 'the enemy'. Moreover, the findings from Karp's (1992:161, 166) study suggest that as an act of resistance to the perceived domination of physicians and their lack of understanding the members viewed themselves as "experts". In other words, by positioning self as the "expert", the members actively construct ideological frameworks that serve to resist felt powerlessness (Karp, 1992:166).

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Symbolic Boundaries

From these case studies we can appropriate the concept of symbolic boundaries to examine how members *designate positions* to others located outside of the defined problem (and the group) – a framing device. This process of attaching an evaluative and identifiable label to others seemingly reflects a perceived distinction between self (group) and 'external' others, that is, a meaningful symbolic identity marker. It would seem that this constructed division likely serves some purpose for those interacting within the parameters of the group. Based on the discussion above we might consider the following scenario in relation to how it would apply to mutual aid groups. The collective (consensual) validation exhibited by the members reinforces the constructed division, thereby, legitimating the common experience and felt powerlessness. The sharing of lived experience among group members, often in storied form. (Maines. 1991:198-200) 'verifies' the personal feelings of stigma/powerlessness. In turn. this experiential knowledge provides a legitimate 'weapon' to resist this felt subjugation and to express a renewed sense of agency – the empowerment that comes from presenting self as 'the expert'. Upon identifying with others engaged in a common struggle, the social ties are woven into a tighter 'bond of significance' - a sense of belonging - that strengthens the weakened self-concept. In the following chapters, this dynamic social process is described and explicated as it specifically relates to the support groups studied.

To illustrate how the concept of 'positioning' might be used to understand the juxtaposing of identity claims in a group context, I turn to Hollihan and Riley's (1987) case study of a Toughlove parental support group. A frequent occurrence observed during group meetings involves 'framing' others located outside of the defined problem

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as "villains" of sorts (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:275). This *presentation of other* (to reverse Goffman's frequently cited *presentation of self*) is grounded in a perception held by the members that others tend to blame them as parents or view them as somehow failing in that capacity (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:275). In light of this perceived marginality, adherence to the Toughlove ideology enables a form of resistance to the negative judgments of others (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:279). The Toughlove narrative provides a template of justification that, if internalized and accepted, enables the member(s) to somewhat lift the tendency to inflict self-blame (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:279). Again, emphasis is placed on the members' dependence on the governing ideology of the group (explicit in this case study) as a form of resistance to the negative judgments by others (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:277, 279). How resistance is mobilized in the *absence of* strict adherence to a dominant group narrative, however, is not addressed. Although the governing ideologies (collective/community narratives) of the two participating groups of this study vary to the extent that they are explicitly or implicitly drawn upon, the analysis focuses on the active inter/weaving of discursive practices shared among the members and subjective meanings of social support. It is not my intention here to uncover 'evidence' of the group narrative reflected in personal stories. Rather, we might view the *experiential knowledge* generated and shared as the legitimated leverage used to resist the negative perception of self that members often bring to the group setting.

Narratives as a Form of Resistance

Narratives constitute a particular form of resistance (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:279; Laird, 1994:179; Mumby, 1993:3). According to Linde,

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> ...we would certainly want to include examples of members of an oppressed group telling stories about successful or unsuccessful acts of resistance, grumbling to one another, or composing and singing satirical or political songs about their oppressors (1993:223).

In his scholarly works that specifically examine power relations. Foucault (1983:210) argues that focusing on the practices/actions of individuals interacting in context enables the relations of power to be lifted into view. Moreover, he advocates that "...using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used" provides the means to lift the veil that obscures the implicit relations of power (1983:211). Drawing upon Foucault's postulates. Epston and White (1992:140, 145) note that dialogue objectifies implicit power differentials, enabling these inequities to be explicitly addressed and thereby facilitating a sense of personal agency.

If we extend this premise to the support group context, we might speculate that the discursive practices of sharing experiences from personal lives and positioning others in certain ways resist felt powerlessness and marginality while fostering a sense of empowerment and belonging among those engaged in the sustained interaction. In viewing the mutual aid group as a site of resistance (Coleman, 1987:86), we can then examine how individuals collectively challenge the felt powerlessness and stigma imposed by some located outside the defined problem. By focusing on how constructing symbolic boundaries of inclusion/exclusion are implicitly used by the members and the consequences that flow from this interactional process, the theoretical abstraction shifts to the empirically concrete. But as Rice (1992:351-353, 359) cautions, while stories told in the support group context potentially challenge external social forces (or narratives as

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representation) the alternative discourse of resistance constructed is merely a replacement and also legitimates certain knowledge claims.

The Function of Narrative in Mutual Aid Groups

Given that the concepts of support, community and identity have been conceptually linked to narrative, what does the storied form of interaction occurring within the mutual aid group milieu accomplish? General theoretical perspectives and specific empirical findings shed light on the multiple purposes served by narrative expression. Numerous examples of the role that narrative plays in the construction and management of identity claims can be located in the literature. For one, stories are told in an effort to lend coherence to perceived chaos (Smith, 1981:225) and as a means to facilitate feedback (Perinyanagam, 1991). Narratives also provide a platform for evaluations (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:273-274, 275; Kohli, 1981:67; Linde, 1993:81; Riessman, 1993:3) and justifications of past behavior, actions and beliefs (Bruner, 1990:121; Cain, 1991:238; Gergen and Gergen, 1984:183; Hollihan and Riley, 1987:274). Arguments anchored to experience in context (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986:120) are often conveyed in storied form. In addition, narratives can serve to legitimate (Borkman, 1976:450; Coleman, 1987:83-84; Hollihan and Riley, 1987:275, 277-278; Levine, 1988) and validate self (Borkman, 1976:450; Hollihan and Riley, 1987:276; Levine, 1988; Lieberman, 1979:222). Along similar lines, in the stories we tell, selves are sometimes portrayed as empowered (Eastland, 1995; Hollihan and Riley, 1987:274, 277-279; Karp, 1992; Pollner and Stein, 1996:217-218; Somers, 1994) or constrained (Eastland, 1995; Karp, 1992; Pollner and Stein, 1996:217-218; Somers, 1994). From these examples of narrative's multiple functions, a moral undertone

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resonates throughout. For instance, this moral dimension is acknowledged in Hollihan and Riley's interpretations of the interactions occurring during Toughlove group meetings:

> Through the storytelling, the parents transformed their lives into a *moral drama*, suffused with righteousness, that absolved them of their guilt and restored orderliness and discipline to their lives. The retelling of these stories provided examples that Toughlove parents could survive and even conquer crises, kept members involved in the day-to-day life of the group, and preserved a *sense of community* among the members (1987:273-274, emphases added).

The authors' reference to 'community', the link to 'narrative' and the consequences that flow from this union underscore the meaningful points of identification derived from sharing recognizable stories that enable the construction of a sense of community (Hollihan and Riley, 1987:273-274; Rappaport, 1993:247) or belonging (Brown, 1997). Rappaport's notion of "community joining acts" reflects this process of sharing common, recognizable stories among those who are seeking assistance or membership with like others (1993:247). With an emphasis on identity, these relational connections result in "...consequences for identity development and change...through the normal processes of social communication by means of shared narratives" (Rappaport, 1993:247). For the general purposes of this research, the narrative functions considered most applicable include evaluation, justification, legitimation/validation and empowerment. Nonetheless, my intention is not to provide examples of these 'functions' per se but rather to note that these elements underlie my focus on the *positioning of self and others* in the stories shared.

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Narrative and Identity

The relationship between narrative and identity begs a closer look. When faced with adversity or ambiguity, we lose our bearings somewhat as fear and uncertainty insidiously seeps in around us. What kind of person am I? Where do I belong? How do I make sense of the turmoil in my life? Where do I go from here? In analyzing how individuals construct "fictional" identities when confronting chronic illness. Charmaz acknowledges the potential for perceptional shifts in self-concept: "As the foundations of the self become shaky, the boundaries of the self become permeable" (1991:74). These constructed identity changes are interpreted as a means of circumventing a stigma – a form of resistance to negative self-concepts (Charmaz, 1991:83). Tinder (1980:24, 30, 34) reminds us that self is discovered while interacting with others vis-à-vis discursive means. Multiple selves are constituted in practices of constructing meanings through interactions with others (Bruner, 1990:138).

Identity work in the mutual aid context revolves around the shared experience of a common problem and the desire to better cope with personal lives gone wrong. Through the sharing of stories, ritualized practices and/or the exchange of written materials, members identify with the experiences of others (Eastland, 1995; Pollner and Stein, 1996; Rappaport, 1993). In the quest for meaning (Karp, 1992), the individual self de/constructs and re/interprets past and present experiences through discursive interaction with others facing like circumstances (Cain, 1991; Eastland, 1995; Karp, 1992; Pollner and Stein, 1996). The process of discarding the 'old' identity and donning the 'new' is therefore discursively accomplished and managed.

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At a basic level, the conjoining of stories contributes to shaping identity (Rappaport, 1993). We might view these "community joining acts" (to use Rappaport's terminology), sealed with common narratives, as the ethnomethods that participants use to show how they relate to others, that is, how they are the same. By the same token, the ideological frames of reference and the stories attached to these frames might function to highlight differences between self and other. In these ways, stories function to draw members together on the basis of both similarity and difference. But what distinguishes identity shifts in the support group from that which transpires among individuals outside of the group?

It has been proposed that the manner by which selves are transformed in the mutual aid context is discursively constructed and modified as individuals accrue some sense of self-understanding over time. Levy (1976:319) attributes this shift in self-perception to the discursive exchange of stories and solutions geared to the shared problem. Others have pointed to the testimonial form of narrative as providing a critical point of identification (Borkman, 1976:447; Levy, 1976:317; Maines, 1991:189-190; Pollner and Stein, 1996; Rappaport, 1993) and a primary conduit through which experiential knowledge is shared among members (Borkman, 1976:447). Success stories provide evidence to support group members of the potential for change (Killilea, 1976:71). A number of empirical studies attest to the groups' ideology as enabling identity change (Cain, 1991; Eastland, 1995; Pollner and Stein, 1996). In this regard, Eastland draws attention to explanatory narratives that hold the potential for a shift in identity stance:

> Adopting the sensemaking frameworks that explain one as a product of
> one's relationships and social context, identifying those aspects of self that

are the outcome of 'unhealthy' relationships. altering one's communicative stance in the world from reactor to actor. reinterpreting and reconstructing one's relational history and identity allows for this transformation of self (1995:311).

The transformation of self is given the collective 'seal of approval' through discursive interaction.

Discursive practices in general shape one's sense of self(ves) (Davies and Harre. 1990:47). Further to this notion. Davies and Harre state:

> ...who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices. the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives (1990:46).

Emphasis is placed here on the dynamic and shifting nature of identity claims that are created interactively through the medium of narrative. Cain (1991:242), for example. provides evidence of changing self-images over time in the stories shared with other Alcoholics Anonymous members. New meanings or understandings of self are generated from the re/interpretation of individual stories in accordance with what Rappaport describes as a community narrative:

> A community narrative is a story repeatedly told among many members of a setting. It can be told directly, as in face-to-face contact, or indirectly by means of written material, rituals, implicit expectations, shared events, and nonverbal behaviors (1993:247). The experience of identity formation and change takes place within a social context that contains community narratives that can be read, observed, communicated, or otherwise understood (1993:246).

The Collective Narrative as Discourse

Beyond the reinterpretation (or reframing) of personal stories to fit the shared narrative is the acceptance and internalization of the group's story (Cain, 1991:242-243).

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Analogous to Rappaport's (1993:246-247) notion of community narrative is that of guiding ideological frameworks as frequently referenced in the literature (Cain, 1991; Eastland, 1995; Levy, 1976, 1979; Suler, 1974). In Suler's analysis of the role ideology plays in self-help groups, he states: "...a self-help group is often founded on an ideology, a system of beliefs, attitudes, and values, that helps its members define their problem and how it should be alleviated" (1984:30). As previously noted, other empirical studies have established linkages between these alternative ideological (narrative) frameworks and identity transformation (Cain, 1991:244; Eastland, 1995:309; Levy, 1976:319). As Suler notes:

> Because the individual's sense of self is also grounded in the beliefs and values of the social groups to which he/she belongs, a self-help group's ideology can serve as a vehicle for engaging and shaping the individuals' identity (1984:30).

Where members experience a greater degree of alienation and isolation from interactions outside of the group, greater value and expectations are likely placed on the collective narrative. In other words, in a desperate attempt to discard a sense of desperation and stigma, individuals reach out to cling to that which offers hope – a *lifeline* of sorts. Empirical evidence to support this premise can be seen in research conducted within the context of recovery groups (Cain, 1991; Pollner and Stein, 1996) and parental support groups (Hollihan and Riley, 1987) whereby the collective narrative is overtly manifest. As Pollner and Stein (1996) note, the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous provides a structural and concrete template of rules to live by. These authors posit an interesting concept of 'narrative mapping' whereby stories are viewed as instructional guides to living: "...narrative cartography is both *about* a social world and part of the process

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through which a social world is produced and sustained" (Pollner and Stein. 1996:204; emphasis in original). As personal stories are repeated over time and interwoven with stories of others within the larger AA narrative, further 'evidence' is provided of AA tenets thus reinforcing its exalted status (Cain, 1991; Pollner and Stein, 1996). Members validate the stories that fit this template by responding in positive and empathetic ways (Cain, 1991:230) which, in turn, reinforces what Rappaport (1993) defines as the community narrative.

It follows then that the greater the schism between personal lives and various social contexts, the greater the need for an ideological template that is both meaningful and useful in ways that will potentially bridge this gap. The pervasiveness of any ideology within the context of a support group, however, is necessarily contingent upon the nature of the defined problem. These studies provide insight on the interplay between personal stories, prevailing ideologies and identity change. But how might individual stories (or "personal stories" according to Rappaport, 1993) connect in the absence of an overt ideological framework? Can a discernible pattern of interwoven personal stories reveal similar linkages to expressed identity transformation? In other words, can individual stories weave a web of significance analogous to that of explicit governing narratives? In the absence of a dominant narrative, is there any indication that perceived stigma and powerlessness are replaced by an enhanced sense of self? And, finally, what kinds of stories (or positions) repeatedly rise to the forefront of group discussion and what is the nature of members' responses? These questions are closely examined in forthcoming chapters using empirical data collected from the support groups studied.

A Narrative Identity

But we might first consider the consequences of sharing stories grounded in lived experience. A narrative identity, according to Widdershoven (1993), is the coming together of experience and how it is expressed in story form. More specifically, Brown (1997:115) draws upon Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity whereby individuals see themselves in the stories they tell of themselves and extends this premise by suggesting that "we recognize our *stories* in the stories of others" (Brown, 1997:115, emphasis in original). These narratives are anchored to lived experience (Brown, 1997:110). And as previously established, stories based on personal experience constitute the basis for 'experiential knowledge' (Borkman, 1976; Hollihan and Riley, 1987; Karp, 1992; Pollner and Stein, 1996) and tend to be attributed higher status/value by the members (Abel, 1989; Borkman, 1976; Hollihan and Riley, 1987; Pollner and Stein, 1996). Thus, the constructed 'collective' narrative is seemingly anchored to the 'common' experience of the members and thereby forms somewhat of a shared ideological frame of reference.

We are reminded here of the critical role that experiential knowledge plays. As discussed in the previous chapter, the members regard this knowledge form as especially relevant and therefore legitimate. Pollner and Stein acknowledge its attributed legitimate status from field observations of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings: "...the voice of experience, not the voice of the expert, is the primary and valued source of personal knowledge" (1996:207). Shared experience associated with the common struggle serves as a key symbolic boundary marker that differentiates members from those who simply do not (and cannot) 'truly' understand. Hollihan and Riley's (1987) empirical study of "Toughlove", for example, suggests that the group stands together as a united front to

rival the 'system' thus exhibiting a collective sense of agency. Viewing the group as a collective that unites to combat a myriad of social forces coalesces with the notion that support groups often arise, initially, in response to institutionalized practices occurring in broader social contexts perceived to be somehow inadequate or inappropriate. The group thus identifies with the common threads that reflect particular ways of thinking, feeling and acting associated with experiences acquired in an array of social contexts. In this way, the power of resistance lies in the sharing of stories to which members can identify, legitimate and validate. In the absence of an overt (formal) group ideology, however, we might focus our attention on the construction of personal stories as forms of resistance and empowerment.

Collective Identity

Although identity shifts at the individual level are emphasized here, we might extend this premise further to embody notions of identity collectively expressed as "we". From a social phenomenological perspective, the "We-relationship" refers to a "...mutual awareness of each other, and it constitutes a usually sympathetic participation in each other's lives, even if only for a limited period" (Schutz, 1970:34). As a mechanism that generates a sense of 'we-ness' among individuals, Brown (1997:109-119) outlines the salient role of narrative. In drawing upon observations of an ethnic-based seniors support group *Primavera*, Brown (1997) contends that the stories shared in this context serve as a mechanism to fostering a sense of belonging - a collective identity. That is, "one experiences 'belonging' to the extent that one is able to interweave interpretations of self with the interpretations of others through narrative discourse" (Brown, 1997:109, emphasis in original). Moreover, Somers and Brown argue that our sense of self extends

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beyond comparing self to others on the basis of identifying attributes alone but to the inter/active accomplishment of articulating experience in storied form (Somers, 1994:605-606, 624, 632; Brown, 1997:110 respectively). As Somers states: "...it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities" (1994:606). The rigid notion of identity as categorically-bound does not account for human agency or personal change (Somers, 1994:605, 611). In order to make room for agency through resistance narratives that challenge the dominant stories, Somers (1994:634) advocates for appropriating narrative identity as a conceptual device to draw attention to the relational and contextual aspects of social life. Hence, relational connections are based on shared narratives couched within networks of patterned relationships (Somers, 1994:626, 635). In light of these perspectives, we might view our identity at any given moment as being filtered through different narrative lenses.

Perhaps the process of self-categorization, however, is not to be discounted too readily. Hogg and Abrams (1988:94-105), for example, discuss the dimension of group cohesiveness in their analysis of intragroup behavior processes from a social psychological perspective. Group cohesiveness is linked to perceived similarity among group members and the mutual fulfillment of needs (Hogg and Abrams, 1988:95-96). From this perspective, categorization is viewed as the central means people draw upon to organize and make sense of their social world (Hogg and Abrams, 1988:209). This process is grounded in the social comparisons individuals make in their interactions with others that assess and then differentiate on the basis of perceived similarity and difference (Hogg and Abrams, 1988:209). The inherent desire to evaluate self in a positive light

fuels the distinctions constructed between self and those who are perceived to occupy a different social category (Hogg and Abrams, 1988:209). The type of category to which I am referring is perhaps in need of clarification. Universal categories, void of social relations in context, hold little relevance as framing devices in this research given that the contextual nuances of social interaction are neglected. As Somers insists. "taxonomical categories of identity aggregated from variables (age, sex, education, etc.) or 'fixed' entities (woman, man, black)" (1994:634) do not take into account the relational interactions occurring in context (1994:632, 634). But even as Brown argues, a taxonomic approach to understanding identity issues is not completely irrelevant but

> ...even if categorization is the most basic level of social discourse it is by no means the only level about which identity work and other processes of symbolic interaction are accomplished. What is understated is how I have knowledge of myself, *not merely relative to others, but in relation to others* (1997:110, emphasis added)

Perhaps then we can view categories of identity as symbolic frames onto which individuals sketch selected segments of lived experience with expressed moments of discordance and triumph (agency and suffering). The tone of these identity frames is necessarily evaluative. Perhaps the appropriation of the term 'subject positions' (to borrow from Davies and Harre, 1990) would best reflect this evaluative element. Some examples of these categorical frames might be 'bad parent', 'the system' or 'the experts'. Although the symbolic meanings of evaluative identity tags are likely to vary among individual use, they provide a general cultural understanding (Cohen, 1985) and define the situation in a way that permits the negotiation, interpretation and modification of meaning and identity claims.

Identity as Process

At this point I wish to draw attention to action in relation to identity. According to

Brown. "identity is established through an interpretation of who *acts* in the narrative"

(1997:113. emphasis added).   Stories reflect human actors as both enabled and

constrained:

> Narrative is that mode of discourse through which human action is
> interpreted as meaningful agency (Brown. 1997:111). We are capable of
> action. yet our own agency may be suppressed or denied by the actions of
> others. We re-cognize ourselves in terms of our suffering as well as our
> agency in the stories we tell. and in the stories we follow...We find in the
> narrative accounts of others formal parallels with our own accounts –
> patterns of action and suffering bearing some similarity to the patterns
> contained in our own history (1997:115).

This dual notion of suffering and agency is similarly reflected in Karp's (1992)

interpretation of the "rhetoric of victimization" coupled with "positive thinking" derived

from the ongoing interactions among members of an affective disorders support group.

We might suspect that from this interplay between constraining and enabling forces the

sharing of common experience provides evidence to the members that justifies the claims

being made. Because others have experienced similar trauma. the claims are perceived as

legitimate and not to be denied. The experiential knowledge provides legitimating

evidence to justify expressed resistance to a negative (stigmatized) sense of self.

Drawing upon this notion of selves expressed as constrained and enabled might aid in our

understanding of how individuals engage in the processes of identity repair or change

within the support group setting. Perhaps the nature of the stories shared and how the

'players' are positioned comprise the pivotal mechanisms activated in order to begin a

process of healing a damaged sense of self through mutual verification and affirmation.

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In turn, this jointly constructed experience enables the member(s) to resist constraining social forces thus enabling a sense of agency to surface.

Along these lines, Mumby (1993:3, 5) asserts that narratives enable the negotiation of meanings and provide a form of resistance. In alluding to the meaningful construction of social ties, he also recognizes "how narratives attempt to 'arrest the flow of differences' and 'construct a center' around which certain kinds of social relations form" (Mumby, 1993:6). Cohen (1985:21, 35-39, 76) draws similar parallels by accentuating the interplay between diversity and commonality. In other words, the diversity among individuals is temporarily suspended in an effort to draw participants together on the basis of some degree of common ground. Language is the symbolic referent people employ to aid in masking certain differences to present an illusion of sameness that in turn sets the group apart from others (Cohen, 1985:114). And from an ethnomethodological perspective, the notion of shared understanding is partly accomplished through practices that manage difference. In other words, individuals draw upon practical practices to sustain interaction and homogenize differences deemed to be irrelevant to the purpose at hand (Hilbert, 1992:126-127).

These lines of thinking can be extended to suggest that a sense of community relies upon the symbolic boundaries created by individuals engaged in discursive practices. The conceptual boundaries serve to distinguish a set of individuals from those who lie outside the constructed set of relations while simultaneously accentuating the perceived commonality of those social ties. To reiterate this point previously established, Cohen (1985:25, 28) insists that it is the management of commonality and diversity that is key to the community-building process. This dialectic of sameness and difference is

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thus viewed as critical in constructing a *sense of community* and *a sense of self* that not only draws upon and expresses stigma/powerlessness but also exhibits agency/empowerment. And as Cohen (1985:70-71, 109) reminds us, standing on the edge of one's cultural understandings serves to enhance identity claims as members begin to see themselves in relation to those on the other side of the constructed *boundary*.

Constrained Community and its Potential

To imply that tensions and constraints are exempt from the support group context would be misleading and only a partial picture. Although a predominant focus of this study is to highlight the processes involved in creating and sustaining a sense of community as an essential (and positive) element of social support in the mutual aid group context, a few words regarding the constraining aspects of community relations are warranted. As Remine, Rice and Ross (1984:15) acknowledge, the cultivation of an insular environment holds the potential for social relations to become closed as a result of excluding others. Young (1995) elaborates on this point in her critique of community interactions by first positing a commonly understood definition (or understanding) of the term and then by challenging the emergent consequences. First, according to Young, a traditional understanding of community is

> ...a unification of particular persons through the sharing of subjectivities: persons will cease to be opaque, other, not understood, and instead become fused, mutually sympathetic, understanding one another as they understand themselves (1995:242).

Second, this sense of unity (or belonging) is perceived to be inherently flawed since by virtue of efforts to include some individuals others are necessarily excluded others which

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contradicts the premise of unification that underlies the community concept (Young, 1995:235-236).

Concluding Remarks

But perhaps the steps individuals take toward building a sense of community (belonging) as a result of felt disempowerment or marginalization is an integral part of efforts to 'equalize' a felt imbalance of power (denial of self). In other words, perhaps the social practices that include some, while excluding others, are necessary tools to begin chipping away at the walls that divide and rob humans of their dignity. We might consider individual efforts to come together in a collective and coordinated response to felt adversity in metaphorical terms: sowing the storied seeds of community to ultimately nourish damaged selves. Or perhaps through the telling, listening and responding to stories that reflect common tales of victimization and agency, the powerless weave a collective narrative over time that provides the ammunition needed to break through the barriers of constraint. By initially erecting the symbolic boundaries through processes of identification, sharing lived experience in storied form and positioning (framing) self and others in particular ways, individuals create a sense of belonging. From this foundation, individuals receive the validation and legitimation needed to collectively express a resistance to felt stigma and a sense of powerlessness, thereby, exhibiting agency. That is, perhaps protection derived from the aura of unconditional acceptance, legitimation and mutual affirmation that surrounds the support group setting provides the medicinal ingredients needed to heal wounded identities. It is to these issues that I now turn to illustrate with empirical data my interpretation of how individuals accomplish social

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support, the intersubjective meanings underlying these complex processes and the consequences that flow from discursive acts. In the next chapter I describe the steps taken in the collection of data derived from experiences in the field. This necessarily includes the methodological approach drawn upon, the specific strategies used and the rationale underlying the choices made.

Chapter IV
Methodology

In this chapter I discuss the active process of *doing* this research by tracing the basic steps taken along the way. Although emphasis is placed on the mechanics of how this study was conducted and the tools used to facilitate the analysis and interpretation, I also reveal my rationale for strategic choices made during the ongoing research process. Specifically, I discuss the methods used to collect the data, the methodological problems encountered and the systematic steps that contributed to the interpretation of the findings. Given that the research is necessarily informed and shaped by the assumptions, experiences and perspectives that the researcher brings to the process, I periodically write myself into the discussion to acknowledge that the researcher is an intrinsic part of the research process. Before introducing the research setting, I situate the applied methodology in the literature to illustrate the relevance of the research design drawn upon. Underlying tensions within the literature are touched upon to recognize that perspectives are not fixed but open to ongoing negotiation and revision.

Research Design: A Perspective on Method

This research falls under what is commonly defined in the social sciences as qualitative research and, more specifically, as an ethnographic case-study. [25] Although these definitional constructs appear firmly embedded in the social science discourse, a closer look reveals their contested boundaries. [26] To engage in this dialogue in any substantive way is certainly beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, I draw upon some general definitions to locate this research in a pre-existing methodological framework that will ground my analysis and interpretation of the findings in a common sociological discourse.

For heuristic purposes, a comparison between ethnographic and statistical methods sheds lights on my rationale for choosing the former in this study of mutual aid groups. The primary aim of statistical analyses is to describe the *correlational relationships among variables* in order to construct and test theories, often with an aim of generalizing to a larger population (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:3-4). This approach has met with considerable resistance by those who question its ability to probe social

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[25] In attempts to place social research into pre-defined categories we often find ourselves on a rather slippery slope. Despite efforts to tighten definitional constructs (see Tesch, 1990 and Hammersley, 1992 for references to diversified types of ethnography), the *practice* of ethnography resists rigid typification.
[26] Hammersley (1992:29) notes that the terms "ethnography", "qualitative method" and "case study" are frequently drawn upon in research accounts in taken-for-granted ways that strips them of precise definition. A common theme in the literature ties qualitative and quantitative research to particular paradigms (worldviews) (Code, 1993: Stack, 1996). Some would argue, however, that the qualitative/quantitative dichotomy is misplaced and would be more appropriately conceptualized as a continuum of multiple perspectives guided by the nature, purposes and practice of research (see Hammersley, 1992:159-172). Similarly, the boundaries of the sociological concept 'case' are critiqued in a recent anthology edited by Ragin and Becker (1992). For present purposes, however, I draw upon Hammersley's definition of case-study: "...the collection and presentation of detailed, relatively unstructured information from a range of sources about a particular individual, group, or institution, usually including the accounts of subjects themselves" (1989:93). Given the emphasis on detail, subjectivity and detailed information, the case-study approach is viewed here as particularly relevant in reconstructing the meanings and actions that embody the mutual aid experience.

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phenomenon in enough depth to attain comprehensive understandings (Harper, 1992:139:
Maton, 1993:282). Harper recognizes its limitations:

> ...the deductive, natural-science model, with specific hypothesis testing
> and statistical analysis, may not allow us to see the most sociologically
> meaningful boundaries of cases or the complexities of their social
> processes (1992:139).

Exempt from this mode of inquiry is the *construction of social relationships among
actors* within given contexts of social interaction.

Along these lines, an ethnographic approach provides access to the underlying
social processes occurring within local contexts (Code, 1993:34: Denzin, 1989:49-50:
Hammersley, 1989:114; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:22: Powell and Cameron,
1993:799; Roberts et al., 1991:717: Silverman, 1993:29, 34) and the subjective meaning
systems that characterize the interactions within (Depner et al., 1984:50-51: Denzin,
1989:11; Silverman, 1993:10: Tebes and Kraemer, 1991:753). Ethnography is thus
considered the active process of participating in empirical research. Hammersley and
Atkinson describe this dynamic aspect of ethnography:

> The ethnographer participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives
> for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what
> is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to
> throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned (1983:2).

As a methodological approach, ethnography is aptly suited to examining social
phenomena that both describes and explains:

> Ethnography (as the case study of the small group came to be known)
> typically begins with descriptions of settings, objects, and the behavior
> and classifications of individuals and groups, and ends with an analyses of
> the structural relationships among the elements of the group....The
> ethnographic case study has become the post-modern 'tale of culture', in
> which description is taken as problematic, and in which theory, rather than

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an edifice from which hypotheses may be mechanically derived, assume a more tentative, inductive character. The goal of description remains, however, to arrive at theoretical understanding (Harper, 1992:140, 141).

It is this 'marriage' of description and explanation as a means to examine the dynamic and complex interplay of social relationships embedded in everyday interaction that embodies ethnographic research.

Gaining access to the systems of meaning that are practiced, negotiated and reproduced is essential to this process. Meanings are defined here as "the linguistic categories that make up the participants' views of reality and which define their own and others' actions"(Lofland and Lofland, 1995:113). As Geertz (1973:10, 20) contends, ethnography is about discerning which pieces of the puzzle to extract for the purpose of reconstructing an image that most adequately represents the meanings of a culture. Central to the ethnographic task is the interpretation of a culture. This interpretation is imbued with the complexities of meaning that must somehow be untangled, as Geertz so eloquently states:

> ...Man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself [sic] has spun. I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. Cultural analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses, not discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape (1973:5, 20).

This intense focus on meaningful interactions among individuals participating in a social context is precisely why an ethnographic approach is conducive to studying mutual aid groups. In this regard, Powell and Cameron (1991:799) advocate qualitative approaches to best capture the dynamic, complex, temporal nature of support groups, as

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well as the unique features inherent within the context of a particular group. If we want to understand how support is accomplished by those who participate with this purpose in mind, we need to grasp what 'support' means to them. This inter-subjectivity is considered an integral part of the ethnographic project (Code. 1993:19-21,31,37: Hammersley. 1989:93-94: Maton. 1993:284: Tebes and Kraemer. 1991:753).[27] Researcher efforts to depict the relevant patterns and linkages among actors engaged in situated meaningful interaction must be systematically and analytically acquired (Agar. 1986:71: Geertz. 1973:30: Spradley. 1980:57). The careful explication of how meanings and actions are linked through situated interactions lie at the heart of ethnography. To shed light on these social processes which tend to be overshadowed in the social support group literature is the primary task of this thesis.

The Role of the Researcher

By virtue of the dynamic and fluid nature of ethnographic research. the role of the researcher defies adherence to rigid directives. Some guiding principles and basic set of expectations. however. govern the ethnographic project. For one. the researcher must make selective choices throughout all stages of the research process – data collection. analysis. interpretation and writing. As Wolcott comments. "In the very act of constructing data out of experience. the qualitative researcher singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background" (1994:13). This task is indeed a challenging one for the researcher in light of what seems at times to be an insurmountable amount of data. Nevertheless, it is a task that must be tackled and conquered if, as

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[27] Recent emphasis has been placed on the researchers' obligation to be reflexive of their role in that process, and not only of the interactions under study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:14-16; Code, 1993:31, 37).

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Fielding and Fielding note. the account is to be a "coherent" one (1986:68). Similarly. the ethnographer is advised to strive for balance between detail and generality in both observing and writing (Wolcott. 1994:14,15,16).

Because of the emphasis on the empirical referent. the researcher is committed to anchoring theoretical understandings to observations in local contexts. Ragin acknowledges this dialectical relationship: "As researchers our primary goal is to link the empirical and the theoretical – to use theory to make sense of evidence and to use evidence to sharpen and refine theory" (1992:225). To ensure that the analysis and interpretation do not stray too far from their empirical roots is the researcher's ultimate challenge (Geertz. 1973:30). If theoretical efforts threaten to uproot the empirical base. the end product is left without a sustainable foundation.

