

**A Feminist Approach To Deconstructing The Media's Image Of Female Social
Workers**

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Abstract

In this thesis I compared and contrasted TV social work in relation to Prince George social work. Does Hollywood accurately portray the lived experience of a social worker in Prince George? The multivocality of Prince George social workers generated stories that supported my thesis and revealed the contradictions between Hollywood's portals and the lived reality of Prince George social workers. My research addresses the need for critical cultural discourse in relation to television and its representation of female caregivers and social activists.

I used multiple modes of inquiry. I used qualitative research methods, cultural studies theory, feminist methodologies and literature reviews to reveal how the mass media socially moulds the minds of the audience and how in turn this shapes our view of social workers and the care-giving role. I transcribed dialogue from the female focus group and quoted their responses in order to support my research. Due to the diverse nature of social work the focus group provided multiple female voices on which I based my feminist action research.

I received additional feedback for my research from the members of my First Friday Research group all of whom are social workers and emerging Masters of Social Work scholars. The group exchanged ideas, information, and experiences while at the same time providing scholarly support. The First Friday Research group was a collaborative and constructive process that provided me with ongoing dialogue and critical analysis that expanded and enriched my thesis journey¹.

¹ I was given permission to quote women of the First Friday Research group and I have used several of their comments.

I critically analysed the media's content for myths, lies, assumptions and negative stereotypes that perpetuate patriarchal values and the social norms of nameless, faceless corporate elites. I found that media images create negative stereotypes of women and social work. The objective of my research is to send a positive message to students, colleagues and the community regarding the professional and humanitarian care-giving role found in the multi-faceted work of female social workers.

Introduction

I want to speak about my own personal experience working [as a social worker in the north] as a white middle class woman. Throughout my career, I worked as a child welfare worker in northern Alberta. I came to an area that was a native reserve and it was very interesting work. I worked with a family whose kids were on my caseload. The father was the local taxi driver and when he ran into trouble I would go into the home and work with them and talk to them. I went and saw another gentleman who had obviously fallen and was in trouble, could not breathe properly. I went to the local hospital and asked the doctor if he would come see this man, he brushed me off and said that, he was an old drunk, he will be fine. I went to the home of the taxi driver, and I asked him to come and help me, and the two of us got the old man into the taxi and up to the hospital. He had fallen and broken two ribs and punctured a lung. And so you work closely with these families and there is huge respect, reciprocal respect (Heather, focus group participant, April, 2005).

Social activists should be represented by the media in a manner that is truthful or representative of the field of social work. My research challenges the media and their perpetuation of a patriarchal culture. Patriarchy is an ideology that requires critical discourse and analysis because it is a place where gender inequalities and oppression can be discussed.

Although patriarchy is manifested in an endless variety of historically and culturally specific forms, all human societies are patriarchal in that they are segregated and stratified by sex such that women are oppressed in social and political institutions; they divide productive and reproductive labour by sex and discriminate against women economically; they privilege men over women generally, guaranteeing men greater and nonreciprocal access to women's material and immaterial resources; they value men and masculinity more highly than women and femininity; and their discursive and symbolic systems

centralize, standardize, and normalize male subjectivity and points of view while casting women as the objectified *other* (Payne, 1996, p. 394).

My hope is that social workers and society will learn how to deconstruct their subconscious and conscious beliefs and throw out their collection of media generated stereotypes and falsehoods. If the women's movement and dreams of equality are to be realized then the mass media must start respecting, valuing, and representing the authentic multi-dimensional roles of women.

My research for the Masters of Social Work program at the University of Northern British Columbia addresses the tremendous impact and influence the media has on the profession of social work, which is statistically dominantly female. I have focused on women in social work because women make up approximately 80 percent of the profession (Gibelman, 1995) and I am one of those women. I am committed to social work and have been practicing in the north for the past seven years, working in adult mental health and acute care psychiatry. As a result I care deeply about how women and social workers are stereotypically portrayed and represented by the media.

I wanted to do this work because I believe television and film have a profound impact on the way society views, interprets and experiences the culture in which we live. The television media bombards our consciousness with foolish sitcoms, low-budget reality TV and serious dramas that glamorize wealth, beauty and power. Television completely ignores valuable social work issues such as: caregiving, racism, sexism, political oppression, poverty and globalization. The role of female

social workers in television is often completely forgotten; however, when social workers do make an appearance their role is often derogatory and disempowering to the profession.

Social workers are typically portrayed as uptight bitches who are either gonna steal your kids or cut you a cheque. In regard to child protection, the media does not paint an entire picture with the facts about why a particular child is removed. They [capitalist media moguls] do not speak to the countless unpaid after-hours (non-overtime) work that goes into providing services to families so that removals do not have to happen (Jorge Kelly, *First Friday Research Group* member, 2006).

Suzanna Walters suggests that the mass media maintains sex-role stereotyping through a variety of techniques aimed at disempowering the women's movements.

In addition most stereotypes are not neutral: they are deeply embedded in structures of oppression and domination and become prescriptions for behaviour and modes of social control. So the stereotype of women as more emotional has vast social and political implications and reverberations, such as the use of that stereotype as justification for certain forms of job discrimination (Walters, 1995, p. 43).

For the purpose of my thesis I have used literature reviews, qualitative research, feminist action research, cultural studies discourse and a focus group consisting of women who watched four clips from a television drama entitled *Judging Amy* (*Methodology* chapter will discuss this in greater detail). The female focus

group was then asked to provide feminist analysis of the clips using their own critical social work thoughts combined with seven questions that were used merely as a guideline or framework for their analysis. I then had the audiotape transcribed and used direct quotes that were carefully dispersed throughout my thesis. In order to further support my thesis statement I have provided additional analysis of two sitcoms and two movies. This eclectic feminist mix of research methods and practice paradigms is a term known as bricolage a brief description will be given in the following paragraphs.

Qualitative social research is a method that scholars such as Norman Denzin are passionate about. He argues that a central commitment of qualitative research is:

to study the world always from the perspective of the interacting individual. From this simple commitment flow the liberal and radical politics of qualitative research. Action, feminist, clinical constructivist, ethnic, critical and cultural studies researchers are all united on this point. They all share the belief that a politics of liberation must always begin with the perspective, desires, and dreams of those individuals and groups who have been oppressed by the larger ideologies, economic, and political forces of a society, or a historical moment (1994, p. 575).

Authors such as Denzin (1994) encourage qualitative social research because they believe that researchers need to learn how to write in a new way: learning how to write a new way, to move from the scenes of memory to the present and back again,

to reclaim a re-visioned present against a newly understood past (Denzin, 2003, p.137).

In addition to qualitative research I have used feminist action research and feminist content analysis because I wanted my research to be a feminist voice that challenges a TV culture that teaches society to privilege some types of information and invalidate others (French, 1977). Feminist methodologist Patti Lather (1988) believes that research is feminist only if it is linked to action. In her view, feminist action research must be oriented to social and individual change because feminism represents a repudiation of the status quo (Lather, 1988). The purpose of feminist action research is to create new relationships, better laws, improved institutions and social change (Reinhartz, 1992, p. 175).

The four participants of the focus group are Caucasian female social workers from similar socio-economic backgrounds and experience in northern remote social work practice; however their practical experience varied. The four women have worked in child protection, mental health, hospital, geriatrics and with First Nations peoples. The next step was to develop seven questions that would stimulate and guide group discussion. My goal was for the women to produce an intellectual, discursive analysis of the content depicted in the four *Judging Amy* video clips. The group was asked to compare the media's representation of a TV female social worker to the lived reality of a northern remote social worker.

Discourse analysis of content allowed the group to discuss contradictions within or between texts that illustrated the pervasive effects of patriarchy and capitalism (Reinhartz, 1992, p. 149). I believe the group understood the valuable

feminist need for deconstructing the dominant culture of the media because studying cultural products such as TV and film through a lens of feminist theory exposes a pervasive and even misogynist culture (Neggrey, 1988, p. 21).

Cultural studies is an emerging body of knowledge in Canada that developed in the UK out of Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and from literary sociological and anthropological domains (Hartley, 2002, p. 49). Cultural studies allowed me to research the intersecting discourses of multiple disciplines such as Sociology, Women Studies, and Psychology. *A Concise Glossary of Cultural Studies* states that culture:

is used to refer to intellectual and artistic works or practices which in their very forms and meanings define human society as socially constructed rather than natural. Sometimes this second meaning is then generalized to produce descriptions of the tenor or spirit of a social group or whole society, period or nation. Culture is therefore used to refer to individual style or character, to a stage of intellectual development, to the expressive life and traditions of a social group, to a social-historical moment or a broad epoch (Barker, 1999, p. 50).

For my purposes I researched the culture of the media in relation to female social workers and our practice.

Cultural studies is theoretically valuable because it opens the doors for critical analysis of North America's customs, habits, technology, values, ideology and political behaviour (Barker, 1999, p. 114).

Cultural studies...represents a body of work concerned with culture and power, with politicizing theory and theorizing politics, with the

political nature of knowledge production, an orientation to the texts and contexts of the objects of cultural analysis, a commitment to the theory of articulation and to the belief that theory offers a necessary explanatory framework for the object of inquiry...(Denzin, 2002, p. 254).

Cultural studies is an extremely valuable tool for social workers to incorporate into their daily practice because it is a sphere in which class, gender, race and other inequalities are made meaningful or conscious. Edward Said, a contemporary intellectual figure has earned his status alongside humanistic intellectuals such as Michael Foucault and Noam Chomsky argues against:

the disciplinary self-quarantining implicit in specialization, which removes that discipline from the public sphere and more general relevance. In short, those specialized professionals are self- or profession-interested, and thus closed off from interdisciplinary as well as larger world concerns. If you wish to uphold basic human justice you must do so for everyone, not just selectively for the people that your side, your culture, your nation designates as okay (1992, p. 80 & 93).

Cultural Studies allows the intellectual to become an active participant when attempting to understand our identity, reality, social and political networks, and the world at large. Cultural Studies promotes powerful and innovative thinkers.

The following chapters will discuss feminism, social work practice, the caregiving role and globalization using cultural studies discourse. This allows the

reader a broader intellectual understanding regarding the social need for critical analysis of the media and its relationship to social work practice. Transcriptions from the focus group are dispersed throughout these chapters.

The Female Gaze (1988) is a collection of essays by women on popular culture. The book discusses how women look at popular culture and how they can find ways to inscribe a female gaze into the heart of our cultural lives (Gamman, Marshment, p. 2). It is from popular culture:

that most people in our society get their entertainment and their information. It is here that women (and men) are offered the culture's dominant definitions of themselves. It would therefore seem crucial to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of intervention in popular forms in order to find ways of making feminist meanings a part of our pleasures (Gamman, Marshment, 1988, p. 2).

Social workers need to advocate for a cultural politics style of intervention because "we cannot afford to dismiss the popular by always positioning ourselves outside it".²

Female social workers are caregivers both personally and professionally. The political culture of the TV media often disempowers caregivers by perpetuating and maintaining stereotypical gender roles [heterosexual, nuclear, upper-middle class family]. In the capitalist marketplace caregivers are often given little attention because they are not seen as worthwhile financial contributors to the global economy.

Whereas the financial economy is primarily concerned with exchange value, the cultural is primarily focused on use – meanings, pleasures, and social identities. There is, of course, continual interaction between

these separate but related economies. *Hill Street Blues* can be used as an example. The programme was made by MTM and sold to NBC. NBC then sold the audience to Mercedes Benz, which sponsors the programme. This all takes place in the financial economy. In the cultural economy, the series changes from commodity (to be sold to NBC) to producer (of meanings for its audience). And in the same way, the audience changes from commodity (to be sold to Mercedes Benz) to producer (of meanings and pleasure). The power of audiences as producers in the cultural economy is considerable (Fiske, 1987, p. 311 & 313).

Cultural studies gives the female audience a place to discuss the meaning of caregiving because the cultural economy does not circulate the same way as wealth does in the financial economy (Fiske, 1987).

The TV media is a powerful communication tool that promotes globalization and affects the cultural lives of everyone around the world. In my opinion globalization can be equated with global sameness and that cultural distances and differences are both being reduced and that the processes of globalization is leading us towards global uniformity (During, 2005). Global theorist's David Harvey (1990) and Immanuel Wallerstein (1999) take a global-systemic approach.

For them globalism is capitalism, and capitalism is a mode of production that swallows up all the alternative modes of production and radically constrains the lives of those people who live inside it.

Globalization is particularly dangerous from this point of view because

² Quote from Gamman and Marshment, 1988, p. 2

it places democratic structures at risk. Strong democratic governance is local, so the argument goes, since the larger the territory under political control the more faint the local voices heard at the centre (During, 2005, p. 87).

Cultural studies attempts to recover and recognize the cultures of otherwise neglected groups.

These research methods allowed me the freedom to gather information from a variety of disciplines and sources, a term known in cultural studies as bricolage:

The concept of bricolage refers to the rearrangement and juxtapositions of previously unconnected signifying objects to produce meanings in fresh contexts. Bricolage involves a process of re-signification by which cultural signs with established meanings are re-organized into new codes of meaning. That is, objects that already carried sedimented symbolic meanings are re-signified in relations to other artifacts under new circumstances (Barker, 2004, p. 17).

Bricolage means that we can use *whatever materials* will assist us amidst the chaos (Transken, 2005, p. 15). Bricolage allowed me to link together unthinkable complexities from across the globe; therefore, I have used bricolage throughout the course of my paper.

As a feminist social worker and scholar I want my research to raise society's consciousness and promote transformational change through critical analysis of the television media and its system of inequality, inclusion and exclusion because the media has a tendency to present feminism and feminist themes critical of the existing

male dominated sex/gender system (Blum, 1982, p. 396). My hope is that this research will create insights and generate possible solutions to the negative images and stereotypes of the media generated social worker.

Chapter One: Research Methodologies

I am not just a researcher who observes life; I am also a parent and teacher who stands pedagogically in life (Max van Manen, 1992, p. 90).

Qualitative research allowed me to create a text that added depth, meaning and purpose to my research. Dey (1997) defines qualitative researchers as those who attempt to describe and interpret human phenomena, often in the words of selected individuals (the informants). These researchers try to be clear about their biases, presuppositions, and interpretations so that others (the stakeholders) can decide what they think about it all. Unlike conventional quantitative and scientific research, there is no single accepted outline for qualitative research. Creswell (1994) lists six basic characteristics of the qualitative mode of inquiry. These Are:

- 1) Qualitative researchers are primarily concerned with process, rather than outcomes or products.
- 2) Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning.
- 3) The qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis.
- 4) Qualitative research involves fieldwork (i.e. going out to people, settings).
- 5) Qualitative research is descriptive.
- 6) The process of qualitative research is inductive in that the researcher builds abstractions, concept, hypotheses and theories from details (p. 145).

