OPENING THE WINDOW ON A VERY DARK DAY:
A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE PEER SUPPORT TEAM
AT THE KINGSTON PRISON FOR WOMEN

by

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A thesis submitted to

the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

in partial fulfilment of

the requirements for the degree of

Master of Social Work

School of Social Work

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

April 29, 1993

ISBN 0-315-84165-6

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OPENING THE WINDOW ON A VERY DARK DAY: A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF THE PEER SUPPORT TEAM AT THE KINGSTON PRISON FOR WOMEN

submitted by Shoshana Pollack, B.A.

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Social Work

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May 17, 1993

Abstract

This thesis is an evaluation, using qualitative and quantitative methods of measurement, of the Peer Support Team at the Kingston Prison for Women. Twelve women trained as peer counsellors were interviewed about their experiences with the Peer Support Team. A survey was distributed to the prison population to assess frequency of service use and to obtain recommendations for program improvement. Interview results suggest that group training based upon principles of feminist counselling and empowerment is useful in building group cohesiveness and participant self-confidence. Survey results indicate that the PST, although used by less than half the prisoners, is a highly valued service. Recommendations for social workers working with incarcerated women are provided.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank the women in the Psychology Department at P4W - Jan Heney, Julie Darke, Heather Mclean and Kathy Kendall - for their support and encouragement of both myself and this work. Their seemingly endless energy and commitment to transforming women's lives both in and outside of the prison fuelled my own motivation through the research process. This paper could not have been written without them.

I also gratefully acknowledge the support from my mother, who has been editing my papers since I was in the fifth grade, and who spent hours on this project. My mother's personal vision of social change and her relentless support of my own individual journey, has taught me the importance of commitment. Whatever forward moving strength I possess, I owe to her.

The encouragement I received from Diana Ralph, my thesis advisor, carried me through many moments of self-doubt. Her confidence in my work was invaluable.

The prisoners at P4W have been central to the completion of this paper and to the development and sustenance of my own personal vision. I would like to thank them for their important contribution to this work and to my life.

Preface

On December 3, 1988 Marlene Moore, or "Shaggy" as she was more commonly known, committed suicide in the prison hospital at P4W in Kingston. In January, 1989 Joanne Mayhew, then a prisoner at P4W, wrote a letter to Ole Ingstrup, the Federal Commissioner of Corrections. She sent a copy of this letter to The Kingston Whig Standard.

In the very recent past we have had one woman dead by suicide, at least four others attempt hanging and the on-going incidents of women seeking release from pressure and pain by slashing their own bodies...At the very least my letter to you will provide a record of events from which to gauge future developments. My personal wish for the new year would be to expend my energies on recording an enlightened path of positive steps rather than the dark shadows of negative regression.

Six other women at P4W have committed suicide since Joanne's letter appeared in The Whig Standard. This work is in memory of Marlene Moore, Pat Bear, Sandy Sayer, Marie Ledoux Custard, Careen Daignault, Johnie Neudorf and Lorna Jones. I also dedicate this study to the many prisoners I have met at P4W who have seen too many women die. They have touched and altered my life in ways too numerous to count. Their strength, vision, and ability to persevere has inspired and sustained my commitment to creating a new and better world for *all* women. This paper is a contribution towards avoiding the "dark shadows of negative regression" and of recording the path that enlightened and courageous women at P4W are following.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

In 1934 the Nickle Report recommended that a penitentiary for Canada's female federal offenders be opened in Kingston, Ontario. Since then, there have been repeated calls for the closure of the prison, some coming as early as four years after it was initially built (Adelberg and Currie, 1987). However, it was not until a report from the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (1990) recommended that P4W be closed and small regional prisons be established instead, that any serious discussion took place regarding alternatives to the centralized federal prison system for female offenders. As a result of this report, Prison for Women is expected to close its doors by September, 1994 and prisoners to be sent to one of five separate regional prisons dispersed across the country.