To present the 'evidence' to others implies some element of description. "The goal is to make a description of your informants' cognitive map for some cultural scene" (Spradley and McCurdy. 1972:76). Ethnographic accounts are encouraged to be descriptive and. as Denzin insists. should entail "thick" descriptions that are "...deep. dense, detailed accounts"(1989:83) that hold the potential to transform lived experience to such a level that the reader is able to capture its essence. This attention to description. however, is not to preclude the distinctly analytic stance that is an integral part of the ethnographer's task (Agar, 1986.44-45; Hammersley and Atkinson. 1983:176:210; Mays and Pope, 1995:111; Wolcott. 1990:28). As Agar (1986:44-45) elaborates, the aim is not only to see things from the participants' point of view but to remain cognizant that the role of the ethnographer is also to analytically decipher that which is observed. Trying to

find the appropriate balance is the key. This dual role of the researcher is reflected in the following:

> That we learn through human relationships forces us into a kind of emotional/rational schizophrenia...It becomes necessary to live in both worlds, motivated and affected by the genuinely subjective feelings...yet able to draw back sufficiently to treat one's subject in sociological terms. It is never possible to maintain that dualism completely (Harper, 1992:151).

> There must always remain some part held back, some social and intellectual 'distance'. For it is in the 'space' created by this distance that the analytic work of the ethnographer gets done (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:102).

Extending this premise of critical distance is the notion of reflexivity advocated by Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:14-18). Because all social research is embedded in the social worlds that we explore and attempt to understand, the goal is to be sensitive to how the research is affected by the actions and perspectives of the researcher (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:14-18). It is then incumbent on the researcher to locate her/himself in the research in a way that reveals personal bias and assumptions. This is to acknowledge that the researcher is never a neutral player in the research process[28] and

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[28] The impact that the researcher has on the research and the inherent dynamics of the researcher/researched relationship has been critiqued in recent years, most notably by proponents of feminist research (Chuchryk: 1996; Mies, 1991; Stack, 1996). Yet despite attempts to eradicate the power differentials that surround this relationship (and some would argue a rather misguided venture), there is always some element of control to be negotiated. In the end it is the ethnographer who orchestrates the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:126).

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also to aid the reader in assessing the interpretive findings. By taking a reflexive stance, we gain insight into these knowledge claims that inevitably frame the inquiry (Code, 1993:31, 37; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:19, 80-88, 195; Stack, 1996:99, 104). While I draw upon these guiding principles throughout the research, I first turn to my own subjectivity.

Locating Self in the Researcher Role

I came to this research with no prior personal experience as a participant in a support group. The increasing presence of support groups in contemporary society, however, implies a certain degree of cultural awareness. Mass media projects images of support groups as potential sites for healing, self-growth, the acquiring of coping strategies or as a means of gaining control over the obstacles that confront us in our daily lives. Support groups are often portrayed as *lifelines* from the testimonials of participants who describe the experience as that of being pulled from the depths of despair by others facing similar challenges. My understanding of how support groups likely operate stems from this prevalent image filtered to the general public through multiple mediums. So although I have not participated in a support group per se, I have been 'exposed' to the idea, rendering the phenomena somewhat familiar. A personal experience, however, influenced how I initially viewed support groups. Sharing this personal reflection is deemed appropriate here to acknowledge that although I had no prior experience with support groups, this did not preclude me from 'taking the role of other' (to borrow a Meadian phrase). In light of this recognition that the researcher's personal experience frames the research process (Agar, 1986:35,36; Miles and Huberman, 1994:18), and

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Code's (1993:37) more emphatic plea for the self-revelation of the researcher. I explicitly address my own subjectivity.

Prior to my decision to pursue graduate studies I faced a potential health crisis. I recall my feelings of uncertainty, fear and anxiety that left me feeling a sense of isolation and the perception that I was somehow standing on the outside of everyday life. I also vividly recollect how these feelings were altered somewhat when an individual (known to me only as an acquaintance) heard that I was experiencing some health difficulties and approached me expressing his concern. Upon doing so, he indicated that he 'understood' what I was feeling and then proceeded to 'share his story' about confronting a life-threatening illness just two years prior. In reflecting upon this moment, I recollect my tremendous sense of relief that someone had 'truly' understood. Symbolically, a welcoming hand had been extended that pulled me towards hope at a time when I most needed it. Later, I found myself relating this experience to the support group context and wondering if a similar 'connection' - a sense of being 'lost' and then 'found' - was also an integral part of that setting. Undoubtedly, this personal experience shaped my thinking, to a certain degree, about the role support groups might play in the lives of those confronting a common struggle.

Notwithstanding the personal experience just revealed, my interest in this research was primarily fuelled by sociological interest. Perhaps by virtue of never having

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participated in a support group, my analytic curiosity was piqued to a greater extent than it otherwise might have been. So when the opportunity to engage in an in-depth case study of a support group(s) presented itself as part of a larger research project in its early stages.[29] I was, admittedly, intrigued to learn what closer examination might reveal.

Gaining Entry and Access

The moment when the researcher is granted permission to enter the research context marks the most obvious point of access. But as Hammersley and Atkinson emphasize, the issue of access is an ongoing process that passes through different stages throughout the duration of the research project:

> The problem of access is not resolved once one has gained entry to a setting, since this by no means guarantees access to all the data available within it....It is often at its most acute in initial negotiations to enter a setting and during the 'first days in the field'; though the problem persists, to one degree or another, throughout the data collection process (1983:76, 54).

To more clearly differentiate between the initial attempts to enter the setting and ongoing access throughout the research, I will refer to the former as gaining 'entry' and the latter as gaining 'access'.

Prior to my commencement with the graduate program, the coordinator of the parent project initiated contact with the coordinator of the parents' resource center to express interest in conducting research with support groups and to inquire as to their possible participation. Upon beginning my studies I contacted the coordinator by

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[29] The data collected from this ethnographic study of the two participating support groups will contribute to the 'parent' project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and directed by Dr. David Brown of the University of Lethbridge.

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telephone in September 1995 to re-initiate the process. After introductions and a brief conversation. I received a favorable response (although not definitive) regarding their willingness to participate. A meeting was then scheduled with the facilitators of two potential groups. This marked my first explicit (formal) attempt at gaining entry. Upon meeting with the two group facilitators in September 1995 I expressed my research interests as a desire to understand what support meant to the members and how it worked (or didn't work) in the context of the group meetings. This dialogue marked a second stage of gaining entry. At this time the facilitators determined that while the participation of one of the groups would be a consideration. the other group was deemed less viable (and more vulnerable) due to its infancy and the nature of the issue. The potential involvement of another group was later discussed with the facilitators who indicated that final approval must come from the members themselves. Accordingly. the facilitators offered to consult with both groups. As a result. members from Group A requested additional time to consider their involvement because of concerns pertaining to confidentiality and the periodic sensitive nature of the group discussions. In the end. however. approval was granted. This point marked the third phase of the more formal. overt stage of negotiating and ultimately gaining initial entry.

The coordinator and facilitators of the resource center were the first 'formal gatekeepers' encountered. that is, those who were initially in a position to either deny or accept my request. Ultimately, the members themselves – the 'informal gatekeepers' – had the final say regarding my entry to the support group setting. Ongoing access was negotiated primarily with the formal gatekeepers (facilitators and designated volunteers). The main reasons for this reliance on the latter are attributed to the following: (a)

structure of the meetings (minimal 'free' time to interact with the participants); (b) my role as an observer interested in watching *how* individuals engaged in the practices of social support; and (c) the 'de-briefing' sessions that the facilitators invited me to attend immediately following the group discussion time as a means to evaluate the meeting and to address any emergent concerns. In this capacity, the facilitators and volunteers acted as informants in terms of providing some basic background information on individual situations that in turn placed the situation in a broader social context.

On a final note, ethical implications potentially arise from issues of reciprocity (implicit or otherwise) between the researcher and the researched. What is the researcher expected (or obligated) to give back to the participants in exchange for being allowed to observe their interactions? This question is laced with moral connotations and any attempts to solve this dilemma are seldom straightforward.[30] As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:75, 78) contend, the participants of any study likely hold a set of expectations regarding the research and the role of the researcher. Formal reciprocity is not necessarily negotiated in any explicit way prior to gaining entry to the research setting. But this does not preclude an implicit expectation by those participating that something meaningful be received in exchange for their participation. In terms of this study, no formal or explicit arrangements were made regarding the provision of specific information/documentation to either the resource center or the participants upon completion of the thesis. Although explicit expectations or requests were not specified, it is quite conceivable that the facilitators and/or participants expect a certain degree of

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[30] Feminist research has long addressed this issue of reciprocity between the researcher and the researched (see Chuchryk, 1996; Code, 1993; Mies, 1991; Stack, 1996).

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information to be of practical or heuristic value.[31] A sense of moral obligation to give something back to the participants studied most certainly poses an ethical dilemma for the researcher.

Introducing the Local Context: The Research Settings

A brief introduction to the local context will more explicitly begin the process of tying theoretical and empirical strands together in meaningful ways. By 'context'. I appropriate Giddens' (1984) notion of "contextualities of interaction":

> (a) the time-space boundaries (usually having symbolic or physical markers) around interaction strips: (b) the co-presence of actors, making possible the visibility of a diversity of facial expressions, bodily gestures, linguistic and other media of communication: (c) awareness and use of these phenomena reflexively to influence or control the flow of interaction (1984:282).

For the purposes of this study, two support groups [32] located in a small Canadian city comprised the interactional context that enabled the collection of data.[33] Both groups were developed, organized and facilitated by employees of a local parent resource center. To ensure anonymity. I refer to the support groups simply as Group A and Group B. Participants included members, professional facilitators and guest speakers (Group A

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[31] In fact, the facilitators periodically inquired as to how the research was going and expressed their interest in reading the thesis upon its completion. More specifically, one of the facilitators indicated that she was looking forward to learning what factors were considered to be effective (or not). I responded by indicating my concern that perhaps the focus of the thesis would not directly address these issues in a way that would be particularly useful for their purposes. In reply, the facilitator did not express concern regarding this possibility.

[32] Again, the term 'support groups' was the terminology appropriated and subsequently used in both written and conversational form by the sponsoring organization, as well as by the participants themselves.

[33] My rationale for drawing upon the data from two support groups (as opposed to one) was based on common patterns that emerged from the interactions within both groups in relation to my theoretical interests. Some of the empirical evidence from one group, as opposed to the other, substantiated certain interpretations more clearly. Although interesting differences between the two groups surfaced, a comparative analysis was not the purpose of this thesis.

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only) who were invited, periodically, by the facilitators to speak to the group as a whole about a variety of issues. By 'members', I refer to those individuals who come to the group meetings in search of 'support' with like others, that is, with those facing similar challenges and struggles. Professional facilitators, in this instance, are defined as those individuals designated by the sponsoring organization to direct or lead the group meetings on a regular basis.[34] The guest speakers occupied professional positions in the larger community and were invited by the facilitators to attend a group meeting, on an individual basis, for the purpose of providing a brief presentation on a matter relevant to the problem or issue common to the members.

A general description of the physical setting provides a sense of the external structure that framed the research and the interactions within. All meetings were held at the parent resource center in a central location of the city. The meeting room[35] was relatively spacious. Cushioned chairs and two small sofas were arranged in a circle to accommodate at least twenty to twenty-five people. If the chairs were not positioned in a circle formation prior to the meetings, the facilitator(s) would arrange them accordingly; I would assist along with any other members who happened to arrive early. A round table that often held information handouts[36] pertaining to the groups' issue/problem was situated just outside the seating area. One end of the room contained children's toys and a climbing apparatus; a photocopier and table holding refreshments were located along an adjacent wall; and shelves of reference books/pamphlets lined the walls on the remaining

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[34] Professional qualifications of the facilitators varied. One facilitator holds a university degree while the other leader had once participated in a program at the center and, at some point, was approached by the coordinator of the parent resource center regarding potential employment as a group facilitator.
[35] The meetings occurred in the same room with the exception of one meeting wherein members of Group A were divided into two groups based on ages of the members' children.

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two sides of the room. Windows were located on two sides of the room. The shelved

books were arranged according to various topics that pertained primarily to parenting

issues and could be signed out for a specified period of time. A bulletin board located on

the same wall as the bookcase held a number of announcements such as advertising for

community activities or upcoming conferences/workshops, as well as a list of the

"Ground Rules" to be followed. These rules defined the center's set of expectations for

appropriate group conduct: "Personal Responsibility: The Right to Pass: All Beliefs

Honored: Mutual Respect: Confidentiality".[37]

Data Collection Techniques

Obtaining access to the culture under study requires application of effective

methodological means. This demands that methods chosen by the ethnographer are

conducive to transforming observations into 'accurate' accounts of what appears to be

going on at a given place in time (Agar. 1980:79). The particular ethnographic methods

drawn upon for this research include participant observation and interviewing. A

nonprobability sampling method was used, defined as "purposive sampling", which is

"...based on [the researcher's] judgment and the purpose of the study" (Babbie,

1989:204).

In order to discover what support means to those participating in support groups,

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[36] Although I collected written materials (informational handouts) that were regularly provided, they were not used to directly inform this analysis; a critique of this nature is beyond the scope and purpose of this research.

[37] These rules were referred to briefly at the beginning of the initial meetings and sometimes when a new intake of members joined the group. Although there was a period of time when the sign was absent from the bulletin board (and posted in an adjacent room), this was toward the end of the scheduled meetings (late spring).

the subjective perspectives of the participants themselves is critical. This necessarily requires an understanding of the meaning systems that constitute the support group experience derived from those who are actually interacting in that particular social context. Conversing with participants in an informal or formal manner is one way of reconstructing subjective meaning systems. But as Hammersley cautions,

> ...to rely on what people *say* about what they believe and do, without also observing what they do, is to neglect the complex relationship between attitudes and behaviour; just as to rely on observation without also talking with people in order to understand their perspectives is to risk misinterpreting their actions (1992:11-12, emphasis in original).

Attention is thus drawn to the dynamic interplay between interviewing and observation. While interviews (formal or otherwise) allow for the subjective perspectives of those who are participating, observations are conducive to uncovering the social processes embedded within situated interaction. But one method does not necessarily enhance the other. In other words, although certain observations might be enhanced or clarified by participants' subjective perspectives, the questions guiding the research play a role in determining to what extent observations require verification or further explanation by the participants themselves. Moreover, participants might be reluctant to confront or explain certain aspects that surface from observations by an external party. Or perhaps as participants engage in the practicalities of social interaction, observations from a critical distance might reveal certain elements of which the participants are not fully aware.

Whatever the devices used to collect data, they are not the perfect tools to carve every subtlety and nuance from the social scene. As Fielding and Fielding recognize: "Any information-gathering device is both privileged and constrained by its own particular structure and location; the qualities that enable one kind of information to be

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collected close off others" (1986:20). In light of these inherent limitations and possibilities. I turn to each of the two methods that I deemed most relevant in my aim to understand the meaning of support and how the support group worked as a collective means to confront a common problem.

Participant Observation

My observations of support group meetings from October 1995 to June 1996 (Group A), and November 1995 to June 1996 (Group B), provided the primary source of data for understanding what constituted support and how it was constructed, negotiated and managed in this collective setting. Both groups convened on separate evenings for two hours each week, with the exception of statutory holidays and the decision by members of Group A to continue the meetings every other week after the initial eight-week scheduled sessions came to a close. All meetings were held at the parents' resource center, as previously described. Although attendance fluctuated over the observational period for both groups, a steady decrease in numbers was apparent in Group A. Overall, the average number of members attending the meetings of Group A and Group B was six and nine, respectively. Typically, the female to male ratio was higher at any given group meeting.

Some basic questions informed this phase of the research: What constitutes support? How do individuals construct and manage support in this context? Is the flow of support interrupted at any given time? What functions or unintended consequences flow from the practices of individuals engaged in the processes of social support? In light of these questions, the logical choice of method is one that enables careful watching and listening. As Maton (1993:284) reminds us, rigorous observation enables us to 'see'

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and 'hear' interaction in context. In simple terms, Wolcott states: "Our opportunity is also our challenge to portray real people doing and saying real things through the eyes of another human observer" (1990:49). This emphasis on observing interaction occurring within context is a particularly useful tool for understanding the processes of social support associated with mutual aid relationships (Roberts et al., 1991:735). In other words, direct observational techniques provide data primarily based on social interactions as they occur, and not that which are limited to recall alone (Roberts et al., 1991:717).

Given that my primary theoretical interest is to understand some of the social processes that enable/constrain mutual aid in the context of a support group, and the consequences that flow from that experience, the observational mode is deemed especially relevant. Perhaps Hammersley says it best in his endorsement of participant observation:

> ...the nature of the social world must be *discovered*: that this can only be achieved by first-hand observation and participation in 'natural' settings, guided by an exploratory orientation: that research reports must capture the social processes observed and the social meanings that generate them (1992:12, emphasis in original).

By further extension, the mechanisms that facilitate the social processes require ethnographic methods to reveal how they work. The current research, for example, focuses on the communicative exchanges among support group members as they participate in ongoing meetings over time. Language, as a symbolic medium for constructing meaning among individuals (Denzin, 1989:77), is viewed as occupying a central role in understanding cultural meaning systems (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:153). Observational techniques are considered an accessible and effective means to lifting these meanings into closer view (Denzin, 1989:81-82). Since both verbal (and

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non-verbal) expressions are observable, they are therefore open to ethnographic inquiry. As Hammersley and Atkinson comment: "The 'situated vocabularies' employed provide us with valuable information about the way in which members of a particular culture organize their perceptions of the world, and so, engage in the 'social construction of reality'" (1983:153, emphasis in original). At the heart of ethnographic research is this emphasis on situated interaction and the meanings that guide the actions among actors.

One particular mechanism that individuals draw upon to construct and communicate their perceptions is the narration of lived experience. Coffey and Atkinson (1996:55-57, 62-68, 77) explicitly acknowledge the salient role of narratives constructed in context. In light of recognizing that interaction is comprised of sharing personal experience in storied form, the researcher is encouraged to draw upon the stories shared to make sense of these experiences (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:56, 80). Similarly, Denzin (1989:62) suggests that meaning is embedded in the stories people tell. It then follows that by *observing* how support group members share personal experiences in storied form, we might gain a better understanding of how these groups operate.

The participant observer must make assessments regarding an appropriate level of participation when studying a social situation while, simultaneously, observing the setting and the actions occurring within. Level of participation and observation varies, however, as reflected by Junker (1960) and Gold's (1958) classification scheme of the ethnographer's role: "complete participant, participant as observer, observer as participant and complete observer" (as cited in Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:93-97). This typology alludes to the broad range of implicit to explicit levels of involvement. Hammersley and Atkinson remind us that "decisions about the role to adopt in a setting

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will depend on the purposes of the research and the nature of the setting" (1983:97).[38] My role in this research would fall more closely in the category of 'observer as participant' as direct involvement was minimal. Although I was seated among the members, I did not participate in the discussion per se (except on a couple of isolated occasions, and then only at a minimal and informal level). In the beginning, I restricted my recording of observations. Over time. I began to explicitly take notes on a rather continuous basis throughout the meetings as my presence in the group came to be expected and a sense of rapport was established. I was careful to ensure that my notes not reflect assessments that might be misconstrued in the event that someone requested to view what I had written. During formal presentations I typically recorded my observations. tapering off if the dialogue was of a sensitive nature. It was my contention that to record observations during the sharing of highly personal issues would have been insensitive and obtrusive on my part. I discuss this aspect of my observational role in more detail when I address the methodological problems encountered.

Interviewing

Interviewing, in general. provides a window through which we hope to catch a glimpse into the subjective meanings people hold of their experiences. The interview is one means by which the subjective accounts of those being observed can be heard. Participants' accounts shed light on the phenomena we as researchers are trying to

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[38] Since I was not experiencing the common problem shared by the support group members it seemed ethically questionable (or deceptive) to participate as if this were the case. Similarly, although a covert observational role carries with it a bevy of ethical considerations, the research setting was not conducive to viewing interaction without the awareness of the members.

understand and as evidence pointing to the construction of knowledge (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:105-107). As Maton notes, "Subjective culture refers to members' subjective view of social reality including assumptions about causality, core values, and meanings attributed to the focal problem and group events" (1993:284). It follows that if the purpose of this research is, in part, to understand *what support means* to those participating in a mutual aid context, then talking to the members about their views on this subject is not only appropriate but imperative. As Silverman attests, the interview is a highly effective device for the collection of such data: "[Interviews] offer a rich source of data which provide access to how people account for both their troubles and good fortune" (1993:114). One way to learn about the form and substance of *support*, from those who were constructing and molding its shape was to explicitly ask the members to talk about the *meaning* of support in their lives and, in particular, within the mutual aid setting. How I approached this phase of the research is outlined below.

As the scheduled meetings came to a close before summer break, I asked the members collectively if they would consider participating in individual interviews, indicating that I hoped to contact each of them by telephone in the weeks to follow. As a result, I interviewed twenty-five members and one facilitator [39] with ten members from Group A and fifteen members from Group B. The facilitators provided me with two membership lists (one per group) that included names and telephone numbers. Some

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[39] In addition, the co-facilitator of Group A was casually interviewed during a time when no members showed for a scheduled meeting. This exchange took the form of a casual conversation at which time I recorded general comments in writing. On another occasion, two members participated simultaneously in an interview until a prior commitment that required one member to leave early resulted in a partial interview; consequently, this interview was not included in the total number of completed interviews.

names listed were unfamiliar to the facilitators or represented those members who had participated in the group prior to my time spent observing the meetings (eleven names listed from Group A and fourteen from Group B fit this profile). [40]   In light of these factors, coupled with my theoretical interest in understanding how individuals actively construct support in the mutual aid group setting, these (inactive) members were not contacted for participation during the interview phase of the research. From the thirty 'active' members listed, only five did not participate in the interviews for various reasons. [41] My rationale for attempting to interview both veteran and new members, who attended either regularly or sporadically, was based on an assumption that perspectives might differ in relation to the efficacy of the support group experience over time and/or the in/frequency of interactions.

Measures were taken to ensure that each member's identity would be protected and confidentiality thus guaranteed. Immediately prior to each interview I issued the member an informed consent form (Appendix A). A second more detailed consent form accompanied the first which included an explanation regarding the purpose of the study and reassurance that all necessary steps would be taken to ensure that no identifiable characteristics would be disclosed (Appendix B). [42] The members were made aware that they could decline to answer any of the questions or withdraw from the study at any

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[40] Although the resource center updated the lists periodically, new members continued to join the group from time to time throughout the period that I was observing the meetings. In light of time constraints I did not pursue the possibility of interviewing these members.

[41] One member was in the process of moving residences and could not be reached. Two members expressed some reluctance to being interviewed. After indicating that I would contact them at a later date about their possible involvement I was not able to establish contact with one member, while the other's schedule (in conjunction with time constraints of the project) did not permit participation. Another member did not show during the scheduled interview time; subsequent re-scheduling attempts were unsuccessful. And, finally, one participant was not contacted due to time constraints.

[42] Two copies of this form were signed so as the member could keep a copy for their information. All members interviewed signed both consent forms.

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time.[43] Before commencing each interview I requested and received permission from each member to tape record the conversation. In the event of potential technical problems, I recorded a portion of members' responses in written form. [44]

All interviews were conducted at the resource center, with the exception of three that were held in the members' homes at their request. My rationale for utilizing the resource center as an interview site was based on an assumption that the members might feel more at ease in an environment that was both familiar and connected with the topic of support.[45] The length of time per interview ranged from approximately one hour to three hours, averaging about one hour and thirty minutes.

In the beginning, a semi-structured approach guided the interview process. This particular style fits between what Berg (1989:17) refers to as standardized and unstandardized approaches to interviewing. In other words, although the interview instrument consists of questions related to the research topic, the dialogue that transpires between the interviewer and interviewee is expected to move in the direction of descriptive elaboration. The interview instrument constructed for this research was intended to function as a guiding template [46] (Appendix C). Initially, demographic

[43] Members were informed that the research was being conducted under the guidelines of SSHRC and the University of Lethbridge. Approval from the Human Subject Review Committee at the University of Lethbridge regarding ethically appropriate guidelines for data collection was granted prior to the commencement of the research as part of the larger study funded by SSHRC.

[44] Given that technical difficulties occurred during the first few interviews, this cautionary measure proved most helpful. The obvious limitations of note taking, however, include the tendency to gloss or summarize with a limited amount of verbatim comments captured in written form.

[45] The facilitators were more than accommodating in this regard and arranged for me to have a key to the building for convenient access after hours. Room bookings were pre-arranged and based on availability.

[46] A range of questions were asked, some of which were relevant to the theoretical interests stemming from the larger research project of which this research is a part.

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information was sought before attempting to elicit more descriptive responses.[47] Upon reassessing the first few interviews. however. I modified my approach to resemble a relatively unstructured format in an explicit effort to elicit more detailed responses that elaborated upon the members' meaningful interactions and experiences. Although the specific questions were no longer explicitly followed during the interview. the key words I used as a guide encompassed the general framework of the initial instrument.

Methodological Problems Encountered

While actively engaged in the research process. problems or barriers are inevitably encountered along the way. I comment on a few of them in relation to this research to illustrate the 'reality' of engaging in fieldwork that is part of the complex and ever-shifting social milieus that we study. How I resolved the various problems as they surfaced is revealed. Methodological decisions are part of an ongoing process that unfolds not only in the planning phases of the research but during the various stages of data collection. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:145-146.150.156.173). as we participate in the active role of collecting data. there are necessarily choices made based on an ongoing assessment of the situation.

One of these choices for me was reconciling the need to capture the myriad details of what I was 'seeing' while remaining sensitive to the participants' personal troubles.

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[47] This strategy was based on an assumption that perhaps the members would feel more at ease. thus. providing an easier transition to talking about personal and/or sensitive issues if straightforward questions were asked first. This approach coincides with the advice of Berg (1989:25-26) who suggests that initiating the interview with demographic related questions is a strategy to elicit straightforward and unproblematic responses, thereby fostering a transition to questions of increasing depth and complexity. In actuality, however, this approach seemed to encourage a question-response pattern in this study.

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:147) advise the researcher to take into account the social context and tailor the decision to record observations based on an understanding of cultural appropriateness. In this regard. I was aware that the issue of confidentiality was of concern to the members. In addition. my purpose was to observe *how* support was accomplished in the group and not to capture the personal details of their daily lives. Although the facilitators had reassured me before commencing the research that the members would likely be amenable to the idea of me taking notes during the meeting (given that they were accustomed to the facilitators doing so). I approached this issue very carefully nonetheless. I acted on the assumption that the members might perceive my role as researcher to be threatening in some way. or at the very least uncertain. In light of these ethical considerations I chose to refrain from explicit note taking, especially in the beginning. I did not want to appear insensitive or obtrusive given that they were sharing very personal and. at times. traumatic experiences. Over time this became less problematic given the increased length of time I had been observing the meetings and a sense of rapport established between the members and myself.

A guiding principle of ethnography is to transform the strange into the familiar as the ethnographer attempts to make sense of a situation (Agar. 1986:20-32; Hammersley and Atkinson. 1983:88. 89). But the researcher's cultural awareness and degree of familiarity with the social context under study is not necessarily *un*familiar, as is often associated with ethnographic research. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:92) contend. the ethnographer's degree of familiarity with the particular setting being studied and the accompanying cultural understanding varies accordingly. In this regard, the support group setting was not embedded in a cultural framework considered completely 'foreign'

to me. Although, as previously mentioned. I have not personally participated in any support groups, I am nevertheless shaped and informed by a broader cultural context that brings these images to the forefront. These preconceived notions and images that the researcher brings into the research context sometimes makes it difficult to see past that which seems self-evident or familiar in some taken-for-granted way (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:92). It is the ethnographer's task to question the commonsense assumptions and routine practices that appear self-evident (Silverman, 1993:29-30; Spradley, 1980:55). This posed an ongoing challenge since the interactions observed tended to reflect many of my pre-conceived notions of how support groups functioned. But as Fielding and Fielding (1986:19) suggest, the 'outsider' status of the researcher necessarily objectifies, thus, allowing for problematizing that which members of a particular culture take for granted.

Although my role was predominantly that of observer, and not participant per se. I discovered that over time this distinction shifted somewhat, albeit in subtle ways. As Agar (1980:70) notes, the relationship between the researcher and the researched does not remain static but rather changes in unforeseen ways over time. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:75,78), when participants are aware of the researcher's presence they have certain expectations or pre-conceived notions of the researcher's role that carries with it the potential to significantly shape the research context. This subtle shift in the relationship was more apparent when the group size was diminished and more informal exchanges took place. Remaining in the background and silently recording observations was less 'natural' during meetings where fewer members were in attendance or when the discussion evolved in a spontaneous fashion with topics that sometimes strayed from the

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defined issue. A few instances occurred where the casual tone of the discussion seemed to encourage my participation; in fact, to not participate would have seemed somehow culturally inappropriate, or awkward at the very least. A more explicit example of the changing researcher-participant relationship (and participants' expectations of the researcher role) occurred one evening during the break when a male member of Group A politely asked if he could read what I had written. I encouraged him to do so and when the group re-convened he specifically requested my input regarding the potential for the formation of an advocacy group. Regardless of the motivation for this request, which is irrelevant to the purposes here, it illustrates the shifting expectations that surround the roles of both the researcher and participants.

Problems were also encountered during the interview phase of the research. Upon completing the first few interviews, I came away with the sense that something was missing from the interview experience. My rationale for beginning with the basic demographic questions to gently ease us both into a conversational mode seemed to yield a somewhat stilted effect, reminiscent of a standard (structured) interview style. As a result, the dialogue leaned toward a patterned question-response at times that constrained a certain degree of elaboration. This pattern varied among participants given that some were inclined to give more or less descriptive responses than others as the case might be.

It also became apparent that when devising the interview instrument my decision to avoid questions associated with emotive 'feelings' (given my focus on the key processes of *how* support was accomplished) was somewhat misguided. Members' attempts to articulate the concept of support seemed to stay within the confines of a few general descriptive terms with less emphasis placed on the experiential dimension. My

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goal became that of finding a way of bringing the lived experience, derived from both their personal lives and the support group setting, into the interview context – a re-contextualizing process. To explicitly address this issue I shifted the interview style in the direction of an unstructured format whereby only key words were used as a guide (Appendix D). As Mishler (1986:241) contends, a standardized approach strips the interaction of relevant context needed to tap into systems of meaning. The revised leading questions – "What initially brought you to the group? How did you *feel* when you first came to the group and how did the group respond?" - represented attempts to bridge the "gap" between private domains and the public support group context. At times my questions arose in direct response to a member's comments during the course of the interview. This spontaneous dialogue is patterned after the ethnographic interview whereby non-directive and directive questions typically unfold during the interview (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:113). In using a loosely structured interviewing approach, however, the issue of closure is less certain. In terms of this research, the saturation point reached in each interview was determined when (a) the same responses continued to resurface; and (b) after the questions tied to the larger research project were addressed. For the most part, this shift to a less structured approach seemed to elicit more elaborate responses which tied personal experiences to the support group context in a more substantive way.

Other practical and logistical problems were encountered during the interview phase of the research. Technical difficulties experienced during a few initial interviews

resulted in problems comprehending and transcribing portions of the conversations.[48] An additional problem encountered during the interview stage pertained to a number of scheduled appointments that had to be rescheduled for various reasons. [49] In light of limited access to available rooms at the center, these delays posed some practical time constraints on the project. As a final note, given that some interviews took place over a period of a few months following the group meetings, it appeared somewhat more difficult for members to reflect upon the support group context.

Data Analysis

To analyze is to probe the complex in an effort to understand the relevant and essential parts that constitute a meaningful whole. As previously stated, the aim of ethnographic research is to securely tie theoretical strands to relevant empirical referents. The strength of the theory is integrally connected to how firmly it is anchored to the data. In this regard, the ethnographer is advised to never lose sight of the data (Geertz, 1973:24-25), always keeping it within arm's reach. In drawing upon the principle of grounded theory for this research, as advocated by Glaser and Strauss, efforts geared to suspending pre-conceived theoretical frameworks imposed onto the data took precedence thus enabling theoretical perspectives to emerge and radiate outward (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:33-34, 37). As Lofland and Lofland concur, "analysis is conceived as an 'emergent' product of a process of gradual induction" (1995:181). From this perspective, analysis is not conducted in a linear fashion but rather as that which informs further collection of

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[48] On one occasion, a complete loss of battery power occurred during the interview itself while diminished battery capacity likely resulted in inaudible portions of initial interviews. My solution to these problems was to use an electrical outlet, as opposed to relying on battery power.

[49] The reasons for rescheduling interview times included: weather conditions (winter storm); work-related; personal commitments; and no-shows.

data and lines of inquiry as the research process progresses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:43). The data is given the opportunity to 'speak': the role of the researcher is to carefully 'listen'. To listen in this regard is to lend a critical ear.

A basic analogy of an inductive approach is the movement of theoretical ideas outward from the center (and back again) as new understandings elicit further inquiries. This spiraling effect is characteristic of inductive research endeavors. Generally speaking, the observations and interviews conducted during the current project evolved from an ongoing, interactive and emergent process indicative of ethnographic research (see Glaser and Strauss, 1967:2-6, 43; Lofland and Lofland, 1995:181-182; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Tesch, 1990:113). In an ideal sense, the grounded theory approach provides a useful template to follow as a guide while conducting research. But the 'reality' is that we bring our own cultural frames to the research process (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:180) which undeniably plays a role in how research is conducted and analyzed. This research endeavor is no exception.