Literature Reviews:

I have gathered literature from scholars such as bell hooks (1996), Stuart Hall (1997), Norman Denzin (2003), Shulamit Reinharz (1992), Bob Mullaley (2002), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), Karl Marx (1977) and many others to support my argument that the media negatively impacts the female care-giving role. As a result social workers struggle for their recognition, voice and ethical intentions in their fight for structural social justice.

...facts don't always tell the truth worth worrying about, and truth in a good story – its resonance with our felt experience...sometimes must use imaginary facts. The emotional texture of experience often is what interests me – the consequences of facts in the lives of actual persons. When I want to evoke the emotional texture of a human experience for an audience I find the canons of social science aren't very productive...I've been trained to make my academic research oriented to the factual, but my telling the story of what research is often disturbingly vacuous, because it lacks the traditional qualities of good storytelling, qualities like plot development...Character...My interest right now is to bring the two areas of questioning and doubt-factual reporting and fictional storytelling-into alignment, to see how ones own streams of writing can be made to flow together...(Anna, Banks, 1998, p. 11-12).

Feminist Methodology

Feminist methodology is well explained in Reinharz's (1992) book *Feminist Methods in Social Research*: feminist researchers try to interpret women's behaviour as shaped by social context rather than as context free or rooted in anatomy, personality, or social class (1992, p. 53). Understanding women's experiences from their point of view generated outcomes that are respectful, authentic and will enhance the public's understanding of women's issues and social issues globally and within the community of Prince George, BC.

The core of feminist ideas is the critical insight that there is no one truth, no one authority, and no one objective method which leads to the production of pure knowledge. This insight is as applicable to feminist knowledge as it is to patriarchal knowledge, but there is a significant difference between the two: feminist knowledge is based on the premise that the experience of all human beings is valid and must not be excluded from our understanding whereas patriarchal knowledge is based on the premise that the experience of only half the human population needs to be taken into account and the resulting version can be imposed on the other hand. This is why patriarchal knowledge and the methods of producing it are a fundamental part of women's oppression and why patriarchal knowledge must be challenged and over-ruled (Reinharz, 1992, p. 7-8).

I used feminist action research and discourse analysis when researching the content of media clips (*Judging Amy*) and when collecting data from the focus group (*female oral herstory*).

Feminist Action Research

I have chosen feminist action research for my thesis because it is change-oriented research that attempts to empower, liberate, and assist specific groups of people and can be applied to a wide range of issues (Reinharz, 1992, p. 180-181).

The visions and possibilities of feminist research are endless, Roslyn Bologh states:

The objective is not some end state, external changes in law or socialization...changes in parenting, nor changes in institutions, including political economy. These changes are the consequences of the struggle, they are not its end because there can be no new identity or institutional arrangement that does not constrain or limit or repress possibilities. The objective is not the product but the process, not a new final identity or institutional arrangement but the movement beyond a given identity or institution (1984, pg. 104).

Feminist action research is communal rather than hierarchical and helps build and develop egalitarian relationships between the *researcher* and the *subjects*. It allows for individual consciousness-raising because the everyday life experiences of the participants provide a greater sense of knowledge (Reinharz, Shlulamit, 1983). The focus group that I used for my thesis was successful because they produced rich, qualitative data revealing the conflicts between television's representation of female social workers and the lived reality of northern remote social workers.

Feminist Content Analysis

I chose feminist content analysis as one of the contributing modes for my research because it is the study of cultural artifacts and is a useful tool for challenging the dominant media culture. Bricolage best describes my multi-method approach to research because bricoleurship is fascinating, layered, and honouring of human complexity (Transken, 2005, p. 17).

Bricolage describes the process of the bricoleur who works with symbolic and material resources from her or his personal experiences, and membership in social communities and larger cultural contexts. Resources are defined broadly as stories, concepts, perceptions, memories, and so forth, by which persons make their world coherent. The bricoleur works with these resources in a concrete, improvisational manner, whereas the engineer progresses in an abstract, formulaic fashion (Geelan, 2005).

Feminist scholars of content analysis are likely to see cultural meaning as mediated, for example, television and movies are thought to mediate experience through the cultural industries that produce them (Walsh, 1984). There are many forms of cultural artifacts that can be researched such as the products of individual activity, social organization, technology and cultural patterns (Reinharz, 1992, p. 147).

Cultural artifacts are not affected by the process of studying them as people typically are. Instead scholars can examine a written record or

some type of text without interacting with the people who produced it
(Reinharz, 1992, p. 147).

Feminist content analysis applies to my research because one of the predominant areas of feminist study is the analysis of narratives and visual texts such as: movies, television shows, advertisements, and greeting cards (Kuhn, 1982; Grant-Colson, 1980; Adams C., Laurikietis, R., 1980).

Feminist content analysis was useful because it studies texts that exist and texts that do not for example, screen writers and producers create a visual text that imposes their patriarchal, stereotypical and prejudicial systems upon us (the nasty child-snatching social worker) and what does not exist are texts that honour and accurately portray the professional role of social work. Typically, studying cultural products through the lens of feminist theory exposes a pervasive patriarchal and even misogynist culture (Neggre, 1988, p. 21). The reader will find that my thesis promotes and encourages a deeper understanding of women and social work.

Identity Pegs: Self-Identification

In order to conduct minimally unbiased feminist research it is important that I have critical awareness of my own biases, stereotypes, whiteness, morals, values and social beliefs; therefore, I must first acknowledge my identity pegs. For example I am female, white, heterosexual, educated, middleclass and privileged. Becoming a critical thinker and developing creative ways of working within society's patriarchal systems is essential when performing feminist social research. In order to be an honest and reliable researcher I listened to the authentic voices of women in an attempt to experience their way of seeing and knowing the world in which they live.

It is self-awareness and an understanding of who we are and where we came from that allows for personal growth and positive change to occur. Denzin (2003) suggests: The authors of autoethnographic performance texts use personal experience and memory as the point of departure for writing about things that matter in everyday life. Such texts allow writers to confront and interrogate the cultural logics of late capitalism, including those logics connected to the myths of motherhood, family, marriage, love, and intimacy. When effectively crafted, these texts create a sense of emotional verisimilitude for reader and writer, producing experiences of catharsis, self-renewal, and self-discovery (Denzin, 2000, p. 137).

Inner self-reflection is a necessary process if we are to be valuable feminist researchers.

Focus Group: Sample Size & Composition

I supported my research by using the data I collected from four female professional social workers who live and work in Prince George and surrounding areas. The four Caucasian women viewed a series of video clips (approximately fifteen minutes in collective length) from the *CBS* evening drama *Judging Amy*. I used purposive sampling in order to select my interviewees.

Participant selection is an integral key in the formulation of focus groups because homogeneity, compatible conversation, and productivity are key elements when conducting a focus group. From recruitment to analysis, all your other decisions are contingent upon the composition of the focus group. The right group

composition will generate free-flowing discussions that contain useful data. The wrong group composition may bring together people who have little to say to each other or who may carry little relevance to your needs and goals (Morgan, 1998, p. 55). Purposive sampling met my qualitative research needs because purposive sampling allowed me to choose social workers that fit my research goals.

Purposive sampling is very different from the random sampling that is so common in survey samples. The reason for this divergence is the fundamental difference between the goals of focus groups and the goals of the surveys. The goal of the surveys is to generalize to larger populations by collecting numerically precise data, and this requires selecting a random sample that will cover the entire range of the larger population. The goal in focus groups is to gain insight and understanding by hearing from people in depth, and this requires selecting a purposive sample that will generate the most productive discussions in the focus groups (Morgan, 1998, p. 56).

The women are professional, generalist social workers who are currently working in a variety of agencies in Prince George and surrounding northern areas. I have met these women through the social work profession and I believe they added purpose, depth, and meaning to my research.

As previously noted the selection of group members has a tremendous influence on the dynamics and participation of the focus group. Purposive sampling allowed me to create a comfortable forum in which to productively discuss my research questions (Morgan, 1988, p. 58-59). In determining the composition of the

focus group I understand that compatibility is a key concern. When participants perceive each other as fundamentally similar they feel safer. Trust can be built quickly and similarly they can share experiences. The group spends less time explaining themselves to one another and more time discussing the questions at hand (Ibid).

I chose six as my sample size because this size provides enough different opinions to stimulate discussion while providing each participant ample time to express personal stories and heartfelt opinions³. Often, this matches a project goal of getting a more in-depth understanding of what participants have to say (Ibid).

The multivocality of the group situation validates the subjects experiences with other subjects of similar socio-economic, gender, and racial/ethnic backgrounds. This validation empowers participants, contributing to the construction of a research agenda embedded in the struggles for social justice. In a culture that highlights individualism and separation, shifting the research agenda in the direction of commonality and togetherness is, in itself, subversive (West, 1988).

The focus group is a collective rather than an individualistic research method that focuses on the multivocality of participants, attitudes, experiences, and beliefs.

Esther Madriz supports collective research by stating that:

In this regard, I argue that focus groups can be an important element in the advancement of an agenda of social justice for women, because they can serve to expose and validate women's everyday experiences

³ I sent out letters to six social workers, however, only four participants showed up. This is a common theme among northern social workers due to heavy workload and travelling long distances.

of subjugation and their individual and collective survival and resistance strategies. The singularity of focus groups is that they allow social scientists to observe the most important sociological process – collective human interaction. Furthermore, they enable researchers to gather large amounts of information about such interactions in limited periods of time (2001, p. 836).

The focus group added depth and understanding to my qualitative research because focus groups are well suited for uncovering women's daily experiences through collective stories that are filled with cultural symbols.

Historically focus groups have been used mainly by market researchers to understand people's wants and needs and there are potential weaknesses to this approach (Madriz, 2001, p. 837). Focus groups sometimes have the disadvantage of taking place outside of the settings where social interaction typically occurs; therefore, the range of information that can be gathered from a group interview is narrower and limited to verbal communication, body language, and self-reported data. In addition, given the presence of a facilitator, it is difficult to discern how authentic the social interaction of the focus group really is because the presence of a researcher could alter the behaviour and feedback from the group (Madriz, 2001, p. 836).

The strength of this research method is found in feminist paradigms that encourage a more textured and rich interview content.

Postmodernist feminism focuses on stories and narratives and on the construction and reproduction of knowledge. Feminist researchers share the common need of centering and problematizing women's

diversity of views and life experiences. Group interviews are particularly suited for uncovering women's daily experience through collective stories and resistance narratives that are filled with cultural symbols, words, signs, and ideological representations that reflect the different dimensions of power and domination that frame women's quotidian experiences (Madriz, 2001, p. 840).

The commonality of group members allowed for a cohesive focus group that provided productive conversation and homogeneity (Morgan, 1998, p. 73).

I realize that conducting one focus group could lead to premature conclusions; therefore, it is my hope that future graduate students will carry on where I have left off and continue my cultural exploration regarding women and the media because it would be fascinating to explore the diversity of outcomes from groups such as: First Nations female social workers, Indo-Canadian women, or a group consisting entirely of men.

Focus Group: Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues must be considered when discussing topics that have a high level of personal involvement. Participants will provide self-disclosure and as a result could experience a variety of emotions and feelings. Participants needing to debrief after the focus group were provided with the contact number of a counsellor. Confidentiality was highly respected and I followed the ethical codes of conduct found in the *British Columbia Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics Handbook*. All group members signed an *informed consent* form prior to participating in my research.

The four group members provided me with fictitious names in order to maintain their anonymity of course they may know each other's real names due to prior contact in a rural context but their privacy was respected in all ways. I recorded the group discussion via audiotape. Duration of the focus group was 120 minutes⁴. The tape was transcribed and feminist discourse analysis was used to select statements that best supported my research themes. Group members received a *participant information sheet* and signed an *informed consent* form that allowed me to use their testimonials for the purposes of my thesis research; it also allowed me to legitimate their claims (Smith-Tuhiwai, 1999). The tape is stored in a locked file cabinet in the privacy and safety of my office at Prince George Regional Hospital for six months, after which it will be destroyed [September, 2006].

Focus Group Questions

The focus group was given question one (1) prior to watching the videotape in order to set the framework for further discussion. Due to the collective nature of the group interview the questions shifted due to individual themes or patterns that emerged. Dialogue among women traditionally has been a major way in which women have faced their social isolation and their oppression. Thus testimonies, individual or collective, become a vehicle for capturing the socio-economic, political, and human challenges that women face (Randall, 1980).

- 1) What does northern remote social work mean to you?
- 2) What thoughts, feelings, and emotions did you experience while watching the video?

⁴ Focus group: number of participants, number of questions and group length based on recommendation from *Focus Group Kit*, Vol. 2, p. 72

- 3) Were the scenes from *Judging Amy* an accurate or inaccurate representation of northern remote social work?
- 4) What social values does television impress upon us?
- 5) What are the gender stereotypes of social workers/women depicted on television?
- 6) How would you describe the lived reality of a northern, generalist social worker?
- 7) How can we use this research to promote social change?

The seven questions were loosely followed; however, they did guide the focus group allowing me to use feminist content analysis for my research. This method challenges mainstream television and the media's representation of female caregivers through focusing on the pensive image, on silences, on representations that unsettle the male apparatus of the gaze (Trihn, 1991, p. 115).

Rationale for Selecting Judging Amy

Judging Amy is a popular evening drama that is broadcast on CBS and the Women's Network. The show has been running for the past seven years and portrays the life of a single, white, middleclass, social worker employed by Family Services (America's equivalent to B.C.'s Ministry of Children and Families). The role of social worker is played by actress Tyne Daly, who is one of the television industry's most acclaimed and respected performers. She has received four Emmy's as Outstanding Lead Actress in *Cagney and Lacey* and she has appeared in numerous productions on Broadway (O'Neill, 2000). Tyne Daly plays the role of Maxine Grey, a social worker. The character works for a government agency in a metropolitan city

and she is often found dealing with the social dilemmas of children and families who face the bureaucratic obstacles of government policies. Maxine shares her home with her daughter (Amy) and granddaughter. Amy juggles roles as a single mom and juvenile court judge.