Between December, 1988 and February, 1991 seven women at P4W have committed suicide. Six of the seven prisoners who took their lives were Native Canadian. Undoubtedly, these suicides have influenced the earnest consideration given to closing the institution and the recent interest in the living conditions of prisoners. Attempts have been made to address the unique and specific concerns of Native prisoners (Heney, 1989; Deschepper, 1989; Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990; Grossmann, 1992) and to pay closer attention to the emotional needs of female prisoners in general. Several of these investigations have led to the implementation of services better suited to the needs of women at P4W. One such program is the Peer Support Team (PST), a program

established as a result of recommendations made in a report by Jan Heney.

THE PEER SUPPORT TEAM (PST)

Background

In 1989 Jan Heney conducted a study on self-injurious behaviour at the Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario. The central focus of Heney's report is the assertion that self-injury must be viewed as a mental health issue, rather than as a security issue. Before her research, prison personnel tended to view self-injury as a precursor to suicide and would react by placing the woman in segregation - a measure generally considered by prisoners as punitive. Heney, however, suggested that self-injury is in fact a coping strategy, not a suicide attempt, and recommended that it be treated as such. In addition, Heney found that there existed an informal network of counselling and support among women who self-injure. She recommended that this support network be legitimized by establishing a Peer Support Team (PST). Heney suggested that a team of prisoners be formally trained in counselling skills, and to be available for intervention in any type of crisis. Furthermore, a Peer Support Team trained to deal with women in emotional distress would place self-injury in the realm of mental health rather than in that of prison security.

The Psychology Department at P4W began running the PST in May of 1990. The two program co-ordinators, both psychologists within the institution, describe their counselling approach as based upon a feminist model of therapy. Consequently, the Peer

Support program is, in structure, philosophy and concept, an innovative woman-centred program and, as such, goes against the grain of traditional corrections programming.

Purpose

Prisons for women typically lack appropriate resources for formal education, the development of marketable job-training skills, the maintenance of family contact and post-release planning and support. The PST, being an offspring of the Psychology Department, does not specifically address these particular problems. Instead, the team offers a service aimed at assisting prisoners through emotional difficulties related to such issues as past experiences, pre-release concerns, and the stresses of imprisonment that may occur during their incarceration period.

The PST Guidelines outlined by the Psychology Department, says that peer counsellors are to be:

> ...used in a preventative capacity (e.g. if there is reason to believe that a woman is experiencing some difficulty that is likely to escalate; if a woman is vulnerable and living unit tension increases); for follow up counselling after the initial crisis has passed; and for crisis intervention.

The PST "was established to allow women access to counselling, support, and comfort when in crisis". A woman in crisis is defined as someone who "appears to be withdrawn, depressed, agitated, emotionally upset or if there is a behavioral change that is

uncharacteristic; anger can also be a reflection of a crisis" (PST Guidelines).

A prisoner may receive peer counselling by either a verbal or written request to a Correctional Officer, Psychology staff or Health Care personnel. The Correctional Supervisor is informed of the request and mediates the intervention. Although a prisoner can ask for peer support at any time of day, it is to the Correctional Supervisor's discretion to determine whether peer counselling is deemed necessary and appropriate for the situation. It is possible, then, for a woman's request for counselling to be refused. In addition, because of confidentiality, some women may feel uncomfortable informing prison staff that they are in need of support and therefore may hesitate to request to see a peer counsellor.

The Peer Support Team Training

Several reports over the last few years have found that the majority of female federal prisoners in Canada have survived childhood sexual abuse (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1989; Heney 1989; Deschepper, 1988). The long term affects of childhood sexual abuse have also been well documented (Herman, 1981; Kluft, 1985; Browne and Finkelhor, 1986). Therefore the knowledge of various issues with which survivors struggle forms the foundation of PST training.

Each training session runs for six weeks with biweekly three-hour meetings. Topics include racism\classism\homophobia, self-injury, women's anger, sexual assault,

counselling skills, self-care, gender stereotypes and substance abuse. Each trainee is given a manual with writings on the various topics. They are expected to read the chapter pertaining to each topic before that particular training session. Women with limited literacy skills may also participate on the team, and they generally receive assistance from team members with the manual content.

Facilitators from the outside community, as well as some internal resources are used to conduct training workshops. In addition, PST members who have graduated through previous training programs are encouraged to facilitate training seminars for the new group.

The training for peer counsellors provides an opportunity for women to develop their own counselling and coping skills and to gain confidence in their ability to support others through crisis situations.