Although I made every effort to follow the guiding principles of an inductive grounded theory approach, it would be misguided of me to suggest that the developing theory evolved solely from the data. It would be more accurate to acknowledge that my personal experiences, commonsense knowledge and theoretical understandings necessarily shaped and informed the analytic process, as others have also acknowledged (Agar, 1986:35-36,44-45; Denzin, 1989:64-65,126; Geertz, 1973:27; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:180,194-195; Miles and Huberman, 1994:18). Although the basic premise of induction is an integral part of encouraging an open and enabling analytic approach (as opposed to one that is closed and constraining), the notion of 'pure' induction is

nonetheless a fallacy (Geertz, 1973:27; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:176; Miles and Huberman, 1994). As Geertz eloquently states:

> Although one starts any effort at thick description, beyond the obvious and superficial, from a state of general bewilderment as to what the devil is going on – trying to find one's feet – one does not start (or ought not) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study....they are adopted from other, related studies, and, refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems (1973:27).

In this regard, questions related to theories of community directly shaped the way I looked at the interactions occurring within the support group context. My theoretical interests were driven more specifically by questions of social integration, how symbolic boundaries are constructed by discursive means and the functions viewed in the process. As I grappled with notions of boundary in relation to the concept of community, these questions inevitably sifted through to the research context. The ideas that emerged from questions brought to the research along with interactions observed within the context of the support groups informed further observations, questions, analysis and interpretation.

The actual 'doing' of analysis involves a certain degree of concrete (mechanical) applications as an integral part of the interpretive process. This alludes to a division conceptually, and not in any 'real' sense, between description and explanation. Or as Tesch (1990:114) suggests, a conceptual line is sometimes drawn between data management and interpretation. Although the distinctions made between organizing and explicating data are used as conceptual tools to better understand the parts of the analytic process, Wolcott recognizes that "in practice they are intellectually intertwined and sometimes happen simultaneously" (1990:114). Wolcott (1994) posits a theoretical

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distinction between description, analysis and interpretation but with a variation in emphasis that is contingent on the nature and goals of the research. In this regard, the descriptive phase reflects a process of sifting, sorting and selecting that necessarily includes and excludes (Wolcott, 1994:13). The more subtle distinction lies between analysis and interpretation. The former is viewed as the more systematic organization of the data into categories (the preparatory stage) while the latter is phase of transcending somewhat beyond the data to explore linkages and relationships among the emergent concepts (the explanatory stage) (Wolcott, 1990:23-35, 260-264). This marks a shift from the concrete to a more abstract transformation of the data (Wolcott, 1994:260-264). Wolcott describes this tacit difference in the form of an analogy: "Analysis exerts a kind of conservative centripetal force on the transformation of data, in contrast to interpretation's expansive, centrifugal one" (1990:175). But as Geertz (1973:24) cautions, interpretation that extends too far beyond its ontological roots does so at great peril. Metaphorically, the connecting threads lose their elasticity and threaten to snap, leaving that which was so carefully stitched together to slowly unravel. In basic terms, the interpretation consists of "telling a story" that "illuminates, throws light on experience" (Denzin, 1994:500, 504). But before the interpretation can be told as a story, we need to know *how* the story was constructed.

Observational Data: Fieldnotes

The fieldnotes from this research were constructed from observations of two support groups over approximately a nine-month period. Fieldnotes defined here "...consist of relatively concrete descriptions of social processes and their contexts" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:145). Or as Kirby and McKenna indicate, fieldnotes

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constitute record-keeping of the research in terms of "content" and "reflections" (1989:55). These detailed descriptions emerged from my observations of support group meetings. Reflexive comments were included at the time of initially constructing the fieldnotes and during subsequent readings.[50]

The content of my fieldnotes initially emphasized the details of the physical surroundings, the format/structure of the meetings (which varied somewhat between the two groups), the attendance, information pertaining to the formal presentations and the general patterns of interaction among members. As my theoretical interests and questions shifted in part over time, the content of my fieldnotes changed accordingly. This occurred in conjunction with ongoing observations, narrowing the focus and more explicit note taking during the meetings. As time progressed, conversational sequences were recorded (often verbatim) which captured some of the experiences frequently shared in storied form. As Hammersley and Atkinson state: "The actual words people use can be of considerable analytic importance. When we compress and summarize we do not simply lose 'interesting' detail and 'local colour', we lose vital information" (1983:153). This emphasis on dialogue reflected my theoretical questions related to how support group members engaged in discursively constructing social support.

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[50] The particular format I used was patterned after a model described by Kirby and McKenna (1989:55-62). A line drawn down the center of each page divided the description from the analytic comments. Detailed descriptions of the setting and interactions were entered on the left-hand side of the page with space directly adjacent reserved for analytic comments. I modified this approach, to a certain degree, upon deciding to compile and store my fieldnotes in electronic form as opposed to handwritten entries. My rationale for this shift was based on sheer expediency. To distinguish analytic comments from description, I used square brackets. Upon revisiting the fieldnotes, the number of brackets increased accordingly. In an effort to view and retrieve relevant data from the fieldnotes in an expedient fashion, I used various techniques: bold lettering, capitalization, multiple shades of highlighting pens and color-coded adhesive notes attached to selected segments of data.

One of the initial steps in the process of organizing the data is to construct a thematic list which, in turn, leads to a central thesis (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:180; Spradley, 1980:169; Tesch, 1990:142-144). This activity is generally referred to in the literature as 'coding'. Codes are defined as the "tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study" (Miles and Huberman, 1994:56). The more concrete and mechanical act of coding sets into motion the systematic phase of the analytic process. As Miles and Huberman attest, "To review a set of fieldnotes, transcribed or synthesized, and to dissect them meaningfully, while keeping the relations between the parts intact, is the stuff of analysis" (1994:56). Coding the data collected enables the researcher to "group the flow of raw reality into packages of items that are related to one another"(Lofland and Lofland, 1995:187).

In my analysis of the support groups studied, I assigned conceptual categories to segments of data, which in turn generated a list of emergent themes. While coding the fieldnotes, I also took into account the analytic comments from initial observations and those that had accrued upon multiple readings. Some conceptual codes were derived from the terms used by the members themselves while other categories reflected my own conceptual understanding or the concepts already situated in the literature. My aim was to look for indicators of the members' meanings of support and how they acted upon those meanings in the context of the mutual aid groups. I drew upon direct references made by members regarding the groups' perceived efficacy as well as the nature of the discursive exchanges. Attention was also given to the potential functions served by the discursive practices of members engaged in the processes of social support. These emergent ideas were labeled accordingly. A number of themes were acknowledged as

meaningful units within the data base as a whole. but only a few concepts were selected as most relevant in relation to the research question(s) and the theoretical direction ultimately taken.

This process of categorizing data represents the concrete activity of reducing data to a more manageable form (Coffey and Atkinson. 1996:8.26: Miles and Huberman. 1994:10-11: Tesch. 1990:138) and imposing order on observations that appear otherwise (Lofland and Lofland. 1995:185). Tesch acknowledges that "...the categories are not 'classes' for their own sake and are not perceived as rigid 'boxes'. but that the system exists for the purpose of bringing order to a collection of material that is not naturally arranged in a way amenable to analysis" (1990:139). Although conducted as a concrete task in one sense. it is also a creative activity that enables the extended 'movement' of ideas (Coffey and Atkinson. 1996:29). But as others contend. data reduction is only part of the analytic process (Coffey and Atkinson. 1996:8. 52: Tesch. 1990:138). The act of coding is the springboard to expanding the data into a meaningful and coherent explanatory framework:

> [Coding] ...can be used to expand. transform. and recontextualize data. opening up more diverse analytical possibilities....Coding generally is used to break up and segment the data into simpler, general categories 'and' is used to expand and tease out the data. in order to formulate new questions and levels of interpretation (Coffey and Atkinson. 1996:29.30).

This task of isolating categories and drawing distinct lines between the concepts is not as straightforward. however, as it might first appear (Tesch. 1990:136). We must resist any temptation to view the codes generated from collected data as rigid and inflexible but rather as labels that embody the inherent meanings we wish to convey. After all, to conceptualize is to portray meaning in a manner that enables a spotlight to

shine on the interplay among concepts. We might then envision the codes themselves as snapshots that temporarily suspend and frame the interactions captured in the text in meaningful ways.

Interview Data

Interviews conducted with twenty-six participants (twenty-five members and one facilitator) were transcribed into text and stored in electronic form. [51] To provide a sense of what the transcribed interviews looked like, the text covered approximately two-thirds of the page with a wide margin along the right side of each page for the manual insertion of categories and analytic comments. Transcribed interviews were read and analyzed in the order by which they occurred, not according to the specific group. In the transcription process, pauses and utterances were excluded from the final text. [52] Attention was directed instead to the general patterns of communication, the elements of the exchange and the nature of the discourse. In this case, I was interested in the descriptions and interpretations given by members as they reflected upon notions of support in general and, more specifically, upon the support group experience.

During the initial readings of the interviews, I coded segments of data into meaningful conceptual categories. Again, some concepts reflected the members' terminology while others represented my cultural and theoretical understandings. Upon subsequent readings of the interview data, color-coded notes were affixed to the relevant data segments for ease of retrieval. From each interview conducted, a summary sheet was then devised that outlined the conceptual categories (themes) generated from the data.

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[51] Technical difficulties encountered with three interviews resulted in partial transcriptions.
[52] Although the decision was made to exclude the pauses and utterances from the text, this information is accessible for future use given that the interviews are stored electronically.

This step was taken as a data reduction strategy intended to organize the concepts or themes in a way that illuminated patterns and/or linkages. Similar to Tesch's (1990:114-121) strategy of de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing, selected portions of data that retained their meaning when extracted from the main data base were given a conceptual label and then arranged into a coherent and meaningful framework. From these conceptual categories, a number of 'mini-narratives' were constructed in an effort to further my understanding of the potential relationships among the concepts generated. The process of creating multiple narrative themes that helped explain some aspect of the support group phenomena afforded an opportunity to weave various conceptual strands together in ways that seemed to reflect a more accurate picture of 'support' in context. It is the interplay among concepts that an interpretive analysis seeks to uncover and not merely the accumulation of themes or concepts. To generate an exhaustive list of themes is to reflect a static view and one that lacks explanatory power.

Linking Observations and Interviews

The next step taken in this analytical process was to depict the patterns connecting the observational data with that of the interviews. Upon reviewing the fieldnotes I compared the emergent themes with those generated from the interview data to determine common patterns, contradictions and linkages. Given the nature of the research questions(s), attention was given to the subjective meanings of support, the social processes underlying the interactions contained within the support group context and the mechanisms that conceivably served as a conduit.

Flow charts were devised along the lines of my theoretical and empirical questions to facilitate my thinking on what constituted the most salient components and,

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by extension, how those parts flowed together (or apart, as the case might be). Visual constructs represent the data in ways that illuminate the linkages and dynamic social processes that might appear unrelated on the surface (Lofland and Lofland, 1994:58; Miles and Huberman. 1994:11. 58. 310). Charting the movement of the concepts generated from the data and how they are interconnected in meaningful ways rendered the invisible social processes of support somewhat visible.

As a final note. in my ongoing efforts to narrow my focus and move beyond attempts to answer broad and all-inclusive questions. I engaged in some writing exercises near the end of the interpretive stage of the analysis to serve that purpose. This enabled me to revisit the data in a way that anchored the interpretation to the data without succumbing to any lasting temptation to stretch the analysis beyond its empirical base.

Methodological Shortcomings

Although ethnographic methods provide an accessible means to examine the multiple dimensions of social life. limitations are inevitable. First. as previously mentioned. the presence of the researcher potentially affects the interactions that occur within social contexts in unforeseen ways (Hammersley and Atkinson. 1983:75-88). In the support group context. the members might have altered their interactions or refrained from highly contentious interactions due to awareness of an 'outsider's' gaze. During the meetings some members made periodic references regarding the merits of the support group experience. These explicit comments might have been expressed beause of perceptions regarding my expectations as a researcher and, concurrently, their sense of obligation as participants. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983:71,75,111) note that participants' pre-conceived notions of the researcher's role might influence what is

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subsequently said or done. In this regard, it is advised that the researcher continuously reflects and assesses his/her impact and adjusts actions accordingly to enable further data collection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:104). In the end, interpretive findings are never tied to "pure" social contexts but rather are always shaped, to a certain degree, by the researcher's presence.

Second, the impossibility of capturing all of the data in a research setting (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:144,150) necessarily equates to the partial collection of data. This desire to accumulate as many aspects of the setting as possible in the early stages of the research is attributed to the uncertainty of which aspects might eventually be considered relevant (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:149). Especially in the beginning stages of this research, when explicit recording of observations during the meetings was kept at a minimal level, relying predominantly on memory resulted in the unintentional exclusion of some data despite efforts to include. Moreover, as Hammersley and Atkinson note, there is inevitably "some trade-off between detail and scope" (1983:156). Certainly the transition to more explicit recording of observations during meetings that accrued over time enabled more detailed notes of conversation and narratives. But at the same time other aspects of the interactional context were necessarily excluded.

Observations restricted to primarily a single setting – the meeting room – constitutes a third limitation of this research. Obviously, exposure to other social contexts such as the members' private domain or social encounters outside of the group context would have offered another angle to view how support was accomplished. Nevertheless, my research questions and theoretical interests focused specifically on the

support group milieu. In this regard, confining my observations primarily to this context was deemed relevant overall.

A fourth shortcoming of this research pertains to the interview phase. Emphasis on the formal interview functioned in part to set the dialogue apart from the support group context carrying with it the potential to preclude contextual elements. Interviews conducted outside of the local context likely compromised (to a certain degree) the participants' attempts to reflect on the support group experience, and to make the connections between self and the group. Perhaps increased opportunity to informally converse with members during the meeting time would have fostered a more explicit contextual link. The interview process itself frames and shapes the interview in particular ways (Mishler, 1986:52; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:112). Interviews are an accounting of experience and thus must be analyzed in ways that do not assume to be 'true' or self-evident (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:103; Silverman, 1993:199, 201). Moreover, both the interviewer/interviewee are aware of their mutual roles which inevitably affect the talk and actions that emerge from the interview context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:111; Silverman, 1993:90). Consequently, that which is revealed by the member (and the researcher) is contingent and always a partially constructed story.

Chapter V
The Context of Support: Settings and Meanings

In this chapter I begin by setting the stage and introducing the actors as a collective ensemble. My aim is to paint an image of the research setting that would be recognizable to the participants of the study, as advocated by Mays and Pope (1995:111). A description of the research setting familiarizes us with the site, the atmosphere and the participants – a re/contextualizing of the support group experience. In light of earlier descriptions of the site itself, I spend a few moments here describing the general format of the meetings within each group as well as offering a basic demographic profile of the group members. Following this basic description of the organizational aspects of the settings, I draw upon field research data to provide a sense of the experience and understanding of support from the members' perspective. The relational dimension of these situated contexts is emphasized here in terms of key identification processes that transpired among participants. In particular, the interplay between inclusion-exclusion and commonality-diversity are interpreted within a community framework, with *community* conceptualized as *process*.

Introducing Group A

Upon receiving permission by the members and facilitators to observe both groups, I began my fieldwork with Group A in October 1995. My entry to the group coincided with the early stages of the group's formation. As discussed in the methodology chapter, my role was primarily that of observer as opposed to active participant. Interactions with members were minimal overall, and generally occurred during scheduled breaks or before/after each meeting in the form of casual conversation.

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As members first entered the room, they greeted one another and readied themselves for the meeting by picking up any available written material and preparing nametags (used for the first few meetings). In the beginning, I was introduced to the members as a whole by one of the facilitators and asked to briefly talk about the research. The facilitator then asked if each member would briefly introduce him/herself to the group. Although seated 'within the circle' of members each week, I played a 'silent' role during the discussion time[53].

The general format of the weekly two-hour meeting changed somewhat over time. For the first eight scheduled meetings, professional members of the community at large gave presentations on a variety of topics (diagnosis, medication, tips on interfacing with public schools, behavioural management and alternative schooling). Typically, the first half of the allotted time was designated to this formal information component. Following that portion of the meeting, the facilitators suggested that everyone take a brief ten to fifteen minute break. At this time members either dispersed to a designated smoking area or remained to mingle with others. Some members helped themselves to coffee/tea prepared prior to the meeting while others perused the bookshelves, approached the presenters with questions or just remained seated. Conversation was frequently in direct response to the information just presented or, more generally, it revolved around pertinent issues related to the defined problem. Sometimes members engaged in conversation separate from the group's issues. Immediately following the break, the remaining time was devoted to the members' mutual sharing of experiences, specific problems, feelings

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[53] It is assumed that this restricted participation on my part was expected and appropriate in this context given that the members were aware that my purpose for attending was driven by research and not personal interests.

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and strategies that hinged on the common issue. Generally speaking, this second portion of the meeting was considerably more informal than the first. By this I mean that the concerns, issues, advice and information were spontaneously shared among the members (with little intervention or direction initiated by the facilitators). One member would relay an incident that had occurred or ask the group as a whole for input regarding an ongoing issue, while other members would respond with questions, ideas, strategies or empathetic concern. Occasionally the advice given was obviously tied to personal experience in dealing with a similar problem (generally relayed in story form) with the premise that "what worked for me just might work for you". While at other times the members' responses appeared more generic, that is, ideas offered as a potential solution that anyone might give upon evaluating the information heard. For the duration of this eight-week session, two professional facilitators were present.

Given that the support group meetings were originally advertised as an eight-week session, some members expressed interest in continuing the meetings indefinitely. After some discussion the members (with facilitator input) decided that they would continue to meet every other week: subsequently, one facilitator and one volunteer continued their involvement. As a rule, these meetings were primarily member-driven, that is, with minimal input or direction by the facilitator. Although initially the members expressed interest in having focused topics each week (material of interest to the members prepared by the facilitators), it soon became apparent that the members were more inclined to introduce and respond to issues of interest that pertained to situations or challenges encountered since the last meeting.

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A typical meeting began with coffee/tea preparations (generally a joint effort by the facilitators, volunteer and myself), casual greetings and a general 'settling in'. After members seated themselves, the facilitator usually suggested or asked one of the members to start, which re-directed the casual nature of the conversation to focus on the issues at hand. Personal situations that had transpired over the two-week period since the last meeting were brought up for discussion. Issues tended to be chronic in nature such as the child's behavioral outbursts at school or at home, lying, impulsive outbursts, bedtime difficulties, medication uncertainties and other specific incidents. Although the dialogue primarily hinged on feelings of frustration, a sense of failure and the sharing of potential solutions, moments of perceived success were also expressed and celebrated periodically.

In terms of the facilitator's level of participation, I observed minimal intervention. At times the facilitator commented on changes observed in the group (such as less concern expressed regarding medication) or reinforced the idea of members as advocates. For example, the facilitator would say, "*you* are the experts...parents can make a difference" (fieldnotes, A:54, 90)[54]. The facilitator placed decisions regarding the format of the meetings, topics of interest or continuation of meetings in the hands of the members.

Although the discussion primarily revolved around the defined problem in some way, there was also talk that strayed from the issue (especially on evenings when the facilitator was absent). Nonetheless, this talk was often implicitly related to perceived

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[54] Reference to observations in the field is formatted in a consistent manner that acknowledges the source of the data (fieldnotes derived from field observations), the page number for purposes of researcher access and retrieval, and specific group affiliation (A or B).

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stigma/powerlessness in other social contexts, which was then either indirectly or directly brought back to the common problem.

Attendance varied from meeting to meeting, ranging from zero to fifteen and averaging six. Over time, the size of the group progressively decreased until only zero to three members attended the meetings. A few demographic characteristics of the participating members provide a sense of membership. In all meetings, considerably more females attended than males – an average ratio of five to one. Of those members interviewed[55], reported ages ranged from thirty-one to forty-five with an approximate average age of thirty-nine. In terms of "current"[56] marital status, the majority of members (nine) reported their status as married and one as divorced. The various occupations declared by the members included teacher, homemaker, nurse, self-employed business owner, manual laborer, sales clerk and health care worker.

Introducing Group B

I began attending and observing the meetings of Group B in November 1995. Although both groups studied shared personal feelings, experiences and perspectives related to parenting issues, the formats of meetings depicted somewhat subtle differences. For instance, a prerequisite for joining and participating in the meetings of Group B included a two-part orientation session (three hours each in duration) led by the designated facilitator of the group. The information presented was based on the philosophy and techniques advocated in a published parental guidebook. In reference to

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[55] Interviews were the data source for age, marital status and occupational status given that this information was collected during this phase of the research; other information was collected but is not included here. Members who attended the meetings were not necessarily interviewed for reasons previously mentioned in the methodology chapter.

these guidelines, the facilitator frequently reassured the participants that they would learn the skills and strategies needed to improve their parent-child relationship.

Although both groups observed dealt with parenting issues, the problems encountered in Group B were marked by incidents somewhat more acute in nature. Given that this group did not revolve around a specific defined problem (or condition) per se, but rather the highly disruptive behavior exhibited by the child, the issues tended to be crisis-oriented (although ongoing problems reflected a chronic pattern over time). General concerns and issues that confronted these parents in their personal lives included ongoing truancy, a `bad` attitude, verbal abuse directed to the parent(s), confrontational behavior, physical altercations, intense sibling rivalry, uncontrollable/volatile outbursts, suicidal behavior, eating disorders and running away from home (fieldnotes, B:3-4). The resurfacing of similar problems over time (and similarly within the main support group) revealed a chronic pattern of generally disruptive and troublesome behavior exhibited by the child involved.

As each participant revealed a verbal snapshot of their `difficult` child, the gravity of their personal situation became apparent. An aura of despair filled the room and hung over the group like an oppressive shroud. The intensity of emotion was evident as some members cried not only throughout their own `testimony` but also, at times, when others were expressing their despair and frustration. Personal dilemmas were `unveiled` to the extent that the problematic behavior and feelings were highlighted and summarized; specific details were not provided in these brief statements. For example, one participant revealed that her child suffered from fetal alcohol effect as a result of her own drinking

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[56] This, however, does not account for previous changes in marital status, nor does it reflect current `blended` family situations.

during pregnancy, the associated guilt from her actions and that she has learned to accept her mistakes. Another parent expressed concerns about her younger child's safety as a result of violent outbursts and intensive bullying exhibited by the child whose problem had brought this member to the group. And yet another participant disclosed his alcoholic background, a two-year separation from his wife and a child who has suffered from both anorexia nervosa and suicidal tendencies (fieldnotes, B:4).

During these orientation sessions, the parents appeared visibly distraught, emotionally vulnerable and in rather desperate need for answers. In this regard, the facilitator would repeatedly tell those in attendance that the strategies introduced in these sessions were viable solutions and, moreover, that the main support group was a valuable resource to be drawn upon on an ongoing basis. Attesting to this claim, a 'veteran' member from the main support group (gathered for a meeting in the adjacent room) was invited by the facilitator to speak to the orientation participants during the second (and final) orientation session. This veteran member 'testified' to the value and significance of the support group in terms of personal success realized from the skills learned through participation in the support group.

Upon completion of these orientation sessions some of those who participated began to attend the meetings of Group B. At the onset, the facilitator asked the veterans to begin the meeting by introducing themselves. They were then asked to give a brief explanation as to how long they have been in the group and to tell the newcomers about the child (situation) that brought them to the group. When it came time for the newcomers to do the same, the veteran members were notably attentive as their comments were laden with empathy, concern and interest – an explicit effort to extend a

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welcoming and 'helping hand'. During these moments it was common for the veteran members to indicate that they 'understood' the newcomers' point of view and feelings based on experiencing similar traumas.

The general format followed in these meetings was somewhat more formal, overall, than that which I observed in Group A. By this I mean that each meeting was initiated by the facilitator in the form of a formal presentation grounded in the ideas advocated by the governing parental guidebook. The facilitator sometimes used flipcharts to highlight key points: information handouts were readily available to the members and were either distributed or located on a table in the meeting room most every week. Other activities that initiated the meeting (albeit infrequently) were relaxation exercises and word associations related to feelings.

A typical evening began with members arriving amidst the preparation of coffee/tea by the facilitator, volunteer and/or myself. Greetings were exchanged as members helped themselves to informational handouts, prepared nametags (for the first few sessions until everyone became acquainted) and settled into a chair of their choice. A few minutes after the designated start time of 7:00 p.m., the facilitator (or member) reviewed a chapter from the textbook guide: from February until June a member summarized the central points and then read them aloud to the group[57]. For a few minutes following this summary, questions were fielded which generally resulted in a brief discussion. Sharing time commenced immediately afterwards.

This sharing time was somewhat less spontaneous, overall, than that which was observed in Group A's meetings. Even though members often directly responded to

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[57] Each week the facilitator asked for a volunteer to summarize a chapter from the guidebook for the following week. Over time, the members expressed less reluctance or uncertainty to do so.

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another member's disclosure with suggestions or a request for clarification (especially as the evening progressed), the facilitator ultimately orchestrated the flow of dialogue. That is, the conversation was guided primarily by structured turn-taking. By this I mean that during each meeting the facilitator began by asking if anyone would like to begin. Usually no one expressed a need to start, in which case someone was asked if they would mind doing so. After this designated member shared issues or incidents of concern, the facilitator asked if he or she would like feedback from the group (if the members had not already done so). Some sense of closure was attained before the facilitator called upon the next person. This format was followed until all members were given a chance to speak if they so desired (most members chose to do so with some expanding upon the issue(s) more than others). A member frequently began by first directing his or her gaze to the facilitator. But as some members offered feedback or questions, the attention tended to shift in the direction of the group as a whole. When certain issues surfaced of a more serious nature (such as suicide and heavy drug use), the members usually remained silent. The facilitator then responded by acknowledging the seriousness of the situation and sometimes suggested that the member contact the center for a private consultation.

Emergent topics were often tied to particular situations that had transpired during the previous week. The sequence of events was briefly recapped to the group as a whole. Typically, each member began with an evaluative preface of the past week, that is, whether it had been a relatively 'good' or 'bad' week. If uncertainties arose, the facilitator (and sometimes members) would often draw upon the rhetoric of the guiding ideological framework initially presented by the facilitator. For example, when a child's problematic behavior was revealed to the group the question "whose

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responsibility/problem is it?" was used repeatedly by the facilitator (fieldnotes. B:97-98). This key phrase was taken from the group's governing principles as advocated in the parental guidebook. Over time, I noted that this perspective was reflected in some members' responses as well. For example, comments such as "just let him (child) experience the consequences" or "don't let him put the blame on you" (fieldnotes. B:142) mirrored the philosophy espoused by the facilitator. When the talk revealed efforts taken and indications of positive change, the facilitator typically offered encouragement by commending members for this turn of events. Comments frequently heard throughout most meetings such as "good stuff, guys", "you're doing great", "you're making really good moves...takes awhile...things will go up and down...hang in there", "keep up the good work...you're doing lots even though maybe it doesn't seem that way...all of you are doing terrific things" reflected this positive reinforcement (fieldnotes. B:111,147).

Immediately after each meeting, I joined the facilitator and volunteer for a 'debriefing' session (the terminology used by the facilitator) to evaluate the meeting and express any concerns that arose regarding the members[58]. Attendance ranged from three to fourteen (with an average of nine) throughout the period of time that I observed the meetings (November 1995 to June 1996). Despite slight fluctuations in attendance, a sustained decrease or increase was not evident throughout the observation period.

A sketching of certain demographic characteristics of the members illustrates a profile similar to that of Group A. The stated ages of Group B members ranged from thirty-seven to fifty-three, with a mean age of forty-five[59]. Again, a significantly greater

[58] During my initial attempts to gain access to the groups, the facilitator(s) asked if I would join them in the debriefing sessions that immediately followed each meeting.
[59] This age span is somewhat higher than the predominant range of twenty-five to forty-four years reflected in the demographic profile of Canadian mutual aid group participation (Gottlieb and Peters, 1991).

proportion of women attended the group than men – an average ratio of six to two. Reported marital status of those members interviewed revealed the following: married (nine); divorced (four); single (one) and widowed (one). The various occupational positions declared by members included cashier, telephone operator, homemaker, teacher, customer-service representative, nurse, truck driver, research assistant, child care worker, manual labourer, insurance adjuster and library services assistant.

Common And Diverse Strands

Certain similarities and differences between the two groups studied were noted. The most obvious similarity is the fact that both groups dealt with parenting issues. Also, the location site was common to both groups as was the meeting room and, for the most part, the basic seating arrangements. Across the two groups, a higher ratio of women to men was apparent[60]. A combination of formal (professional) information with the sharing of experiential knowledge and feelings associated with the common problem was observed in both groups. The exception here, however, was noted in Group A after the initial eight-week session had come to an end. This group continued with informal discussions for the entire two-hour time period that reflected a virtual absence of explicit professional information either through presentation, documentation or a guiding set of formulated ideological beliefs[61].

Although both groups involved professional facilitators, more active intervention was observed in Group B than Group A. In other words, the facilitator's presence in

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[60] A similar pattern is evident in the findings from a survey analysis of Canadian mutual aid group participation conducted by Gottlieb and Peters (1991).

[61] To be more accurate, an understanding of the common affliction appeared to be understood among the members – an understanding based on knowledge derived from the scientific medical model. This is not to imply, however, that the members never resisted some of these knowledge claims.

Group A was less 'visible' during the meetings as members typically spoke and responded to each other without external direction. Group A's facilitator seldom but intermittently contributed to the conversation, remaining in the 'background' of the ongoing dialogue that transpired among the members. Thus, in terms of ensuring 'equal time' or opportunity to speak, no explicit efforts were taken. In comparison, the facilitator of Group B played a more active role during the meetings by guiding the flow of conversation from member to member – a process of structured turn-taking – as well as offering suggestions or posing questions for consideration. This is not to say, however, that spontaneous (undirected) comments did not occur among the members of Group B. Rather, the facilitator of this group played a more inter/active role that followed relatively the same pattern each week. In this way, each member was ensured the opportunity to speak if he or she so desired. Conversely, the onus to actively participate (or not) in Group A appeared to be overtly placed on the members.

An additional feature that distinguished the two groups was the 'presence' or 'absence' of a specific set of governing beliefs. The facilitator (and sometimes members[62]) of Group B drew upon an explicit philosophy, whereas the understandings related to the defined problem of Group A were generally acquired upon receiving a traditional medical diagnosis prior to entering the support group. For most meetings, written materials and informational handouts were available to the members of Group B which was not always the case in Group A. The facilitator of Group B consistently advocated the strategies/techniques of the guiding ideology as a viable working solution to the problems encountered. Solutions or perspectives grounded in experience, however,

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[62] Over time, I observed that the members began to use the phrases/ideas from the professional discourse more frequently in telling their own experiences and in responding to other members.

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were also shared among the members and drawn upon as a collective resource. But experiential knowledge was clearly the predominant resource exchanged among the members of Support Group A. with no explicit ideology followed (except for the common understanding associated with the medical condition).

Two additional characteristics that differentiated the two groups pertained to the nature of the problem and the size of the group. First. Group A primarily dealt with chronic everyday problems tied to a specific affliction while. conversely. Group B frequently portrayed crisis-related incidents that varied in type and intensity. Second. the size of Group B remained relatively constant as did the format of the meeting while. conversely. Group A's meetings became progressively more unstructured and member-driven coupled with a steady decline in attendance.

Turning to the Ethnographic Story

This introduction to the general setting. format and structure of the two groups studied was provided in an effort to situate my analytic findings in the context from which they were observed. I now turn inward to the dialogue and actions of members as they actively engaged in the practices of social support – an intentional shift to the micro-social processes of interaction and communication. Personal accounts and social interactions provided the substance from which my interpretations were formed. My responsibility as a researcher is to unravel the interpretive frames that participants use to make sense of lived experience (Denzin. 1989:109-110). By giving my interpretations of what I 'saw' and 'heard' in turn reveals to others the basis from which analytic claims are being made. According to Denzin (1989:64-65, 83, 120-121). this step in the interpretive process ideally extends beyond a basic gloss to a "thick" (rich. detailed) description. In

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this way, a comprehensive description personalizes and contextualizes the phenomena being studied so as to recreate the scene for the reader (Denzin, 1989:83). Emphasis is intentionally placed on describing processes by which individuals within a specific social context interact in meaningful ways (Denzin, 1989:49-50). Notwithstanding the integral role of rich description, one must ultimately move beyond description to *explain* the situation under study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:210). The explanation involves constructing conceptual linkages among the themes and concepts generated from the data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983:180; Coffey and Atkinson, 1996:7-8). I offer my synthesis of this process in the telling of this ethnographic story.

My thesis is that support group members engage in discursive practices that enable the construction of relational ties, the resistance to negative identity claims and the expression of both suffering and agency. In other words, members participate in constructing a sense of community (belonging and acceptance), resist felt powerlessness (stigma) and begin to repair damaged selves by acknowledging their constrained and enabled selves. Specifically, these processes are accomplished as members draw upon experiential knowledge, engage in processes of identification and position (present) self and others to reflect adversarial or congenial relations. A sense of community is fostered through mutual affirmation of constrained identities, processes of mutuality and identification with like others. In turn, this provides room for not only the expression of suffering, but of agency and resistance as well. It is through discursive positioning practices that the construction of symbolic boundaries is accomplished. Through communicative means, members legitimate and resist a sense of perceived powerlessness (stigma and suffering) while creating social bonds of significance amongst themselves.