I had a difficult time finding a television show with a longstanding character that represented a social worker. I searched for a purposeful television show or movie for over a year and asked for input from my colleagues, scanned TV guides and surfed the web. I decided *Judging Amy* was the most evocative show because it is perhaps the only television drama on a national broadcasting network that has a character representing a social work role; however, I must note that I have seen numerous television social workers making cameo appearances as child protection workers. The scenes are usually traumatic, dramatic and short. The viewer sees screaming children who are being scooped away from the arms of their parents by unfeeling, cold-hearted social workers. It is myths such as these that my research attempts to deconstruct.

After selecting *Judging Amy* I videotaped eight one-hour episodes and then hired a video editor to compile twenty minutes of Maxine Grey as a television social worker. The video clips seen by the focus group were selected because particular *Judging Amy* episodes had a distinct portion of the script dedicated to the portrayal of social work while others did not.

Analysis of the television media culture is of great importance because the media uses every psychological trick they can get away with so that politicians and the nation's top media managers can sell elitist actions and policies to the public.

The owners of the media have been working on conditioning our minds for quite some while, and I remember how slowly my own mind responded to the deep significance of the wealth distribution statistics. We are all handicapped by the fact that it is almost impossible to reverse years of brainwashing overnight (Manipulation of the Media, <http://www.users.uniserve.com/~synergy/pg3-13.htm>).

My research challenges the media culture and encourages the reader to become more critical of television's representation of women and social work. In order for positive social change to occur, society must be cognisant of the myths, lies, assumptions and stereotypes that perpetuate the patriarchal values of corporate elites. In the following chapters I will be discussing: feminism, generalist northern social work practice, the political devaluation of caregivers, globalization, the media and sex-role stereotypes, and deconstructing cinematic social work myths (*Judging Amy, The Cold Squad, When Angels Come to Town, and The Norm Show*).

Chapter Two: Waves of Feminism

Possibly the one characteristic that most feminist scholars would agree upon is the need for social change (Unger, 1982, p. 10).

Social workers practicing in the north must incorporate cultural feminism into their daily work because in order to be productive social activists we must first learn how the forces of structural oppression operate. My thesis is relevant to future feminists because I am challenging the culture of the media, one of the most powerful oppressors towards the women's movement. *The Concise Glossary of Cultural Theory states that:*

Feminism is women's work committed to consciousness raising and to campaigning on issues of women's health, childcare, and equity at work. The slogan the personal is political has raised some awareness regarding the invidious distinction between woman's supposed domestic sphere of home, and family and the male-defined public sphere. Imelda Whelehan believes feminism has been the victim of media stereotyping she appeals to feminists to resist the distortions of the media and male-oriented knowledge and to remain united in their opposition to patriarchy and male domination (Brooker, 1999, p. 82-82).

This chapter gives a brief history of feminism allowing the reader to understand the essential role feminism plays in social work practice.

Throughout the nineteenth century women had few legal, social, and economic rights. Women were invisible and defined as *feminine*, a word that carried with it considerable stereotypical baggage. *Webster's Revised Unabridged*

Dictionary of 1913 defines feminine as: modest, graceful, affectionate, confiding; or... weak, nerveless, timid, pleasure-loving; effeminate was used to describe women and did so in a very derogatory fashion. In 1895 the women's movement changed *feminine* to *feminism*, which they defined as the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes (Bloom, 2001, p. 12). First wave feminists were social activists who found their roots in the suffrage movement and abolition movements⁵.

The first wave of feminism began in the 1840s and women such as Susan B. Anthony vigorously campaigned and fought for a woman's right to vote in the political arena. Anthony realized that women must have the right to vote in order to gain political influence. Their activism was known as the suffrage movement and this led to the temperance movement that campaigned for stricter liquor laws. Feminists acknowledged the fact that alcohol had a detrimental effect on women, children, and their families (Shaw, Lee, 2004, p. 6). They wanted social policies that treated women and children as a social not solely a familial responsibility (Mika & Trotz, 2002, p. 110). As women's conventions grew, national organizations such the National Women's Suffrage Association (NWSA, 1869) and the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA, 1890) merged and formed the American Woman Suffrage Association. These associations were crucial in the fight for a woman's political personhood...a fight that continues today (Ibid, p. 8).

Rise of the Second Wave

The second wave of feminism can be coined the Women's Liberation Movement because it occurred somewhat simultaneously during the 1960s and 1970s. The second wave of feminism grew out of women's discontent during the 1950s. It

⁵ The abolition movement was the fight to free slaves (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 7).

was a period that created many societal myths and concealed the discontents and discomforts of many women. This decade can also be known in North America as the Cold War Era. The media filled the minds of Americans with fearful propaganda that suggested communism, Soviet espionage and nuclear threat. Family stability became critical and women's domestic role as wife and mother was interpreted as the only socially appropriate choice. Baxandall and Gordon state:

Girls grew up in this cold war era barred from wearing blue jeans or sneakers to school, required to sit with their knees together and to set their hair in pin curls. Nothing in the culture encouraged them to become strong or competitive. Girls grew to hate athletics and dread physical education in school, where they were required to wear unfashionable tunics or bloomers. Girls were not encouraged to fantasize about careers, about what they would become when they grew up. They were expected to break a date with a girlfriend if a boy asked for a date. They watched movies and TV in which married couples slept in twin beds and mothers were full-time housewives. The people of colour on TV were stereotypes, comic or worse: step-and-fetch-it black servants, marauding Apaches, or fat lazy Mexicans (2000).

U.S. policies endorsed female subordination through the promotion of a Cold War Gender Culture; it was a prescribed genre in which politicians and media moguls perpetuated domestic, white, middle class culture (Baxandall & Gordon, 2000).

Women's issues such as violence, abortion, and divorce were extremely taboo and highly disregarded. Television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* presented a glossy portrayal of the nuclear family that created a *feminine-mystique* culture. There was a resurgence regarding the myth of domesticity, a racially driven myth that assumed elite, white norms were universally held beliefs (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 33-46). American middleclass women did not seem to need jobs; they were perceived as happy homemakers who enjoyed a never-ending array of household appliances that demonstrated efficiency and superiority (hooks, 2004, p. 1-16). Many women today still cling to this myth and I hope my research will help debunk the *feminine-mystique* that is continually perpetuated by the media. Jen Marshall writes:

All my life, I had been taught that a romance headed for weddingville was the Holy Grail, the answer to every question. It's understandable that I came to believe that finding the right man was a central goal in life. I'd read the mushy novels, seen all the right movies, and watched *Days of our Lives* for almost eleven years, so I knew that living together was a major milestone in the progression of love. I glossed over the fact that the only job I could find was a \$5.50-an-hour-clerk. I felt guilty rather than resentful when I compared his work with mine. And then there was the problem of how to make money matters fair, when his salary was four times mine. It was scary how powerless I felt because I made less money than he did. I began to suspect this whole living together thing was not as simple as it looked on TV.

Before long I resembled a housewife straight out of Hollywood's central casting, complete with secret sorrows just begging to be smothered by Valium (2002, p. 24).

Television suggested that women stayed home and enjoyed long afternoons filled with baking cookies for the children and having coffee with the neighbours. However the reality was that by 1954 women's employment rates had equalled those of World War II. This was an era when North American women were expected to function as economic, social, and political members of society; however, at the same time they were excluded from equal opportunities, rights and respect.

National organizations concerned with women's issues grew during the 1960s because it was a time when many young women attended college and university. Women grew collectively and began connecting their personal experiences with societal structures because unfortunately many female students were exchanging similar experiences of gender discrimination and sexual harassment. The women's liberation movement was born (1968) and fought to empower the human rights of women (Baxandall & Gordon, 2000, p. 41).

When a mass women's movement arose, it was not liberal but radical in the sense of seeking out the roots of problems and working for structural change at a level more fundamental than law. It wanted not just to redistribute wealth and power in the existing society, but to challenge the sources of male dominance: the private as well as the public, the psychological as well as the economic, the cultural as well as the legal (Ibid, p. 40).

It was a movement that addressed political and legal issues such as: divorce, abortion, violence and childcare.

The second wave of feminism achieved many judicial and legislative victories. Women's coalitions and agencies have provided the women of today with many more options and freedoms. We have the choice of motherhood, marriage, relationships, abortion, and divorce, but more importantly feminist women learned that in order to achieve equality we must first learn to deconstruct structural difference inherent in a patriarchal run society.

Within these movements women learned to think critically about social structures and ideologies, to talk the language of freedom and tyranny, democracy and domination, power and oppression. Then they applied these concepts to question their own secondary status. It is precisely this combination of raised aspirations and frustration that gives rise to rebellion (Baxandall & Gordon, p. 36).

Many women today have more freedom and can choose their career and lifestyle; however, as a white middleclass woman I am always aware of my privilege and humbled by the fact that I have received a university education that has assisted me in deconstructing societal myths that oppress women. The women in my focus group have added meaning and depth in my attempt to deconstruct the medias image of female social workers by providing their personal and professional feminist views.

The Third Wave

The third wave of feminism began in the late 1980s. It was a new decade that combated controversial issues such as AIDS, sexual identity, child poverty, and

pornography. Feminist groups continue to advocate for these issues; however, feminists are becoming increasingly aware of globalization and the resurgence of good old- fashioned hegemonic values.

Hegemony is used to describe the operation of ideology in modern capitalistic societies. In capitalistic societies it is in the best interest of the ruling class to have society as a whole accept the rule of property and capitalism [inequalities in wealth, status, and opportunity]. The elite are privileged and powerful, they use their power to dominate one class over another and achieve consensus through controlling the media's textual content and meaning of images, messages, and gaze (Brooker, 1999, p. 99).

Hegemony is a valuable term when attempting to analyze the intersecting links between feminism and the media.

Third wave feminists must understand the growing need for applying theory and practice when critically analyzing the globalization of economic markets, and technologies found in our homes and work place (GayeTuchman, 1995, p. 12). Anne Bishop speaks out:

One thing is clear; consciously co-ordinated or not, multinationals and banks have a huge investment in hierarchy, competition, and divide and conquer tactics, and they put vast resources into keeping the world they way they want it. They prefer to do this gently and quietly, or at least invisibly but, if necessary, they will use the influence they have over our governments. Governments, in turn, use such forces as their

armies, intelligence services, media, police, schools, and weapons to maintain control of the population. A world system designed to keep people in unjust and unequal positions is held in place by several interrelated expressions of power-over: political power, economic power, physical force, and ideological power (1994, p. 36).

Despite the passionate activism of second wave feminism the feminist of today must be very aware of the resurgence of neo-liberalism and its oppressive tactics.

Society often pays lip service to phrases such as *multitasking* and *dual roles*. The duality of women's lives is an important issue for third wave feminists because many women of today are faced with the unreal expectation of maintaining their careers, marriage and families. Arnup states:

How do we include children in our lives without sacrificing our identity as women and citizens? We are mothers, yes but we are also scholars and artists, clerical workers and educators, lovers and friends. How do we find time for our multiple roles without sacrificing our physical and emotional health? How do we begin to share parental responsibility with our partners without sacrificing the intensity and stability of our relationships with our children (1989, p. 18-32)?

As a feminist and northern remote social work practitioner I meet and work with women who have become so overwhelmed by their tasks, responsibilities, and lack of supports that they often become depressed, anxious and even suicidal⁶.

⁶ I have been employed as a psychiatric social worker on an acute care psychiatric unit for the past seven years and have worked with numerous disempowered women.

Feminist social workers understand that in order to build healthier lives for women systemic, transformational change must take place.

Although liberal feminists want a piece of the pie, radical feminists (sometimes known as cultural feminists) want a whole new pie.

Radical feminists recognize the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorized as inferior based upon their gender. It is not enough to remove obstacles; rather, deeper, more transformational changes need to be made in societal institutions (like the government or media) as well in people's heads.

Patriarchy, radical feminists believe, shapes how women and men think about the world, their place in it, and their relationships with one another as well as the social institutions in which it is embedded (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 10).

My research is important because I believe one of the current struggles for third wave feminists is educating social workers and women through critical analysis and consciousness-raising about the oppressive nature of the media.

Chapter Three: Generalist Social Work Practice

Empowerment of people with disabilities occurs through three strategies: people having the information and knowledge they need; people having economic opportunities; and people achieving their civil rights (Graves, 1990).

I believe generalist social workers have an inherent responsibility to use our knowledge, education and experience to deconstruct cinematic myths so that women and society can somehow learn to gain control and mastery over their lives and communities. The multiplicity of roles and lived experiences of women allows the generalist social worker to identify and have compassion for the inequalities faced by women. It is unfortunate that women have the burden of figuring out patriarchy and then assertively working their way through the mess (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 41).

Historically the profession of social work has relied on three areas of specialty: individual case-work, group work, and community development. Other domains that have been less popular are: research, administration and education (Collier: 1993). A generalist method of practice is essential for northern remote social workers because they have the education and multifaceted skills necessary to be a care-giver, problem solver, counsellor and community activist.

The generalist approaches each problem or issue by estimating the possibility of solutions from many vantage points. The generalist considers problem-solving on many levels, across a spectrum of conceptual and practical approaches, and pursues any avenue that may be productive. It is not a specific approach, like casework with its theoretical base. The generalist enters each situation ready to tackle an individual problem, a neighbourhood issue or a political contest.

Generalists consider it proper to select whichever approach will produce the best results, and may engage in all of them (Collier, 1993, p. 35).

As a UNBC graduate student and social work practitioner in a northern hospital, I engage in generalist approaches to social work and must be a quick, responsive and creative thinker. Working within northern communities can be challenging and my research validates the complexities of northern/remote practice.

A generalist, feminist approach to social work requires a multidisciplinary approach relying on other professions such as psychology, sociology, anthropology and political science. A generalist uses a variety of academic foundations in order to consider and analyze social problems within a local, regional, national and global context. Generalist social worker's should possess an integrated view of persons and their environment and use appropriate interventions to empower consumers at all social system levels. Heather (group participant) gives a generalist's perspective of working in *Hospice House*:

I have lots of work to do with hospice and their staff, I work with nurses and care-aides, and I have a new client that I was introduced to last week. I talked to her (client) about does she have a will, lawyer, we need to do all those things and we need to know what her wishes are. The client said to me that she was really appreciative, because she wanted to bring it out but did not know how to do it, and she is surrounded by nurses...they don't have that expertise, it is more task-

oriented. We all have very good skills, but we need to work collaboratively, rather than segregated.

Heather gives us a perfect example of why multi-disciplinary teamwork is necessary: the hospice nurses were probably more concerned with the patients medical condition, while the social worker engages in the social needs of her client. Generalist social workers regard client systems in relation to the social milieu, view problems in the context of the situation, and seek solutions within both personal and environmental structures (Dubois, 1992, p. 205).