Participants

Participation on the PST is voluntary. Each volunteer is given a screening interview, conducted by the PST program co-ordinator, before she is accepted as a trainee in the Peer Support Program. During the interview, volunteers are asked questions about why they are interested in joining the team and what, if any factors, such as a substance abuse problem or personal difficulties, might impede their ability to effectively support others in crisis. Volunteers are also asked if they feel they might have difficulties counselling

various prisoners such as those who are considered protective custody, or are of a different race or who are lesbian. An attempt is made to select a team comprised of women from diverse ethnic, racial, and sexual orientation backgrounds and from the various living units (North and South Wings\North and South Ranges) within the prison. Each training session has approximately eight to ten participants.

Once a woman is selected as a member of the PST, she attends a six week training program. After successfully completing training, (they must miss no more than three training sessions), participants attend a formal graduation and become official peer counsellors, available for intervention during crisis situations.

Graduates from the training program are expected to return (as long as they remain incarcerated) for subsequent training with each new group of trainees. The purpose of returning to the group is to refresh their own counselling skills and to share with the new team members their experiences and perceptions of peer support. In between new training sessions, all peer counsellors are required to meet as a group with the psychologists who co-ordinate and facilitate the program. The group meets for one hour a week to discuss any issues or problems that may have arisen pertaining to the PST or individual counselling situations. The primary purpose of this meeting is for the program facilitators to present pertinent information to the peer counsellors and for the psychologists and team members to provide support and feedback regarding the women's peer counselling experiences. Peer counsellors are also encouraged to consult the

Psychology staff at any time if they have fears or concerns regarding someone they are counselling.

Limitations of Peer Support in a Social Control Setting

Dependency

Ferguson (1984) describes bureaucratic institutions, including prisons, as an environment in which, for the "clients," the only "posture permissible toward the bureaucracy is one of dependency" (145). Prisoners must rely upon the prison workers for access to basic needs during confinement such as food and exercise, and for parole, prison programming, visits and day passes. Each prisoner's behaviour is documented and scrutinized to assess her qualification for privileges and determines the quality of life they lead in prison. Those who run the prison also control each prisoner's access to one another. Therefore, the Security Staff controls the circumstances under which peer counselling may occur, particularly if it is during lock-up times or after hours, both times in which prisoners are locked in their living units. The dependency enforced by the prison institution and the constant surveillance and scrutiny of prisoners put severe constraints on the efficacy of a peer counselling service.

Confidentiality

The imbalance of power in prisons is also reflected in the use of information. Each prisoner's personal history, experiences, crimes, psychological assessments and institutional behaviour is detailed in files to which she has little access. Information is

thus one-way, creating an imbalance of power based upon possession of knowledge. Details of this file can determine how the prisoner is treated during incarceration, access to privileges, and conditions of parole. In such an environment, where information is controlled and used by those in authority, confidentiality takes on a new dimension. Peer counselling programs, which must rely upon confidentiality, may therefore be regarded with suspicion. It is not easy to trust when living in an unpredictable environment over which the individual possesses so little control.

Co-optation

Foucault (1979) writes that prisons strive to create the "obedient subject, the individual subjected to habits, rules, orders, an authority that is exercised continually around him and upon him, and which he must allow to function automatically in him" (129). The social control aspect of the prison environment is in its dependence upon the imprisoned to succumb to the institutional rules. Foucault writes that the prisoner therefore becomes both the subject of subjugation and an instrument of subjection, through the forced compliance to prison standards. Peer counselling programs carry with them, then, the potential for co-optation by administrative concerns thereby becoming a tool to maintain the prison status quo.

Potential for Change: The Peer Support Team

There are several characteristics of the PST at Prison for Women that suggest its potential for challenging, rather than perpetuating, the prison status quo.