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The concept of symbolic boundaries is heuristically useful as a means to enhance our understanding of how the processes and practices of social support are accomplished within these contexts of support.

First. I begin by presenting a general framework for understanding the initial processes of identification and the sense of community generated among individuals interacting within the support groups studied. Emphasis is placed on the members' perspectives associated with the experience of participating in the support group and the aspects deemed most salient. meaningful and beneficial. Although instances of members explicitly expressing what it meant to them. personally. to participate in the support group periodically surfaced. the meetings tended to focus on discussing and reflecting upon the common problem in order to generate potential coping strategies. This is not to imply that identification processes and the construction of community relations are not part of members' interactions. but quite to the contrary (a point that is specifically addressed in the chapter to follow). The interview phase of the research. however. provided the context for members to reflect upon the *experience* of their participation and to express their views pertaining to the *meaning* of support. Points of identification and the significance of social bonds among members frequently surfaced throughout the interviews conducted. Interview data are therefore predominantly featured at this point of the interpretive story. while observations of group meetings are drawn upon to a greater extent in the next chapter.[63]

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[63] The data are used to substantiate my interpretation of the findings in an *illustrative* manner as opposed to accounting for each and every instance of occurrence. In other words. selected excerpts from interview and observational data are used to explain predominant patterns that surfaced from field research activities.

An Aura of Despair

An ongoing theme of despair and frustration surface from both observations of support group meetings and interviews with group members. This is not to imply, however, that elements of hope and success are not part of the support group experience. But the sense of desperation surrounding the affliction – the common struggle - initially draws the members together in a collective quest to seek solutions. Identification with the common struggle continued to define the meetings throughout the period of observation: in fact, without this defining element the group would have no reason to exist. To provide a sense of the trauma and issues that members expressed. I spend a few moments describing what I heard during interview conversations and observations of group meetings:

> ...sometimes I wish [child] wouldn't come home and these are terrible things to say about your own kid, but sometimes I wished she wouldn't come home, sometimes I wished she died in a car accident, just horrible things. I don't know how I can say that, but you get so tired of being lied to and deceived...(Interviewee 18:B).[64]

> I was very frustrated, very depressed, ready to give up, wishing then I never had this child, thinking I was the only one in the world who had a problem like this, not knowing that there was help out there. And I had been going around in circles for about six months to a year getting nowhere, just going around and around in circles...(Interviewee, 14:A)

> We've been through a lot with [child]. I mean, you could say almost through hell. Because there were times it was very difficult. And we felt like we were coping most of the time, but there was still times when we wanted to throw our hands in the air and say, what do we do? (Interviewee, 23:A)

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[64] Interview citations are referenced in a consistent format intended to protect the identity of the individual as well as allowing for ease of access to the collected database. Numbers assigned reflect the order in which interviews were conducted, while the A/B designation refers to the group affiliation.

Overwhelmed. totally overwhelmed. I was at a loss as to where to go and what to do. I was embarrassed - those kinds of feelings that are hard to explain unless you've been there. But a fear that others in the community would find out and totally pull my husband and myself down or ruin our self-image we had in the community. Knowing it wasn't. or feeling that it really wasn't our fault. but at the same time asking what did we do wrong? Where did we go wrong?... (Interviewee. 24:B).

Similar perspectives surfaced during support group meetings of both groups studied. One member commented on the difficulty in finding child care providers: *"For two years I lived like a prison guard in my own home"* (fieldnotes. A:87). Other experiences shared in storied form reflect the ongoing turmoil in members' everyday lives and provide here a sense of the issues/problems members confronted. One member relayed a particularly difficult week:

[Child] is in trouble with the law again and we have not heard from him for a week. Police have been over at the house two nights in a row. searching the house for evidence...the entire week has been very stressful and draining...(fieldnotes. B:24).

A newcomer to Group B shared the following story of despair. infused with anger and anguish. as she informed the other members of her personal situation:

[Child] recently stole the car and has been heavily involved in drugs and alcohol. He is fourteen years old. I know you're supposed to be patient. kind and understanding like what we talked about last week in the orientation. but I've done that. I don't want to be anymore! I'm tired... (fieldnotes. B:87).

She continued on to say:

[Child] tells me to fuck off and says that if kicked out will support himself just selling drugs. Has been in lock-up for three months and seemed much better after being released. but now is worse than ever. He doesn't care about anything, he doesn't care about dying. (fieldnotes, B:87)

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During one particular meeting, similar stories of anguish were told by two members in succession. In a voice quavering with emotion, one member shared the following sequence of events:

> We've had a couple of very rough and tense weeks. [Child] took an overdose, two times. She was in the 'psych' ward – just been released because she won't cooperate. My wife has responded by becoming very detached. She feels that her mother doesn't care, or love her (fieldnotes, B:45).

This next story is based on a similar issue with common feelings of despair and emotional turmoil expressed. This member provided an overview of events that had transpired over the past few weeks:

> Since the beginning of February my [child] was grounded and rebelled by consuming over 45 Tylenol, but wouldn't admit she had taken them. It turned out that she had taken a large number. Blood samples taken in emergency at the hospital revealed that a large dosage had been consumed... had exceeded the limit and has possibly suffered permanent liver damage. I almost lost her...[at this point the member began to sob while one member seated nearby offered a tissue. Meanwhile another member reached out and lightly grasped her arm for a few moments in what appeared to be a comforting gesture] (paraphrased from fieldnotes, B:45-46).

A similar story by another newcomer to Group B revealed feelings of anger and a sense of being at the 'end of her rope': "*I could just kill [child]!*" (fieldnotes, B:88). The rationale for this emotionally-charged response was based upon the member's portrayal of problematic incidents whereby her child (fifteen years old) was "getting drunk and then roaming the streets in 30 degrees below zero". In describing her child's behavior as extremely rude - a constant barrage of offensive language – she emphatically stated: "*I am so angry that I could just shake her/kill her! I've had it!*" (fieldnotes, B:88). Another member of Group B who has attended the meetings from the beginning of my field

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research shared a personal moment of escalating emotions and actions. When the child was asked to leave after showing no effort to curtail abusive behavior. the child's response was to hurl obscenities in a fit of rage – *"bitch. slut. whore!"*(fieldnotes. B:144). The member then revealed: *"at that point I lost it and slapped (her)!"* (fieldnotes. B:144). And. finally. on different occasions two newcomers shared a traumatic chain of events with group members. The first story. as paraphrased from fieldnotes. portrays undeniably difficult times:

> My [child] had a serious childhood illness where she almost died...I knew something was wrong and I had brought her into emergency where they then released her thinking it was the flu or some viral infection. I returned a day or so later because I knew instinctively that something was very serious. was very wrong. At that point [child] had deteriorated even more and the situation was dealt with more seriously. She had been administered lots of medication which could have affected her behavior. but lots of things could be impacting upon the behavior. [Child] has seen violence from her father. I suspect abuse because she had a broken arm and bruised handprints on the back – a long slash-like bruise. I had a nervous breakdown one year ago: the doctors called it post traumatic stress syndrome. I've also had cancer and now [the doctors] have found two lumps. one in each breast... (fieldnotes. A:68-69).

Along similar lines this next story reveals a series of incidences. depicting the desperation of troubled lives:

> My [child] has been diagnosed with [three different medical conditions]. I lived in a small town but the whole town knew of my personal situation and. consequently. my [child] was being labeled at school. [Child] had been on [medication] but in March had suffered a heart attack and two strokes from the medication – is seven years old...Has been sexually assaulted while in the father's care...I had been sexually abused as a child for fourteen years by my stepfather...[Child] has been a witness to me being beaten...and often got in the middle of it all...(fieldnotes. A:117).

From these various accounts we are presented with an image that conveys a sense of members' feelings and experiences as they struggle with traumatic moments in their

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everyday lives. Although the actual experiences among members are not identical, per se, the child's disruptive behavior represents a common point of identification.

Identifying with the Common Struggle

To illustrate how the common struggle experienced by support group members serves as a central point of identification, I draw upon certain theoretical perspectives of community. These include the processes of meaningful identification among individuals (Kaufman, 1966:97; Gusfield, 1975:24; McMillan and Chavis, 1986:13), the common referent points that connect individuals to one another (Cohen, 1985:18, 21) and the collective value placed on the connection (Gusfield, 1975:35). Moreover, as previously discussed (see Chapter 2), identifying with the common struggle is a central theme that also emerges from many scholarly interpretations of the support group experience. Certainly evidence of this relational connection frequently surfaced in conversations from meetings and interviews of both groups studied. It is perhaps this identification with others that is considered a key precursor to generating meaningful social ties – a sense of community – among a set of individuals. We might assume that the intensity of the connection is somewhat dependent upon the nature of the identification. In other words, although we 'connect' with (or relate to) others in daily encounters and interactions, the point around which the connection occurs plays a critical role.

Shared adversity might be viewed as the driving force behind the construction of more intensive social ties if we accept the notion that one tends to feel the need to belong, to connect with others (especially in times of uncertainty). This idea draws upon community perspectives, most notably those of Scherer (1972), Sarason (1974), Gusfield (1975) and Erikson (1994), whereby conflict is regarded as that which fuels the

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development of what I refer to here as *social bonds of significance*. The adversity that stems from the common struggle not only sets one apart from the regular flow of social life. it is the 'glue that binds' certain 'wounded' individuals together. Moreover. the shared understanding derived from the common dilemma is a critical connecting node that initially draws individuals together and contributes to sustaining the social bond that develops over time from ongoing interactions.

As reflected in numerous members' accounts. identifying with others who have experienced similar traumas is key to the support group experience. When members were asked general questions about how participation in the support group had been supportive. the following comments given by a number of respondents reflect the value they place on identifying with the common struggle and the understanding that flows from that connection:

> ...you know. [the members] have the *same pattern of feelings* and I suppose the understanding. They *genuinely understand* what you're saying when you say it because *they've been there* (Interviewee. 10:B).

> ...there are *other people that are like me*...and they're still surviving and so am I. So there's more of a *bonded feeling* of similar things that. I guess. attracts. is the word (Interviewee 24:B)

> ...everybody in this group is coming from the *same experiences* or they're having the same experiences...(Interviewee. 2:A).

> ...[the members] know how you feel and you know how they feel. I think that's genuine...(Interviewee 19:B).

> These people dealt with it. and they're dealing with it everyday...they've gone through it. or are going to go through it because we had such a wide variety of age in children in that group. But you know. they can say, *we know what you're going through* and we can sympathize, may not be able to help you, but...(Interviewee 17:A)

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Early in the observation phase of the research. during an impromptu discussion regarding the feasibility of starting a support group for the children, one member suggested that different ages of the children might prove to be difficult. In providing justification for this claim, the member stated: "here at the parents' group, there is *a common goal* – dealing with our children who all have *a similar condition. We're like kindred spirits!"* (fieldnotes, A:36). This last statement alludes to the symbolic bond that coalesces around the common struggle. Individual selves interconnect on the basis of common suffering that in turn generates a sense of collective identity. Constructed social ties hinge upon common adversity, feelings and purpose of anticipating a future that is an improvement over the present.

From these accounts we can interpret that a sense of community begins to develop as members identify with others who experience the common struggle. Members encounter others to whom they can *relate*, others who can *connect* with the *common threads of adversity* in ways that those who are not confronted with similar dilemmas cannot understand (at least not on the same level). The experiences and associated feelings are expressed in the claims and stories shared within the support group setting. To be heard, understood and acknowledged by others who 'know', by virtue of lived experience, paves the way for members to cultivate *social bonds of significance.* Experiential knowledge therefore fosters the relational connection constructed among members. How community relations are managed and reproduced over time is addressed in the next chapter where I examine in detail the discursive mechanisms and practices members use to 'strengthen' social ties.

Observations of support group meetings also reveal evidence of this need to connect with like others and the salient role identification processes play in these contexts of support. As one member expressed frustration and anger regarding the perception of a social system that blames the parents. she explicitly acknowledges the value placed on the relational ties formed in the support group and the understanding received: *"I like it better in groups like this where it's about real life. where you can relate to each other"* (fieldnotes. B:48). From a newcomer's perspective. this realization was made explicit during one meeting: *"Everything I feel I can now see you've felt the same"* (fieldnotes. A:88). Other members offered similar perspectives during group meetings. For example. a verbal exchange between two members illustrates an attempt to connect. to relate. After one member traced the events of an emotionally charged week. another member extended a personal invitation: *"If you feel like going for a drive or go out for coffee sometime. just call me. We can just talk. I understand - I've been there"* (fieldnotes. B:22-23). In response to this gesture. the member gratefully stated: *"That's what's helpful in a group like this is that you understand where we're at"* (fieldnotes. B:23).

This empathetic understanding derived from similar experiences was also observed after one member's emotional disclosure: *"I don't know what to do or even what to say. The kids just don't seem to have any respect for me. I'm being held hostage in my own house"* (fieldnotes, B:127). In response. another member portrayed an understanding based on common experience: *"I sense that you're really frazzled and I understand that – I've been there, done that...(fieldnotes, B:127").* From the members' perspectives and actions thus portrayed we are sensitized to the collective identity initially constructed on the basis of shared experience with the common struggle.

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Processes of Social Comparison

Although the perception of commonality is the basis upon which members relate
to one another, processes of social comparison serve to differentiate personal dilemmas
among members. This aspect of the identification process draws upon the theoretical
perspectives of Borkman (1976:450), Killilea (1976:67) and Cohen (1985) whereby the
self engages in an internal assessment of how others are the same and yet different. In
terms of difference, comfort lies in the perception that the personal situation of others is
somehow worse than one's own. Empirical studies of mutual aid group contexts reveal
that perceiving others to be in a worse situation (Coleman, 1987:83; Levine, 1988:171;
Abel, 1989:223; Lavoie, 1990:81) contributes to the process of repairing a damaged sense
of self (Lieberman, 1979:224; Coleman, 1987:83).

This process of assessing and comparing one's struggle with that of others,
frequently resulting in the perception that others are battling worse conditions, is
reflected in a number of member accounts:

> ...you don't feel alone in the world, and I think it's helpful because
> everybody thinks, oh man, I've got such terrible problems, but you go
> there and *you find that your problems aren't as bad as you think* they
> are...you go there and hear about other people whose kids are in jail, out
> of jail, and all the other things that go along with it, and you don't have
> any problems. I think it's helpful that way which is the one thing that I
> did get out of the support group (Interviewee 25:B).

> ...finding out, hey, *we're not so bad* and it would get you through for the
> next few weeks. Kind of, oh, I can cope, and then you start feeling like, oh
> why me, why me, why me and you come back and you think, hey, I don't
> have it so bad. It was that kind of reassurance, that extra little
> boost...(Interviewee 5:A).

> I realized that we weren't the only ones with this problem, and *we didn't
> have the worse case scenario* (Interviewee 17:A).

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...I had a hard time talking about it, but after I came back a few more times and really got into other people's problems, then it helps because *some of their problems were so much worse than mine*. And I thought, well, maybe I can handle this (Interviewee 18:B).

...I felt even more comfortable talking to them after I realized *my problems were nothing compared to theirs* ...[the most helpful aspect of being part of the group was] knowing that *there are people who have worse problems than you do*...(Interviewee 25:B).

Just being there sometimes, listening to them, sometimes you go home feeling better having been there because somebody's problems are bigger than yours. That sounds terrible, but...I've heard that other people have said that too, well I'm glad I've got my child (Interviewee 11:A).

...you'd see the same faces and you get to understand that, okay, maybe I don't have it so bad because look at what this person is going through and *maybe I don't have it as bad as them*. So it made it a little easier to deal with what I had to deal with because you could look at what everybody else was going through...(Interviewee 16:A).

The value placed on identifying with others experiencing common adversities implies that this need is not being met in other social encounters or situations. While the following comments mirror the relational connection among members, they point more directly to that which distinguishes the group from other social contexts, that is, the perceived lack of understanding by those who cannot relate to the common struggle in the same way. In other words, the connection among members hinges upon experiential knowledge to which others do not have access:

...Because we've all gone through the same things, the same behaviors, the same fights with the kid, the different stages, *we've all gone through it so we know...we all understand each other*. We all know what we're going through. We've all gone through it or just going through it or what have you, it's just *a sense of understanding*...It was a relief to have people out there nodding their heads saying, yes, we understand you, *you're not crazy, we understand*. Whereas, the other places I went, it was like you need help too. They made you feel like you were crazy (Interviewee, 14:A).

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People there have walked the mile that you have, so *they understand far more than even being able to speak to my family or good friends* who have never had to go through that type of thing, even though they say, they're supportive and they are. The feelings, I don't think are really the same (Interviewee 24:B).

...it was almost a relief to know that I'm not a nutso Mom, *everybody else is going through the same, similar things I am, and they can relate to what I'm going through and I'm not here by myself,* and there's somebody I can talk to...I can go here, there's going to be somebody that I can talk to that will understand me. If you talk to your friends that don't have kids that have [medical condition] they're going yes, uh huh, and they just give you a pat on the shoulder, but *they don't quite understand it...*(Interviewee. 16:A).

...when you have a child with [this medical condition] you feel really different. Your kid is just not...the same as other kids, there's other issues involved and I think *other parents really don't understand* what you're dealing with. They say, well, I do this with my kid, why don't you do it with yours or why isn't it working with yours and they really have no understanding of what you go through. When I go to the support group it kind of normalizes me. I feel more normal whereas I don't with other parents of kids who don't have [this condition]. So when I go there I feel I'm normal. *These people are struggling with the same issues I am and they're not judging me and they're not questioning me* and it's just a big relief. And you need that fuel, it's like a fuel, you need that to keep going in the real world (Interviewee 15:A).

This perceived lack of understanding and, moreover, the harsh judgments (implied or stated) by those located outside of the problematic experience are specifically addressed in the next chapter where I examine the felt sense of powerlessness, constrained identities and resistance to negative claims that stem from a sense of exclusion. Although emphasis will be placed on the processes of social comparison *between* members and non-members, that which transpires *among* members will also be addressed.

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The Antithesis of Community

To extend the processes of identification further to emphasize notions of community I turn first to the concepts of isolation and exclusion as the antithesis of belonging and acceptance. We can assume that members' explicit references to the perceived benefits and value of relating to others who understand the negative impact of the common struggle imply that a lack of belonging and acceptance are experienced during the course of interacting with certain others outside of the support group setting. This sense of exclusion is reflected in a number of members' accounts:

> ...you feel *isolated*, as though other *people on the outside don't understand* or they perceive it as a discipline problem (fieldnotes, A:13).

> ...when you're going through a difficult time in your family, it's very easy to start feeling *isolated* and to feel that there isn't anybody that understands...it's very hard on your self-esteem...(Interviewee 22:A).

> Knowing that *you're not alone* and that everybody has the same problem, I finally feel like, no, I'm not the only one with this. I'd often felt very guilty about it because I'm thinking, what am I doing wrong? (Interviewee 1:B).

> I know that in the first two weeks what we felt was we were not in this alone, and came home from the group and said, yes, they are going through the same problems and the same or similar situations. We're not the only ones dealing with this kind of behaviour. And that in itself is a huge support, just psychologically knowing that *you're not alone* anymore. Because while you're dealing with it at home you know that they [group members] are going through the same or similar situations, so going through the group definitely helps you feel like hey, *we're not alone* in this (Interviewee 23:A).

> ...I guess when I got in there, I didn't feel that I was so alone and overwhelmed that this was happening in our home (Interviewee 24:B).

> I think sometimes people get to the point of total helplessness. They don't know if there is anything out there to help them and knowing that you can go every Monday to the group and just get things off your chest, you know that you've got some support somewhere and *you're not alone* (Interviewee 6:B)

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...the group helped so much in sorting things out, the people are understanding, and *you're not feeling alone*. I think we were getting to be a close group (Interviewee 8:B).

...remembering that *you're not the only one* because you have a tendency to forget that when you're in your house and you're looking at the walls and you think you're the only one in the whole wide world, it keeps you from being depressed and you can cope better (Interviewee 14:A).

You feel like someone listened to you and *you're not the only person going through it* because sometimes you *feel so alone* (Interviewee 7:B).

I think the biggest think though, is the fact that everybody's about at the end of the rope and they're looking for help, *feeling alone* and all that things that go with that, the frustrations, *the loneliness* (Interviewee 19:B)

Filling the void that accompanies this sense of isolation is implied in one member's emphatic relief expressed during a meeting upon hearing that others also experience bedtime challenges with their children on an ongoing basis: *"I'm glad I'm not alone!"* (fieldnotes, A:46). This statement echoes the sentiments expressed by others at different times throughout the meetings attended. During an interview another member commented on the salience of this felt connection as well as the desire for common ground:

I think a breakthrough for me was when one of the parents was talking about how it just drove him nuts because his kid had to have a fan on all the time in the house, in the bed, whether it was the middle of winter or whatever. And I jumped up, and both [husband] and I were there, and that was [our child]! Had to have the fan on all the time!...and that's when it clicked in on how much the similarities were, and that's when I started listening a little bit differently to what other people were saying to see if I could pick up on similarities that [our child] was doing (Interviewee 22:A).

As illustrated by this story, relating to others on the basis of a central connecting thread is a critical point of identification. That which had been misunderstood by this member is

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suddenly placed in a meaningful framework – a transition from chaos to coherence. It is thus interpreted that the constructed sense of community (belonging) hinges upon the shared understanding of the isolation and exclusion that accompanies experience with the common struggle.

Partial Identification and Constrained Community

Despite the evidence presented thus far that suggests members yearn for and acquire a sense of belonging from identifying with like others in the face of adversity. it would be misguided to imply that this identification is inevitable or complete in any way. It is important to note that despite the surface appearance of intensive social ties bound by identification with the common struggle. a certain lack thereof is expressed at the individual level. Although few responses reflect this contradiction. it warrants mention here if only to caution us against uncritical acceptance of that which might appear self-evident from observation alone.

Certainly a predominant pattern of unification among members prevails on the surface of interactions: that is. instances of partial or limited identification are virtually absent from observations of those participating in weekly meetings. Nevertheless. during interview conversations. some (albeit few) members acknowledged the tenuous nature of the social ties constructed. For example. identification perceived by members as limited or partial is revealed during one interview:

> ...I feel terrible saying anything, but the way [this member] spoke and the body language. it appeared that [this was]...someone who thinks this is my lot in life and there will never be anything better for me, and it's hopeless...Don't get me wrong. I was compassionate for [this member]...But you think. what hope do these kids have with a parent who is so messed up themselves?...None of us in the room could identify with [this member], although we felt [compassion], but if anybody felt the way

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> I did. and I'm quite sure that they did. we were dumbstruck thinking how
> hopeless the situation was. And you didn't know where to start with a
> suggestion...And not for a second did I think that [this member] shouldn't
> be here. It's just that all of us were so far beyond that stage in our lives
> (Interviewee 20:B).

> ...One [member's] biggest concern was that [child] wasn't
> listening...[This member] was weeded out fairly quickly from the rest of
> us. Some people were quite hostile to [this member] because [there were
> no real problems] as far as we perceived it. But I tried to explain to them
> that in [this member's] mind they *were* problems. and maybe they should
> go a little easier on [this member] (Interviewee 20:B).

Limitations of identification are also noted during an interview with one member despite

numerous references made earlier in the conversation regarding a perceived reduction in

isolation and a felt sense of belonging/acceptance received from participation in the

group:

> Right now I can't say that I really made that attempt to bond or to really
> use the support group in the way it can be used...I come back [to the
> group] because of things that my children are doing (Interviewee 18:B).

And. finally. notions of uncertain community surface during a meeting as members

discussed the feasibility of starting an advocacy group. A question regarding leadership

prompted the following verbal exchange between two members:

> What we need is a *solid* group! (Member 1)
> But this *isn't* a solid group – people come. people go...(Member 2)

This latter response implies that solidarity among members is. to a certain degree.

perceived as transitory and tentative. To reiterate, these claims are not introduced as a

counter-argument to the predominant pattern of constructed relations of community-like

dimensions. but rather as an acknowledgment of claims that suggest appearances on the

surface are necessarily partial images.

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A final point in relation to constrained community considers whether a sense of community is restricted from extending beyond the bound and insular set of relations constructed among support group members. Although this aspect of community was not apparent in observations of members' interactions during meetings, it surfaced periodically in interviews conducted. For example, the following interview segments allude to the constraining component of a bound and segregated set of intensive social ties:

> *...sometimes you feel like you need to help somebody else or do something or share the information you've got with somebody else,* but then *you don't know who to share it with or what to do...*I think it goes back to the point where we all come in feeling needy and leave the group feeling needed, and *we need to do something about where we're going.* We need to either do something in the schools, or make people more aware of the problems...*there's no channel...*(Interviewee 11:A).

> ...several of us from that support group are now starting up an advocacy group...That has stemmed from the support group. We just saw a need for children, we felt a need I guess from the group and the things that the group talked about is we picked out something from that we saw lacking and that was advocacy for our children particularly in schools...We have to go to the schools, we have to go to the doctors, we have to go to the different community agencies, we have to explain to other parents and we just felt that need was not being met for these kids...And so *maybe that's why our advocacy group is getting going because maybe you can only complain or air your problems so much and then where does that get you? Maybe we're just taking it one step further, well, let's get some action on some of the things we're talking about* (Interviewee 15:A).

> ...one of the things that I find with support groups is that *the most frustrating point is knowing when it's not working for you anymore and to make that break....*we were at the point where we were beyond needing specific help at home with coping and dealing with things, and *we were ready to go on to help in a broader sense,* so that in some ways, it was *like a graduation. We wanted to move on and help make a difference and make changes on a broader scale...*The starting of [this advocacy group] were people from the support group who felt the same. *They got to a point where things got stagnant in the group, where instead of progress...*(Interviewee 22:A).

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Although the theme of a constructed sense of community is a central thread that can be traced throughout the data. these interview excerpts allude to the constraining aspect of intensive social ties perceived by members to be restricted from extending beyond the parameters of the support group. Interestingly. clues regarding this felt strain in the sense of community constructed among members are hidden from view during ongoing meetings. Instead. evidence surfaced during individual interview conversations held outside of the context where participants regularly gathered. This constraining dimension of the community building process. however. has implications for sustained support group participation.

An Aura of Commonality

Nevertheless. the predominant pattern derived from field research suggests that identification with the common struggle (collective identity) and sense of constructed community creates an aura of commonality. By extension. this appearance of an integrated and united front homogenizes diversity of social status and/or belief systems among members. This interplay between sameness and difference draws upon Cohen's (1985:35-39) premise that certain diverse representations among a set of individuals are temporarily suspended in an effort to provide an illusion of commonality to those outside of the constructed community relations. As Cohen (1985) attests. this presentation of sameness or commonality serves to distinguish the group from others thereby fostering a collective identity. Some members discussed this aspect of the identification process during interview conversations:

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> I think we all *joined* on the same problem. Everybody that is there, and there's a lot of differences as far as age and occupation there. class. or whatever you want to call it, there's a lot of different people in there. but everybody seems quite *united* in helping each other with their kids (Interviewee 6:B).

> ...we were all different ages. different lifestyles. some of were divorced. some of us were married. *We were all different* but we all had a *common bond*...we all had the same problems with the kids. and we all fit together in a nice little family setting (Interviewee 16:A)

> There's a very warm feeling there. We know each other's names and we all share with one another and that in itself. being able to share with one another as hard as it is. being honest. the warmth that I feel when I go there. like *we're all equal*. Even if there was a doctor sitting beside me. he's no better than me and I'm no better than him. We have a child that needs our attention. *We're on the same basis. we're equal as people* (Interviewee 18:B).

Moreover. to encounter the diversity of social status and roles held among members. and often those perceived to be exemplary. is to offer reassurance that the problem does not rest solely with oneself. This dimension of difference is reflected in the following passage selected from interview data:

> One of the things that was really amazing was the difference and the diversity in the parents. There were some very religious people there. married people. single people like myself. people who were teachers. and people who dealt with other kids all the time. not their own. and yet they were having problems with their own...It made me feel better to see a happily married couple with one child - they didn't drink. they didn't smoke. they went to church and they were having problems...And in spite of all the coping tools they have. they were having problems and it told me that maybe it wasn't just because I was on my own (Interviewee 20:B).

Again, identifying with the common problem renders certain social differences irrelevant and inconsequential. So although diversity might be viewed as a resource – a source of comfort – the common denominator rises to the surface for all members to grasp.

Differences perceived by members as potentially divisive are relegated to the sidelines; instead, the common dilemma assumes center stage. Although different meanings and values ascribed to by members are inevitable (as Cohen would argue), interactions are predominantly geared toward accentuating the common 'playing field'. This highly congenial atmosphere of positive, non-threatening interactions coincides with findings from other studies of mutual aid groups (see Chapter 2). Actions and dialogue lean toward the development of consensual relations within the support group setting, minimizing diverse elements that might be perceived to divide these relations. This pattern of interaction reflects Goffman's notion of a "working consensus" whereby individuals construct and project an image of agreed upon or shared understandings of the definition of the situation while engaged in the processes of social interaction (1959:10). In Goffman's own words, "Typically, but not always, agreement is stressed and opposition is underplayed" (1959:238). This is not to suggest that discordant moments do not occur (since in fact they are inevitable given the limited information individuals possess of one another or the un/intended responses that can potentially surface while interacting with others) (Goffman, 1959:239, 249). But rather that individuals typically engage in practices geared to sustaining the interaction in an effort to refrain from interrupting the orderly flow of consensual relations and to avoid a sense of embarrassment that emerges from such a disruption (1959:10-14, 239, 242).

We might safely assume then that support group members are tacitly aware of the potential for alienation of members and obstruction of the supportive process if conflicting beliefs were to surface during group meetings. From interviews conducted outside of the support group context, some members acknowledged the notion that

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diverse (and potentially conflicting) perspectives or beliefs might impede the flow of support:

> ...you're going to have a division when it comes to people's basic beliefs...if you start putting religious differences or basic beliefs in there that's where you are going to get division...you can get into a long and heated discussion but it's not helping you with your overall problem, so you think, okay, right now that is irrelevant (Interviewee 6:B).

This is not to imply, however, that moments of contention or disruption to this constructed social 'order' did not occur but, rather, to acknowledge that conflicting values/perspectives were certainly less apparent. Although conflicting meanings and beliefs surfaced periodically during group meetings, the 'eruptions' were rather brief. Collective attempts were rather quickly initiated to gloss over the disruption in the flow of interaction. From an ethnomethodological perspective, this 'breach' in the 'definition of the situation' initiated a response intended to 'repair' the perceived tear in the social ties formed. Or as Goffman would suggest, individuals co-participate in social practices geared to "saving the show" (1959:239), that is, collaborative efforts are enacted to sustain the jointly produced definition of the situation. In this case, the posed threat from conflicting perspectives between members, in an atmosphere that was otherwise highly consensual and generally void of expressed moral judgments, was immediately clarified by those participating. Counter-perspectives were minimized or modified to render compatibility with expressed claims. Consequently, the relational connection among members in this instance, and others, was kept intact and thereby socially reproduced.

It is interesting to note that during an interview conversation, the issue of conflicting social roles resurfaced to a significantly greater degree than was observed during meetings:

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I found in the group I wear two hats. It seemed to me everybody in the group picked on teachers. and me being a teacher, became very defensive of teachers. as well as a parent of [a child with this affliction]. Sometimes I left very upset about the way they talked about teachers. Teachers are not there to be glorified babysitters. They're not there to be a second parent...(Interviewee 5:A).

Conflicting perspectives are therefore part of the support group experience at both the individual and collective level. When conflicting meaning systems occurred. immediate actions were taken by the members to clarify (repair) the discordance in an effort to return to the consensual interactions that dominated the meetings. Thus the group retained its appearance of a united front.

Certain contentious moments that surfaced within the group. however. appear to serve as a catalyst to intensifying the constructed sense of community among members. With a different twist. but resulting in similar consequences. the emphasis that members placed on differences (conflicting perspectives) between themselves and those located outside of this social context are interpreted as also enhancing a sense of belonging and acceptance within the group. Further discussion of these processes is elaborated upon in the next chapter.

Diversity as a Resource

Notwithstanding the critical role of a common foundation and consensual interactions from which relational ties can be constructed. sustained and nurtured. diversity of another kind - experience and perspectives - provide a valuable resource to

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the members.[65] Learning from the diverse experiences of others holds the potential for

hope – possible paths leading to a way out of the misery, heartache and sense of failure:

> I think *you need a good cross-section,* and if you have only single moms
> in a group, then they're not going to get as much out of it. The cross-
> section is important in ages, in situations, and I think there's much *more to
> be gained from a varied group* than there is from a homogeneous group
> (Interviewee 23:A).

> ...I think any experience a person goes through, you learn from it, and
> *listening to other people's experiences you really learn* from it. Of course
> not everything that happens to them can apply to your own life, but you
> can take what you need and leave the rest (Interviewee 6:B).

> ...there's a tremendous amount to be gained from having different levels
> [of experience]. It helps people move along quicker than having
> everybody at the same spot...I think of it as aerating. It keeps the water
> flowing, it keeps it clear. I think if it's the same group all the time it gets
> stagnant and there are problems sometimes with us kind of wallowing -
> the flow kind of stops. You need new people to come in and it doesn't take
> very long... (Interviewee 22:A).