Rappaport (1987) suggests that the generalist social worker views the personal as political and attempts to empower her clients by acknowledging that structural change occurs by first understanding the oppressive nature of capitalism.

The concept (of empowerment) suggests both individual determination over one's own life and democratic participation in the life of one's community, often through mediating structures such as schools, neighbourhoods, churches, and other voluntary organizations.

Empowerment conveys both a psychological sense of personal control or influence and a concern with actual social influence, political power, and legal rights. It is a multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well to organizations and neighbourhoods; it suggests the study of people in context (1987, p. 121).

The community agency that Kate (group participant) works for empowers clients by providing them an informal and inviting environment.

I think there is a difference in community versus facility because I work in community, well, my work is still in an office. But it is still more inviting. Everybody jokes around. We have comics out and newspapers, people can just stop in and grab the newspaper. We have like a basket of mittens that people can take when it is cold out.

This type of agency is using innovative ways to create an environment that is more inviting and less intimidating for their clients, a form of empowerment in which Kate's office created a relaxed atmosphere that hopefully encourages clients to access their services. Empowering clients socially, economically and politically is both a process and goal that is the foundation of generalist social work practice.

The television media causes women's lives to become even more messy and clouded because the reflected everyday self and its gendered presentations are attached to the cinematic / televisual self (Denzin, 2003, p. 69). Genevieve (group participant) supports this statement by suggesting:

I don't know, we are just flooded with these images on TV, in radio, in media about stereotypes, and this is my personal belief, I think that a lot of stereotypes of how men should be and how women should be and how kids should be really is very rigid. This how we have to be and so forth. Well I just think that media in general presents white middle class folk...heterosexual...definitely heterosexual, nuclear family.

I believe this is why my research is so relevant to social work practice because if we are to empower our clients then we must help them to deconstruct prescribed gender

roles perpetuated by television. Denzin (2003) suggests that real everyday experiences and social issues are judged against a patriarchal cinematic gaze.

The fans of Hollywood celebrities and their dreams of a glamorous lifestyle place unreal expectations upon themselves in an attempt to emulate these stereotypical cinematic roles. The generalist social worker must attempt to empower their clients by first understanding and then deconstructing the negative stereotypes which plague women, children, and disenfranchised groups.

The main carriers of the popular in postmodern society have become the very media that are defining the content and meaning of the popular; that is, popular culture is now a matter of cinema and the related media, including television, the press, and popular literature. A paradox is created, for the everyday is now defined by the cinematic and televisual. The two can no longer be separated (Denzin, 2003, p. 70).

The female identity becomes confused because we are bombarded with a media culture that wants us to perpetuate the nuclear family surrounded by the white picket fence...and if this can not be attained or maintained the woman is then viewed as a useless failure.

This is why I believe my research is important to the overall well-being of women because as social workers we must educate and teach women to deconstruct these destructive cinematic myths...what could be more liberating or empowering?

Chapter Four: Defining Northern Practice

The question of difference is one with the question of identity (Wallach Bologh, 1984, p.388).

My research reflects the multifaceted and multidimensional role of northern remote social work practice; however, in order to do this I must first define the complexities of northern social work practice. Professional care-giving women who work and live within small isolated communities should have a grounded knowledge and passion for feminist theory and generalist social work practice. Small communities are often faced with unique social problems and are left struggling due to limited community resources. First I define north and then I discuss the challenges and cultural considerations when practicing in the north. The word north means many things to many people and defining it can be complicated. I will define north using the geographical boundaries determined by my employer, the Northern Health Authority, and Hamelin's Global Nordic Index a ranking system that measures a place by its degree of nordicity (Graham, 1990).

The Northern Health Authority is responsible for the delivery of health care across Northern British Columbia. The Authority was introduced on December 12, 2001 and combines 16 former health organizations into one unified body. I borrowed the health authority's definition of north because I am a practicing social worker in Prince George, B.C.⁷ who works with clients within these boundaries. Northern Health covers almost two-thirds of British Columbia's landscape, bordered by the Northwest and Yukon Territories to the north, the B.C. interior to the south, Alberta to the east, and Alaska and the Pacific Ocean to the west. There are over 300 000

people currently living within the northern health region. By 2010 the population is expected to grow to just over 348 000. The north has the fastest growth rate of senior citizens and 13 percent of the population is Aboriginal, the highest proportion in the province⁸.

Geographical factors must also be used when defining north. Canadian physical geographers have attempted to define north by latitude, climate, and circumpolar zones (Graham, 1990, p. 21). Genevieve (group participant) describes the north in a humorous way:

To me, in Prince George, we are rural, north of Hope. Cell phones do not work here if you come from Vancouver, don't even try, this is a bit of a joke and please do not bring up your summer tires when it is fall and winter...but this is the place that challenges my values, beliefs, my professionalism, my skill set.

Scholars have constructed a multitude of complex methods in order to define north. Canadian Geographer Louis-Edmond Hamelin wrote that north is not only geographical but also conceptual.

He noted that because of this, the north was (and still is) the subject of a great deal of ignorance and misconception. People tend to define the north for themselves based on peculiar mental constructs that often bear little relation to reality. Thus, for most, the north remains a stranger...it is an unknown quantity. Even though (Canadians)

⁷ Prince George is a city with a population of approx. 75,000 and is geographically located 850 km north of Vancouver, BC

⁸ Geographical boundaries and stats compliments of the Northern Health Authority website.

experience its influence, they do not know what it is, how far it extends, how it may be subdivided, or what its future may be (Ibid).

Hamelin's definition of north is useful because he respects the subjectivity and diversity one is faced with when defining north. He developed a flexible system that captures the essence of north and his scale accurately reflects all aspects of northernness both real and perceived (Graham, 1990, p. 24).

Hamelin identified ten fundamental elements (latitude, summer heat, annual cold, types of ice, total precipitation, natural vegetation, cover, accessibility by means other than air, air service, population, and degree of economic activity) (Hamelin, *Canadian Nordicity*, p. 15). For each element in Hamelin's *Global Nordic Index* is a set of possible values that reflects the situations in northern latitudes. The index is then graded on a scale of 0-100 where 100 reflected extreme nordicity, and zero, a complete lack of nordicity (Ibid). Hamelin's ten elements are noteworthy and pertain to my research because he recognizes that the influence of human activity and northernness can change over time (Johnston, 2004, p. 2).

Challenges of Northern Social Work Practice

Conditions such as accessibility, long winters, and community economy directly impact how social workers deliver services to their clients. Northern communities often suffer from a lack of social welfare programs such as education, health care, mental health, and child welfare services. Wharf (1993) believes that northern social work is unique and requires specialized education. Wharf states that social work education must include:

1)The study of power and its impact on people in rural and northern communities; 2) feminist theory as an integral part of social work education; and 3) a revision of courses on social work practice and the planning of change (Wharf, 1993, p. 138).

Northern social workers must be respectful towards northern culture in order to build positive relationships with community members.

Heather (group participant) recounts a personal experience of creative social work:

I want to speak about my own personal experience working as a white middle class woman. Throughout my whole career, I worked as a child welfare worker in northern Alberta. I came to an area where it was a high native reserve and it was very interesting work. I worked with a family who kids were on my caseload. He was the local taxi driver and when he ran into trouble I would go into the home and work with them and talk to them. I went and saw another gentleman who had obviously fallen and was in trouble, could not breathe properly. I went to the local hospital and asked the doctor if he would come see this man, he brushed me off and said that he was an old drunk; he will be fine. I went to the home of the taxi driver; his kids were on my caseload, and I asked him to come and help me, and the two of us got the old man into the taxi and up to the hospital. He had fallen and broken two ribs and punctured a lung. And so you work closely with these families and there was huge respect, reciprocal respect.

Heather provides a perfect example of how social workers must be multifaceted, creative, and have an understanding of communities, social, economic and political systems.

British Columbia's political power is governed from Victoria, B.C.'s southernmost city. The outcome of political decisions can be problematic for northern communities. Political decisions and social policies are often based on urban metropolitan culture and do not always acknowledge the geographic realities of northern people. Heather describes:

I recall working in emergency one day where a young child, 6 or 7, was sent down to the Richmond hospital. The child went by herself and the hospital called two days later to say that they had called the parents to just come and get her. What do they mean? They (parents) can't just come and get her. So then ensued a long process because they (Richmond) weren't helping to get the child back home without an escort, not appreciating anything about geographical barriers, financial barriers. That was incredible!

At the Eighth International Symposium of the International Federation of Social Workers (1984) the journal, *The Social Worker*, makes an effort to reflect northern Canadian realities.

The geographic diversity and rural/urban imbalance in Canada have presented difficulties in many contexts including social welfare services. While most urban centres are able to make available a range of social services for a variety of needs and populations, the less

densely settled parts of the country have had fewer services in both number and type. Geography has therefore been responsible to a certain extent for disparities in social welfare. The issue of how to deliver services both effectively and efficiently to rural and remote populations is of continuing concern (Drover, 184, p. 6).

As a hospital social worker I witness firsthand the economic hardship and social problems faced by patients who experience government cutbacks to social services.

Colleague Sandra Harker (2002) evidences lack of community support in her UNBC thesis, "Discharge Planning at Rural and Small Town Hospitals: How is it Accomplished". Two small town physicians were quoted as saying:

Difficult situations are where they (patients) don't have the resources, financially or family support...it is social issues and the social supports, that's probably the biggest challenge in this area (discharge planning) and that's not going to improve and I think we will see it increase as a problem for people just to get the resources that they need (p. 42).

Another physician similarly suggested "if they (patients) don't have family support they don't do well after discharge, if they are socially isolated they don't do well, if they don't have resources like financial resources they don't do well and this is especially true for mental health patients" (Ibid).

Genevieve (group participant) talks about the complex and challenging nature of northern remote social work practice:

I think that it is a lot more difficult to be a rural social worker than an urban social worker because I think that we deal with so many more, uh, variety of issues. We are looking at transportation difficulties, people living in smaller communities don't have a bus system, they don't have a transit system, and how do they get around, how do kids get around, how do single moms get around with their children? It is just near impossible. And the lack of resources, I can remember in a meeting in Terrace and someone from Vancouver said, *oh well you just hire blah, blah, blah, and they will come in.* We just sat and dumbfoundly looked at her, we started to laugh and I said to her, where will we find these people and where will we find the money to pay for these people to come and help us?

The information gathered from my focus group supports the need for northern cultural discourse regarding the unique and challenging work of caregivers practicing in northern, remote communities.

Cultural Considerations

Living vast geographical distances from political decision makers can have a negative effect on the culture, economy, and social structures of a northern community. Zapf (1992) states:

Provincial residents are often assumed to share common values and vision, a common ideology, as we examine similarities and differences in programs across provinces. Social policy and program planners

have tended to view their own separate northern regions as variations of the south posing service delivery problems (p. 349).

Cultural confusion occurs because northern communities are often forced to assimilate southern, white, upper class male paradigms, a set of values and beliefs that are foreign to the indigenous members of the north (Collier, 1993).

The television media strongly perpetuates hegemonic beliefs and teaches us collectively to accept this notion of sameness. *Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment* (2004) advocates that society must break the media cartel that controls the information we receive. The journal suggests that whoever controls communications, controls both consciousness and social programs. We need to act on social issues at every level from the local to the global. Zapf (1992) suggests:

The key issue is that acceptance of the province as a unit of analysis carries with it a mind- set that can be damaging for northern people. A provincial perspective limits our ability to move beyond problems of service delivery towards appreciation of the very lifestyle and ideology that might serve as the foundation for relevant social policy in the north (p. 69).

For northern social workers to become active community members, we must respect and critically analyze the cultural differences in our communities.

Social workers must educate community members and become a collective voice for political and social change. The time for building community cohesion has never been more important. We are living in an electronic era in which society is saturated with television, movies, DVDs, Gameboys, internet, video games and

satellite. Many young people today are totally disconnected from their communities because they spend countless hours staring at an illuminated screen that projects a multitude of images and text. Louis Hock (1994) states:

Public art was once a village green with a statue on it. But the whole concept of community has changed radically. Politics has become something that happens in newspapers and through tv ads. The community ground now is the media, telephones, computers, and such things. And our work is placed like a statue in it (p. 31).

The community of today is a global one in which we can do our shopping, banking and meet new people in cyberspace with a click of the finger, having never left the couch.

Media dominance can be devastating for communities because how we define and identify with our environment reflects the intensity of our connection with the local place (Zapf, 2002, p. 351). Phenomenological geography supports the reality that places have great psychological meaning for individuals because it is in our memories that we reclaim past connections. Phenomenological geographer Edward Relph (1976) states that:

The essence of place lies...in the experience of an inside that is distinct from the outside; more than anything else this is what sets places apart in space and defines a particular system of physical features, activities, and meaning. To be inside a place is to belong to it and to identify with it, and the more profoundly inside you are the stronger is the identity with the place (p. 49).

People have become so saturated with media images that it causes community members to question their identity and purpose.

Loss of culture and lack of community cohesiveness is challenging for social workers. And no one knows this better than Aboriginal people who have experienced numerous assaults on their spirituality, lifestyle and meaning of community.

Aboriginal clients often experience feelings of worthlessness, inequality, and self-blame (Morrisette, 1993). Collier provides evidence of northern social work practice using a postscript from a 1993 news clipping.

An Aboriginal town on the corner of a lake had existed there for over one hundred years. The people made their living by fishing, hunting, and trapping. Over a period of a few years, timbering had begun within a few miles of town. The cutting destroyed some trapping and hunting areas. As the timbering grew in area and economic importance, the government made overtures to the people to move the town across the lake. New houses were to be built, largely by the people themselves, with their work counting as sweat equity. Many houses had no furnace hooked up, and the school had only a furnace, with no ducts. Fall arrived. It snowed, but the people were prevented from entering their houses unless they could make the down payment. People lived in tents in front yards of their houses. Children were getting sick. There was no reliable clean water supply. Sewage and garbage lay in soggy, ice pools among the humps of snow. Social Workers attempted unsuccessfully to provide down payments through

social assistance. Over a period of months the problems were solved, only as a result of firm interventions by social workers, nurses, and other government officials (p. 42-43).

I have used Aboriginal communities as an example because they are the indigenous people of our region that make it the unique and diverse place that it is and their spirituality and culture has suffered greatly due to the invasion of television and white patriarchal belief systems.