Sharing Knowledge

The educational component of the PST training is embedded in an analysis of theories of dominance (patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism and racism). Participants engage in an analysis of societal inequalities and are encouraged to reflect upon the ways in which these inequities shape their life both inside and outside of the prison. Ferguson (1984) theorizes that the personal qualities that the oppressed are forced to adopt (submissiveness, dependency, non-assertiveness, and subjectivity) are also qualities defined by the socially constructed term "femininity".[1] Therefore, an analysis of the social conditions in which women live under patriarchy contains within it the potential to challenge the structural injustices in the prison. Sharing knowledge within the group context of the PST training provides a forum in which circumstances of women's lives, in and out of prison, can be discussion and then, through each peer counsellor, be passed on to other prisoners. (This is most evident when ex-prisoners are invited in by the PST to speak of the struggles with post-release bureaucratic constraints and to give practical advise on how to prepare for these problems). Lastly, by allowing prisoners to rally around a common goal, whether it be policy changes, organizing an event, or concern for a certain woman's welfare, the PST program has the potential to decrease the individual isolation common to those dependent upon the will of a powerful institution (Ferguson, 1984).

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[1] Ferguson writes that both bureaucratic administrators and clients are "placed in institutional situations in which they must function as subordinates, and they must learn the skills necessary to cope with that subordinate status, the skills that women have always learned of their 'femininity'" (93).

Advocacy

The Psychology Department at P4W, although hired by the institution, is generally viewed as being at odds with the overall prison goals and philosophy. Typically, it is members of this department that prisoners ask to advocate on their behalf and to whom complaints are brought. The PST participants and co-ordinators also constitute a lobbying body for the prisoner's concerns. Recommendations for policy change and educational workshops and events are often put forth by the PST as a whole. Further, the PST invites outside speakers, who are not accountable to the prison, to speak and help educate prisoners and staff alike. These components of the program suggest the ability of the PST to challenge the norms of the prison and the potential to influence structural change.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the PST from the perspective of both the recipients and the providers of peer counselling. The PST was established three years ago and has not yet been formaliy evaluated. P4W will be closing within the next one to two years and it is likely, therefore, that levels of anxiety and stress will increase as the closing date nears and staff and friends begin to leave. In this situation, peer counsellors may be in even higher demand. It seems clear that an assessment of the program and providing positive alternatives for improvements would be especially helpful given the possibility of a need for increased service. In addition, administrators of the new regional prisons are currently planning future programming. This evaluation may

provide useful information to the Psychology Department at P4W, regarding counselling programs in these new federal institutions.

The Research Questions

There were several research questions that I was interested in exploring for this evaluation:

1. I was interested in finding out if prisoners were using the peer counselling service and, if so, how helpful was it? If they were not using it, how could the program be made more accessible?

2. I was also interested in the effectiveness of the PST training session. Were the program co-ordinators meeting the desired goals to "not only help [participants] when supporting other women, but [to] also support [them] in looking at the world, women's lives, and [their] own lives in new ways." If so, how were these goals accomplished?

3. I had been told by a variety of different sources that therapeutic groups were generally unsuccessful at P4W because of the high level of distrust between prisoners. I hoped to find out how peer counsellors felt about the group training, and, in particular, if they sensed the development of trust and group cohesiveness among the team members. I expected to gain insight into the intricacies of establishing trust within groups at P4W.

4. I wanted to know the types of crisis situations peer counsellors typically dealt with. What were the common emotional difficulties prisoners struggled with? Was the PST training useful in providing peer counsellors with the tools to appropriately intervene?

5. I had several questions regarding the PST and race issues. The PST facilitators attempt to select team members that reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the prison population. Were prisoners typically receiving peer support from those with similar cultural backgrounds? I also wondered if the training sessions adequately addressed cultural issues. Did the group training contribute to expanding cultural sensitivity or understanding?

6. I was interested in how the PST is *restricted* by the social control setting and in what way is the program able to *challenge* the prison status quo.

RESEARCH BIAS

I was a student intern with the Psychology Department at P4W for seven months, in partial fulfillment of a Master of Social Work degree at Carleton University. I arrived to this position at P4W with several years' experience working with female adolescent survivors of sexual abuse in a residential setting. My position at P4W included providing individual counselling for women with histories of abuse, facilitating a cultural support group for the Native prisoners, and assisting with the PST training sessions. I presented

workshops on counselling skills for the peer counsellor trainees, assisted in organizing prison events that were sponsored by the PST (for instance, I arranged for a Toronto based theatre group to perform a play about violence against women at P4W), occasionally facilitated weekly meetings and had seen many of the team members for both regular counselling sessions and crisis intervention.