> I come to the [support group] to focus on the [problem] and see how they
> deal with the education system, the medical system and listen to their
> stories and see their problems they encounter. Someone else has already
> tried it and failed...*you learn from their mistakes* (Interviewee 12:A).

> ...maybe I can use that idea....*Listening to other people's stories* and
> *trying their ideas, listening to what they've been through* and *what they've
> tried to do*...I'll try that and you really do use the ideas that some of them
> have...They do have some ideas that you never thought of before because
> you're always in the middle, you're always too pressured, too worried
> (Interviewee 18:B).

> ...somebody new coming into the group could possibly bring some,
> maybe not specific, but maybe something we hadn't discussed or some
> new ideas (Interviewee 23:A).

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[65] This understanding of diversity (difference) is conceptually distinct from that which the members perceive to be a potential barrier to support (the diversity of personal belief systems as the antithesis of support).

While participating in the group(s), members engage in processes of exchange that involved disclosure of personal information, advice-giving, receiving feedback and listening (or being listened to). The mutual exchange of social resources is predicated on the shared understanding of another's "pain" by virtue of lived experience and cultural expectations related to support group participation. This transaction occurs within an environment that promotes the exchange of stories, suggestions and advice. The principle of mutuality, as discussed in the community and social support literature, is integral to the support group experience (see Chapter 2). In light of established linkages between community and social support, we might regard support groups as embodiments of community-like relations that are reproduced through processes of mutuality. The mutual exchange of human resources is conceptually synonymous with "helping" processes. To reiterate from an earlier chapter, "social support is an expression of the ongoing interdependence between people; mutuality is its cornerstone" (Gottlieb, 1983:28). Mutuality is the "helping of any kind that takes place between persons who are regarded as both potential help-givers and potential help-seekers"(Shapiro, 1990:169). The interchangeability of roles as both recipient and provider of resources is recognized as an essential ingredient of the support process within the context of mutual aid groups (Killilea, 1976; Levine, 1988; Levy, 1976). As we are reminded, practices of mutuality are comprised of "reciprocal sympathies and concerns which people feel for one another" (Benn, 1982:59). Moreover, the action of "giving" is perceived as empowering at the individual level (Gartner and Riessman, 1984:19-20; Killilea, 1976; Levy, 1976; Coleman, 1987; Levine, 1988). How this principle of mutuality is understood by the

members of the support groups studied is reflected in the following segments selected

from interview conversations:

> ...even if I'm having a good week I know there's probably somebody in
> the group that's not and I feel I need to be there for support. Maybe I
> don't have anything to offer, but I'm there to listen...*I got so much for
> myself and being able to start feeling better about what was happening
> with me. I just want to be able to give that back...*I know how good I felt
> or how good I was feeling once I started the group...some of the newer
> people that were coming into the group...I could feel that they were
> feeling that way, and being able to be there to listen for them and maybe
> offering, you know, *just being there for them*. Whether it was listening or
> anything like that, for them to know that someone was there and caring...*I
> know as soon as I walk through that door I'm supported...But I like to be
> able to support somebody else* and I think we have to share our good with
> our bad because maybe something that's happening with me and my
> children is happening with somebody else and their children...I know if
> somebody's had a really bad week I often will give a call later in the week
> or on the weekend and just see, you know, how they are doing. I think
> people in the group did that for me...(Interviewee 8:B)

> Sometimes it's important to be able to talk about it...sometimes just
> listening...Another thing I found is being able *to say something that might
> help somebody else*...Or just saying, I know how you're feeling, has felt
> good for me to be able to say to somebody else (Interviewee 11:A).

> ...*we've been helped so much, we'd like to be able to help somebody else.*
> Personally, I don't want anybody to feel the loneliness and being alone
> that I had to go through (Interviewee 11:A).

> I felt, as I sat there over that period of time, that *I couldn't just take from a
> group without giving back*. So I gave what I could. At the beginning I
> know I could not give a lot and I did not give a lot. But I have that feeling
> that you can't just take from a group and leave, and I'm a very strong
> believer in that, that you also have to give back in order for things to
> work...Like I said before, *for me to give back some support when I didn't
> need it made me feel good, so that was emotional support for me as
> well*...[What keeps me coming back to the group is] knowing that I've got
> support and feel that these children are worth the effort and that maybe I
> can be a support to their parents to keep carrying on... (Interviewee 24:B).

> ...Part of the satisfaction that you get from support groups, is the fact that
> *you know you've got something you can offer yourself,* and I guess that's
> part of *the two-way street* within a support group. You don't just go for
> support, you're hopefully helping others (Interviewee 22:A).

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...we're all going through the same kind of thing, we're all in the same kind of boat, so we all relate to each other and one thing worked for this individual, well, it might work for me, so if you did it this way, well, hey, I've tried it this way (Interviewee 1:B).

I guess *it's that giving*, say, if we're talking to family or friends that don't have kids that are [afflicted with this condition]. For them, they're almost in awe of the fact in how you coped with all these things going on in your family and for us it's one-sided. The support is just going one way, they're just giving it to us, and I think it's important for self-esteem, for anybody's self-esteem, for it *to feel that it's a give and take, and it's empowering* (Interviewee 22:A).

I think it's important to come regularly...You might have an up day and it might help somebody or *you might hear some problem somebody's having and you could help out* with that. But just coming in times of crisis is really not supporting the group, as a group (Interviewee 19:B).

As substantiated by scholarly claims, and reflected in these accounts, the members perceive the giving aspect of the support process as personally beneficial.

The underlying sense of obligation or commitment to the exchange process – a sense of reciprocity – is reflected in the following excerpts from interview conversations:

I felt it was important to be there even if we'd had a wonderful week and nothing had gone wrong. I still felt a need to be there. In some respect, it's a show of support for those that are there, even though I didn't feel there was particularly anything that I needed. But there could always be something that came up in the group that I could use. There was *a commitment to being there* (Interviewee 23:A).

...So it's out of courtesy...*you have to put your needs aside and say this person needs me right now.* And I've got to sit there and listen to this person and help them come down off the wall type thing, you know, before they go back home... At that point *I don't think it's right for me to say, hey look, my needs are this, I don't care about your [problems] when they're there for me when I'm stressed out* (Interviewee 12:A).

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Evidence of a cultural understanding regarding role expectations associated with support

group participation surfaced during a meeting as one member apologized to the group as

a whole for not attending the last few meetings:

> My husband and I felt we didn't need to be here but we forgot that a
> support group is not just about *getting* support but *giving* it as well!
> (fieldnotes. B:15).

Emphasis on "giving" was accentuated at different times such as when new members

entered the group. Observations reveal that veteran members were especially attentive

and responsive to newcomers by illustrating that they could relate to their suffering, to

their "pain. This gesture can be conceptually linked to the active construction of

community (belonging) – cultivating social bonds of significance. Specific reference to

different role expectations associated with veteran and newcomer status are revealed in

the following member's interview account:

> ...We [veterans] recognize when new members come in...because they're
> at a high stress level so we take the mode of the sounding board...*We can
> help you let it out type thing, we understand* and we just show mainly by
> listening...Of course we know how they feel because we've been there
> before. *We know exactly the right questions to ask* to get them to
> come....*And then we share some of our stories so they acknowledge that
> we do understand...With the older ones it's more of a check-up* – how are
> you doing, this and that, how's Johnny this week and any big problems
> that came up that we might be able to help solve together...I shouldn't say
> solve, really, but let's try this and let's try that and you come up with
> suggestions for each other...(Interviewee 12:A).

> I think what usually happens is, with new people coming in, *we try to give
> more time to help them feel welcome, to feel that they're being heard, help
> them out with some of their issues.* But sometimes that is a detriment to
> people that have been there for awhile and are still very much needing
> some help. But often there isn't a large or frequent turnover, which is
> good. It gives the group time to be able to come together...(Interviewee
> 24:B).

From the excerpts of data provided thus far we catch a glimpse of the value and significance placed on the points of identification that revolve around the common struggle. The common strands of experience, fused by shared understanding of the common affliction, link members together relationally, giving the appearance of a united front. Although this common foundation provides the basis for identification and unification among group participants, the diversity of experience and perspectives plays an important role as a necessary resource for personal growth and anticipated futures. In addition, processes of social comparison tend to differentiate self from the perceived commonality by perceiving the personal traumas of others as somehow worse than one's own. This comparative process contributes to the exoneration of self-blame - a step toward self-renewal.

Concluding Remarks

As outlined in this chapter, my interpretation of research findings suggests that members entered the support group carrying a burden of despair, hopelessness and a sense of being disconnected from others – a gathering of the wounded. Upon meeting others whose stories, feelings and perspectives resonated with one's own, relational ties among members were initially constructed. The common struggle was the pivotal point around which a web of community relations was spun. Experiential knowledge of the common struggle formed the basic foundation upon which members identified with like others. Processes of mutuality – giving and receiving – facilitated the sharing of experiences in discursive form and provided room for expressed agency. To a certain degree, shared adversity equated to shared understanding, despite elements of diversity. Members responded to the common elements in the stories of others and frequently

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commented on that which they could relate to and understand. During group meetings, consensual interactions were prevalent with minimal conflicting perspectives observed. This appearance of a united front served to sustain a sense of community constructed in order to promote inclusion of individual members. Because feelings of isolation (and exclusion) are part of the problem. per se. concerted efforts were made to include each member. Moreover. the sense of despair and exclusion that surfaced in members' disclosures were not only tied to the common problem itself but the perceived alienation and lack of acceptance that stems from the judgments of others located outside of the common struggle.

It is this notion of the interplay between constrained identities. constructed community and resistance to a denied self that lies at the core of my analysis (to be examined in detail in the next chapter). How members collectively shifted from a preponderance of expressed exclusion and despair to an increased perception of belonging and hope is of particular interest. In particular I turn my attention in the next two chapters to *how* a collective sense of suffering was drawn upon by members to allow for expressed agency.

Chapter VI
Symbolic Boundaries and the Discursive Positioning of Self and Other

As outlined in the previous chapter. individuals entered the support group settings under an umbrella of uncertainty. chaos and despair. compounded by a sense of isolation and exclusion. Upon meeting others who shared their suffering. however. the oppressive web of hopelessness and despair began to slowly unravel. In this chapter. and the next. I specifically examine *how* the experience of *suffering* and *agency* was expressed. negotiated and managed among participants of the two support groups studied. and the implications that arise from these interactions. While this chapter focuses on the element of suffering and how it was portrayed and communicated among participants. the following chapter is devoted to the interpretation of how a sense of human agency (the antithesis of suffering) was articulated and accomplished among support group members. By no means does this imply that these two concepts are mutually exclusive. but rather are conceptually and inextricably linked. The rationale for conceptual separation is for logistical purposes only.

Emphasis in both chapters is placed on the discursive methods or practices that members used to not only acknowledge the suffering and legitimate the sense of powerlessness but also to express moments of efficacy and agency. The concepts of symbolic boundaries and positioning practices are applied as analytic tools to explain interpretive findings from the field research data collected. The un/intended consequences of these communicative practices appear to include a solidification of the social bond constructed among members within the group as well as the provision of room for resistance to suffering through expressed agency. In other words, a damaged or wounded self seemingly underwent a process of healing as a result of members'

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collective efforts. The support groups provided the site wherein individuals collectively united, legitimated their suffering through mutual corroboration and then outwardly projected an image of efficacy (agency).

Emphasis is placed on subjective meanings related to elements of suffering and agency, the discursive practices employed and the resources members drew upon while actively engaged in the processes of constructing social support. My interpretations are based on observations of members' interactions and, specifically, the dialogue that transpired during support group meetings. Supplementing my observations are various selected moral assertions and narratives shared during conducted interviews. Although linkages to theoretical perspectives previously discussed are introduced periodically, the thrust of this chapter is to provide a clearer interpretation of analytic findings with earlier theoretical chapters used as a backdrop for this discussion.

The perception held by members that external others[66] bestow negative judgments upon their parental actions was frequently expressed during meetings of both groups studied. Through processes of corroboration, members collectively acknowledge and affirm the expressed claims of injustice. Their perceived marginal status is collectively validated and therefore deemed legitimate by virtue of acquired experiential knowledge. The concept of symbolic boundaries is used here once again as an explanatory framework to examine how members communicate a sense of powerlessness and constrained agency associated with the perception that external others negatively or harshly judge parental actions.

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[66] I frequently employ the term "external others" to refer to non-members and, more specifically, those located outside of the defined problem.

As Cohen (1985:12-13, 108-109) contends, the symbolic referents to which individuals collectively relate provides the context for joint identification – a collective identity – that is necessarily separate from those outside of the constructed set of relations. Symbolic representation, according to Cohen (1985:92), assumes multiple forms with ritualized practices as a critical means to render the chaotic more coherent and to reconcile shifting or conflicting discourse. In reference to the support groups studied, however, certain symbolic forms are less apparent as distinguishing identity markers. For example, the attire worn by members did not stand apart as unique from that which might be worn in a number of other social contexts. Certainly, the ritual of meeting each week to focus on coping strategies related to the common problem sets the group apart from other informal interactions in everyday lives. In addition, the specific ritualized turn-taking practices that structured the conversational flow in Group B's meetings, for example, represent formalized interactions that would not likely occur in everyday interactions. The emphasis placed on symbolic rituals in Cohen's (1985) theoretical analysis does not sufficiently address the specific nuances of social interactions.

The symbolic referent drawn upon most significantly in this interpretation is that of language use and discursive practices that members not only identify with, but use (unwittingly perhaps) as leverage to receive validation and legitimation of common suffering, as well as to initiate resistance to the felt stigma. As I will illustrate, the terminology members used to frame the interactions (for example, 'the system') does not necessarily hold the same meaning among members, as became apparent during interviews when questions pertaining to the meaning of 'the system' elicited a rather broad range of meaning. Yet this term was drawn upon frequently during meetings as if

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a common understanding prevailed. Members used the term in relation to expressing experiences encountered in various social contexts and responded as if meaning was universally understood. In other words, the frequent reference to `system talk` is interpreted here as a symbol that frames members' experiences in particular ways during situated interactions of support (a point that is examined in detail in a forthcoming section of this chapter). On a basic level, a common understanding enables meaningful and sustained interactions while still allowing for variation of specific meanings. This premise is modeled upon Cohen's (1985) assertion that symbols, by virtue of their common referent points, serve as connecting nodes without precluding specificity of meaning held among individuals. Thus, the symbol enables a set of individuals to relate to one another based on a common or basic understanding, while still providing room for individual differences. Adherence to a common symbolic form gives the appearance of a cohesive unit to others – a collective identity.

Although the despair and frustration that members expressed often pertained to difficulties directly associated with the `problem`, as emphasized in the previous chapter, additional prevalent themes of powerlessness, stigma and exclusion surface as yet another dimension of the common struggle. These themes resonate throughout the field research conducted with both groups whether during interview conversations or observations of group meetings. The devaluing of self, associated with these concepts, is interpreted here as stemming from contentious moments in the interactions of everyday lives. As expressed by members, these instances reflect the powerless and constrained position in which they perceive themselves – selves as denied, damaged and devalued. Evidence of

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this portrayed image of perceived 'otherness' is reflected in the following selected excerpts from field observations.

Perceived 'Otherness'

Previously discussed theoretical perspectives in Chapters 2 and 3 drew attention to the key role that perceived stigma plays in both the construction of community and the management of identities in general and. more specifically. in the context of mutual aid groups. It is the dimension of suffering in personal lives that fuels the mutual assistance response. Although the terminology sometimes varies among theorists[67]. the basic meaning of stigma encompasses feelings of marginalization and a perception of self as different from others – a difference perceived as negative. It follows then that stigma involves notions of constrained identity or a sense of denied agency. I draw upon these terms and others - wounded identities. damaged selves and perceived otherness - to name but a few. Despite the array of descriptive language used. the basic intent is the same. That is. one's *perception* of self is viewed as somehow lacking credibility or worthiness on some level (Goffman. 1963:3. 128-129). While I use various descriptive terms in my interpretation of field research findings. the basic conceptual understanding is tied to Goffman's premise of stigma: a perceived difference from others that is somehow

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[67] For example. some of the different referent points of perceived otherness used by theorists include: stigma (Goffman); deviance (Erikson); constrained selves/sufferer (Brown); victim (Karp; Hollihan and Riley). This list is by no means exhaustive but reflects the range of conceptual theoretical and empirical application.

discredited by self and others. Emphasis is placed on the self-perception of stigma and the experience of stigmatization. In other words, the perceived 'otherness' that one feels from a sense of exclusion is the basic understanding that informs this ethnographic interpretation.

A descriptive image of what I refer to here as constrained identity is reflected in the following perspectives shared by two members during interview conversations:

> ...you already feel damaged....Having been through the experiences I've been through. *I came [to the group] feeling very insecure and no self-confidence* in what I was doing because some people were also telling me that that's the way it was...(Interviewee 11:A).

> ...all of us, who have had kids that [have this condition], have had experiences where *people have said that the problem is our parenting of the child, so we've had doubts about our parenting ability, and we're kind of at a loss,* which is why we end up in a support group (Interviewee 22:A).

Two levels of identity are implicitly embedded in these claims: (a) the sense of uncertainty and self-doubt surrounding one's identity as a parent; and (b) collective identification with 'like' others. The first example more closely reflects an individual level of constrained identity whereas in the second perspective this individual sense of suffering is extended to the active process of seeking other sufferers with the expectation that understanding, acceptance and assistance will be realized.

Additional specific examples of constrained identities and a personal sense of powerlessness noted from field observations include one member's comment related to the parent-child relationship: "*I feel taken advantage of*" (fieldnotes, B:152). Another example of felt powerlessness (and otherness) is evident from a member's evaluation of an especially difficult week with a child who engages in verbally abusive accusations and

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places blame on the parent for a perceived 'hard' life: *"I feel conned – really conned"* (fieldnotes. B:132). Yet another instance of powerlessness is reflected in one member's statement: *"I feel a loss of control over not being able to make my own decisions"* (fieldnotes. A:125). Similar images of constrained identity and a sense of felt powerlessness are captured in the following member's claim. But in this instance. the source of the problem is perceived to lie with external others who question or judge members' parental actions: *"*When a child becomes a young offender. *you cease to be a parent. cease to be of any importance!* They take your child away and that's it..." (fieldnotes. B:162). In response to this claim. a number of members (as well as the group's facilitator) concurred with a comment such as "it's just not right" (fieldnotes. A:162). Consequently. the expressed claim of felt powerlessness and unworthiness is legitimated by the collective response. Audience participation is interpreted here as an extension to Eder's notion of intensifying relational ties among individuals engaged in "collaborative talk" (1988:225). especially when the agreement is based on a jointly held negative perception (1988:230). In this regard. the interactions described above reflect a similar process. The active process of corroborating a sense of felt powerlessness in turn generates a sense of community among those participating.

The implication here is that some identities are stripped away by the actions and perspectives of external others. In this case it is the identity of 'good' parent that was subject to erosion by others' judgmental actions and was frequently expressed as such. But even though support group members often expressed their social status (of parent) as marginalized and condemned by certain others or institutionalized practices, they also

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challenged this evaluation at times by collectively negotiating definitions of moral appropriateness.

Additional illustrative examples selected from field research data depict the perceived constraints on self. One member's feelings of powerlessness are revealed in reference to actions taken by Social Services:

> *They are really keeping me in the dark* where my [child] is concerned. Basically, all they will say is that I didn't protect him, *but I feel like I didn't have any control over what happened to him in the father's care...I want to move forward, but sometimes I feel like I'm not allowed to* (fieldnotes, A:119)...The foster parents don't seem to understand or care about my situation and neither does the social worker (fieldnotes, A:121).

During an evening when an external representative of government initiatives attended a support group meeting (Group A), a number of moral claims are expressed by different members:

> We are always playing the role of advocate...*always on the defense!*
> You *have to fight for everything* you need!
> *Not told* where the resources are!
> *They're the ones with the answer – we're just the stupid parents*, what do we know! (fieldnotes, A:86)

Earlier during this discussion, the perception of voices being denied is evident in the following comment: "*They do not listen, these doctors, to what we have to say* – wham bam thank you!" (fieldnotes, A:82). Along similar lines, a member shared a personal 'life' story with the group that highlights points of medical uncertainty, self-discovery and perceived misdiagnosis. In the conclusion of this story, a denied sense of self is expressed in relation to the medical community: "*I have this knowledge and they don't listen!*" (fieldnotes, A:108-109). And, finally, the perceived lack of acknowledgement from others and the sense of felt exclusion (isolation) is reflected in the following

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member's statement regarding negative events related to the child's conduct: "The hard thing is that people at work and church are acting as if nothing has happened in your life" (fieldnotes, B:150).

These selected stories and assertions drawn from various field observations paint an image of powerlessness and constrained identities. A perceived lack of acknowledgment, denial of access to resources, contested knowledge claims and unheard voices resonate throughout the dialogue of support group members engaged in situated interaction. In this light, the pattern of damaged selves that resurfaces throughout the members' interactions is considered a source of conflict and thereby an impetus to the construction of community relations. It is this felt presence of 'conflict', in its various forms, that other theorists have similarly acknowledged as a primary catalyst and essential part of the social construction of community (see Chapter 2). I would add that contentious social factors, or the perception thereof, are integral to the resistance of negative identity claims, the management of constrained and enabled selves, and the presentation of identity as transformed. The sense of powerlessness, stigma and perceived injustices (from negative judgments/moral claims by others located outside of the problem) are examples of such contentious elements. How experiences of perceived conflict from other social contexts were drawn upon by members and subsequently dealt with in the situated context of the support groups studied is of particular interest.

This collective sense of perceived 'otherness' yields an *outsider* status for the individual members and the group as a whole. But this sense of exclusion that members experience translates to feelings of inclusion among others similarly affected – a sense of community. The perception that one is being treated differently than others, that is, in a

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manner that denies voice and agency, projects an image of standing alone on the outside of cultural acceptance. An implied sense of boundary – insider and outsider – begins to emerge from the stories and moral claims shared by the members during both interviews and support group meetings.

The Construction of Symbolic Boundaries

The concept of symbolic boundaries is therefore a conceptually relevant term to aid in our understanding of how members collectively draw upon and express perceptions of their marginalized status. Moreover, it provides a conceptual framework for describing and interpreting discursively shared experiences and perceptions communicated among support group members who, in turn, describe and interpret self and others. In drawing upon notions of insider-outsider we can begin to understand how individuals 'see' themselves in relation to others. We are reminded that identity is realized only through social interaction (Charon, 1989:74; Cohen, 1985:109; Tinder, 1980:34). In an effort to better understand ourselves we engage in processes of comparison with others which necessarily constructs conceptual dichotomies (Cohen, 1985:109, 117). The significance of the group in this regard is that it provides a context for cultivating a positive sense of self:

> ...groups provide their members with a positive social identity and that the positive aspects of social identity were inherently comparative in nature, deriving from evaluative comparisons between social groups. It followed that to provide positive social identity, groups needed to distinguish themselves from other groups and that intergroup comparisons were focused on the maintenance and establishment of positively valued distinctiveness for one's group (Turner, 1996:16).

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These symbolic markers of inclusion and exclusion therefore serve to not only foster a sense of community among common sufferers, but to manage or perhaps even alter identity claims as well.

The support group provides the context for building community-like relations and the subsequent negotiation, repair and transformation of damaged identities. This analysis examines how this insider-outsider dichotomy is reflected in the dialogue and interactions of members. To enhance our understanding of this relationship attention is directed, for the moment, to the *presentation of other* and the positioning practices (external and internal) members apply to facilitate this process of constructing symbolic boundaries by discursive means. Again, this concept of 'positioning' is drawn upon from the scholarly works of Davies and Harre (1990) as outlined in Chapter 3. My specific application is on the positioning of self and others in the stories and moral claims told by support group members that transpired within the context of situated interaction. As Davies and Harre (1990:32,52) contend, the concept of positioning is useful in tapping into the shifting nature of social interaction and the relational dimensions of social life. It enables us to look more closely at the strategies individuals use to manage and sustain interaction, and their identities, in the context of mutual aid groups.

From field observations and conducted interviews, two broad categories of external 'other' are devised: (a) others as lacking the experiential knowledge or the 'authentic' understanding that is based on the common struggle: and (b) others as adversary (the enemy). In both cases the positioning practice is one of positioning *external* others, that is, those situated outside the support group context. Members' references to both designated forms of 'other' provided a basis for justification of felt

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powerlessness, stigma and severed (or strained) relational connections in broader social contexts. How members articulated these constraining elements are explained using interview and observational data as empirical evidence of this ethnographic story.

Positioning 'Others' as Outsiders

First, the perception that others lack 'authentic' understanding of the common problem illustrates a conceptual line that distinguishes self from external others as well as setting the group, as a whole, apart from others. Hence, a sense of community (belonging) is generated among the members that in turn excludes others whose experiences do not intersect with those expressed within the group. Stories and moral claims shared are the mechanisms that members draw upon to pull the community strands together. A collective identity is thus formed around the common struggle and the shared understanding that flows from that central point of identification – an identity that is necessarily distinct from others. Turner reminds us that groups play an important role in identity formation given that people classify themselves according to experiences with others:

> ...the perception of people in terms of their social group memberships
> leads to a tendency to exaggerate the perceived *similarities within* groups
> and the perceived *differences between* groups (1996:13, emphasis added).

As the following interview accounts reveal, 'authentic' understanding hinges upon lived experience. In this light, others are perceived as 'outsiders', positioned outside of the experience and therefore outside of the constructed set of relations:

> Because your friends don't understand, *no one understands because they haven't gone through it.* They have normal, healthy kids who listen and when you get a kid that doesn't listen then they stick out. And it's the parents' fault and there's something wrong with the kid, you know, *they*

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just don't understand. They don't have a clue what we go through and the same with the teachers and the principals, they don't know (Interviewee, 14:A).

...I don't think that anybody that has not gone through what we go through have any sense to that type of feeling. So they wouldn't know how to reassure you that it's okay...*I don't think anybody outside of this group can understand.* You know, when your neighbour across the street sees that the kid hit you with a stick, he's going to say, kick that kid out... *People on the outside* [think] you're nuts if you let that kid back into the house (Interviewee 10:B).

...you can go to other people for their advice as well but if they don't have a child that has this problem *they don't see things the same way* that someone else does who has a child like that...(Interviewee 11:A).

...that's what makes it a supportive group because you're there to understand each other, rather than someone [who is not going through the experience]. And it's no fault of theirs, you know, I'm not saying those are terrible people out there. It's *unless you walk around in my shoes you don't understand*...(Interviewee, 12:A).

I probably have the most trouble with people in the church who expect certain things and rules and regulations to be followed *having never gone through any situations themselves, having no idea what they're talking about.* You know what I'm saying? I always say, you know you haven't walked in another's moccasins... (Interview 6.B).

Our friends and that, they know there's a problem, but *they don't have firsthand experience...a lack of understanding.* They look at it as a discipline problem and it's not (Interviewee 17:A).

There's somebody that understands what you're going through and can relate [in reference to the group]. And you don't feel like you're talking to a wall. With some of my friends that have normal kids, *they don't understand.* So what if your kid's screaming his lungs out, he'll stop, but with our kids they don't. They go on and on, and, oh well, if he's fighting with his sister they'll stop, but they don't. They keep going and it gets worse and worse, so it's nice when you can actually talk to somebody that understands and knows where you're coming from...(Interviewee 16:A).

The biggest issue is the people in the group have walked along with a troubled child. A lot of my friends and relatives have never had that happen, so the support from there, in that aspect [isn't there]...The group, again, the knowledge and the understanding that some of these issues

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[brings], maybe it's a depression in a child. But *your friends don't see it* as that (Interviewee 24:B).

The feedback in the group is supportive, they understand, they've been there, done that. *As for outside the group they don't necessarily, or are able to give that feedback*...so the feedback is different (Interview 12:A).

I feel that, hey, it's okay to feel this way, it's okay to talk this way. It's like they understand, you know, everybody in the group is always there, always understand what I'm saying and what I'm feeling. Whereas *the people outside*, the person next door or whoever, does not feel or understand what I'm going through...(Interviewee 1:B).

Parallels to this perception that others situated outside of the group lack understanding of

the plight support group members confront, are noted in the following field observations:

I found that, personally, although friends can be supportive *they don't completely understand* what you're going through (fieldnotes, B:23).

...you feel isolated, as though *other people on the outside don't understand* or they perceive it as a discipline problem (fieldnotes, B:13).

...what *parents don't realize [with kids who aren't similarly affected]* is the ongoing frustration, battles and temper tantrums (fieldnotes, A:66).

One member's shared story, based on concerns pertaining to a foster care situation,

concluded with the following claim: "*the foster parents don't seem to understand* or care

about my situation and *neither does the social worker*" (fieldnotes, A:121). In a storied

response, another member corroborated this claim by drawing upon personal experience

that serves to legitimate the marginal status members often expressed:

They [social workers] don't seem to understand until they are a parent. I was fostering – the social worker went strictly by the book and not willing to listen to my suggestions about the children in my care. Then in church one day I was there with my numerous foster children, sitting as quiet and good as gold and the social worker entered with her new baby who wouldn't settle down for anything. I'll never forget the look on her face when the social worker looked at me sitting there with all these children

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sitting so well in church. I always said that *she wouldn't understand until she had one [child] of her own* (fieldnotes, A:122).

The shared perspective revealed in these accounts illustrates how participants 'position' external others as *outsiders*. By positioning others in this way, the collective identity of the groups are thus enhanced. The claim here is that 'we know the struggle, we understand' whereas others do not (and cannot) know or 'truly' understand in the same way. Experiential knowledge provides the legitimation and justification of the common suffering. In turn, perspectives of those who lack the experiential knowledge associated with the defined problem are de-legitimated. The 'perceived otherness' frequently described in members' dialogue is strategically turned and designated instead to those outside of the experience.

The concept of symbolic boundaries is drawn upon as a conceptual framework to aid in our understanding of how these positioning practices are manifest in the support group context and the consequences of their application. Members construct a symbolic line separating the members as a collective unit and those who are thereby excluded, with lived experience as the criterion for inclusion and exclusion. 'Authentic' knowing is attained only through experiencing the common struggle, the common suffering. In this light, perspectives held by external others are brought into question and, moreover, rendered somewhat meaningless. The shared understanding derived from common experience is a form of justification, collectively endorsed, that provides the rationale for personal predicaments. In turn, self-blame is exonerated, to a certain degree, given that rationale for personal situations is predicated on experiential understandings. The members attest to the uniqueness of their problem by corroborating the perception that

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external others lack the critical link, that is, the understanding associated with the common suffering. How members are ‘different’ from others outside of the experience is accentuated through the articulation and mutual affirmation of shared understandings among members, and the lack thereof, in relation to others outside the boundary lines constructed. Authentic understanding of the common struggle is therefore professed to be a critical point of identification that is corroborated by members actively engaged in processes of communication. The consequences of these discursive practices of identification and mutual affirmation of the shared understanding (and lack thereof by external others) fosters the construction of social ties that bind members together on one level while conceptually disconnecting them from external others on yet another level. Collective endorsement of the value and salience of experience renders personal dilemmas legitimate, thereby challenging that which external others might regard as culturally inappropriate.

For the purposes here the ‘boundary’ concept can also be viewed as a framing process. Discursive practices are used as framing devices whereby others are ‘framed’ or ‘positioned’ in particular ways. This positioning of others is in relation to oneself with narratives and moral assertions grounded in lived experience as evidence of expressed identity claims. The mutual corroboration of these claims in the support group context further legitimates the marginal positions in which the members perceive themselves.

Positioning ‘Others’ as Adversaries

The second categorization of ‘other’ – the adversarial position – perhaps more clearly illustrates the constructed line that symbolically divides group members from external others. Substantiated by storied claims, this symbolic distinction reveals a sense

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of constrained identities and exclusion from the larger cultural set of expectations regarding the role of parent. Expressed indignation and the perceived injustice of misplaced blame are expressed in storied form and perspectives laden with moral connotations. Experiential knowledge is used to legitimate assertions; corroborated responses lend a sense of belonging and cohesion to the group.

Brought to light are perceptions of self positioned in relation to others. The act of positioning external others as adversaries through discursive practices renders perceived distinctions 'visible'. Attention is thus directed to the sense of felt powerlessness, stigma and tarnished selves as expressed by members. As the following interview segments reflect, symbolic boundaries are discursively constructed around a collective sense of exclusion. How the discursive positioning of external others as adversary – the enemy – accentuates the division between the collective members and others outside of the support group setting is thus examined:

> Well, for instance. I went to mental health to get help and all they were into doing was putting my child on drugs and I was dead against that. And then *they started on me, like you're the one with the problem,* you don't want to put your kid on drugs - how could you not want to help [your child]! *They really made you feel low and dirty* because you're not cooperating with them and *they're the professionals* and *they know!* You don't need that kind of attitude when you're under such stress. And you may think you're the only one out there in the whole world like that. But, *here, you felt wanted and comfortable. There you felt like you were fighting a battle...*(Interviewee 14:A).

> ...it's *the enemy: them and us...*I've yet to find a parent that hasn't said that when they had one problem or another, they walk into rooms and it's *them and us.* There's always that automatic *physical segregation,* it's your first picture...this clearly, right away, tells you it's them and us before they even open their mouth...(Interview 12:A).

> ...dealings with the schools and actually getting them to listen to you because a lot of time *they just brush it off...You can only bang your head against the wall so many times* until somebody actually pays attention to

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you...One of those meetings, the principal, the teachers that [child] deals
with, one from the school board and one from the mental health *against
you, so you feel like the little person on the one side of the table against all
these lion heads*...(Interviewee, A:16).