It is not uncommon to see young Aboriginal men and women emulate the images of rap musicians and Los Angeles gangs that are perpetuated through music videos shown on broadcasters such as; *Much Music*, and, *MTV*, an identity far removed from their native ancestors.

The pattern of cultural and economic breakdown is similar wherever hunting and gathering people live in close proximity to industry and its state apparatus: original tongues give way to the language of the schools and legal system; the orally transmitted stories of people are eclipsed by the stories of the dominant people and by books, radio and television; kinship obligations are eroded by the structures of the nuclear family imported from the city; the old forms of male/female and young/old relationships are subjected to the debates current in the outside society. Traditional political structures give way to the political organization of the state; craft skills are lost; hunting and gathering and early agricultural forms are replaced by welfare, partial wage labour, and dependence; money exchange gradually becomes the

economic mode; and communities are relocated at the convenience of the state or industry (Collier, 1993, p. 41-42).

It is imperative that northern social workers acknowledge the First Nations people and their loss of culture because in our professional settings we often work directly with Aboriginals who suffer from the negative fallout of euro-centric acculturation and assimilation.

Northern remote social workers must recognize that the television media have created a culture industry that perpetuates the ideas of the ruling class:

Culture that is produced by profit-oriented corporations is wholly formulaic and standardized in order to guarantee both audience and profits. The culture industry claims to be democratic and individualistic, but is authoritarian and manipulative. Film, radio, music, and magazines seem diverse and individualized, but are standardized and conformist, a form of mass culture that is inferior, predictable and mass produced – not *by* the masses, but *for* them (Richard, Johnson, 2004, p. 138).

Northern remote social workers can use their structural knowledge of acculturation and assimilation to help communities gain insight into capitalism and the oppressive nature of the media. The following four chapters: *Political Devaluation of the Care Giver Role*, *Globalization & Social Issues*, *The Media and Sex-Role Stereotyping* and *Deconstructing Cinematic Social Work Myths* will discuss in greater detail how the media impacts the reality of our northern environment and social work roles.

Chapter Five: Political Devaluation of the Care Giver Role

(There is no such thing as women's issues. Kevin Kruger, MLA Kamloops, Nov. 2003)

Unfortunately it is statements such as the one quoted above that perpetuate neo-liberal, patriarchal ideologies and equate self-sufficiency with having a job...the societal norm of a responsible adult, because only people with a paid job are worthy citizens (Young, 2002, p. 41). The neo-liberal government does not give credence to the role of motherhood and caregiver. Politicians and policy makers do not acknowledge the economic responsibilities of women and if women cannot fulfill their caregiving responsibility they are viewed as deviants or failures. Arnup states:

It is by no means co-incidental that while feminists were beginning to grapple with these issues, they were, at the same time, being blamed for many of the problems that were allegedly plaguing the family, from high divorce rates and child poverty to the supposed increase in psychiatric problems among children of working mothers. In the current debate, we are witnessing a rallying cry for a return to the 1950's family. We hear calls for tougher divorce laws, mandatory relationship counselling, and a greater willingness to stick it out in a bad marriage for the sake of the children (1989 p. 18-32).

Television and politicians are re-creating a culture in which blaming women has become culturally, socially, and politically acceptable. Genevieve (group participant) states that: "my belief is that we live in a women-hating society and we turn on each

other as soon as there is something gone wrong. It is like, who do we blame? Who didn't do their job? And who can we dump it on?"

These political ideologies are damaging to women and children everywhere, especially those living in poverty and in need of government assistance. Women in Canada are losing their battle in the struggle to end discrimination, poverty, violence, exploitation, and abuse. For example: all 37 women's centres across the province of B.C. had their funding cut by 100% in March, 2003⁹, provincial legal aid no longer deals with family law (separation, divorce, child maintenance etc.), the Ministry of Children and Family Development cut 525 positions, many of them front-line social workers¹⁰, and tens of thousands of health care workers – mostly women – have either lost their jobs to privatization or had their wages cut by 15 per cent. The newly privatized health care workers now earn \$10.00 an hour with few benefits and no job security¹¹. Heather (group participant) states:

I am a bit alarmed, I am not sure if anybody read the paper (*Prince George Citizen April 28, 2005*) but more social workers are losing their jobs. It is on the island (Vancouver Island) where they have more FTE (full time employees) social workers than FTE child welfare workers than their budget allows, so they are going to look at cutting more FTE. That alarms me because the people who are at risk, the elderly, the sick, the disabled, the children who have no voice are

⁹ Information obtained from the BC Coalition of Women's Centres, e-mail sent Oct. 2003.

¹⁰ Information obtained from a letter to the editor from *BC Association of Social Workers*, Oct. 2003.

¹¹ A message from the *Hospital Employee's Union*, article found in the *Prince George Citizen*, March, 2005.

further at risk. So the social workers who continue to work will not be able to do a good job.

The cutting of social service agencies has devastating consequences that directly impact the overall health, well-being, and safety of women and their families.

Without the government's financial support vulnerable people such as: women, the elderly, impoverished and most importantly children will suffer because the government is putting more and more pressure on women who are already trying to juggle three jobs.

Many families involved in social services have extensive histories of mental and cognitive health challenges and are ill equipped for parenting in the first place. Social worker involvement in these cases is imperative to the best interest of these children. Many children of disabled parents live in circumstances of poverty and unintentional neglect causing bodily, and emotional abuse/damage. Social workers work diligently with teams of family care and other community service workers to teach basic and necessary skills to these challenged families, but this is not illustrated in the news. The picture is instead painted with an entirely different brush, one that portrays child protection social workers as intrusive, nosy and unnecessary. It is very unfortunate and insulting to the many of us who work so hard in the front lines of protection (Jorge Kelly, *First Friday Research Group* member, 2006).

Prince George social workers often experience the backlash of government cuts through increased caseloads (size and complexity) or alternatively job loss, and the loss of referral sources.

Provincial governments are abusing their power by using patriarchal authority to erode women's equality and years of dedicated social activism and feminist reform. Some anti-feminists would argue that women have achieved equality and that we should quit our whining:

The idea that women have achieved equality is reinforced by the capitalist society in which we live. Surrounded by consumer products, we are encouraged to confuse liberation with the freedom to purchase these products or to choose among a relatively narrow range of choices. Often personal style is mistaken for personal freedom as the body becomes a focus for fashion, hair, piercing, exercise, and so forth. We are often encouraged to confuse such freedoms of expression with freedom in the sense of equality and social justice. Of course, popular culture and the mass media play a large part in this. We are encouraged to enjoy the freedoms that in part, feminism has brought, without recognition of this struggle or allegiance to maintaining such freedoms (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 12).

Current welfare policy in B.C. suggests an anti-womens agenda because in 2003 the government cuts became so profound and disproportionate that it caught the

attention of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹².

An anti-woman government agenda has effectively been implemented in the province of British Columbia, spearheaded by the Minister of State for Women's equality, Lynn Stephens, and Premier Gordon Campbell. All 37 women's centres across the province of British Columbia will see their provincial funding cut by 100% on March 31, 2004. B.C. has the highest rate of violence against women in Canada at 59%, and poverty and unemployment are higher than ever. The poverty facing women in B.C. is so extreme that women are being forced into the sex trade, or are staying with or returning to their abusers out of desperation. There is no longer legal aid for family law and poverty law cases. Even the B.C. Human Rights Commission has been abolished¹³.

Only in a patriarchal society would the inclusion of women be interpreted as a potential threat or loss of men's power and only in an androcentric society would it be assumed that the inclusion of one group must mean the exclusion of another (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 15). Real social workers who live and work in Prince George know these patterns and work daily at resisting women's oppression.

The female caregiver is not valued because caregiving is unpaid labour and society defines having a job as the only meaning of work and our work is defined by what a capitalist authority dictates as *work*. Many women are not given any choices

¹² B.C. Women's Centres Call for Federal Action on Anti-Women Agendas. Oct. 2003.

¹³ Ibid

regarding their caregiving role and are therefore, deprived of their personal autonomy/choice, and this is a direct violation of our human rights.

I define such personal autonomy as being able to determine one's own projects and goals, how one will live one's life, without having to answer for those goals to others, and without having to obey the orders of others about how one will live. An autonomous person is not dependent on another to set the direction of her life, and others do not have the right to determine what is good for her. Unlike the virtue of moral autonomy, personal autonomy should be thought of as a condition that a society should respect for all persons. Personal autonomy is conceptually close to liberty; where liberty is about simple non-interference, letting people alone; however, personal autonomy carries the additional meanings of being able to decide one's own goals and their means to fulfillment, and meeting with respect from others in one's right to govern one's life. In a democratic society of equal citizens everyone ought to be autonomous in this sense; autonomy should be a right (Young, 2002, p. 45).

Government welfare policies deprive people of their autonomy because the state's ideology is that if you are a welfare recipient then government has the right to dictate how you will live. The system treats disempowered individuals as though they do not have the right to decide what vocation to pursue, or how they will juggle family responsibilities and work.

The high number of women in poverty places burdens on the state because many female jobs are low paying, part-time, insecure with no benefits (Young, 2002, p. 40). Three out of four working women earn less than \$30 000 a year and receive half the average pension benefits of men. Women are often at a disadvantage of being qualified for good paying jobs because they lack post secondary education, technical skills or training...often a result of their care taking responsibilities these statistics are unfortunate, especially for those who are single mothers and/or reliant on social assistance.

Critics of current welfare policy point out that most recipients of public assistance get off welfare to perform low skilled jobs that neither pay well nor develop skills so that the worker can move up the economic ladder. If the goal of welfare policy is to make poor families self-sufficient, these critics say, then these wage earners need to have jobs that pay a *living* wage, which some estimate at almost twice the minimum wage. The goal of self-sufficiency is a cruel joke, moreover, these advocates say, jobs are not secure, don't have decent working conditions, and do not carry good health and retirement benefits (Ibid, p. 41).

Recent statistics suggest a staggering 71 percent of the nation's 4 million elderly poor are women because they do not retire with enough money¹⁴. If welfare policy were really about combating poverty, then it would need to be tied more broadly to employment and human capital investment policy to raise wages, expand

¹⁴ Article from Women's eNews, a non-profit independent news service covering issues of concern to women and their allies. Nov. 2003.

opportunities for the acquisition of qualifications, and expand the supply of good jobs (Ibid, p. 44).

Many women are forced to leave their jobs in order to care for children or elderly parents, and unfortunately the economic reality of absence from the work place is that long-range financial priorities take a backseat to immediate needs.

Timothy Cahill (2003), Massachusetts State Treasurer states:

Women are focused on today, because they have to be. The children need shoes now. The family must be fed now. The elderly parent requires care now. Women are focused on everyone and everything but themselves, because circumstances require them to be. Women who head households do not necessarily have the opportunity to think about the future as much as they should¹⁵.

It is unacceptable that the people who provide care for the vulnerable, weak, and oppressed do not get any financial remuneration or government benefits but instead are accused of not contributing to society (Young, 2002, p. 51).

The harsh reality is that our society wrongly reduces making a social contribution to having a job. Kate (group participant) states:

In all those clips (*Judging Amy*) there is always the imbalance of financial power. I mean, the black woman a minority woman, she does not have any money because she is a deadbeat, convict, she is violent. The young man does not have any money and it is assumed he is ripping off people, he has got to rip people off because he is under 18...what kind of job does he have? And then you have the

other woman, ok, you have Miss high and mighty lawyer who is threatened by the social worker (Maxine Grey), like don't screw it up...I am going to go to your boss and tell them that I am going to investigate the neglect of your children and then you won't get your partnership. Really wrong, there was no working together.

As social workers practicing in the north we often find ourselves advocating for financially disempowered and vulnerable clients who are fighting against political oppression, media brainwashing and stereotypical thinking.

Many women live in poverty and struggle financially because they receive no money or benefits for time spent child rearing...but when another women performs this same task for pay it suddenly becomes recognized as work [though poorly compensated] and as a result the devaluation of care work is perpetuated.

At the same time, many unpaid or poorly paid activities contribute centrally to the social good. Paramount among these is caring for children and other family members, and doing housework for them and oneself. There are many other important activities that contribute to communities that are often not paid or poorly paid: community caretaking and organizing, care of the natural environment, and the production and dissemination of artworks and performances. People who aim to enhance their skills and capacities to contribute to society, moreover, need support to study. They are usually engaged in productive activity by learning, and it is often difficult for people to

¹⁵ Cahill's quote taken from an article found in: *Women's e News Today*, Nov. 2003.

develop skills and capacities very efficiently if they must worry about their daily bread (Young, 2002, p. 48).

One of the greatest societal contributions is that of nurturing and raising healthy children who will be the leaders of tomorrow therefore, I argue that women not only contribute to society but to the future of humankind.

My research challenges the assumption that the only way to make a recognized social contribution is through the labour market. Society must learn to value the social activism of those who contribute to the safety and well-being of our communities, the environment, and those in need. The media's portrayal of social work is unacceptable because it does not acknowledge the wealth of skills, tools and knowledge northern remote social workers must possess in order to deal with the social, economical and gender inequalities that have been inflicted on our clients. The following two chapters will discuss how the media promotes globalization and sex-role stereotyping.

Chapter Six: Globalization & Social Issues

The media megacorps have colonized the global mindscape and developed it into a theme park – a jolly, terrifying homogenized Las Vegas of the mind (Author unknown, Adbusters, 2004, no.51)

The new millennium is faced with many grim realities such as unemployment, pollution, violence and poverty. Politicians of industrial societies have sold the soul of their countries to global corporate elites. As a result our nation's policy-makers are in the greedy hands of money making trans-national corporations. Social welfare programs, health care, and education are being cut because much of what we value as a society is indicated by its price tag (Ollenberger & Moore, 1998, p.74). In today's globalized world social workers are busier than ever attempting to advocate for social change and advocate for those in need. How have we (a so-called intelligent society) allowed these consumerist elites to rape and dismantle our mother earth, democracy, identities, culture and communities?

Economic globalization is having a massive impact on women, children, the disempowered, and the social welfare of our country. Economic globalization is a belief and a set of universal rules made by trans-national corporations not our governments; therefore, those with the least amount of power (women and children) have no political control or voice regarding a global agenda and their welfare (Barlow, 1999, p.15).

Everything is for sale, even things that we thought would never be for sale, things we consider sacred like health, education, culture and heritage, genetic codes and seeds, and natural resources including air and water. We know that last year about \$157 billion worth of public

institutions, public assets were privatized, mostly to large transnational corporations. This represents an increase of about 70 percent in one year (Barlow, 2000, p. 15-16).