Several of my own personal characteristics must be acknowledged in how they may have contributed to the power imbalance between myself and the interview participants. I am a white,middle-class,well-educated woman who was considered a member of the Psychology staff at P4W, and during the interviews, was in the position of "researcher." All these factors contribute to an imbalance in power and authority and may have influenced the participant's comfort and trust level with revealing certain information.

It is possible that my role as a staff person with the Psychology Department both hindered and enhanced the reliability of the data obtained through interviews. I was very involved in the PST training sessions and may have been perceived has having a personal investment in the outcome of the evaluation. Participants may have been hesitant to reveal negative comments about the program for concern that they would insult or disappoint me. They might also have feared that less positive comments would jeopardize my support of them as a counsellor or potential ally. Conversely, despite my role as staff and counsellor, I was also considered an "outsider" by many prisoners. Being

"outside" sometimes enhanced my credibility because I was unpaid and thus not seen as working for the institution. I was told many times by prisoners that it was because of my separate status that they felt able to trust me with information during therapy sessions. In addition, my status as "student" placed me in a learning role and may have contributed towards reducing the distance between myself and the participants.

The interview sample in this study also limits the generalizability of the findings. Interviews were only conducted with those prisoners who had volunteered for, and received acceptance on, the Peer Support Team. They are therefore unlikely to be representative of the overall prison population and may be more in support of peer counselling than those prisoners who either did not get accepted or are uninterested in the PST.

Although there has been recent interest, both by scholars and the media, in women who kill violent partners (Browne, 1987; Gibbs, 1993), the majority of the female prison population has been largely ignored. The attention recently given to battered women who kill is interesting in that typically these women do not have a history of drug abuse, prostitution, or prior involvement with the law. They are first time offenders. What about women who are drug and/or alcohol addicted, have lived a good part of their lives on the street and/or have been in and out of prison for most of their adult lives? Where are their lives documented? Where are their voices heard? If, by undertaking feminist research we mean to strive towards researching and changing the

conditions of women's lives. (Stanley & Wise, 1983), then we must be dedicated to changing the condition of all women's lives, including those women who are literally locked behind bars. The first step towards this goal is listening to them. Through this study I had hoped to provide a "space for an absent subject, and an absent experience that is to be filled with the presence and spoken experience of actual women speaking of and in the actualities of their everyday worlds" (Smith, 1988: 107). It was my intention to allow the voices of imprisoned women to fill this space.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer Counselling Programs

Peer Counselling programs have been implemented within hospital, school and other settings. Generally, these programs are modeled very much like the PST at Prison for Women, in that a team of participants takes part in a training program to become peer counsellors. In a retirement community, for instance, twelve residents were trained in helping and facilitating skills in order to provide social support for their elderly peers (Hyde, 1988). Members of an in-patient psychiatric unit were taught empathetic counselling skills (Lomis and Baker, 1985). Children in Florida were taught to be peer helpers, special friends and tutors for classmates (Bowerman and Myrick, 1985) and, in a high school in New Jersey, students underwent a four week training course in identifying signs of depression and the development of peer counselling skills. In all these studies, researchers found that participants in the peer counsellor training sessions derived greater helping and communication skills, an increase in empathetic abilities and an increased level of self-confidence (Bowman and Myrick, 1985; Frederick, Matus and Rinn, 1986; Lomis and Baker, 1985; Hyde, 1988). These studies do not discuss the effectiveness of peer counselling from the perspective of the recipients of the service.

In addition, Self-Help Groups (SHG'S) have proven to be an effective means of

support in the community and in the prison environment (Romeder, 1990; Hamm, 1988). The qualities of SHG'S, these authors suggest, are the sharing of a common problem, little or no involvement with professional helpers, shared personal aims, and a procedure that focuses upon equality and cooperation. Hamm outlines four separate types of SHG'S that commonly exist within prisons. (His research is based upon male prisons in the United States). He describes the "destigmatizing groups," such as the seven-step that assists inmates in their attempts to return to mainstream society; the "Addicted and Disabled Groups" that help inmates with addictions, mental disorders and physical disabilities to break their isolation and obtain emotional support; the "Ethnic Groups" that provide solidarity among members of minority groups such as Native Americans, Hispanics and Blacks; and the "Human Potential Groups" that strive to build a "network of friends who would help each other" (Hamm, 1988). Like other SHG'S these prison support groups provide an opportunity for people in similar situations to share their stories and support with one another. They provide a useful supplement or alternative to professional psychological services.