The key word is advice. *They're [family members] not listening. They
don't even hear what's being spoken.* They know how to fix it. That's
how family members are (Interviewee 10:B).

...[family members] do not respect your parenting skills, they tell you that
the decisions you have made are totally wrong and that you're detrimental
to your child. I could go on. I mean, this was not only unsupportive but
destructive...(Interviewee 11:A).

From these excerpts, external others are framed as adversaries and thus positioned

outside of the social bonds of significance constructed by participants of the support

groups. The outsider status is thus deflected from self, by virtue of collaborative efforts,

onto those adversarial others perceived to be a symbolic barrier to human agency.

Additional references to the notion that external others bestow harsh judgments

upon members' parental roles surfaced in a particular meeting of Group A when an

external speaker (government representative) was in attendance. The perception prevails

that outsiders are defining the members in certain ways that, in turn, yields a stigmatizing

effect. Participants frequently commented on the view that external others stood in

judgment of their parental actions, intimating that they are somehow not 'measuring up'

to societal standards of appropriate parenting. In other words, the perception is such that

external others label members in ways that deny the recipients a sense of agency:

You're an unfit mother – you don't watch your child enough. Often
marriages break-up over this and then the problem is well, you're a single
parent, that's why...(fieldnotes, A:82).

The school and teachers can't spend the time, so it's the parents, they're
the problem. *They write parents off* (fieldnotes, A:79).

...the idea that *they put the blame on the parents.* the family has to change. It's not the child that has to change...[child's] actions were blamed on the family. on the generational gaps, the whole thing...(Interviewee 9:B).

...*people on the outside don't understand or they perceive it as a discipline problem* (fieldnotes, A:13).

Another member corroborated this member's claim with the following general comment:

"...*they attribute it to poor parenting skills*" (fieldnotes, A:17). From these excerpts. the

conceptual line is drawn more explicitly between self and other. revealing the felt stigma

as expressed by members and the perceived injustices associated with these moral claims.

A sense of denied agency rises to the surface of these shared accounts.

The concept of symbolic boundary is apparent in a member's comment made one

evening in reference to frustrations regarding interactions with teachers in the educational

context and. specifically, in relation to an experience that had transpired during a

scheduled meeting with teachers/administrators:

It's so intimidating...When you go in [to the room]. it's *them and you – them and us* – usually *them and me* (fieldnotes. A:26).

In direct response to these evaluative claims another member offered a similar

perspective:

I feel so *intimidated by doctors and teachers.* What's so important to me is the support I get from here because I feel supported as a parent. *I'm tired of everyone else always questioning my parenting skills or attributing my children's problem to my ineffectiveness as a parent* (fieldnotes. A:26-27).

An adversarial connotation clearly surrounds the description of the experience as

perceived by these members. A constructed boundary is rendered more 'visible' with the

members' applied terminology such as "intimidation". "them-us" and "them-me". The

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dichotomies embedded in the language members used allude to the symbolic boundary that serves to conceptually separate the member(s) from external others. A sense of powerlessness is articulated in the expressed feelings of intimidation. In contrast, the support group is portrayed as a safe haven wherein a sense of community (belonging and acceptance) is accomplished within a non-judgmental environment. The support group is thus defined as a protective enclave that shields the members from the harsh judgments by external others. thereby fostering a sense of community among those who have gathered together on the basis of the common struggle. Part of the process involved in defining what constitutes 'we' – a collective identity - is the discursive construction of symbolic boundaries that distinguish self from external other.

Constructing 'The System' as a Common Symbolic Referent

Similarly, in the support group meetings observed. articulation of the 'enemy' frequently took the form of 'the system' – a label that symbolically represents a range of institutionalized practices in the larger social context. The 'system'. in this context. functions as a gloss. According to Abercrombie et al. (1984:105-106). a gloss is a term commonly drawn upon by ethnomethodologists that refers to contextual meanings inferred and generated among individuals engaged in social interaction. As a means to sustain social interaction. "...actors produce a shorthand description. or gloss. of what is going on. of what makes sense to them" (Abercrombie et al.. 1984:106). Feelings of frustration and resentment are directed to this representative category that members consider somewhat responsible for their subjugation. The 'system' is a symbolic representation of a basic collective understanding which members draw upon as a common referent. Nevertheless, the term does not insist upon ascribing to a monolithic

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meaning but rather enables an assortment of meanings without distorting the common understanding. As Cohen reminds us. the "...range of meanings can be glossed over in a commonly accepted symbol – precisely because it allows its adherents to attach their own meanings to it" (1985:15). In this light, the common referent plays a salient role in holding the constructed community together in the face of adversity or otherwise.

By discursively constructing 'the system' as a common category to be drawn upon during the meetings. members devise a symbolically meaningful referent around which social ties are generated. This provides a foundation – a common template – from which members can collectively interweave selected strands of their personal stories. Members can identify with this common referent and what it entails: the exclusion: the powerlessness; the suffering; and the denial of self. On this basis. otherwise distinct individuals are drawn together to form social bonds of significance. As Brown contends.

> Two or more individuals. having their separate experiences of suffering. construct a sense of communality – a sense of belonging to one another – by virtue of the way their narrative accounts of structured social relations can be shown to converge (1994:282).

The common identification with 'the system' also serves to symbolically sever the social ties between members and non-members. This is not to imply that positive interactions with 'the system' are absent from discussions among members. Rather. the periodic surfacing of references regarding positive experiences with 'the system' suggests that constructed boundaries are fluid and shift accordingly during the course of situated interaction. The implication is that the 'walls' of constructed boundaries are somewhat penetrable. But for the purposes here I elaborate upon the observed predominant pattern of constructed adversarial relations between the groups and external others. The 'system'

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is therefore perceived as a barrier of sorts to human agency. Collectively, members

interweave stories and perspectives that create a tapestry of suffering.

As interpreted from the following series of field observations and interview data

segments, symbolic boundaries are constructed (expressed) from verbal exchanges as

members discursively position themselves relative to the system - the 'enemy':

> I feel angry that we're not informed of her whereabouts...I feel angry that
> no one follows up...frustrated that *'the system' always rescues
> her*...(fieldnotes, B:41).

> We're always *fighting 'the system'* (fieldnotes, A:65).

> [The system] is a common thread that everybody has...You can't talk
> about that in the offices or the services you're sitting in trying to get help
> with your kid, but...that's what we talk about is *how you get done over by
> this person in that office* (Interviewee 10:B).

> Several experiences with Social Services and Child Welfare Department...
> I would say that if my [children] acted [inappropriately] it's my fault,
> whatever their behavior is, it's my fault....[They] kept on saying it's my
> fault, it's my fault, the parent's fault because the kids are [problematic]...I
> don't think so! I didn't go and tell them to go shoplift. I didn't go tell
> them to go run away, and I didn't tell them to skip out of school...It's
> extremely frustrating because *[the system] keeps on putting the blame on
> the parents*...There's teenagers out there stabbing their sister or their
> mother or whoever they feel like, going and killing this person. I mean *it's
> not fair when they put the blame on the parents!* (Interviewee 1:B).

> ...I don't like going somewhere and trying to get help and being told I'm
> the problem...you get all the negative attitudes [at Social Services] like,
> well, if you don't do this then [child's] going to end up a nobody, be in jail
> when sixteen and I don't go for that nonsense...That's the way the system
> is nowadays...(Interviewee 14:A).

> There's something *wrong with 'the system'* – they make fools of the
> mothers and heroes of the fathers. The mothers have everything to lose,
> the fathers are excused...(fieldnotes, A:69).

> ...[Child's] actions were blamed on the family, on the generational
> gaps...*The system*, again, *blamed the parents* basically, blamed my
> brother, blames everybody except for [my daughter]...So I've gotten

bitter. I don't know. I used to be bitter over the system but now I just kind of, yes. I find it pretty *degrading to parents*...(Interviewee. B:9).

I *plan my strategy* when I go in [to meet with teachers/administrators]... (fieldnotes. A:101).

...I'm so tired and frustrated *fighting alone* [said in reference to the education system] (fieldnotes. A:105).

Reinforcing the perception that 'the system' either doesn't seem interested in their input as parents. or presumes that they are the reason for the problem in the first place. is one member's personal anecdote in response to another's storied experiences with the juvenile penal system:

It sounds to me like *they* [the system] were trying to make them [the parents] look bad because of the things that weren't working for their child. That's why I hate counselling! I like it better in groups like this where it's about real life – where you can relate to each other (fieldnotes. B:48).

Similarly. the following dialogue sequence reflects the disjuncture between self and external other:

They [school personnel] make you feel like your child is the only child with [this condition] (fieldnotes. A:132).

In corroborating this claim another member stated:

If you are a single parent it's even worse...that the child is messed up because there is no man in your life (fieldnotes. A:132).

Yet another member expressed frustration and anger directed at the system for early hospital discharge of child because of excessive violent behavior:

[Child] is too 'psycho' for the 'psych' ward! This drives me nuts with *the system*! (fieldnotes, B:53).

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Narrative responses by two members reflect the subjugation of self relative to the harsh

judgments of others:

> ...the social workers, probation officers...*blamed us as parents* - a
> generational problem. The more I look back...[child] may have had
> [medical condition] but went unnoticed. I remember that in Grade four
> [child's] grades started to go down. In Grade 7. [child] wrote a story that
> was quite sexual and then *everyone blames us – it was our fault.* We
> weren't handling things right (fieldnotes. B:58).

> That's when all these things started – I was being accused of sexually
> molesting my step-child. [Child] started getting all this attention from this
> story [child] wrote. [Child] has been labeled by so many psychologists
> now – the labels have just piled up one on top of the other in layers
> (fieldnotes. B:58).

Similarly. one member's disclosure during a support group meeting exemplifies the felt

impact of constrained identity claims derived from negative labels imposed by others. In

this case, professional workers in other social contexts constitute 'other':

> *I feel so intimidated by doctors and teachers.* What's so important to me
> is the support I get from here because I feel supported as a parent. *I'm
> tired of everyone else always questioning my parenting skills or attributing
> my children's problem to my ineffectiveness as a parent* (fieldnotes. A:26-
> 27).

The following claims expressed by a member during one meeting allude to a sense of

denied agency. A story related to the child's breach of probation and subsequent arrest

provided the context for the collective response that followed:

> [Child] wore an expensive shirt and I wanted [her] to change because if
> [she] was in 'lock-up' it would be gone for sure. So when my husband
> went in to the police station the cop said, "I'm not your personal slave and
> I deserve the respect!" And [husband] just asked if his [child] could
> change shirts! This was the same cop that busted my [child]. He's new to
> the force. He seems to be on a power trip (fieldnotes. B:69)!

A number of members offered verbal agreement regarding the inappropriateness of actions taken by police personnel, as well as suggestions to pursue the situation further (fieldnotes, B:69).

Yet another illustrative example of denied agency, powerlessness and alienation is reflected in the following passage:

> [Child] was picked up by the police and charged. We spent hours at the police station, but this time it was a different experience than in the past. *I felt intimidated, used and taken advantage of. The police were using me* to get more information about my child (fieldnotes, B:33).

From these multiple examples provided, striking parallels can be drawn to the empirical findings of two studies in particular. First, Hollihan and Riley's (1987) study of a Toughlove Parental Support Group highlights a prevalent adversarial theme that frequently emerges in the stories shared among members. Professional others are discursively framed, or positioned (to use the terminology appropriated for this study), in ways that target them as the 'enemy' and, moreover, as lacking the key ingredient of experiential knowledge. Implicitly interwoven within these members' stories are images of denied selves that resonate throughout the rhetoric of positioning external others as adversaries, as do they in this research project. The second empirical case that bears striking resemblance to the interpretative understandings of this research is that of Karp's (1992) study of an affective disorder support group. What Karp defines as "rhetoric of victimization" – the persistent dialogue of negative feelings and experiences associated with the problem and professional others perceived to lack personal and experiential understanding – functions to displace the blame attributed to self (Karp, 1992:154). This mirrors the processes that occurred in the two support groups studied here. Both studies

reveal how members expressed their denied selves within the collective context of support groups. Also implied is how participants viewed themselves in relation to someone (or something) else. It is thus interpreted that positioning oneself in particular ways reflects a constrained or enabled identity (this latter dimension of identity is explicitly addressed in the following chapter). In addition, this leads us to thinking about the consequences that flow from these constructed boundaries, that is, the impact upon the social relations of those participating. In other words, discursively positioning oneself as the object of others' judgments collaboratively with those similarly afflicted – a collective effort - seemingly fosters a sense of community among the latter.

A further extension to this sense of powerlessness and denied agency associated with the harsh judgments and practices perceived to be imposed by 'the system' – an institutionalized other – is the discursive shifting of blame onto the 'shoulders' of 'the system'. By projecting an image of partial blame or inefficacy onto an external source, members exonerate themselves, to a certain degree, of self-blame. For example, members periodically discussed concerns related to the virtual absence of consequences for their child's behavior/actions. One member expressed frustration with the *"juvenile system – nothing happens!...Why do they play games? This is black and white evidence!"* (fieldnotes, B:108). In later meetings, this member expressed a somewhat altered or extended version of the prior claim regarding the legal system:

> I'm starting to see the other side...it's not always the kids playing the system – *the system plays the game too*" (fieldnotes, B:136)...I'm getting *disillusioned with the legal system* – judge and crown just as bad as lawyers! The lawyer didn't even show for the last court date (fieldnotes, B:150).

Despite the numerous empirical references provided, this is not to imply that "the system" is always perceived as the enemy. In fact as illustrated in the following excerpt recorded from field observations, "the system" is sometimes personified as a victim:

> There's no books on *kids abusing 'the system'*...drug abuse and everything else but not system abuse. *Kids out there are abusing the system all the time* (fieldnotes, B:118).

It might also be suggested that drawing upon "the system" label depersonalizes the target to which the anger and frustrations are then directed. The assumption here is that personalizing the adversary increases the potential for the eruption of contentious moments in the support group meetings. Conceivably, the more specific the target, the greater the possibility for confrontation to erupt among members, and therefore the increased potential threat to the dismantling of social ties so carefully constructed. An illustrative example of how this attribution of blame is discursively shifted from specific social positions/roles to a more conceptually abstract (and less personal) representation - "the system" - is noted in the following field observations. For example, in response to a number of members' comments regarding the teachers' lack of sufficient knowledge in regard to the defined affliction, a counter-perspective that functions to displace the blame from the teacher to the system is provided by one member:

> In defense of teachers, since I am a teacher, I would not feel qualified because I was taught two classes that addressed [this condition] at the institution where I was trained. The teachers are not getting that say – can't blame the teacher – *it's the system that's doing it to the teachers!* (fieldnotes, A:80).

In an attempt to justify the claim being made and to negotiate meanings, another member immediately responded: "I'm not blaming the teachers. Yes, I think that

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sometimes we don't look at it from the other perspective" (fieldnotes, A:80). A specific

attempt was made here to deflect the blame from specific roles onto 'the system' – the

symbolic referent in this case. This broad representation enables basic consensus of

meaning by a multitude of members, as Cohen (1985) would argue. From this discursive

exchange, meanings are clarified, negotiated and reinterpreted by the participating

members. Subsequent interactions among members of the group are thus sustained and

reproduced. The constructed social ties seemingly remain in tact; that is, the discussion

and format of the meetings continued as usual.

Before continuing further with this ethnographic story, it is useful to briefly

summarize the key points presented thus far. As members relate to the common sense of

denied agency and stigma through the sharing of similar stories and acquired experiential

knowledge, a symbolic boundary is constructed around the set of relations within the

support group settings. Stories and moral claims provide evidence of shared

understanding related to perceived injustices grounded in experience. Identifying with the

common struggle legitimates this acquired experiential knowledge. These discursive

forms serve as conduits through which constrained identities emerge. They constitute

some of the methods members use to construct social bonds of significance that in turn

create a sense of belonging. Feelings of exclusion that members express upon entering

the group, and communicate during meetings thereafter, shift in the course of situated

interaction to form a circle of relational ties. In other words, participants create a sense of

belonging (inclusion) from identifying with the feelings of powerlessness (exclusion)

associated with the common struggle. In turn, this process necessarily excludes others

outside of this circle of constructed relations thereby serving to intensify the connection

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among members. Ironically. the positioning of others as outsiders is a spin on the very subject position that members express themselves upon entering the group. that is. the status of outsider. The discursive forms and practices applied by the members thus enhance the collective identity of the group and thereby facilitate a sense of community.

Experiential Knowledge as a Facilitating Mechanism

Experiential knowledge is the mechanism members use to mark and sustain boundaries between themselves and external others. As previously discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. empirical evidence points to the critical role that experiential knowledge plays in the social processes of support enacted within the context of mutual aid groups. The professional 'voice' is sometimes perceived to be antithetical to the experiential. as depicted in the following claims:

> It would be nice *to have a professional come in and learn from us* (fieldnotes. A:51-52)

> *Professionals adhere to absolutes. We know already* what factors point to [this condition] (fieldnotes. A:37).

One participant expressed the desire for others to learn *"what it's really like* to live with (this problem)" (fieldnotes. A:52). Another member's claim reveals a level of frustration with the medical community because of the perception that she has this "knowledge" and *"they don't listen"* (fieldnotes. A:109). These comments point to the schism between experiential and professional knowledge with the former being attributed legitimate status, overall. by the members. Support group members legitimate the experiential knowledge claims that they perceive are often de-legitimated by external others. The

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salience of experiential forms of knowledge (versus the lack thereof) is acknowledged in

various members' accounts:

> *...Some people have tons and tons of theories and ideas but they've never been through the actual situation.* They just say, 'you know, this is what you need to do'...But they've never had children with [this condition] and *it's all strictly theory...*Because you never really know until you're in the situation how you're going to deal with it, or what's the best way to deal with it...*In the group you're all there because you have this problem in common, whereas outside the group in talking with friends and family they haven't been through the same situation. So they're dealing more from theory and they make suggestions, but it's not suggestions based on experience.* It's suggestions based on what they think might help, but it's not necessarily because they've been through it...(Interviewee 23:A).

> ...the one on one with a counsellor, myself and my children...it's like you're not in the real world and all the theory in the world that they give me, I would say it's like...a counsellor trying to deal with my situation, *even though they're well versed and schooled in those situations and they see all sorts of different people, they aren't actually feeling those feelings...*the counselling is great, but *I got more out of the support group because those people were living it at the time* (Interviewee 20:B).

> *I seem to get more out of the one on one with all the people in the group...I got more out of how to deal with [child] on the day to day basis from the people in the group...It sounds better when it's coming from somebody that has gone through the same things,* and it seems easier to take their advice because they know what you're going through (Interview 16:A)

> I found the *discussion among the group, after the speaker left, was more beneficial to me* than the actual speaker (Interviewee 17:A).

> *These people dealt with it, and they're dealing with it everyday.* My parents are in denial and say, you need to be firmer with her, you have to do this... We've tried it and it didn't work. *But these people, they've gone through it or are going to go through it...*But you know, they can say, we know what you're going through and we can sympathize, may not be able to help you, but... (Interviewee, 17:A).

It warrants mention, however, that in the majority of members' subjective accounts the

positioning of external others (professionals and those outside of the experience) as

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lacking legitimacy did not typically include the facilitator(s) of the group. Evidence of

the value placed on the perspective. input and professional discourse advocated by the

facilitator(s) is noted in the following data segments:

> *If [facilitator] has a recommendation I tend to listen to it more.* but think
> that well. [the facilitator] has been there more than anybody else. I don't
> know what it is. it's like if you have a class discussion and the teacher says
> something you tend to think more of that recommendation than anything
> else...*I think you look at them kind of like experts.* And although I'm sure
> they haven't heard it all. because it's an ongoing thing. and just because
> you've gone to the group for a year or two. doesn't make you an expert
> because you're always learning (Interviewee 19:B).

> I told them [Justice Committee] what a good group this is – an excellent
> facilitator (fieldnotes. B:54).

> [Coping with recent tough times is a result of] "the book and the group"
> (fieldnotes. B:57).

The discursive positioning practices of symbolic boundary construction that

transpire within the group are. for the most part. directed at drawing conceptual lines

between individual selves and those outside the context of the support group.

Nevertheless. one account suggests that a similar perceived distinction *between* members

lurks just below the surface although. interestingly. was not revealed during the meetings

(at least not in any observable way). An interview conversation. however. points to a

perceived disjuncture between experiential and professional knowledge *within* the group

context (a contradictory perspective to the preceding members' accounts):

> *[Facilitator] was coming from it at a professional point whereas the
> people who were in the group were experiencing what was going on in
> their lives...*Basically, I really felt that the support group was run too
> professionally. It was too formal. and, two, you didn't dare speak out on
> how you were really feeling...*A support group is to listen to each other
> without any professionalism...*I felt, in that group, I would have been
> criticized by the facilitator about my opinions and the way I would handle
> things because [the facilitator] was a professional...I felt that the facilitator

had rules in this group and you didn't challenge anything...because it was a professional point of view...I keep bringing up that word professional a lot. *I have a thing against all the professionals*...The people in this group are looking for answers and they're looking for help, and they're looking to the professional person who's running the group as the one who is the most capable of giving the right answers...They need something to believe in...Basically, I'm very shy in a group setting, but when I saw the professional side of that, this other side of me says, well to heck with this noise. I'm going to throw in a few things here and see how far I get, but then I know enough to back off. If I were to have kept going to that group, I might have gotten so that I'd speak out of turn because that would be my back getting up because of the professionalism...*I find that professional people analyze you, they don't analyze why you're there, they analyze you...it goes back to whether you believe in something that's professional, or whether you go there because you want to hear other people, what kinds of situations other people are having*...(Interviewee 25:B).

Although this positioning of professional "internal other" was discussed in an interview conversation, explicit efforts to challenge the professional discourse were not observed during group meetings (at least not in any overt way). Because this member's subjective views were also based on the perception that members' state of desperation leads them to accept the facilitator's philosophy (Interviewee 25:B), we might interpret that any overt challenge to the professional influence might not have been substantiated by the members as a whole. It follows then that those members who appeared to endorse and reproduce the professional discourse might conceivably confirm (perhaps partially) this member's internalized sense of being an outsider (in relation to the members). In this member's own words:

> ...the people in these groups are so desperate, not all of them, but when people are in such crisis they look to somebody higher than them or they think is much smarter than them who can help. And I think that's why people don't speak up, and I can bet you that three quarters of the people in that group would agree with what [the facilitator] was saying because [facilitator] is a professional. That's why I'm saying nobody would speak up (Interview 25:B).

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Although a few individual perspectives given by members differed somewhat from the professional discourse, the majority of interview accounts and dialogue that transpired during group sessions corroborated aspects of the group's formal ideology as espoused by the facilitator(s). Of particular interest here was the *observed* lack of overt opposition to the professional discourse.

Thus far I have focused on the discursive construction of symbolic boundaries that conceptually distinguishes between members drawn together on the basis of identification and mutual understanding of common suffering, and those situated outside these parameters. As discussed earlier, interactions among members were observed as highly congenial and non-confrontational, an occurrence that mirrors the findings of other empirical studies (see Chapter 2) and Goffman's (1959:238) premise that an aura of consensus is typically constructed among individuals engaged in social interaction. For the most part, instances of expressed conflict are framed here in relation to those outside of the support group context. My interpretation of these processes suggests that external others are often positioned or framed as adversaries – symbolic representations. By constructing others in this fashion members are able to identify with the sense of powerlessness, stigma and denied agency expressed through the sharing of certain experiences, feelings and perspectives. Moreover, collaborative efforts validate the perspectives associated with perceived injustice stemming from interactions that have transpired in other social contexts. The boundary between member and non-member is thus accentuated, as are the relational connections among members. Experiential knowledge gained and shared in the group is a major source of leverage that members use to corroborate perceived injustices. In collectively highlighting denied agency, relative to

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others portrayed as adversarial, members draw attention to their wounded sense of selves. In turn, the social bond constructed by mutual identification processes provides members with the sense of inclusion and belonging previously absent, in varying degrees. This sense of community is, in part, realized by discursive efforts that *exclude* non-members from the seemingly unified set of relations. Viewed in this light, perhaps exclusionary processes of positioning selves and others onto different sides of a symbolic line are necessary to reproduce and enhance a sense of community among participants that seek a sense of belonging. It follows that perhaps the greater the sense of exclusion or denied agency experienced, the greater the need to generate social ties among common sufferers. These social bonds of significance constructed by support group members are built upon efforts to distinguish themselves from those who do not relate to the common struggle in the same way.

Attention has thus far been directed to the processes and practices of symbolic boundary construction – a conceptual distinction between members drawn together on the basis of common identification with the defined struggle and those situated outside these parameters. But is there evidence of similar boundary construction *between support group members*? And, if so, what unintended consequences result from these discursive practices?

Positioning Internal 'Others'

Despite the predominant observable pattern of consensual relations constructed among members, periodic disruptions to the flow of interactions reveal a rippling effect in what otherwise appears as an unmarred surface. Although the construction of symbolic boundaries is most apparent when a sense of otherness is expressed in relation

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to others located outside of the group context (and outside of the experience), a similar positioning practice was observed *among* support group members. For the purposes here. I refer to this aspect of symbolic boundary construction as *internal positioning*. A boundary that otherwise remains 'hidden' from view is rendered somewhat 'visible' from discursive practices that position self and other in particular ways. Once again. the concept of symbolic boundary is a useful theoretical concept to aid in our understanding of how individuals manage social relations and identity claims while participating in a social group.

One incident in particular is drawn upon here for illustrative purposes. It warrants mention that this was the only occurrence of its kind observed during the field research. Nonetheless. it is discussed here as an interesting 'twist' to relations otherwise presented for the most part as consensual. united and non-contentious. Given that it bears striking resemblance to processes of symbolic boundary-making and external positioning practices outlined above. this sequence of interactions begs a closer examination. We might ask whether constructing symbolic boundaries among social relations otherwise portrayed as integrated and unified result in similar consequences of appearing as a set of intensified community relations? When a member positions other members as a potential source for constrained identity or denied agency is there evidence of severed relational ties among members or a compromised sense of community? Or. conversely. is a sense of belonging seemingly enhanced by the disruptive flow of consensual social interaction? In other words, does the act of constructing symbolic boundaries *within* the support group context appear to dissolve social bonds of significance formed on the basis of

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identification with the common struggle? Or is a sense of belonging (community) among members reactivated, reinstated and perhaps even rejuvenated?

In drawing upon ethnomethodological concepts - breach and repair − I examine the expression of denied agency by one support group member and the subsequent collective response by other participants. According to Hilbert (1992:83), a basic premise of an ethno-perspective is that while individuals engage in practices that enable and project an illusion of stability, moments of discordance periodically surface, rendering a sense of instability. This is typically referred to as *breaching*, whereby the sense of order is interrupted and participants engage in sequences of action to bring the perceived chaos back to a level of coherence (Hilbert, 1992:92-93). The 'breach', in this case, represents a moment when the established patterns of interactions and discussion format were momentarily disrupted. Following this interruption to the patterned flow of communication, some participants attempted to 'repair' the damage associated with what was expressed as a wounded identity. Might we assume that these same processes and unintended consequences of constructing symbolic boundaries could transpire between self and *internal* other?

The example I draw upon from field observations shows how a sequence of interactions among members is interpreted as a form of symbolic boundary construction. One member's expressed 'otherness' during one evening's discussion is a result of *positioning* self in relation to other members in the group (internal others), as opposed to those located outside of the group (external others). I first describe the sequence of events as they unfolded during a meeting of Group B that took place approximately two

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months after the field research commenced[68]. Following this description. I offer an interpretation of this interactional sequence by drawing upon the conceptual framework of symbolic boundaries.

The Breach and Repair

The meeting began in its usual way with the facilitator asking if anyone wished to begin the designated discussion (sharing) portion of the evening. Typically, no one expressed the need to do so at which point the facilitator asked if someone would mind beginning the sharing time. Rather than proceeding as usual. however. one member expressed a need to go first because of something he felt compelled to say. He then continued with the following disclosure (Moment 1):

> I was uncomfortable with what went on last week – I thought there was some 'male-bashing' going on. *I felt that my feelings were not being acknowledged.* I wasn't getting feedback. which is what I need from the group. I guess what I'm trying to say is that males have feelings too (paraphrased from fieldnotes. B:17).

In reference to this last point. another member responded in a concerned and empathetic manner: "Of course. [men] do!" (Moment 2). With somewhat less emotional angst. the concerned member then added: "I guess I feel that I need help because I don't feel that I am handling this situation well – not coping well." In response to this break in the typical patterns of interaction. the next hour of group discussion hinged upon this member's expressed concerns. For example. the volunteer asked if there was anything that the group could do to help and offered a personal apology in the event that she might have said something to offend him at the last meeting. He assured her that anything she might

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[68] Selected segments are marked as 'moments' for easier reference when reviewing the interpretation of the breach and repair.

have said wasn't the problem, reiterating that he was just feeling like he wasn't coping well with the situation and that he needed feedback. In response, one member explicitly offered assistance: "I can relate. I felt some of those same feelings, especially in the beginning" (fieldnotes, B:19) (Moment 3a). He related this to similar feelings associated with being a stepfather to a child who continually exhibits outbursts of inappropriate behavior (Moment 3b). Subsequently, other members provided storied responses to these verbal exchanges. One member offered a viewpoint in regard to her partner who was not in attendance: "[Spouse] finds it difficult to come sometimes. He finds it depressing in that he says it seems like we just talk about mumbo jumbo and nothing happens" (fieldnotes, B:20) (Moment 4). Another member responded with a worldview of how we, as a society, learn from a very early age that girls and boys act differently by dealing with, and showing, their feelings/emotions in different ways. That is, girls are socialized to show emotion (that it is acceptable to do so and even encouraged by others) whereas boys learn that it is not socially acceptable to cry or show emotion. This member then told a story to substantiate this perspective (Moment 5):

> When my son was five years old, his grandfather died. At the funeral [gravesite] he ran off crying. He had not cried up to this point. When I caught up to him and asked him what was wrong, I could see that he was crying. I told him that it was okay to cry and he immediately responded by saying 'no, it's not! Big boys don't cry. Daddy's not crying!' (fieldnotes, B:22).

Upon concluding, this member explicitly linked this experiential story to cultural understandings of how we are "socialized" (fieldnotes, B:22) as such in the social world. At this point, another male member extended an offer directed to the individual who initially expressed his feelings of not being heard or acknowledged: "If you feel like

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going for a drive or go out for coffee sometime. just call me. We can just talk. I understand. I've been there" (Moment 6). In response to this gesture. the partner of the member to whom these comments are directed stated: "That's what's helpful in a group like this is that you understand where we're at" (Moment 7). Marking the conclusion of this sequence of interactions was a statement by the volunteer member who attended the group on a regular basis: "I found that. personally. although friends can be supportive they don't completely understand what you're going through" (sequence of dialogue from fieldnotes. B:17-23) (Moment 8a and 8b).

This sequence of interactions serves as an illustrative model of key social processes introduced earlier. My interpretation is situated explicitly within the paradigm of ethnomethodology and utilizes the following conceptual frameworks: identification processes of community (belonging). symbolic boundary and positioning. In the scene just described. the breach is attributed to Moment 1 whereby the concerned member expressed feelings of exclusion and denied agency. Because this communicative act stands apart from the patterned ongoing format of interactions that transpire during meetings on a regular basis. it is labeled as a breach in what otherwise appears 'normal' or expected. When the normalcy of the situation is disrupted. other members intuitively engage in a process of repair – a restoration of meaning. We might consider the onset of this repair process to occur at Moment 2 whereby the first response to the breach is given. In other words. the initial 'definition of the situation' is unexpectedly interrupted. Members then respond by attempting to restore the sense of order (and sense of community) that has previously been established over time.

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Conveying a sense of denied agency implies a certain level of felt exclusion. Although a sense of denied agency is similar to that frequently expressed in other meetings, the difference here lies with the positioning of a symbolic adversary designated as a player in the process of managing identity claims. In this case, it is the members who are portrayed as the adversarial 'other'. The *presentation of other* in this instance transpires *within*, rather than beyond, the support group setting. But this act of internal positioning similarly draws symbolic boundary lines that set one (or more) apart from others. It is the placement of symbolic markers that differs. In this case, gender-related understandings constitute the basis for the conceptual division. This implies that identification among members is also stratified along different lines beyond the central identifier – the common struggle. The process of constructing symbolic boundaries is thus interpreted as fluid and ever-shifting, defying any notion of rigid placement. Perhaps the act of positioning self as marginalized, and others as somehow contributing to this perception, intentionally begs an overt response from others. We might view this as a method members use to negotiate and manage identity claims when interacting with others. Potentially, then, one's sense of self might be reproduced in the breach and repair process.