The global activism of Social Workers is in great need because the middle classes, working poor and disabled persons are losing control over their human rights, democracy and lives.

For example the British Columbia Liberal Party and Premier Gordon Campbell put a two- year time limit on those receiving welfare benefits. In April 2004 many individuals were cut off from their financial support. The provincial liberals developed their social welfare policy by using a wealthy consulting firm (Anderson Consulting) who are situated in the United States. What could Anderson Consulting possibly know or understand about British Columbia's social issues? Did these consultants spend time in northern BC to learn about our economy, geography and First Nations issues? Do they know that Burns Lake has the highest rate of alcohol consumption per capita in Canada¹⁶? The message being sent tells us that the new global royalty centrally plans the global market destroying lives and nature in its wake (Barlow, 1999, p. 18-19).

Many of the individuals I work with in the hospital are mentally disabled, and cannot be gainfully employed. They could be eligible for government financial assistance; however, patients often refuse to complete disability applications because they find the process to be dehumanizing and humiliating. The Ministry of Human Resources has made policy very black and white and there is no room for caring

¹⁶ Burns Lake has a high aboriginal population and is located approx. 250 km west of Pr. Geo. Statistical information provided by *The Passionate Eye*, CBC, Nov. 2004.

about the disabled or mentally ill. The patriarchal attitude is, find work and get off the system.

The global economy is widening the gap of discrimination and inequalities, creating a system of the *haves and the have-nots* (Barlow, 1999, p.80). An emerging underclass is being created in every society and the ruling class are living in unprecedented wealth (Ibid p.81). These global royalties are frightening because they are mysterious, faceless individuals who appear untouchable and elusive. David Korton, who once worked for the World Bank is quoted in Maude Barlow's book as saying:

The World Bank is now ruled by a global financial casino staffed by faceless bankers and hedge-fund speculators who operate with a herd mentality in the shadowy world of global finance. Each day, they move more than two trillion dollars around the world in search of quick profits and safe havens, sending exchange rates and stock markets into wild gyrations wholly unrelated to any underlying economic reality. With abandon they make and break national economies, buy and sell corporations and hold politicians hostage to their interests (Barlow, 1999, p. 17).

This small elite group attends international meetings and lives a lifestyle that we will never see or experience.

Canada is an accomplice in the creation of inequality and dramatic wage gaps. Countries all over the world have colluded in globalization and now they are being used for their natural resources, cheap labour, and as dumping grounds for toxic

waste and pollution. Maude Barlow (1999) key note speaker for the Conference of the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women has travelled to countries such as Mexico, India and China and has witnessed first hand the devastation and destruction incurred by globalization and pollution.

Today almost one billion people have no access to clean water and more than five million people, most of them children, die every year from drinking poor quality water. All over the world, industry is moving up precious river systems, drinking them dry, as they go. To finance its so-called economic miracle and provide for the demands of the global consumer market, China has diverted its water usage from farmers to industry, leaving huge areas of desert in its wake and millions without access to water. The Worldwatch Institute, the World Bank, and the UN say that if we don't change our use of the world's water pattern now-the amount of available fresh water is very finite, it's less than half a percent of all the world's total water stock-if we don't stop depleting, polluting and diverting it, by the year 2025 two-thirds of the world will be living in water scarcity, a full third of the population living in the absolute extreme condition of no clean water whatsoever (1999, p.18-19).

The rivers along Northern Mexico are polluted and contaminated with toxic waste. The polluted waters can strip the paint off a pencil and babies are born with deformities because their mothers ingested chemicals due to their appalling working conditions. Babies are drinking Coca-Cola out of baby bottles because there is no

clean drinking water and nobody can afford milk or juice. In rural communities the farmers are being devastated because they are forced to shift production to genetically altered foods and many farmers in India are committing suicide with the pesticides they are forced to use – a protest of defiance because they will not collude in the destruction of mother-earth (Mika & Trotz, 2000 p.68).

Feminist visionaries and activists across the world are conducting research, publishing papers and speaking out for themselves and others who are involved in the losing battle with global capitalism and the struggle for social justice. The paper “Organizing Across Borders, Organizing for Change”, (2000) was written for the conference entitled “Feminist Utopias: Redefining our Projects”. The project interviews female Mexican workers that produce goods for global capitalism. Maude Barlow explores the reality that these Mexicans are slave labourers who make huge profits for the corporations and yet are unable to make a living wage (1999, p. 67). Women are the primary employees in these export-oriented manufacturing plants because stereotypically they are seen to be suitable for repetitious factory work and they are docile (Ibid, p. 68). These women work long gruelling hours in dangerous environments to pump out products for the consumption of the westernized global consumer. The corporations they work for care nothing about these women and their families.

Sister Susan Mika and her organization the Benedictine Sisters are bringing together various sectors such as unions, church groups, and women’s groups to work together in order to bring justice into the lives of these Mexican workers and their families.

In an increasingly complex world, we cannot be effective, let alone achieve anything remotely approaching a feminist utopia without networks of interested parties. When I think of all the resources amassed by the corporations to fight our resolution or campaigns, I am grounded by the belief that speaking to power is critical. If not us, then who? If not now, then when? (S. Mika, 2000, p.73-74)

Within the ivory towers of the global economy there is no legislation or laws designed to regulate its behaviour and actions. The social activism of women such as the Benedictine Sisters is invaluable because these trans-national corporations must be held accountable for their conduct.

All of these global dynamics shape and reshape the small northern community in which I live and work. The six female social workers who shared their perceptions of their own professional work engaged with these macro / mezzo / micro realities both implicitly and explicitly.

Chapter Seven: The Media & Sex-Role Stereotyping

Individual perception untainted by other's influence does not exist
(Bloom, 2000, 12).

Images generated by the media are used to perpetuate myths that benefit a capitalistic society. These images are continuously being recreated, reproduced and broadcast to millions of viewers across the world (Berger, 1972, p. 9). Starting at a very early age our brain and imagination are collecting images and depositing them into our consciousness. These images and false realities shape our identity and establish our place in the world (Ibid).

Jung states that the consciousness is forever interfering, helping, correcting and negating, never leaving the psychic process to grow in peace (verse 20, p. 74). Television and film saturates our senses with distorted messages and images that are entrenched in capitalist propaganda that perpetuates racism, classism, consumerism, sexism, and violence. They have created an imaginary social reality that teaches us to value production, consumption, and the accumulation of wealth. We are instructed that an individual's worth is based on his/her purchasing power and monetary funds (Mika, 2000, p. 69). Society has become part of a global collective conscience that condones discrimination, corruption and perpetuates oppression towards women, children, the homeless and disempowered.

The reflection model of culture suggests that media reflects reality like a mirror; therefore, we are instructed to believe that the sex-stereotyped reflections before us must be reality. The mirror that media holds up to the world can be either undistorted and clear or fractured and fuzzy, but it is a mirror nonetheless (Walters,

1995, p.40). Denzin supports Walter's claim by stating that the media occupy a central place in the background of our cultural consciousness and that popular media representations shape and define cultural identities (2002, p.58). Altheide and Gottschalk suggest:

Members of the postmodern society know themselves through the reflected images and narratives of cinema and television. Culture is not only mediated through mass media...culture in both form and content is constituted and embodied by the mass media. The postmodern landscape is distinguished, as Gottschalk (2000) argues, by its constant saturation by multiple electronic screens which simulate emotions, interactions, events, desires...from TV screens to computer terminals, from surveillance cameras to cell phones, we increasingly experience everyday life, reality...via technologies of spectacle, simulation and telepresence (Altheide, 1995, p. 50) (Gottschalk, 2000, p. 23).

Life and art have become mirror images of each other and reality, as it is visually experienced becomes a staged, social production (Denzin, 2002, p. 68). Media culture subconsciously teaches society to internalize an abstract reality, which in turn suppresses personality, creativity and social activism.

North American society is fascinated by wealth and fame and often hostile towards women's issues and feminist thinking. Early feminist researchers were interested in stereotypical imagery and analysed the images of women in the mass media. Feminist researchers explored sexism and sex role stereotyping in a whole

variety of media forms including television, film, comic books and newspapers (Walters, 1995, p. 32).

Feminist researcher and theorist bell hooks (1996) supports my argument that television and movies are often re-imagined, re-invented versions of reality. She suggests that film is the perfect cultural context in which to talk about race, class, and sex. Elizabeth Traube, feminist scholar also suggests that society interprets commercially successful movies as the making of the new middle class. Elite producers and wealthy corporate owners shape their work so that it will conform to dominant sensibilities and values (1992, p. 69).

Media producers might argue this and state that they are responding to the needs of the audience; however this is a myth/lie because the mass audience does not make what it sees, but receives and reacts to what is produced (Slotkin, 1984, p. 413).

As part of the raw material for cultural production, such a myth of the audience is eventually incorporated into cultural products and returned to consumers. What returns along this circuit is not a reflection but a highly selective version of collective sentiment, the culture industry's ideologically structured image of popular desires and fears. Active mass participation in the circuit begins at this point with the reception of cultural forms by social groups (Traube, 1992, p. 69).

As an end result the audience plays out these mythical ideologies in their individual lives.

Hollywood is a powerful institution that constructs movies in which nurturing fathers are often substitutes for bad over-ambitious career women. Television shows

such as *Murphy Brown* (1990) demonized female professionals and created an unrealistic image of professional women. *Murphy Brown* portrays a powerful and successful TV anchorwoman who has a child out of wedlock and vows to raise her baby independent of a man...patriarchal sacrilege. In a political speech Dan Quayle (former vice-president U.S.A.) preaches that traditional family values must be maintained and that single mothers cannot adequately raise a child without a father figure.

It doesn't help when prime time has *Murphy Brown*, a character who supposedly epitomized today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman, mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it just another lifestyle choice (Walters, 1995, p. 11).

Murphy Brown is portrayed in this highly masculine light and thus her ability to nurture her baby is limited. Walters (1995) suggests that *Murphy Brown's* character makes a jab at professional women as naïve hysterical little girls hiding beneath their conservative business clothes, tortoise shell eyeglasses and sensible shoes. *Murphy* must accept her poor parenting skills as a trade off, meaning that she must choose between motherhood and career, because the media tells us that career women are not good mothers. Dan Quayle's quote is a perfect example of a wealthy, white, male politician showing his absolute ignorance towards a woman's personal autonomy and choice.

The concept of family is a notion often used by politicians and the media to encourage society that white middle class ideologies and good Christian moral values are the backbone to every respectable individual. Traube states:

Overall the results are not encouraging from a feminist perspective.

Hollywood movies during the Reagan era organized desire along traditionally asymmetric lines, encouraging men to pursue an inflated version of the *American Dream* from which women continued to be excluded. In movies that overtly endorse different social values and sensibilities, the figure of a demonized independent woman justifies the reassertion of patriarchal control (1992, p. 24).

The erosion of democracy, in both the dismantling of social programs and the promotion of initiatives favouring the wealthy during the Reagan, Bush years led to increased polarization of the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, and the left and right (Felshin, 1995, p. 23).

The media supports these political initiatives and perpetuates the patriarchal belief that women should get married, raise children and take care of their families.

TV is used to market politicians their campaigns and manipulate voters. Indeed most people never see a politician except on TV, most likely in a firmly controlled format designed to communicate the exact message and image desired by the politician and their media advisors. Politicians tend to avoid freewheeling press conferences where they are not in control (Ritzer, 2004, p.112).

The message to women is pretty clear: women are incomplete without a man, motherhood is inherent within all women, and through turmoil, diligence and sacrifice we will all succeed.

The movie entitled *Maid in Manhattan* is a so-called romantic comedy that depicts a hard-working single mother. She travels daily from the Bronx to Manhattan in order to keep her job as a chambermaid in a posh five-star hotel. The movie shows ethnic minority women doing subservient work while all the time they are longing for the decadent lifestyle of their wealthy clients. Eventually the weak and powerless minority woman played by Jennifer Lopez¹⁷ (J-LO) falls in love with a powerful Caucasian politician. The chambermaid cunningly hides her true identity because she is ashamed of her social, economic, and ethnic background.

Maid in Manhattan is highly reminiscent of childhood fables such as *Cinderella* where the lonely maiden is rescued by the handsome white knight.

The mass media performs two tasks at once. First, with some culture lag, they reflect the dominant values and attitudes in society. Second, they act as agents of socialization, teaching youngsters in particular how to behave. Watching lots of television leads children and adolescents to believe in traditional sex roles: boys should work, girls should not. The same sex-role stereotypes are found in the media designed especially for women. They teach that women should direct their hearts toward hearth and home (Gray, 1987, p. 24-25).

This movie is full of sexist stereotypes and cultural signifiers that use derogatory images of hard working single mothers as methods of social control and order. The following chapter will discuss in further depth how these sexist media signifiers influence the role of female social workers.

¹⁷ Jennifer Lopez is currently a movie star and cultural icon. Her image epitomizes wealth, beauty and the American dream.

Chapter Eight: Deconstructing Cinematic Social Work Myths

I thought it would be just like the shooting and stuff you see on TV...I would shoot her and just walk away (Amy Fisher, 2005)¹⁸.

Television is one of the most influential forms of media because it is so pervasive and its presence is taken for granted. Television has changed the lifestyle of many families because it encourages passive interaction, replacing alternative familial interactions such as sports, family games, creativity and learning. TV broadcasts multiple images on a continuous basis and these images come to be seen as the real world influencing our understanding of others and the world around them (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 386). Society collectively gathers these messages and in turn this shapes our beliefs about gender, race, class, appearance, social norms, roles and values. In this chapter I will discuss how *Judging Amy* and television play a significant role in reflecting, reinforcing, and sometimes subverting the dominant systems and ideologies that help shape gender and our perception of female caregivers and social work.

Society's attitude towards social workers, women and their work as caregivers is often derogatory. Historically the work of helping others has been viewed as a non-professional activity, pertaining mostly to women (Young, 2002).

The media does not talk about the relatively sick wages and poor working conditions, received by social workers in comparison to other professions, including nursing, who are largely women. The media does not broadcast that social workers do not receive student loan forgiveness upon graduation as doctors and nurses do. The media does

not speak to the fact that many social workers live on the borders of poverty upon graduation. This is so because many (women) who become social workers are no longer typically from upper-middle class families, but rather many come from working, poor backgrounds and choose the profession to make a difference in their client's lives. They are not so far removed from the sad/dismal realities facing many families accessing social services (Jorge Kelly, *First Friday Research Group* member, 2006).

In reality social workers must maintain high professional standards because they deal with social and personal issues such as: grief, loss, drug addictions, and abuse...often emotional and situational issues that cannot be measured with an empirical formula and therefore of no use in a capitalist culture. The roles of social worker are diverse and complex and often do not have clear-cut parameters. Glen Schmidt (2001) professor of social work at The University of Northern B.C. states in a Canadian National Sector Study that: *social workers find it difficult to describe their role and function clearly*

Other professions such as medicine and psychology have a greater influence on society and their conceptual theory is unquestioned because their school of knowledge is based on scientific knowledge and research. This type of work is therefore valid because it has measurable outcomes (Young, 2002). Television and film perpetuate the belief that technology and scientific knowledge is more productive, powerful, and demands greater respect, while the social sciences are often

¹⁸ Amy Fisher is a woman in the USA who shot her lover's (Joey Buttafuoco) wife in the face. This case of attempted murder was a media sensation. Quote taken from Oprah Show, March 08, 2005.

viewed as fuzzy, abstract and non-productive. Gregory Kane (2003) states in his article for the *Baltimore Sun*:

Hollywood big brains – executives, producers, directors and writers – seem to recognize only three occupations when they develop dramatic television series: doctors, lawyers, and police officers. When there is a change, it's either for the weird – undertakers in *HBO's Six Feet Under* – or the stereotypical, as in the Italian-American mob family of *The Sopranos* (August, 16, 2003).

Laura Mulvey is a feminist and scholar who has done some groundbreaking work on the *male gaze* that dominates our understanding of gender in filmmaking.

Mulvey argues that:

Movies are essentially made through and for the male gaze and fulfill a voyeuristic desire for men to look at women as objects. Viewers are encouraged to *see* the movie through the eyes of the male protagonist who carries the plot forward. Some feminist scholars have suggested the possibility for *subversive gazing* by viewers who refuse to gaze the way filmmakers expect and by making different kinds of movies (2004, p. 388).

Television also uses its power to maintain the status quo through enforcing gender stereotypes that support myths of motherhood, family, marriage, and love (Denzin, 2002). Women and men are under a great deal of societal pressure to become educated, wealthy and successful.

Men, women, and children everywhere feel that their private lives are a series of traps. They feel a loss of control over what is important, including family, loved ones, sanity itself. The dividing line between private troubles and public issues has slipped away. People feel caught up in a swirl of world events, from the Middle East to Afghanistan and Iraq. These events and their histories seem out of control. Life itself in the private sphere has become a public nightmare (Denzin, 2002, p. 222).

The television media prescribes to us a reality that directly impacts our relationships, identity, and behaviour towards others. My research challenges gender myths and televisions prescribed role of female social workers and I encourage the reader to do their own research and use cultural studies and feminist discourse analysis the next time they watch TV.

Images of Social Workers in Judging Amy

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The role of social activist and caregiver is rarely depicted in the mainstream media as important or significant. Today's television is bombarded with sitcoms, reality TV, and talk television which reinforce the American myth that anyone can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and overcome oppression through individual attitude, perseverance and moral character (Jhally & Lewis, 1992). Judith Schagrin (2003), social worker with the Baltimore Department of Social Services suggests:

One of the problems might be we're a women's profession. Cops, gangsters, lawyers and doctors get their shows. Not nurses, or social workers. Hollywood doesn't see how interesting our work is. Social workers can be found in hospices, hospitals, private practice and child welfare...and speaking of child welfare, since that's my part of the world, we have some interesting stories to tell¹⁹.

John O'Neill (2000) talks about *Judging Amy* in his article for the *National Association of Social Workers Newsletter*.

While lawyers were trying cases, cops were arresting criminals, doctors were saving lives, cowboys were riding the range, and a sprinkling of soldiers, teachers, private investigators and newspaper reporters were centre stage, social workers played minor roles, if any at all, in America's television line-up

The four women in my focus group watched four episodes of *Judging Amy's* rendition of a child protection worker (Maxine Grey). The group conceded that Maxine's character did not reflect social work as a positive care-giving profession that plays a significant role in society. *Judging Amy* (CBS) was an appropriate TV show to use with my focus group because it portrays dramatic scenes where actors play out the supposedly real actions and emotions of female social workers.

The focus group found the character of television social worker Maxine Grey to be *bossy and self opinionated* and believed that she did not uphold the values and ethics bound by professional social workers. One of the greatest attributes a social worker can have is that of listening to their client's needs and empowering them

¹⁹ Schagrin's quote taken from Gregory Kanes article.

through our knowledge of social services and advocacy. Kate (group participant) found that Maxine Grey did not empower her clients:

People that I serve now, most of them are persons with disabilities, so they are financially strapped and they make comments about their truck needing some work and stuff and they can't get around. One thing that I thought about with the TV show, was there was no strength based work done, everything was negative, uh ya, focusing on the person's deficits really...but no structural social work happening in that show. It was all working for the system almost to keep the system running properly, how they wanted it.

Maxine's role as child protection worker was also stereotypical in that she snatched children away from unsuspecting parents, a role that should never be taken lightly and one that can have severe mental and emotional consequences for the real life social worker and the families they work with. Heather (group participant) states:

I found the clips moved quickly, it was stark, it is TV gripping you by the, uh, because it has all those elements of drama because all of a sudden she [Maxine] without any hint, she snatched the baby and said, there is no other option! And then I am sure we went to commercial and suddenly he [the baby] was in some type of home with Maxine saying you know we are all going to live here happily, but these are the rules, and don't screw up.

The media has created a general myth in which television social workers are depicted solely as child protection workers. It is rare that we see social workers as therapists, mental health clinicians or grass roots advocates.

What is tough about the media image is it doesn't show us how child protection social workers exhaust all resources before saying *OK*, the child needs to go into foster care, so the general public thinks that they [SW] don't do anything, and they jump to conclusions and so that is where it gets frustrating...because you know that a lot of other stuff goes on, but the media does not show that aspect so it makes us appear to be very incompetent (Catalina, group participant).

Television social workers are often vilified and represented as social conformists who do nothing more than follow government policy and apprehend children from abusive, neglectful parents...we are reduced to Dobermans working for the Gestapo.²⁰ Genevieve (group participant) states:

What comes to mind is that social workers are baby snatchers. That's their role, they snatch babies, they snatch people's kids. I found it is all punitive actions...we are taking this baby, you can't have these kids, you are not looking after them, as opposed to asking, what needs to happen for you to make it workable?

Kate's (group participant) response was:

I found her [Maxine] to be grating...she often led you to believe that she had some social work skills. She attempted to listen and perhaps be empathetic; however, it was quickly dashed into her very cutting

remarks: labelling the person, no negotiations, no options there was no advocacy, her policy was firm.

The focus group made numerous statements regarding Maxine's punitive, threatening, and judgemental behaviour. The group generally agreed that Maxine is not sending a positive message to the TV audience about the caring professionalism of social workers. Heather and Catalina (group participants) provide their critical analysis of Maxine's professional conduct:

One thing that really stands out for me is that there is a lot of judgements...punitive, and as a social worker this is what we, what I strive to stay away from...so that you are not judgemental towards people. That is when you can negotiate change, problem-solve, work towards an end result that is positive. On the topic of judgements...that is something that I constantly struggle with as a social worker because our code of ethics is to be non-judgemental.

Maxine Grey's so-called professional conduct on television directly violates the *British Columbia Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics* (1994). The handbook states that:

The profession of social work is founded on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals. Social Workers believe in the intrinsic worth and dignity of every human being and are committed to the values of acceptance, self-determination and respect of individuality. They believe in the obligation of all people, individually and collectively, to

²⁰ *Dobermans for the Gestapo* is a term used by my thesis supervisor Dr. Si Transken.

provide resources, services, and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity (p. 7).

The group concluded that real social workers do not behave like TV social worker Maxine Grey. The group appeared to recognize and value the ethical and professional responsibilities we have towards our community and the clients we work with:

Maxine is not doing a good job of how she is treating people...if she was a real person, she needs to look at how she is acting in her work setting and how it is affecting the people she is working with because she is not being much help (Kate, group participant).

According to Heather (group participant) television completely neglects social workers: *“overall social work is seen as being very brutal...I don’t think the media really portrays what social workers do!”*

As the researcher I agree with all the comments made by the focus group participants; however, there are some more subtle nuances of *Judging Amy* and Maxine Grey’s social work portrayal that the focus group did not reveal. As the researcher I believe my analysis of *Judging Amy* is deeper because I critically analysed the show for the past four years from a feminist, cultural studies perspective and engaged in numerous discussions with my supervisor, Dr. Si Tansken and the First Friday Research group. There is no argument however, that Maxine Grey does not uphold the core values of social work.

Initially Maxine appears to be a very competent and caring social worker; however, I found the editing of videotapes made a profound difference in how one

views and interprets the SW role of Maxine. In a one-hour television drama there are several stories being told within one episode and numerous commercial breaks.

When the episodes were edited I only chose scenes that showed Maxine playing the role of SW, there were no distractions or interruptions of other story lines or commercials; therefore, the viewing audience has a much clearer lens through which to analyze the role of television SW.

Maxine Grey was in violation of professional social work conduct most of the time. I found the character to be authoritative, judgemental, controlling and disempowering to her clients. In some episodes she is found raising her voice, pounding her fist on a table, yelling at hospital staff, and in one episode Maxine refers to a female client who makes jewellery as, *the wire bender*. In a different episode Maxine threatens a professional single mother who is working overtime trying to become partner at a law firm, Maxine states that if she [client] continues to work late and neglect her children they will be apprehended. Maxine is also seen giving a complicated referral to a young newly graduated SW and when she [new grad] makes a mistake Maxine is non-supportive by raising her voice and making a passive-aggressive remark. Maxine works in isolation and does not collaborate with other social workers or professionals. She fixes the clients problems and solves extremely complicated social issues with one profound sentence or phone call.

The power imbalance between gender roles is also prevalent in *Judging Amy*. In one scene Maxine is seen seated at her office chair while her male supervisor towers above her stating that he is her boss and she will do as she is told, in another scene Maxine is in a hospital waiting for an African American woman who is

incarcerated to give birth to her child so she can apprehend the baby immediately. The male doctor walks into the scene like a guardian angel and advocates for the pregnant mother to have a few moments with her baby alone after it is born. This scene devalues the social workers role because the doctor does not listen to Maxine he dismisses her as incompetent and disrespects her professional opinion and role. The television audience would perceive the doctor as the saviour and Maxine as the evil villain.

The episodes I saw never revealed the complex and creative side of social work, Maxine Grey never seems to be plagued by government cutbacks, political bureaucracy, or a lack of community resources. She does not have to drive long distances in severe winter conditions, her clients never go missing, she doesn't have student loans, she doesn't teach or mentor students, attend conferences, nor did I see her participate in any grass roots community activism or marches.

Television & Social Work:

The viewing audience collectively absorbs these images and over time television shapes our perceived reality of social norms, issues, and belief systems.

Has anyone seen *Lilo & Stitch* [Walt Disney animated movie] because it is a perfect example of how child protection workers are portrayed in movies. It is just typical because this is a kid's movie but there is a hidden agenda because you see this big black limo pull up to the curb and out jumps this black dude who is dressed like a rap musician...well he is a social worker a child protection worker who snatches these kids off the street, puts them in the limo and drives

away. What is the viewer left thinking (Cathy Denby, *First Friday* Research Group member, 2004)?

According to Slotkin (1984, p. 413) the mass audience does not make what it sees, but receives and reacts to what is produced.

As part of the raw material for cultural production, such a myth of the audience is eventually incorporated into cultural products and returned to consumers. What returns along this circuit is not a reflection but a highly selective version of collective sentiment, the culture industry's ideologically structured image of popular desires and fears. Active mass participation in the circuit begins at this point with the reception of cultural forms by social groups (Traube, p. 69).

These popular desires and fears bombard the audience through a multitude of sitcoms, talk shows, commercials, reality shows, news channels and dramas. Rather than teaching audiences how to think critically about the power relations which structure their world and the social conditions which help produce their problems, audiences are taught to focus on their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities and taught how to conform to social norms and dominant modes of thought and behaviour (Hammer& Kellner, Vol. 1, 2005). As media technology grows the need for feminist cultural analysis becomes profoundly important.

I will further support my thesis statement and research by using several more examples of TV social workers from a police drama (*The Cold Squad*) a Christmas movie (*When Angels Come to Town*) and a 1999 sitcom entitled the *Norm Show*. The *Cold Squad* (Showcase, March, 2003) episode begins with a female social worker and

a female detective conducting a home visit in which there is suspected child abuse and neglect.

The family being investigated is dependent on welfare and lives in a dirty, dilapidated house. The mother is in an abusive relationship and is addicted to heroin; as a result she is not providing the care her daughter needs. Upon entering the home the social worker is confronted by a staggering male carrying a six-pack of beer, in an aggressive tone he disrespectfully asks: *who the hell are you...a god dam social worker? If there's one thing I can't stand it's a female god dam social worker.* Half way through the one hour show the social worker must apprehend the children and she is called a *bitch* several times. Child protection workers have perhaps the most spiritually, emotionally, and mentally demanding job in the field of social work and television does not give these women the respect they deserve. Instead of being awarded for their work they are condemned and unfortunately this is an ongoing theme among TV producers.

Further proof of oppression towards female social workers can be seen on a CBS family Christmas movie *When Angels Come to Town* that aired Nov. 28, 2004. Peter Falk (*Columbo*) plays an angel named *Max* and he is sent to help two families in need at Christmas time. The one family is struggling financially and features a young single girl her goal is to get a job promotion and get her younger brother out of foster care. The siblings were torn apart when the young boy was taken away by a female social worker who plays an uncaring and authoritarian role.

Actress Tammy Blanchard plays Sally Reid a 25 year-old girl who is an assistant manager at a department store and who is struggling financially because she

is trying to raise her young brother alone. In the beginning of the movie Sally and her brother are living together until an authoritarian social worker comes to the home and threatens to take her brother away because Sally does not earn enough money. The social worker states: *you are setting yourself up for failure*. Sally attempts to reassure the social worker by stating: *I can take care of him*. But the social worker dismisses Sally by saying: *that's not what the file says...your brother needs to be with a normal family...you need to let him go...do him a favour*. The message that the viewing audience receives is that these siblings and their relationship are not healthy or normal.

Screenwriters who perpetuate these types of hegemonic values are doing real damage to the social work profession and the people we serve. Sally is punished for being single, working fulltime, and not being able to afford a babysitter/alternative caregiver. The television social worker does not challenge the reality of structural inequalities faced by Sally nor does she confront the neo-liberal policies inherent within government agencies...so why should the viewer.