As observed in this instance, efforts to bridge the gap created by one member are enacted upon by others. In other words, the sense of exclusion expressed in the form of a breach is repaired vis-à-vis the actions taken to include and thereby invite a sense of belonging. Moreover, identification with gender-related experience is evident at Moment 3a and 3b as two male members acknowledge their common ground, thus, alluding to additional strands of common identifiers. By expressing a sense of shared understanding

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on the basis of gender and parental status. some members initiate the identification process that encourages or invites inclusion. These additional nodes of identification comprise yet another dimension of commonality that transcends the common struggle as a single (mutually exclusive) unifying force. This distinction based on gender-related understandings was discussed during an interview conversation conducted with the member who initiated the breach. When asked about the incident during an interview conversation. this member responded as follows:

> *It felt like I wasn't a part of it.* Maybe I was doing that myself. *setting myself aside.* because I mentioned before I thought it was [my partner's] kids and she's the one that should be talking. But when I finally did start speaking. *it felt like no one was really listening* to what I had to say. It's probably wrong. but that's the feeling I got. And a few times [when others addressed my partner], *it was like I wasn't even there.* like poor [partner], she's going through this. and *I felt invisible there for awhile* (Interviewee. 19:B).

A similar perspective discussed by another member corroborates this claim:

> ...the group is about kids and the mothers. the caregiver in the family. the one that's supposed to be really emotionally tied to the kids. and sometimes I have a hard time relating to what was being said...(Interviewee. 10:B).

From these interview excerpts. the connotation of boundary is evident throughout, intimating a constrained sense of community in personal lives. Other members are positioned in an adversarial role. in this instance, while self is framed as a sufferer exhibiting denied agency. This positioning practice is an antithetical stance from the consensual and unified interactions typically portrayed during support group meetings.

In returning to the breach and repair sequence for a moment, the first story offered in response to the breach reveals a similar viewpoint as experienced by her partner

(Moment 4). It is thus interpreted as an effort to validate the feelings and perspectives held by the member who initiated the breach. Again, identification based on shared understanding and common experience is accomplished. The second story that surfaced in this exchange – an expressed cultural understanding – is interpreted here as justification of a moral claim or worldview (Moment 5). Provided as evidence of the assertion being made, this story is rooted in personal experience and serves to exemplify broader cultural norms of gender-related behavioral expectations. Similarly, the story provides a basis for the rationale (justification) of why members might experience a sense of inequitable relations based on perceived gender-related cultural differences. Corroborating this perspective is one member's comments taken from an interview conversation:

> ...I felt I was *an emotional outcast. I'm a man and I'm not supposed to have emotions* (Interviewee 10:B).

By focusing on the various points of identification constructed among individuals and how members position themselves in relation to others to express themselves as denied (or enabled), we can better understand the processes involved in expressing, resisting, modifying and/or sustaining identity claims. The boundaries constructed within the group context are thus rendered 'visible' by discursive means. While these somewhat tenuous moments during the course of ongoing interaction are negotiated and new understandings are reached, the semblance of social ties among members is resurrected, reinstated and reproduced. In a metaphorical sense, members collectively respond to a perceived tear in the community fabric.

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A further extension to the community-building process occurs when one member offered to meet outside of the group because of an implied understanding that was based on experience perceived to be shared (Moment 6). An explicit gesture of community-generating processes extended to encompass the group is reflected in the statement: "That's what's helpful in a group like this is that you understand where we're at" (fieldnotes. B:23) (Moment 7). The selective identification constructed among members along gender lines is now expanded to encompass the members as a whole – a united front. Thus. the collective identity of the support group is reinstated and socially reproduced. And, finally. the concluding comment noted in the above sequence of interactions accentuates the common ground connecting members to one another that. in turn, serves to further reinforce the image of a cohesive and unified set of relations (Moment 8a). Interestingly, external others are positioned once again as outsiders thereby returning to the predominant pattern of interactions observed during the research period (Moment 8b).

From these processes of boundary construction and deconstruction. the un/intended consequences are such that the collective identity of the support group is reinforced and reproduced. To substantiate the interpretive claim that the breach and repair process fosters a sense of community among those involved is the observable increase in participation (disclosure and input) by the initiator of the breach in subsequent meetings. Further evidence of an enhanced sense of community constructed among members is addressed in the following interview conversations that reflect upon this incident:

> I think it really awakened me and a lot of people in the group. And through
> that. there were some of us that were *able to then become a lot closer* [

thought, and express our point of view without feeling put down....There was never really an argument about it, but it was *an awakening* for a lot of us...I think we were all trying to give our apologies...(Interviewee 24:B).

It seemed that after that [the breaching incident], *we opened their eyes* to the fact that men have feelings too, and our feelings were valid (Interviewee 10:B).

Reflected in the series of discursive exchanges outlined above is a concerted collective effort to validate and acknowledge one member's expressed sense of denied self. An alternative response might have been to disregard or challenge the perspective revealed by this member. Instead, the general reaction reflects a collective apology for any efforts perceived to have failed one of the members. After all, to exclude another member contradicts the basic premise of mutual aid groups. Moreover, internal dissension stands in sharp contrast to the predominant projected image of mutual and unconditional acceptance among support group members. This incidence of breaching the definition of the situation certainly stands apart – an anomaly to the established patterns of interactions that accrued over time. Although this disruption holds the potential to disengage situated interactions, thereby severing the constructed social ties, it appears to have elicited the opposite effect. The felt discordance and lack of connection one member expressed to others seemingly invites a community-initiated response. The repercussions from this collective accomplishment appear to support the argument that conflict is a catalyst to the construction of community. In this light, the discursive construction of symbolic boundaries alludes to a certain level of discordance and disconnection among individuals. But what might be perceived a somewhat negative practice of constructing symbolic boundaries that project one side of the dichotomy as the adversary, is interpreted here as the means to a positive end. That is, the conceptual

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division generated among individuals, whether internal or external to the group, actually appears to encourage a response that promotes integration among some and, in this case, among the support group members.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter my interpretation of the data collected from these support groups emphasized discursive practices that members used to accomplish support. These practices included expressions of suffering, denied agency and perceived 'otherness'. Stories and statements inflected with moral undertones were common discursive forms and mediums for expressing these identity claims. If we listen closely to the story lines, a conceptual separation emerged as individuals maneuvered their identities around perceived barriers while interacting with others in a similar predicament.

A predominant pattern of conceptual dichotomies, linked implicitly or otherwise, to self-concept is traced:

Outsider ----------------------- Insider

Exclusion -------------------- Inclusion

Professional Knowledge --------------------- Experiential Knowledge

Them ---------------------- Us

Constrained Identities --------------------- Enabled Selves

Although these might appear as simple distinctions on the surface, the manner by which their meaning was communicated within the support group context was complex, dynamic and multi-dimensional.

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Interactionist sociology points to the need for researchers to examine the micro-dynamics of such groups in detail, a contrast to that which is found in the social support literature. I have appropriated a conceptual framework of symbolic boundaries and positioning practices as a working template in an effort to better comprehend how identification processes and discursive practices of self-representation 'work' among individuals engaged in the collective act of accomplishing support in the mutual aid group context. Certain representations of self, as constrained or enabled, surface from the symbolic lines that individuals construct and deconstruct in order to depict how individuals are the same and yet different. My analysis focused on the consequences of individuals positioning themselves in relation to others in particular ways. The concepts discussed in the preceding chapter were useful frames for thinking about how symbolic boundaries are constructed among support group members and how they facilitate the formation of social ties and a sense of community. At the same time, as members identified with common suffering and perceived injustices, the social bond that tied them together in a relational sense intensified. In turn, these identification processes accentuate the symbolic boundary that encapsulates the members as a whole and thus excludes others situated outside of this constructed set of relations.

Emphasis in this chapter has been placed on the active construction of symbolic boundaries between self and other that highlights the dimension of suffering. By discursively placing self and other on different sides of the constructed boundary, constrained identities are negotiated and managed within the context of community partially created by these boundaries. One aspect of this positioning practice was defined and emphasized here as the 'presentation of other'. Framed within various discursive

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forms, this practice of positioning highlights the sense of suffering and denied agency communicated among these members.

By extension, the next chapter examines the role that symbolic boundaries play in the resistance to negative identity claims and the transformation of identity within the context of the mutual aid groups studied. This entails how members position themselves discursively to express both individual and collective agency – a resistance strategy that contributes to presenting damaged selves as repaired and empowered.

Chapter VII
The Discursive Transformation of Damaged Selves

In the preceding chapter interpretations focused on the micro-social processes of support group members engaged in the active construction of symbolic boundaries between self and other. By viewing the interactions and subjective accounts of members from a certain angle. attention is drawn to methods they used to discursively position 'others'. in particular. so as to communicate perceived injustices. These practices also reveal the felt impact upon identity claims. With the dimension of suffering highlighted in the last chapter I now place emphasis on the discursive positioning of 'self' in ways that express resistance to negative identity claims, projecting a sense of agency at both the individual and collective level. Before telling this part of the ethnographic story. however, I situate the discussion in context.

A Safe Haven

Whether the processes of constructing symbolic boundaries are derived from discursive practices of positioning self in relation to external or internal others. the image of 'otherness' (denied selves) prevails. The support groups provided the setting for those seeking solace from the trauma associated with the common struggle and protection from moral claims perceived to be judgmental or adversarial (a barrier to a sense of an enabled self). In this light. each support group is viewed as a 'place' wherein members perceived others to be authentically listening to their voice. This contrasts with that which is frequently encountered in other contexts where voices are felt to be unacknowledged. denied or silenced. The image of support groups, as reflected in a number of members' accounts. is that of a 'safe haven' – a refuge of sorts. This corresponds with various

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empirical studies as previously discussed (see Chapter 2). Imbued with a sense of community (belonging and acceptance) and the absence of harsh judgments of others, the support groups are regarded as sanctuaries offering solace, protection and hope. Elements of these concepts surface in numerous accounts recorded from interview conversations:

> When you have a crisis in your house and you come to this group and it is like you're at your wits end. *You don't know where to turn, you don't know who to talk to, you don't know who to phone...almost like you're standing in the middle of nowhere and you want to grab out to something and you go to this group, you sit and talk about your problem and then they ask, how can they help and they share some of their ideas and it seems to help.* But being in this group *you get the feeling that you've got some place that will help you* (Interviewee 7:B).

> *...You feel like you're banging your head against a wall but when you come to this group, they listen to you and how you feel, and then they help you out with what you're feeling* and, try this out and did you try this, but at the end of the class, *sometimes you still go away feeling very tearful, but you go away feeling that there's still hope* (Interview 7:B).

> *...you're so down on yourself and then you come here and you find out that someone has the same problem as you. Well, it really lifts your spirits and the whole tension and pressure just lifts right off your shoulder* because you realize you're not the only one and there is help out there, there is people out there who care and there's kids out there that are the same, just different ages, a little more so [afflicted] than others, you know, unique (Interviewee 14:A)

> *...it's a place to talk, get information, people listen to you, they don't put you down, they don't tell you you're crazy.* There's no feeling depressed because everybody there has gone through it, and you feel joy and happy because you're not the only one...*I don't know what I would do if I had a bad two weeks and I didn't come here.* I would go bonkers because it's so easy to start yelling and screaming...You can either come or you can leave. It's your choice what you want to do, there's no pressure, no pushing, no nothing. *People are friendly, understanding and they're here for the kids,* to help the parents raise the kids and that's the whole key to this...(Interviewee 14:A).

> I find it's *important with the support group because you can talk about your [children] without having them judge you,* or placing judgment on

your [children] because everybody in the group is dealing with problems with their [children]...(Interviewee 13:B).

I heard a lot from my ex-husband's parents, like, you're just a bad mother, or he's just a rotten kid, but *with the group, they don't judge you, they don't treat you like you're doing something wrong. They treat you as an equal and don't judge your background, or your lifestyle...*The *ones outside of the group don't quite understand what you're going through and it's almost like they're looking at you through a microscope because they're analyzing everything you say and do.* like, I wonder what's wrong with her, why is her kid like this and *they don't quite understand the gist of it, but when you have people from the group, they can relate and understand because they've gone through the same thing* so they understand the gist of it. (Interviewee 16:A).

I think *in the support group you don't feel too bad about [saying something bad about your child], sometimes I could just wring their necks, whereas, someone else, you wouldn't want to say that* because they would probably think you literally meant that you would do that. That's what I get from the group, that we're a little more able to share how we really feel (Interviewee 11:A).

...familiarity of their faces and getting to know them personally and knowing that they weren't there to judge [said in reference to the support group members]. That was very important to me...like [church or family members] or anybody that I went to as a friend, and as much compassion as those people had, in a way they judge a little bit. *But when I came here I felt that they weren't judging me.* They weren't judging [child] and they weren't judging us as a family (Interview 18:B).

Not putting the blame on myself - it helped to come and tell others about the awful stories − to those who might not think they're so awful − just helpful to talk...wouldn't want to go telling friends (fieldnotes, B:164).

...we're in the same boat, we have kids with the same affliction, they know what you go through, they deal with the same issues, there's *a lack of judgment that maybe you get from people outside of the group* that don't understand why your kid is a certain way, so there's that *non-judgmental in the group,* we all understand each other, we've all been there or are there (Interviewee 15:A).

...*the non-judgmental atmosphere*...you can go and *feel that you're not judged* even if your kid is running around and not listening to you...There you can go and feel non-judged. You can say, oh, my kid did these horrible things, suspended from school and whatever and you know it's a non-judgmental atmosphere...[even in the event that someone in the group

disagrees with actions taken] It's done in such a way that *you don't feel criticized.* It's done in such a way that maybe somebody would say well, I've tried this in that situation and it worked for me rather than a criticizing, judgmental kind of atmosphere (Interviewee 15:A).

...When you go to see [church members or family friends] you are comparing and they're comparing and you don't want to compare. *You're accepted when you come here* (Interviewee 18:B).

In extending this premise of a community-like atmosphere, parallels drawn between the support group and a romanticized image of 'home' (family) are reflected in the following interview excerpts:

...*this is my home* where I can stretch out my feelings and let them lay on the floor and not worry about [my feelings]...*In a way, [the group] becomes part of your family, part of your extended family...* (Interviewee 10:B).

To me, it is being able to go without having to measure your words, without feeling like you've got to be careful with the words that you've used. And the feeling of not having to justify yourself or defend yourself, that you're with people that can identify with how you feel...Such a relief that you didn't have to weigh what you were saying...Having somebody to talk to that is on the same wavelength and can identify with the feelings that you've got, you know, the same feelings and the same things that you're going through is such a relief. *It's like coming home* (Interviewee 22:A).

...*we became like a little family,* and when somebody was gone for a bit, you wonder how they're doing...because we all worry about each other (Interviewee 16:A).

In synthesizing these comments an implicit sense of community comprised of belonging, acceptance, identification and intensive social ties emerge as a critical dimension of the support group experience. Further to the notions of constructed community, the premise of mutuality and the solidarity of constructed social ties are implied in the following members' comments:

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It's amazing how *you feel the other person's pain* (Interviewee 10:B)

It was really good being here that week [in reference to a disclosure about a problematic situation] because I felt desperate and you could feel the rest of *the people in the room feeling my pain* because there was a lot of pain (Interviewee 20:B).

And you share in the success of the others too. It's like one person's success is everyone's success (Interviewee 22:A).

...just to come and see the people and see how they're doing because you do have *a sense of bond* in there...(Interviewee 14:A).

There's a very warm feeling [in the support group]. We know each other's names and we all share with one another and that in itself. being able to share with one another as hard as it is. being honest. *the warmth that I feel when I go there*...(Interviewee 18:B).

Sometimes relational connections constructed among certain members suggest that community ties are manifest on different levels. This is evident as some members established a supplementary connection with certain members. for example. during 'smoke' breaks. while socializing outside of the group or in meeting beyond the group setting for further discussion to name but a few. Two examples illustrate this branching-out process of building community ties:

> ...there's usually *two or three from the group. the ones that go upstairs to the smoke room. We've gotten to be a little cliquey group and we'd talk*...If I didn't get [what I needed] in the group. then when we went upstairs...I got it upstairs. I always went away feeling a lot better than when I came because it was like that weight was lifted off your shoulders. because you did talk to somebody and they did understand (Interviewee 16:A).

A second example of an extended connection established among two members during a meeting is reflected in the following dialogue:

> I want to say thanks to [member] for getting together on Saturday. We talked and it really helped (Member 1).

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Hey. it goes both ways – it helps me to talk about things too. What was great. too. is that for fifteen minutes or so we just talked about other things. not about the kids (Member 2: fieldnotes. B:35).

Although this individual (selective) response was not observed with all members. or at frequent intervals. the 'reaching out' to another member reflects some level of a community-like connection that is derived from the support group context.

In general. a sense of belonging and unconditional acceptance is acquired within a protective and 'nurturing' atmosphere constructed by support group participants. The support group is thus interpreted as a sanctuary – a place to seek refuge from those perspectives and actions exhibited by others perceived to be judgmental and damaging to self. It might be suggested that due to the sense of felt adversity. the term 'acceptance' is more closely linked to the notion of a safe haven than that of 'belonging'. To be accepted unconditionally by group members is to imply that they are denied access (excluded) on some level from other social contexts. Both terms are relevant in terms of this interpretation; however. the slight variation in meaning (or the degree of disconnection) perhaps warrants further consideration in future studies. But for the moment. what processes might we attribute to the facilitation of a safe and nurturing environment?

Processes of Mutual Validation

Mutual validation processes foster this aura of belonging and acceptance whereby members are protected from adversarial social forces – the perceived judgmental perspectives and labels imposed by external others. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, constrained or uncertain identities undergo a healing process as members engage in discursive practices that offer reassurance, validation and non-critical evaluation. This

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absence of explicit critique contributes to the healing of wounded identities. To be listened to, heard and responded to in a non-critical and empathetic manner appears to be a critical step in the process of self-renewal. Numerous accounts given by members reflect this dimension of validation within a framework of mutuality:

> ...what I really like is that *everybody always acknowledged how you felt,* just being there, just listening, to know what's going on during the week....they are there to listen to you and not judge you...I know I can say it within the group so I'm not afraid to...*assurance that I'm doing things right.* I find that they've always been positive, *they always give you positive feedback, they've always been sympathetic*...(Interviewee 1:B).

> ...I think what it comes down to is, in this group...it's about feelings and if you're okay to feel...*being reassured that it's okay*...I think that it's the two hours in a week that I can just be, *my feelings are valid...* that you're being *reassured that your feelings are okay*...I don't think that anybody that has gone through what we go through have any sense to that type of feeling, so they wouldn't know how to reassure you that it's okay (Interviewee 10:B).

> ...I've been there, I am there, and I know what you're going through. Someone that knows what you're going through, not that they can just say, I can sympathize with you. But someone who can say, *I can empathize because I know exactly what it is because I've been there* (Interviewee 23:A).

> ...One of the things that the support group did for us is that it *helped [us] realize that we were okay parents*...We were getting a lot of *positive feedback* from others in the group...the positive things people said, *felt like we were on the right track, good parents*...which made us feel like it was not our fault that [child] was stealing...(Interviewee 22:A).

> ...at my very last meeting here, I talked about what I did with my [child] when we went shopping...I shared that with a co-worker and the first thing [she] said was 'I would never have done that to my kid!' And I'm thinking, well, put yourself in the same position then...*whereas I felt support from everybody here – 'way to go'!*...That's what I mean by nobody [in the group] would say, well I would never do that to my kid. In fact, *they were supporting your actions in what you did,* and if it wasn't so great they offered a different way of dealing with it (Interviewee 2:B).

> ...when I'm really stressed...at that point what you need is a sounding board, *you need to have them sit there and nod their heads and yes, they*

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*understand what you're saying and sympathize with you...*you want to hear oh. I know what you're saying. like my child did the same thing... like that type of validation. So that's what you're more looking for. *sympathy on your side* (Interviewee 12:A).

A lot of the *feedback has told us that we are doing some things right* which I think we need to know...(Interviewee 10.B).

I was always *made to feel that what I was choosing or the progress that I had made was wonderful* (Interviewee 24:B).

For me it's more the support. basically *that you're doing something right*, I guess...(Interviewee 9:B).

Suggestions are one thing. but criticism and seeing the reasons why things can't be done. that's not what anybody needs to hear...(Interviewee 20:B).

[The members] are *agreeing with you*...(Interviewee 17:A).

An explicit example of this interactive validation process is evident in the following collaborative effort observed early in the field research. A member recalled a past experience of parenting six children under the age of eight while attending a post-secondary institution. This image elicited numerous empathetic responses from other members such as "Wow. I can't imagine that!" (fieldnotes. A:11). As the dialogue continued. this member reflected upon a particularly stressful period of time:

> I had to come to the realization and acceptance of the fact that I could not keep up the continual managing and watching over my [child with this condition]. I came to this self-realization. This was extremely difficult – I admired others who could always seem to be there for their children [with this affliction] but the reality was that I had to let go. I couldn't take it any longer. *I felt that I must be a really bad parent – a failure* (paraphrased from fieldnotes. A:11-12).

Immediately following this disclosure a member interjected with a validating claim: "*It's obvious you are a good parent* just by what you are saying and your viewpoints" (fieldnotes, A:12). Other members verbally concurred with this statement of validation.

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In response. the member responded enthusiastically: "You know, *it's so important and nice to hear that*! That's what I get from this group – that's what support means!" (fieldnotes. A:12). In a collective effort to continue searching for a descriptive word to define the meaning of support. other members offered suggestions such as "confidence". "self-esteem" and "validate". It is this latter term that elicited an enthusiastic response by the member:

> Yes. yes. that's it – *validated*! *It validates my feelings* because sometimes it gets so hard – you get down on yourself and thinking you don't do anything right. And *that's what I get from a group like this – validated!* (fieldnotes. A:13).

An image of *wounded selves* emerges from these constrained identity claims made by members during situated interaction. In seeking and finding others who have experienced similar feelings of 'alienation' members collectively engage in discursive practices that contribute to repairing a damaged sense of self. That which is viewed as 'normal' or culturally acceptable in the broader social context stands in contrast to the reality of members' individual experience. With the perception that others bestow judgment on parental actions. self-doubts tend to develop over time: 'Maybe I *am* a bad parent? I must have done something wrong along the way!' A deteriorating sense of self-efficacy and human agency leaves the parent feeling ostracized. excluded or marginalized. Negative identity claims are intensified by the perception that others harshly evaluate their performance as parents.

The uncertainty and vulnerability related to certain negative identities. however. are subject to erosion through reassurance and reinforcement of validating claims mutually shared among support group members. This corresponds to Eder's (1988:230)

theoretical premise that a collaborative (interactive) response to expressed claims or stories is a strategy that functions to generate a sense of solidarity among those participating. In Eder's own words. "...the expression of shared perceptions can strengthen social bonds further" (1988:230). It follows that a sense of community among the support group members was enhanced by these collaborative efforts in addition to providing a forum for negotiating and managing identity claims.

Similarly, the support groups provide a means to *escape* the havoc and despair of daily lives gone awry (a slight distinction from its role as a refuge whereby individuals seek protection from adversarial social forces.). In this light, the support groups offer an alternative place to which members can flee. This connotation is reflected in the following members' comments:

> ...I think the most helpful were the ideas, the support, the commonality, *the break away from your children*. For some of them, that was their only break was to come here for two hours...(Interviewee 5:A).

> *Gets me away from my kid*. That's rude to say, you know. I love my kid but it is a nice break to get away (Interviewee 14:A).

> ...just the fact of *getting away for two and a half hours* and I didn't have to deal with the kids. It was a big *relief* that way (Interview 16:A).

Just how meaningful and salient the support groups are to these members is acknowledged in the following claims:

> ...*This group was there for me. We couldn't handle it on our own*. That's why we're back for support (fieldnotes, B:79).

> I'm *so glad I came to this group. I have somewhere to go*...(fieldnotes. A:105).

> Don't know how I would have *survived without everyone!* (fieldnotes, B:166).

I just refer to *the group as a lifeline* (Interviewee 12:A).

In appropriating the terminology from the latter response, the *lifeline* metaphor is an especially descriptive conceptual frame. The support group is interpreted here as a lifeline to members who perceive themselves to be drowning in despair, uncertainty and chaos. The provided safety net of belonging, unconditional acceptance and protection from adversarial social forces that potentially threaten the identity of 'good parent' resonates with the community and mutual aid group literature as previously discussed.

Given that the processes leading to the active construction of symbolic boundaries have been outlined, as well as the consequences of enhanced community (collective identity) among support group participants, how might these aspects of support processes be linked to notions of transformed identities or expressed agency? Moreover, in light of the pervasiveness of corroborated claims of felt stigma and denied agency, how are these negative concepts of self *resisted* on a collective level? How might the joint construction of symbolic boundaries contribute to the management of identities? And what role does audience participation play in these processes of negotiating and managing identity claims?

A Site of Resistance and Renewal

More than a safe haven, the support groups provided the context for members to resist felt powerlessness and negative concepts of self. Collectively, members challenge the adverse identity labels, judgmental perspectives and unjust actions perceived to be exhibited by external others. In sharing experiences and feelings with others traveling a similar path, members mutually validate their own daily struggles. Again, the

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experiential knowledge gained is the leverage members use to resist negative identity

claims. In turn, processes of repairing damaged selves are enabled. Members therefore

not only perceived the support group to be a safe environment within which perceived

injustices could be shared, but it was expected that these claims would be corroborated by

others "who know" – *authentic* verification by a source deemed legitimate. Since others

expressed similar struggles, one's sense of isolation is reduced and replaced with a sense

of belonging and acceptance. Moreover, the subjugated positions in which these

members perceived themselves to be placed are mutually acknowledged and legitimated.

But these processes of identification realized from the telling, listening and

corroboration of similar stories not only bring comfort to individual selves but also

objectify expressed injustices. This, in turn, activates collective efforts to negotiate, resist

and perhaps even alter constrained identities. The portrayal of selves as somewhat

wounded undergoes a process of transition that reflects a more explicit image of selves as

healed. In interpreting these situated interactions, I distinguish between two levels of

expressed agency: individual and collective.

Individual Agency: Expressing a Transformed Self

The ethnographic story told thus far has drawn attention to the dimension of

suffering. I now turn to explicitly address its oppositional referent: human agency. Self

is portrayed as an active agent who resists being placed in a position of powerlessness.

Resistance to this felt subjugation was sometimes expressed in the form of indignation

associated with perceived injustices and unethical actions. For example, as one member

shared a perspective stemming from an experience related to interactions with the police,

an alternative view was offered by this member's partner: "The police were only doing

their job. They want to get these jerks and find out who's supplying them with drugs! They want to nail these guys!" (fieldnotes, B:34). In response to this counter-perspective, the member who initially relayed the story replied in a somewhat defensive tone: *"I didn't do the break-ins and I don't deserve to be talked to or treated that way!"* (fieldnotes, B:34). From this rather emphatic response, the perceived injustice is accentuated and resistance to denied agency is then conveyed on moral grounds. The sense here is that a moral order of some sort lies just below the surface of interaction and, in this instance, has somehow been breached (coinciding with an ethnomethodological stance) (Hilbert, 1992:37).

Similar perspectives that tend to de-legitimize the actions taken by external others (the system in this case), while legitimizing members' discourse of resistance are reflected in members' dialogue regarding events surrounding an arrest of one child:

> I was also angry about the kids left in the car in the pouring rain while the cops searched the vehicle. Three cop cars were at the scene – it's ridiculous! (fieldnotes, B:69).

Other group members corroborated this member's perspective of police actions as unnecessary. Although one member offered a counter-perspective that perhaps the police thought the kids were "up to" something because there were so many of them, another member upheld the original claim: "But three police cars! That wasn't necessary!" (fieldnotes, B:70). Other members substantiated this original 'discourse of resistance' with comments such as "Ya, that's ridiculous!" or "It's like they have nothing else better to do!" (fieldnotes, B:70).

This exchange between members serves to (a) acknowledge the injustice; (b) objectify the problem for collective reflection; (c) resist and therefore de-legitimize

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certain institutionalized practices; and (d) legitimize one member's perspective that, in turn, is collectively endorsed. With a number of participants corroborating one member's assessment of actions that transpired outside of the support group context, the resistance to exclusionary practices is collaboratively achieved and endorsed. According to Eder (1988), this strategy of

> ...explicit expressions of agreement or acknowledgment...serves to strengthen not only the narrative performance but also the social relationship between the co-narrators. When one co-narrator takes the role of evaluator [she] provides support for the other co-narrator and conveys a shared orientation toward the event being described (1988:230, 229).

This collaborative practice initiated by the members is also viewed as a strategy to foster group cohesiveness – a sense of community. Again, I draw upon Eder's concept of collaborative talk viewed as a mechanism to constructing cohesive social ties in the context of shared negative perceptions of others:

> By expressing a negative, shared perception of an outsider, group members imply the existence of positive, shared feelings among themselves (1988:230).

In this light, we can interpret members' portrayal of adversarial others as an impetus to constructing a sense of community. The endorsement of these claims by other members communicates a shared understanding, legitimates the perceptions and subsequently enhances the social bonds created.

The common response by various members gains acceptance, thereby reinforcing and reproducing the collective resistance to perceived injustices imposed by external others. Evidence of this collective endorsement is noted in a concluding remark by the member that initially offered the counter-perspective: "Yeah, three cars is a bit much – I

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could see maybe two cars" (fieldnotes. B:70). Interestingly, this modification to the original claim acquiesces to the overwhelming collective response even though this member only partially relinquished hold on the initial perspective. This exchange of dialogue also reveals that meanings are negotiated and managed during the course of interaction. Other members legitimate the evaluation of events portrayed in one member's story thereby generating a shared perception of the injustices that negatively impact upon one's sense of self. Although this process of validating and legitimating another member's resistance to perceived social inequities is collectively accomplished (consensual validation). complete endorsement of the actions is not apparent. Evidence of limited (partial) acceptance is evident by the alternative perspective offered by one member. This latter perspective. however. was modified during the course of the discursive interactions to be more compatible with (or seemingly less resistant to) the consensual version that is ultimately reproduced.

From the recorded dialogue that transpired among members. we might ask what purposes are served by the construction of symbolic boundaries between self and adversarial others? Attempts to deconstruct the boundary in the recent example were unsuccessful. The constructed boundaries are sustained and implicitly used as a means to (a) express the unjustness of the situation portrayed in the story: (b) to resist the negative consequences to one's self-concept; and (c) to solidify (as well as reproduce) the social bonds constructed within the group. One discursive mechanism that facilitated these social processes and practices is narrative.

Narrative Linkages to Identity and Community

We are reminded from an earlier discussion of narrative's role in the formation and expression of identity claims, as well as the construction of relational ties (see Chapter 3). Within stories shared, pieces of ourselves are revealed for self and others to see. As a tool to make sense of lives that might otherwise appear chaotic (Smith, 1981:225) and disconnected, narratives mold experiences into a manageable and communicable form. Stories are used as a vehicle to present *self* in particular ways (Perinyanagam, 1991), and I would further add that we pay heed to how *other* is presented in the stories we tell. Moreover, in the interactive process of telling our stories to and with others, our identities dynamically shift in relation to contextual nuances (Davies and Harrer, 1990), while the audience response facilitates the formation of cohesive social ties (Eder, 1988; Robinson and Hawpe, 1986).

Stories therefore serve as a conduit through which a sense of agency is channeled and thus expressed. Successful strategies or actions taken are exemplified in storied form and symbolize hope to others who are actively seeking solutions to personal traumas. Resistance to the perceived stigma and sense of powerlessness is accomplished by the discursive positioning of self in an empowered role, thereby displacing the felt status of sufferer. This increased sense of agency is reflected in the following storied segments.

In the first example, the events of a personal dilemma were shared during an interview conversation:

> [Child] had stayed in the cabin without permission and was having parties there and basically had dropped out of school, and *I went down and got [child] and said, you are coming home with me*, and she said, no, I'm not. *I said, yes, you are* and she said, no, I'm not, and I said, well, you have some choices. And *I felt I was empowered because of some of the things that people here [in the group] have told me*...It was really good being

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here that week because I felt desperate. and you could feel the rest of the people in the room feeling my pain because there was a lot of pain...(Interviewee 20:B).

During the final meeting before summer break (and the last meeting of the observational period of the field research) this same member described actions taken to deal with a situation following her child's involvement in a four-day party:

> I was mentally so trounced. so beaten. *but I wasn't going to risk my other three children.* So *I put my foot down.* [Child] had some choices to make. It was going to be my rules or foster care. If [child] ran away she would be arrested if she tried to get back into the [house] without my permission. *I made it clear* that *she did not have my permission any longer...* now seems to be living by the rules (fieldnotes. B:163).

From this narrative description. it is interpreted that the member presents self in a way that clearly conveys a sense of agency. The story provides 'evidence' of agency and transformation – a symbolic representation. A sense of powerlessness and constrained identity claims previously expressed by this member and others on a rather consistent basis are displaced by the projection of self as enabled. In this light. damaged identities seemingly undergo a process of repair and transformation. Or. perhaps more accurately stated. it is the *discursive representation of self* that gives the appearance of self-renewal and identity change. It might be further interpreted that this success story serves as a symbolic representation. or evidence of the support group's efficacy and significance in the process of self-transformation.

As events of the second story unfold in this next example. the positioning of self is such that the member is similarly portrayed as acting with efficacy:

> I took my [child and friend] to [the store]. [Child] badgered me for some money to buy candy. When the money wasn't enough, he proceeded to make a scene and took off. [Child] was nowhere to be found so *I made a*

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decision to leave with [my other child] and [the other two] would have to suffer the consequences by walking home [quite some distance from the store]. It took them two hours! After getting home I was worried and began questioning whether I had done the right thing [since the children are approximately twelve years old]. But they did arrive and I think that he was quite surprised that *I went through with it.* He was upset initially but then I saw that he seemed more respectful afterwards (paraphrased from fieldnotes. B:167).

Upon sharing this story with the group as a whole. a number of members rallied in response with positive affirmations. clapping and congratulatory comments. The facilitator legitimates and reinforces the actions portrayed by the member: "You did the right thing!" (fieldnotes. B:168). Consequently. a story that depicts acts of agency is celebrated and legitimated by both members and facilitator alike. Affirmation by other members of the story shared is interpreted as enhancing and sustaining the sense of community constructed among members.

Yet another narrative that illustrates steps taken toward empowerment is revealed during one meeting as a member informed the group as a whole of a decision to discontinue all of her child's medication:

It's been almost three weeks now and so far so good. There has only been one incident in school the whole time since [child's] been off 'meds'. and he used to be in trouble at least once a week. The teachers don't know that he's off 'meds' but they know I was going to the doctor so they think he is on new medication – they see improvement. I think this is quite humorous! They will definitely be surprised to find out that the new medication is 'no' medication! The *pediatrician is not very impressed that I've made this decision. taken this step. The doctor thinks this is a big mistake. But [child] is sleeping well - schoolwork and writing skills have improved in such a short time. I made this decision* after watching a show at three o'clock in the morning on [this medical condition], medication and the potential side effects like heart failure. strokes. etcetera. This really scared me. So I decided I wanted to try it (fieldnotes. A:124).

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Reflected in this story is the narrator (self) positioned as a subject acting with agency and a sense of empowerment. In contrast, external others are positioned as constrained and disempowered. A positive outcome related to the narrator's actions is provided as evidence and endorsement of actions taken – a justification. In accordance with actions taken by the narrator, the knowledge and expertise of non-members (professional others) are challenged and overridden. If the template of symbolic boundaries and positioning practices is transposed onto this story, professional others appear to be placed in a subjugated position whereas self occupies a dominant (empowered) role. Although the non-member is still positioned as somewhat adversarial, the member is not conveyed as the victim or sufferer in this instance. Instead, the expertise and agency of non-members are denied to a degree while the member is shown to exhibit a certain sense of agency. The positions in which self and other are placed in this member's story are a 'spin' on the typical identity claims expressed of adversarial other versus denied self.

In the next two stories, told in succession during one meeting, the depiction of similar actions reveals a convergence of empowered selves. Members position themselves as individuals acting with agency and efficacy in both narratives. Moral undertones permeate these storied claims as members present themselves to others as 'good' parents:

> Two weeks ago my [child] and a friend started a flood in the school bathroom. [Child] kept this a secret with the friend but the friend told. I told the school that I want [her] cleaning bathrooms for two weeks! But the school's stance was that [she] couldn't because [she] might get a disease! So I made [her] write lines and apology letters to at least six teachers and then [she] did homework all day! (fieldnotes, A:133).

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As another member enthusiastically agreed with the actions taken relayed in this account, a similar story (initially shared with the group during an earlier meeting) is offered to substantiate the expressed identity claims:

> Remember when I talked about when my [son] shoplifted and *I insisted that [he] clean the garbage bin* at [the store]? *There is no way my child will be a thief!* (fieldnotes. A:133).

This latter response provides validation that in turn reinforces the identity of 'good parent' and legitimates the appropriateness of actions taken. Moreover. the corroboration of one member's claims by another simultaneously endorses the actions of self and other. Personal experience is used to legitimate actions taken for both participants and. together. the stories provide evidence of selves acting with agency. efficacy and moral fortitude.

Perceived Impact of Group Participation on the Transformation of Self

The perception of self as changed or transformed is implicitly linked to participation in the support groups studied. Members periodically attributed their acquired sense of agency to participation in the groups. The efficacy of the group. in terms of the apparent transformation from chaotic to coherent selves. is stamped with a 'seal of approval'. By verbally endorsing the groups' perceived influential role in identity transformation. members impute the groups with symbolic relevance that in turn is socially reproduced. This public endorsement is given by members who exhibit tarnished images of self upon first entering the group but. over time. show a different (efficacious) side of self. The value and significance of the support groups is thus recognized and acknowledged by members. Whether this is actually manifest in members' lives outside of the support group context is unknown. Nevertheless, we can make an interpretive

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claim that members *express* or *communicate* claims of positive identity change discursively to others in the stories that they tell within these specific contexts of support. We might be safe in assuming that doing so within an environment whereby approval for actions taken is likely attained, serves a purpose to members who do not frequently receive positive reinforcement or endorsement of their parental actions. In other words, the support groups provide the validation members need to alter or repair their compromised and alienated sense of self.

Illustrative examples of the residual effects of support group participation, that is, the linkages between the specific social context and perceived shifts in identity are provided as empirical evidence. In one member's account, for example, indications of increased agency are coupled with claims that explicitly attributed this renewed sense of self to the group experience. Upon sharing with the group the terms of a court-ruling related to the child's conduct and a problem that had occurred during incarceration, this member conveys an act of agency interpreted here as an example of expressed identity transformation tied to the perceived efficacy of the group:

> *I have come to the decision,* and *partly from what people have said here* [in reference to the group], that if he doesn't obey the rules he'll have to go to foster care. *No more of the goings on like have happened this last year...*(fieldnotes, B:165).

In yet another example, the perceived efficacy gained from participation in the support group is revealed in one member's actions as expressed in the following account. More specific reference to the group's formal ideology, in this case, is also noted here:

> *I'm not as hysterical as last week. I've let go somewhat* and have been *applying some of the skills from the book* [reference guide]. *I have changed tactics* from forbidding contact with [certain] friends to 'killing her with love' by encouraging friends to come in to our home. My

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[spouse] said that he *sees that the changes in approach seem to be working* (fieldnotes. B:107).

Additional evidence of the perception that the group plays an instrumental role in the process of self-transformation is acknowledged in the following field observations. One member commented upon observed improvement in the child's behavior and attitude:

> All in all. it feels really good. This time last year I was a basket case! *This stuff really works!* (fieldnotes. B:133).

Another member revealed a similar evaluation of the group's felt impact upon self: "In some ways *[child] is better – willing to talk about things and not screaming matches like before I came to this group*" (fieldnotes. B:155).

The support groups' perceived significance related to the process of acquiring self-efficacy and agency is also reflected in the following excerpts selected from interview and observational data:

> ...I couldn't even talk about it but I've come a long way to even be able to talk about this stuff, and I think *being able to come to the support group has given me the courage to spit it out and say it and to face it* because I was in denial all this time (Interviewee 18:B).

> *I have come to the decision. and partly from what people have said here* [the group], that if [child] doesn't obey the rules [she] will have to go to foster care. No more of the goings on like have happened this last year (fieldnotes, B:165).

> ...I've been going to the group before that and gained the information and the strength that I needed and then when we had this major blow-up with the family, it wasn't as devastating as it could have been if I hadn't been going to the support group. *I gained all that knowledge and strength to be able to stand up to it* because I know I wouldn't have been able to stand up to him like I did if I hadn't already built up all that strength...(Interviewee 11:A).

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Proposed is the conceptual linkage between collective efforts (a collaborative process) and the perception of acquired individual agency. The perception that support group participation contributes to an enhanced sense of individual agency (at least in part) constitutes this interpretive claim.

With a somewhat different twist, the following success story told by a member depicts an act of agency couched within a framework of humour:

> I do have a good thing to share with you tonight. Our child left my bike at a friend's house and had not returned it home. *We said it had to be back by a certain time or threatened that I would wear a clown nose to the friend's house to get the bike back.* Sure enough, the bike wasn't back in time so *I followed through. I knocked on the door and asked for my bike back* – the friend never said a word. However, the bike wasn't there. But there was no reaction from the friend. But [our child], however, was mortified! (fieldnotes, B:109)

Upon sharing this story, members responded with an uproar of laughter and the facilitator noted that it would serve as terrific new material for use in the orientation sessions (fieldnotes, B:109). Although self is portrayed in a humorous light, the member is still positioned in such a way as to convey an act of agency. Moreover, the members' positive affirmation of actions taken endorses the transformation of identity expressed. Expressed acts of agency are celebrated and encouraged by the facilitator and members alike[69]. In turn, this serves to legitimate the actions taken and thereby bestows a positive identity label upon the members. From these illustrative examples of interview and observation data, the individual self is positioned as an active protagonist acting with agency and thereby resisting negative identity claims.

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[69] This explicit reinforcement of actions taken is more apparent in Group B; the meetings tended to follow a more structured format under the ongoing direction of the facilitator.

The aim here is not to measure whether actual, or even perceived, efficacy is attained in some way. But rather how members resist negative perceptions of self and how this resistance is manifest in a social group are questions of theoretical interest. The *expression of* perceived efficacy and agency assumes certain significance here. By expressing an empowered self in dialogue with others, the member activates a form of resistance to frequent references of felt powerlessness, stigma and constrained identities. Human agency (or the lack thereof) was emphasized in the dialogue exchanged among members in accordance with how self was positioned in relation to others. This positioning practice is viewed as an attempt to challenge or resist the felt stigma and denied agency that is communicated through the construction of symbolic boundaries. These processes address how *individuals* resist a sense of powerlessness by expressing empowered selves within the support group context. Might this also be apparent at the collective level whereby the empowered subject position of "we" replaces "I"?

Collective Agency: Expressing Transformed Selves

In extending beyond the level of individual agency, collaborated resistance to constraining social forces and identity transformation is expressed on a second level – a collective representation. As individual stories are interwoven to create a community tapestry within the support group milieu, the image of *we* is periodically reflected in the dialogue of members. In the process of identifying with the common struggle, individual selves join together to form a configuration of collective selves. Members' explicit reference to "we" or "us", however, surfaced most notably at moments when attempts to

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exert a sense of agency are set into motion[70]. Underlying this process of identity management is an implicit resistance strategy used to challenge negative identity claims by asserting a sense of agency that reflects identification with the group.

Identification processes previously discussed reveal that individual members begin to collectively identify with other members as they identify with the common strands of lived experience embedded in the stories they share. Moreover, the sense of belonging acquired from relating to the common suffering and agency expressed in these narratives facilitates a collectively shared identity (Brown, 1997:116). As Brown contends, "belonging, in this sense, is something more than the multiplication of personal identities – it gives us the authority to speak of we, us, and ourselves"(1997:116). Indications of this collective identity that evolves from individual members engaged in these identification processes lies with the positioning of 'we' in a manner that denotes agency. This symbolic representation of the support group as an integrated whole is interpreted here as a by-product or consequence of the initial weaving together of individual (yet common) threads of lived experience. Members draw upon and express this collective representation by resisting constrained identities and projecting an image of enabled selves. Selected data segments from field observations are provided to illustrate this interpretation:

> We're not powerless. I've been there – the back talk – and I've learned to walk away – many times with tears rolling down my cheeks...(fieldnotes, B:154).

> We should compile a book of hints and solutions for parents dealing with children [afflicted with this condition] – tricks of the trade (fieldnotes, A:35).

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[70] One noted exception to this is acknowledged earlier when one member describes an experience of meeting with school administrators/teachers as 'them and us', denoting a sense of denied agency.

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We are the experts in this field. *We* are the guinea pigs... (fieldnotes. A:39).

We 're more interested in rehabilitation than the system is...(fieldnotes. B:151).

It would be nice to have a 'professional' come in and learn from *us* (fieldnotes. A:51-52).

Implicit in the latter three excerpts is the symbolic boundary constructed between the members who hold the key to experiential knowledge (authentic 'ways of knowing'). and those who prescribe to a different body of knowledge.

Experiential knowledge is granted legitimation by the members while. conversely. professional knowledge is considered a counter-discourse that conflicts with the lived experience. For example. the notion of contested forms of knowledge is implied in the following member's comment related to an ongoing conversation of frustrations associated with hearing multiple and repetitious diagnostic criteria issued by those in professional positions:

We know already what factors point to [this condition]...[the medication] is perceived as a crutch by the professional (fieldnotes. A:37).

An additional example of implied collective identity and legitimation of experiential knowledge is noted in the following statement. After a number of participants shared a common strategy proven to be effective in calming their child. one member stated rather emphatically: "*We* should write a book!" (fieldnotes. A:90). This declaration represents collective agency whereby one member attests to the value of the collective experience and knowledge gained as a result of sharing selected moments extracted from the daily turmoil of personal lives.

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Collective agency is further reinforced and legitimated by the facilitator of the group. As observed from field observations, the facilitator periodically acknowledged the experience and efficacy of the members by explicitly defining or labeling the members as such: "*You are the experts*" (fieldnotes, A:54). In this light, the "professional others" that interacted with the members in the support group setting are not positioned, or conceptually segregated, by the members in the same way as those in similar social positions located outside the group setting. The symbolic boundaries typically constructed by the members that position 'other' in the role of outsider or adversary are not 'visible' in relation to the professional facilitator(s) of the groups. The relations within the group, to include the group facilitator(s), are presented as a unified and coherent whole.

Concluding Remarks

From previously discussed empirical studies, the transformation of identities is most frequently linked to the formal governing ideologies or discourses that structure interaction in the mutual aid group context (see Chapter 2). That is, support group members forge new identities from reinterpreting past experience, ascribing to a new set of beliefs, and then internalizing that framework of understanding (Cain, 1991; Eastland, 1995). Interpretive findings from this research, however, suggest that moments of expressed identity transformation in the support group context also occurred in the absence of a formal ideological doctrine. As outlined in this chapter, participation in the group yielded an increased sense of agency – a reinvented identity – which was communicated to and among other members. Members attributed this transformation, in part, to the skills and strategies learned from participation in the group, which necessarily

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included some elements of professional discourse. But the premise of mutuality and the critical points of identification around which individuals connected to each other, both of which occurred within the protective enclave of the support group(s), are interpreted here as catalysts in enabling the expression of self(ves) as transformed (see Chapter 5 for a detailed description and earlier interpretations provided above).

Emerging from these storied claims of expressed agency was a form of resistance to the social forces perceived to threaten or undermine one's sense of self[71]. In this case, it was the role of parent at stake and one that was actively managed and modified within the context of the mutual aid group. Narrative, as a particular discursive form, was the medium through which identity was negotiated, managed and expressed as either denied or enabled. Similar strands of suffering and denied agency were interwoven with storied threads of empowerment and efficacy to reveal a collective narrative of shifting identities. We might regard the stories themselves as `evidence` members provided of not only denied selves (as discussed in the previous chapter), but also of selves acting with agency.

In appropriating the framework used throughout the thesis, support group members discursively constructed symbolic boundaries by positioning self and other in ways that reflected different subject positions of agency: constrained or enabled. These positions shifted in accordance with the particular claims being made at the time. In other words, emphasis placed on the presentation (or positioning) of other as the adversary, for example, tended to position self as a victim of sorts. Other members

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[71] The term `social forces` simply refers to the `adversarial others` constructed by the members as a categorical frame of reference to draw upon and then situate in the stories told as reflections of experiences that occur in various social contexts. Also, the feelings associated with, and circumstances surrounding, the affliction or problem itself is viewed as social forces that contribute in part to denying agency.

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typically corroborated the moral claims associated with these positions - the perceived injustices and denial of experiential knowledge that yielded this marginalized position. In contrast, when the member positioned self as the protagonist, the positions shifted so as to present self as enabled and others as constrained. Again, stories provided the context within which identity claims were maneuvered through different positions that rendered the symbolic boundaries between self and other as more, or less, visible.

In this chapter, the expression of agency in storied form was interpreted as a resistance strategy that attempted to break through the symbolic boundaries constructed between self and other. The boundary, however, was a necessary part of the process given that it provided the rationale for resistance and the 'substance' against which to resist. In other words, the constructed boundary provided the space wherein a sense of agency and efficacy could be expressed.

In extending this premise, a sense of collective agency and efficacy emerged from observations in the field. Collective identity was represented here in the form of 'we'. On this level, identity was predominantly expressed in the form of moral statements as opposed to the discursive form of narrative. Perhaps this collective representation of identity was primarily communicated in this manner after relational ties had already been established through the sharing and interweaving of individual stories. If stories are provided as legitimating evidence of the identity claim being made at the individual level, perhaps the collective endorsement of the members as a whole legitimates the moral claims expressed. Worthy of mention here is the virtual absence of this notion of collective identity associated with the mutual aid group context in the social support literature. An exception to this is Bandura's proposed concept of 'collective efficacy', as

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an extension to self-efficacy (the former of which is regarded as a relatively undeveloped concept) (as cited in Katz and Bender. 1990:90). This line of thinking holds promise for future research inquiries that might examine various dimensions of collective identity as an extension of self-identity. and the community narrative as an emergent discourse constructed from the individual stories of suffering and agency.

Conclusion

This ethnographic "story" has focused on social processes that transpired among a set of individuals in two support groups. An inductive approach yielded a number of emergent themes from the ongoing analysis of field research data. Certain thematic strands were selected on the basis of (a) personal theoretical interest; (b) a focus on social processes; and (c) noted patterns and contradictions that surfaced in the data. In exploring what support meant to the members themselves, and observing their interactions during scheduled meetings, selected theoretical ideas were found to be particularly useful. Certain recurrent themes resonated with my prior and emergent theoretical questions related to community and boundary. Although numerous dichotomies emerged during the ongoing analysis, certain distinctions were drawn upon to a greater extent than others: inclusion-exclusion (insider-outsider); isolation-belonging; commonality-diversity; experiential-professional knowledge; and constrained-enabled selves (victim-agent). I turn now to a brief summary of my interpretation, one that is grounded in the field research of both support groups studied.

As individuals brought a sense of despair, frustration and isolation to the support group(s) they immediately encountered others with strikingly similar stories to tell. In identifying with the struggle, members found solace in the similar plight of others. This sharing of experience in storied form enabled mutual identification with common dilemmas and thereby forged a sense of collective identity. Despite the diversity of social statuses and roles attributed to these members outside of the support group context, the feelings, moral claims and experiences associated with the common struggle served as critical connecting nodes. As individuals *connected* with others who conveyed

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common tales of denied agency and moral claims embedded in the shared stories, a sense of belonging replaced feelings of isolation. Through processes of identification, mutuality and social comparison, meaningful and valued social ties were constructed around experiential knowledge. In particular, a felt sense of "otherness" was expressed in relation to the perceived lack of understanding and judgmental claims by others located outside of the experience (external others). Participants typically corroborated perceived "otherness" and injustices thereby legitimating their sense of alienation and stigma. The basis for this legitimation was the *experience* associated with the common struggle – the rationale (and leverage) for resistance to felt stigma. The sense of isolation and exclusion often expressed by members shifted, instead, to exclude others located outside of the constructed set of bound relations. In turn, this also served to generate a sense of belonging and acceptance (community) among the members. The support groups provided a nurturing context within which these processes were enabled and set into motion, thereby, laying the foundation for the transformation of identities - the transition from a *wounded to healed* sense of self. In other words, identities frequently expressed as constrained underwent subtle shifts that conveyed increasingly enabled selves at different points in time.

A conceptual framework was developed to describe and explain *how* these processes were accomplished within this local context. Two central concepts – boundary and positioning – were drawn upon in conjunction with the constructs of community and identity. This working template was used to explain (a) how support was understood by the members; (b) the processes through which support was accomplished; and (c) how support was managed among members interacting within the mutual aid group context.

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The basic interpretation of the data, grounded in the dialogue of members, is that members discursively positioned self and others in ways that portrayed a self-image of suffering or agency as represented in the distinctions derived from constructed symbolic boundaries. In other words, how self was positioned in relation to others (or vice versa) conveyed identities as constrained or enabled with self portrayed as victim or agent. These positions shifted in accordance with the nature of the experiences and perspectives shared at any given moment, that is, whether problematic or efficacious moments were the topic of conversation. Others were frequently portrayed as *outsiders* or *adversaries*. From this positioning stance, the sense of alienation and isolation was framed in relation to the perception of harsh judgments by ˙external others˙ (non-members) who lacked the understanding and experiential knowledge to which only the members had access. Other members corroborated this constrained identity position with the knowledge derived from similar experiences. The sense of ˙otherness˙ expressed by most members invited a collective response of mutual legitimation. Objectifying perceived injustices through sharing personal experience with those who could relate served to validate the feelings and perspectives associated with the sense of their collectively acknowledged marginal status.

The consequences of discursively positioning self as the object (or target) of the judgmental actions by others included the construction of a sense of community (belonging and acceptance) among those similarly afflicted. Such positioning practices were certainly most prevalent in reference to ˙external others˙. Nevertheless, similar practices occurred among members, thereby implying that the construction of symbolic boundaries was a highly fluid and complex process. The significance of this internally

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constructed symbolic boundary was the enhanced sense of community (belonging and acceptance) created among the members, a similar pattern as that which occurred when boundaries were constructed between members and external others.

When members positioned themselves as empowered subjects. a subtle shift from the articulation of constrained to enabled agency was accomplished. Portraying self as acting with agency was thus interpreted as a form of resistance to negative definitions of self. While perceived injustices were acknowledged and verified with corroborating stories, acts of agency were condoned and applauded. The support group provided the context wherein these discursive processes were enacted and responded to in an affirmative and legitimating manner by the members. In this light, audience participation contributed to the process of identity management as well as the construction of community among members. Experiential knowledge provided a legitimate foundation from which negative identity claims could be resisted. Stories of resistance and agency, with self positioned as agent, was the chosen medium to communicate positive identity claims. The experiential knowledge couched within these stories provided the justification and rationale for expressed agency. Tales of common suffering, denied agency and the unjustness of this marginalized position were interwoven into a community narrative of sorts that formed the moral foundation from which resistance could be expressed. The corroboration of perceived injustices and denied agency depicted a shared understanding that seemed to encourage the construction of social ties among members. This sense of community was reflected in how members related to one another by virtue of common experience, mutual validation of particular identity claims and the mutual corroboration of felt powerlessness.

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In continuing this line of thinking, it is interpreted that our identities are revealed in the spaces provided by the construction of symbolic boundaries via positioning practices (and the moral claims associated with these positions). The boundaries were typically constructed in ways that accentuated conflict or uncertain social relations. Moreover, the interactive response by members (audience participation) played a key role in generating a sense of collective identity irregardless of whether the symbolic boundaries were constructed between self and external others, or amongst the members themselves.

Stories grounded in lived experience were a catalyst in facilitating this relational connection, in legitimating experiential knowledge and, in turn, de-legitimizing the knowledge claims held by others outside of this constructed 'circle' (professional or otherwise). Stories provided evidence of the shared relational connection constructed among members and, in contrast, of the disconnection between members and non-members. Consequently, the act of storytelling drew the members together in a way that distinguished them as separate or distinct from others. On a certain level, common stories of suffering and agency rendered the differences among members invisible (irrelevant) while those between members and non-members were brought into focus. Applying the concepts of boundary and positioning to members' stories enabled both the points of identification and difference to be more closely examined.

A number of theoretical implications arise from these findings. Participating in field research activities over an extended period of time enabled a closer look into actual support groups and the actions of members over time. Emerging from this exploratory process is the conceptualization of community as process in lieu of the more traditional

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understanding of community as an entity of sorts. In addition, the application of concepts such as boundary and positioning are conducive to capturing the dynamic nature of interaction among support group members given that the social processes of support shift in complex ways. By grounding the concepts in empirical data, the abstract is rendered more concrete. An additional theoretical implication emerging from this study lies with the interplay between commonality and difference. In other words, my interpretation of the data suggests that the assumed common basis for identification is but one part of the support group experience. Contending with perceived differences among members, and between members and non-members, is also part of the support process. Also, this research draws upon the positive dimension of boundary, in contrast to its rather restrictive and insular-like image reflected in the literature. For example, the symbolic boundaries noted in members' talk was interpreted as facilitating the process of drawing members together and enabling a discourse of resistance to negative identity claims. And, finally, the findings from this study suggest that the collective response to members' stories plays a critical role in validating and legitimating both the felt sense of suffering as well as agency.

Given that this is a small case study, perhaps future research efforts might apply this interpretive framework to comparative analyses of other mutual aid groups to determine where emergent patterns converge and contradictions surface. Also, to draw upon this framework in studying support groups that vary in terms of format, leadership, structure and nature of the problem would yield an additional understanding of where this interpretation differs or remains relatively the same.

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In terms of applied value for those involved in the development, organization or participatory aspects of mutual aid groups this research provides some insight into the various micro-processes associated with social support. Our attention is drawn to the manner by which support group members see themselves the same as and yet different from others. It is through the negotiation of perceived sameness and difference among members and non-members that identities are managed and expressed as transformed. Moreover, by examining the identity claims embedded in the stories and perspectives of the members, we catch a glimpse of how members shift the insider-outsider relationship to create a sense of community, while also resisting negative identity claims that convey an image of individual and collective agency. An analysis of the discourse that members draw upon sheds light on how individuals perceive themselves to be affected by encounters that occur in other social contexts and how they accept or resist these perspectives.

For practitioners and facilitators of these groups, this understanding has implications for how individuals see themselves as victims or agents. These findings also point to the critical role that experiential knowledge plays in mutual aid groups. It is advised that those involved with groups of this nature be cognizant of the value members attach to this knowledge form, the 'power' it holds to draw members together and the leverage it provides to resist negative perceptions of self. And, finally, by applying an interpretive framework of boundary and positioning we are able to better understand how members see themselves in relation to others, and how constrained and enabled images of self are negotiated within the spaces created by these distinctions. In other words, the process of constructing symbolic boundaries that simultaneously include some, while

excluding others, allows us to explain one way by which members (a) develop relational ties that bind; (b) respond to felt stigma and powerlessness; and (c) use experiential knowledge as a legitimate form of resistance to express a sense of agency. These understandings hold some promise to those working with or participating in these groups.

Further questions of potential applied value arise from this thesis. First, a detailed analysis of how experiential and professional knowledge claims intersect, complement and detract from the support process would presumably aid those interested in developing or facilitating a support group. Although not explicitly addressed in any substantive way in this research, empirical findings suggest that professional knowledge is also viewed as a resource and typically regarded as distinct from support. An additional question with applied relevancy lies with further examination of the negotiation of contested meanings among the participants and the consequences of this interaction. This would likely contribute to a better understanding of disruptions to the social order of support groups and the role they play, especially considering that this aspect of support groups is certainly less researched. And, finally, further inquiry into the different levels of connection among members, and the basis on which they are formed, would likely tell us more about the nature of constructed social ties within this local context and how they coalesce around different points of identification beyond the common problem itself.

In terms of methodological implications, this study points to the importance of field research as opposed to predominant reliance upon survey analysis in this area of study. Fieldwork allows for an in-depth examination of social phenomena *in context*. In

this way, social *processes* assume a primary role in the analysis. In contrast, the aggregation of data from large samples for the purpose of generating statistical relationships among variables precludes this relational dimension of research. The use of ethnographic methods provided me the opportunity as a researcher to tap into the meanings of social support from the members' perspective and to observe the interactions of participants as they engaged in the practices of support within the specific group setting. This better enables us to see not only the patterns but also the contradictions that occur within any given social context. Moreover, using a *combination of* interview and observational methods proved invaluable in this project since certain aspects of the support group experience were not accessible by observations or interviews alone. (If anything, these two methods could have been even more closely linked.). Certainly other approaches such as life histories, comparative studies, discourse/narrative analysis and multiple ethnographic case studies would shed light on the support group experience from a different angle.

In terms of ethical or political implications resulting from this study we might draw upon the concept of symbolic boundaries as a way of understanding the politics of research. Appropriating this framework might shed some light on the inherent power differentials between the researcher and those we research, therefore contributing to our understanding of how this relationship shifts in unforeseen ways. Additional avenues to pursue along these lines, specifically within the mutual aid context, might include the symbolic boundaries constructed between facilitators and participants, between veteran members and newcomers, or between members themselves.

Although the limited sample size in this case study precludes any broad generalization, relevancy lies with its contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of micro-dynamic processes within the context of support groups and how members from these particular groups collectively engaged in the social practices of accomplishing support. This contrasts with much of the literature on mutual aid groups that is grounded in statistical analyses or ethnographic studies of the formal discourse (ideology) often governing these groups. More specifically, the conceptual framework of boundary (as process) and positioning (as practice) further contributes to our understanding of how processes of support unfold within the specific context of mutual aid groups. Attention to the consequences that flow from processes of identification, social comparison and mutuality lead to notions of how a sense of community is constructed and contested among support group members. By extension, the interplay between expressed suffering and agency reflected in the stories shared among members is brought to light as identities shift in the ongoing processes of situated interaction. In an effort to describe and explain the meanings and processes of support within the specific context of two mutual aid groups, this ethnographic story necessarily builds upon the actions of its members and the telling of *their* stories.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT

I, _____ . understand that the results of this study
will be used for educational purposes and that all information disclosed will be kept strictly
confidential. I understand that the researcher/interviewer will take the necessary steps to
ensure that any identifiable information or characteristics will not be revealed.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

July 2. 1996

SOCIAL SUPPORT STUDY - INFORMED CONSENT FORM

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of support within the context of a support group. I am interested in studying the various aspects of social support. In particular. I would like to understand what support means to you.

All information disclosed will be kept strictly confidential. I will take all necessary steps to ensure that any identifiable information or characteristics will be not be revealed. In light of potential written reports or published findings resulting from this study. please be assured that anonymity and confidentiality will be upheld. Also. you may withdraw from the study at any time if you so desire. As well. you may decline answering any of the questions I might ask.

This research is being conducted under the guidelines of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the University of Lethbridge. If you have any questions or concerns pertaining to the study please contact me at 329-2346 (work). or my supervisors as follows:

> Dr. David Brown. Associate Professor.
> Department of Sociology.
> University of Lethbridge.
> 329-2551.
>
> Dr. Patricia Chuchryk. Chair and Associate Professor.
> Department of Sociology.
> University of Lethbridge.
> 329-2550.

Thank you.

Sincerely.

Brenda J. Bell
Graduate Student
Department of Sociology
University of Lethbridge

****

I. hereby. consent to participate in this study as outlined above:

| Printed Name | Signature | Date |

Appendix C

INTERVIEW: SOCIAL SUPPORT STUDY

PART I: DEMOGRAPHICS

Interview No._____

Date:

_____

Time:

_____

Place: _____

"First, just some background questions...."

Male/Female: _____

Age _____

Marital Status: _____

Occupation: _____

Education Completed:_____

Number of Children: _____

Length of Residence: _____

PART II: SUPPORT GROUP

"Just some questions about your experience in this group...."

1. How did you first learn of the group? (friends, referral, advertisement?)

2. Did you initially attend the group alone or with someone you knew?

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3. How long have you been a member of the group?

4. Do you spend time. or have you spent time, with any members of the group outside of the group meeting time?

   [If yes]. Did you know the member(s) prior to the group?

   Was it just socializing or more 'group work'?

5. Have you ever participated in other support groups?

   [If yes]. How many?

   For about how long?

   In what ways was that/those group(s) similar to this one? (how the meetings were run. the size. purpose. informal?) (...any other ways?)

   In what ways was that/those groups different from this one? (...any other ways?)

6. In what ways has this group been supportive? I mean. how does the group work in a supportive way? (...any other ways?)

7. When new members come into the group how does the group change? In what ways? How did you feel when you first entered the group?

8. What kinds of things get in the way of giving or getting support in the group? (any other kinds?) Have you ever not felt supported? In what ways? example?

9. Can you tell me more about what gets shared in the group?

PART III: SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

"......some questions about support you receive outside the group..."

1. Who do you receive support from outside of the group? Just a list of the 'kinds' of people is all I need - no names... (friends, relatives. other organizations?) (any other kinds?)

[refer to attached sheet]

2. Overall, does the support group provide something different from the support you receive outside of the group? In what ways is it different? (are different things 'shared'?)

   In what ways is the support you receive outside the group the same? (are the same things shared?)

3. What kinds of things get in the way of support outside of the group?

   What makes it difficult to receive the support you need?

4. In general, what are the biggest hurdles that you encounter outside of the group (in your dealings with others regarding your child)?

   Biggest frustrations? How does it help to talk about these in the group?

PART IV: GENERAL

                  ".....just a few last questions to wrap up..."

1. In observing the group meetings over the past few months I've noticed that the system is referred to quite frequently -

   What does the 'the system' mean to you?

   Can you describe your experience with the system?

   What helps in talking about 'the system' to the group? How does the group help, if it does, in your further interactions with 'the system'?

2. Is it important to you to attend the group on a regular basis or mainly in times of crisis or need? Is there something about coming regularly that makes it more supportive?

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3. If your week has gone relatively well (no specific problem or crisis) do you to usually come to the meeting?
    What is important to you about coming even if you don't have a particular need to be met that night?

    What keeps you coming back to the group?

4. What kinds of things do you find most helpful about attending the support group?

5. The least helpful? (the way the meeting is run. the size...?)

6. What kinds of things. if any. divide people in the group?

7. What kinds of things bring people together in the group? Do you think the members really come together at certain times or over certain issues?

8. Anything you'd like to add to any of this?

Appendix D

INTERVIEW GUIDE
(Revised Format)

What initially brought you to the group?

> ➢ feelings upon entering?

How is the group supportive?

> ➢ in what ways?

> ➢ helpful? examples?

> ➢ problematic? examples?

Can you recall a specific time or moment when the group helped?

What keeps you coming back to the group?

How is the support group different from that outside of the group?

> ➢ same as?

System talk

> ➢ I noticed that members frequently referred to the system and I wondered what the 'system' means to you?

What do you think brings the members together?

> ➢ divides the members in any ways?