The major programs dedicated to everyday life target individual failings and offer largely individual solutions to a wide range of problems, solutions that reproduce dominant ideology and forms of thought and behaviour. The class bias makes working class people feel inferior and sets up middle class and professional people as the social norm and ideal. Importantly, the politics of difference, especially in relation to class, race, gender, and sexuality are effectively obscured and depicted as one-dimensional, psychological,

personal problems, which tend to blame the victim rather than critique the socio-political and economic contexts which mediate these kind of pathologies (Hammer & Kellner, Vol. 1, 2005).

The reality is that a professional generalist social worker would view Sally's social problems as arising from a specific societal context - liberal/neo-conservative capitalist - rather than from the failings of individuals (Mullaly, 1993, p. 124).

The movie vilifies social work because what the audience sees is a highly unprofessional social worker who is threatening, condescending, sarcastic, disrespectful, and did nothing to empower or advocate for Sally and her brother. The social worker does not consider financial help or the emotional trauma she is inflicting upon brother and sister by separating them. So once again the media reflect social workers in a negative way. Sally and her brother eventually receive celestial help from a male angel who reunites sister and brother and saves Christmas...the perfect TV ending.

The Norm Show aired on ABC and ran from 1999-2001 the role of Norm was played by ex-*Saturday Night Live* comedian Norm Macdonald and was supposed to be a comedy about a male social worker...instead it was thirty minutes of prime time devaluation of the social work profession. In the show Norm Macdonald plays Norm Henderson an ex-hockey player who is banned from the sport for gambling and tax evasion. A judge gives Norm the option of going to jail for tax evasion or becoming a social worker by performing community service (Nieves, 1999). He chooses the latter option and shows his loathing for the social work profession through excessive drinking, lusting for his clients, and complaining about his job. The message sent to

the audience is that becoming a social activist and caregiver is equivalent to doing jail time.

Norm's character and others on the show belittle and berate clients and engage in a variety of unethical behaviour, including gross violations of confidentiality and in return exhibit a total lack of respect for community social work (O'Neill, Jan. 2000). Norm practices social work without a license or professional / academic credentials implying anyone without training can simply become a professional social worker. We know it's a television show says Josephine Nieves (1999) executive director of NASW's²¹ national office. But for starters, *Norm's* character is practising social work without a license. Would anyone buy the premise of a show in which a hockey player was sentenced to do community service as, say, a surgeon?

Nieves has a list of ways in which the character violates the social workers code of ethics. These indictments include:

- Misrepresentation: Norm has no professional credentials and yet calls himself a social worker.
- Unprofessional / unethical conduct: social workers do not bribe their clients.
- Violation of a confidentiality agreement: Norm's friends shouldn't know who his clients are.
- Use of derogatory language: social workers should not treat clients in a disrespectful or demeaning manner.

²¹ National Association of Social Workers is an organization in the United States in Canada we have the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW).

The Norm Show maligns our profession and confuses our clients who count on the social work profession for advocacy, counselling, and support. Thankfully this show is no longer on television; however, it is a perfect example of the media using their power to distort and deceive the viewer under the guise of a comedy sitcom.

Margarete Parrish (2003), social work professor at the University of Maryland states:

I have a bone to pick with Hollywood honchos about the topics on weekly television shows. I'd like to see a positive focus on social work and an authentic reflection of social work. Social work serves a lot of people our society doesn't see as glamorous or sexy. Poor people are neither glamorous nor sexy. We see things about corrupt cops but nothing about dedicated social workers. We're not sexy²².

In the case of women's work, its devaluation is compounded by the fact that much of the actual labour is in the services to the relatively powerless- children, the infirm, elderly, the poor and the sick (Ollenberger, Moore, 1998, p. 74). The struggle of single mothers living in poverty is an issue usually at risk of being ignored and misrepresented by the media because the fallout presents us with the messy issues of spousal abuse, unemployment, child poverty, and poor mental health...very non-sexy social issues.

²² Margarete Parrish's quote taken from Gregory Kanis's article.

Chapter Nine: Summary & Conclusion

Whoever controls communications controls both consciousness and social organization (unknown).

In conclusion I found my research: “*A Feminist Approach to Deconstructing the Media's Image of Female Social Workers*” to be stimulating, rewarding and insightful. I discovered a new passion for cultural studies and realized the great potential and validity it has for feminist thought and the school of social work. My scholarly journey has allowed me to critically analyze and deconstruct the powerful and damaging effects of hegemonic and consumer driven forces that are broadcast to millions of viewers around the world, everyday. It is my hope that my research will raise critical cultural awareness regarding the overwhelming influence the media has over our values, beliefs and perceptions of our professional, political, and personal lives.

I have found that cultural studies can be a testing ground for dismantling boundaries and intellectual debate; however it does have limitations. Writing my thesis from a cultural studies perspective has at times been intellectually challenging and confusing because cultural studies is messy and concerns itself with the meaning and practices of everyday life. Cultural practices comprise the way people do particular things (such as watching television, or eating out) in a given culture. Particular meanings attach to the ways people in particular cultures do things (www.answers.com. cultural studies, 2005).

Cultural studies is a place where individuals can grow intellectually and dominant ideologies can be challenged; however, for large scale social change to occur this must happen at a political policy making level and the powerful forces

[media, politicians, mega corps] that control social policy will never allow cultural studies practitioners to dismantle their systems that create and perpetuate social, political, and economic inequalities. Feminist scholars however; must not give up because cultural studies teaches us a new way of thinking and interpreting the world around us, cultural studies can become a *way of life*. It is my hope that women will look at popular culture differently putting their own unique stamp on their cultural lives.

Qualitative, ethnographic research and a women's focus group were the ideal approach to use because it allowed me to add depth, meaning and purpose to my research methodologies (Heath, 1997). Qualitative research allowed me to describe and interpret a variety of scholarly literature, and human phenomena while feminist ethnography allowed me to interpret women's behaviour as shaped by social context rather than as context free or rooted in anatomy, personality, and social class (Reinharz, 1992, p. 53).

The focus group consisted of four Caucasian, female social workers from a variety of disciplines and was an integral key in the formulation of the group because this forum allowed for homogeneity, compatible conversation, and productivity (Morgan, 1998, p. 55). The participants generated free-flowing discussions that were intelligent, vibrant and relevant to northern remote social work practice. They provided a collective voice by expressing their attitudes, experiences and beliefs that supported my thesis that the television media ignores and/or perpetuates the role of a female social worker in a negative way.

Television social workers are almost always urban based and therefore, do not address the complex nature of northern remote social work practice. Northern realities such as: accessibility, long winters, community economy, cultural diversity, and a lack of social welfare programs is not recognized in television dramas, movies or sitcoms. What TV does recognize however, is wealth, physical beauty, traditional family values, and success. The media perpetuates a hegemonic discourse and grooms society to become a mass culture that is standardized and conformist. Social work and social issues are far from standardized and can in fact be very messy requiring hours and days of creative and collective work with clients, family and community. In the television world complex social issues are neatly wrapped up within 60 minutes. In most one hour TV dramas the audience sees babies being placed in loving foster homes, women recovering from eating disorders, depression and suicidal thoughts and therapists who can eradicate all forms of social inequalities with one simple phone call.

My research has been ongoing for approximately four years, and during this time I have spent countless hours critically analyzing the images and messages that are broadcast to viewers via television. I believe that media images are used to perpetuate myths that benefit a capitalistic society and that these images are continuously being recreated and reproduced, interfering with the audience's consciousness (Berger, 1972, p. 9). As a result the audience loses the power to shape our own consciousness and perhaps our own future. We are left feeling confused, inadequate, and under social pressure to conform to North American culture and standards.

I found the social implications of television to be forceful, and terrifying. It is almost impossible to escape the TV because they are found everywhere: dentist's offices, airplanes, phones, fridges, and automobiles. The culture of our communities is at the mercy of white capitalist elites who care nothing about the environment and social welfare, but have every interest invested in wealth and control. Television producers develop shows disguised as entertainment so that advertising moguls and multinational corporations have a global forum in which they can spread their patriarchal propaganda.

We're in the business to make money, and we're in the business to sell customers products. So why would we come out and say don't buy anything and affect the economy (Al Hudak, CTV Canada, group director of national sales)? (*Adbusters: Journal of the Mental Environment*).

Social activists in northern remote communities and around the world must have critical awareness and understanding regarding the nature and agenda of media mega corporations.

I believe female social workers are negatively represented in television and film because the egalitarian and humanitarian nature of social work is in direct conflict with the culture of capitalism. The networks are the gatekeepers of global culture and decide what messages do and do not get heard.

Here's how it plays out. You can use sex to sell beer. You can use psychological tricks to sell junk food to kids. You can use hype to sell cars. You can lie to sell war. What you cannot do, however, is turn

the tables and speak out against the companies that are doing the selling. In a totalitarian system, you aren't allowed to talk back to the government; in the capitalist system, you can't talk back to the sponsor (Adbusters).

TV networks clutter our minds with audio-visual garbage such as *reality TV*, the producers' newest and most affordable way of developing programs. Reality TV shows such as *Dog the Bounty Hunter* glorifies an ex-Hells Angel turned social activist, and *Growing up Gotti* glamorizes the lifestyle of single working mother Victoria Gotti, daughter to notorious mob boss John Gotti. Where are the reality shows about social workers and feminist activists who fight to keep children safe, care for the mentally ill and comfort women who have been violated?

As a third wave feminist I hope my research will assist women, students, and any person passionate about social justice/activism in critically analyzing and deconstructing the oppressive power of the media.

It is not enough to remove obstacles; rather, deeper more transformational changes need to be made in societal institutions as well in people's heads (Shaw & Lee, 2004, p. 10).

Attending *The First Friday Research Group* for the past four years has been a privilege because the MSW students who attend this group are both colleagues and mentors with numerous years of northern remote social work practice. Our rich, vibrant discussions and critical analysis of the media assisted me in my transformative journey and has forever changed the way we interpret and analyze TV.

Racism, violence, poverty, and depression are rising because we as a human race are suffocating, mentally, spiritually and emotionally. Our mental environment is littered with false images that unwillingly force us to assimilate and adapt to a reality that does not exist, and we must not allow these nameless, faceless people to continue shaping the way we see and interpret the world in which we live.

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You have been selected by myself (Kristine Henning) to be a research participant in a focus group for the purposes of completing my Masters Degree in Social Work at the University of Northern B.C.

INFORMATION SHEET

Researcher: Kristine Henning BSW, MSW candidate

Address: #

Phone No. & E-mail:

Thesis Supervisor: Dr. Si Transken

Thesis Title: *A Feminist Approach to Deconstructing the Medias Image of Female Social Workers*

Purpose of my research: The intention of my research is to critically analyze the social context of messages and images depicted in specific television shows as they reflect the role of female social workers and caregivers. It is my prediction that your contribution as a Prince George social worker will generate stories that will support my research and reveal the contradictions between Hollywood's portrayal and the lived reality of northern rural social workers. My research will address the need for critical cultural discourse in relation to television and its representation of female caregivers and social activists such as your-self.

Potential benefits and risks: My objective is to encourage critical thought and raise cultural feminist awareness. I want to educate others by sending a positive message to students, colleagues and the community regarding the professional and humanitarian / caregiving role found in the multi-faceted work of northern, female social workers. If issues arise that cause you to become emotionally upset for any reason and you require clinical de-briefing I will provide you with a contact number for a counselor. Please be advised you can withdraw from the group at any time.

Why you were chosen: You have been selected to be a research participant in my focus group because you are a Caucasian woman, caregiver, and professional social worker who I feel will add depth, vitality and validity to my research.

What you will be asked to do: You will be one of six women in my focus group and as a group you will watch a videotape approximately 15 minutes in length consisting of a variety of clips from the CBS evening television drama *Judging Amy*. Prior to watching the video the group will be given one open-ended question to help set the framework for the 90 minute semi-structured discussion that will take place after the video. The discussion will be recorded on audiotape, transcribed, and then segments of the discussion will be used in my final thesis.

Individuals that will have access to your responses: Myself (researcher), Dr. Si Transken (thesis supervisor), Professor Anita Vaillancourt (internal committee member), Professor Katherine McGregor (external committee member), and Jennifer Young (transcriber).

Voluntary Participation: Your decision to participate in the focus group must be a voluntary decision and you have the right to withdraw at any time (however 48 hours would be appreciated),

Remuneration for participating: If required I will provide financial remuneration for babysitting and transportation costs. Snacks and beverages will be provided.

How anonymity will be maintained: You will be given a fictitious name that you will use throughout the audio taping of the group.

Confidentiality: Confidentiality is extremely important because this is a group process and each member involved must trust one another in order to speak freely. I ask that you follow the professional codes of conduct found in the *BCASW Code of Ethics Handbook*. All group members will have fictitious names in order to maintain anonymity, of course you may know each-others real names due to prior contact in a rural context, therefore, confidentiality and privacy must be respected in all ways. You will be asked to sign an *informed consent* form (enclosed) that addresses confidentiality.

Storage of audiotape: The audiotape will be kept for six months in a locked file cabinet in my private office at Prince George Regional Hospital. After six months the tape will be destroyed.

The research focus group will be held April 28th, 2005 at 7:00 pm in the 4th floor conference room (old wing) at Prince George Regional Hospital, 1475 Edmonton St. The *informed consent* form must be signed by your-self prior to participation in the focus group. A self-addressed envelope is provided. If you have any questions or concerns I can be reached at the contact numbers provided above. Any complaints about this research should be directed to: *Vice President of Research*, 960-5820.

Thank you for your time, Kristine Henning.

**RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD
SCHEDULE "C"
INFORMED CONSENT**

Do you understand you have been asked to be in a research study?	Yes	No
Have you read and received a copy of the attached information sheet?	Yes	No
Do you understand that the focus group will be audio-recorded?	Yes	No
Do you understand the benefits and/or risks involved in participating in this study?	Yes	No
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study?	Yes	No
Are you a voluntary participant?	Yes	No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time?	Yes	No
Do you agree to maintain confidentiality?	Yes	No
Do you understand who will have access to the information you provide?	Yes	No

The nature of this focus group was explained to me by Kristine Henning, MSW candidate from UNBC and I agree to take part in this study:

Signature of research participant

Date

Printed name of research participant

Signature of witness

Date

Printed name of witness

I believe the person signing this form understands what is involved in the study and voluntarily agrees to participate.

Signature of researcher: _____

Date: _____