Peer Support in Women's Prisons

Unfortunately, there is little literature available on the effectiveness of peer counselling with women in prison, a gap which is probably a result of the similar lack of research conducted on imprisoned women's mental health and emotional needs (Ross and Fabiano, 1984; Moss, 1986; Adelberg and Currie, 1987; Deschepper, 1989). Of the few studies that do exist, however, there is some suggestion that prisons for women provide fertile

ground for peer counselling programs.

The call for prisoner controlled support groups has been heard for at least the past fifteen years. Two very different studies from the 1970's suggest that giving female prisoners the opportunity to share their feelings, engage in group problem-solving, and learn to appreciate themselves has had favourable results (Pendergrass, 1974; Page, 1979). Pendergrass critiques two attempts at teaching self-determination to female prisoners at a Florida prison. She concludes that self-help programs that teach prisoners to analyze the social and political context of women's lives will "encourage bonding of women in jail and prison to one another, and...will enable each woman to organize her own protest wherever she is" (Pendergrass, 1974: 369). Page's study (1979) also promotes the importance of support groups for female prisoners, although he describes a therapy rather than an activist group. In an unstructured "feeling-oriented" group for drug-addicted prisoners, Page promoted a social learning model in which participants benefit from the knowledge of their peers. He found that allowing prisoners to express their feelings led to group sharing, problem-solving and new ways of relating.

Several other studies point to peer relationships as integral to helping female prisoners cope with their incarceration period. Some American prisons for women have found, as a by-product of formal therapeutic groups, that support networks evolved which continued to flourish after the completion of the group (Wilfrey, Rodon and Anderson, 1986; Jefferson and Smith, 1985). Genders and Player (1987) also found that women

developed strong relationships of mutual support through which they solved problems and shared personal experiences. The authors suggest that these supportive relationships helped to restore the loss of autonomy that prison life affords by enabling the women "to learn from the experiences of others" about dealing with bureaucratic regulations, relationships and daily troubles (172).

Two further studies suggest that relationships among female inmates help them cope with prison life. In an American study of adjustment patterns of female prisoners, the researchers found that "newcomers" were more apt to be part of "play families" than were women who had been imprisoned for some time (MacKenzie, Robinson and Campbell, 1989). The authors suggest that these relationships helped facilitate smoother adjustment to prison life by providing a sense of safety and intimacy with others. In North Carolina, prison psychologists trained long- term inmates in listening and facilitating skills. These inmates then co-facilitated a psychodidactic support group designed to help ease the pains of adjustment for new prisoners (Sultan, Long and Kiefer, 1986). They found that the prisoner-facilitator enhanced the credibility and the effectiveness of the group because of a shared experience with the newcomers. They also suggest the potential for improved relationships between long-term prisoners and prison staff as a result of "working together toward a common goal" (470).

Some peer support groups within prisons for women already exist. Although they are not identical to the PST at Prison for Women, they draw upon similar principles and

illustrate the efficacy of such groups. A personal account details the success of a peer-initiated substance abuse program in a prison for women in Germany (Inowlocki and Mai, 1980). German prisoners refused formal prison help when prison officials labelled them as hopeless and they received court mandates to undergo prison substance abuse treatment. In response, a peer-initiated substance abuse program evolved in which prisoners held group therapy meetings, took training courses and created art work. The authors note that prisoners who attended the peer substance-abuse group remained drug-free, whereas those who attended institutional therapy programs relapsed. They also stressed the need for incarcerated women to have contact with ex-addicts during treatment in order to provide positive role models with whom prisoners can identify.

Two programs at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York State are a powerful illustration of the potential in prisoner controlled programs. The first group is called AIDS Counselling and Education (ACE) and is "a program of peer education, counselling, support and health advocacy" (Clark and Boudin, 1990; Women of Ace, 1992). ACE provides support to prisoners who are HIV positive, recruits and trains new group members and invites speakers in from the community. The prisoners at Bedford Hills have also developed an orientation for new prisoners and a pre-release program for AIDS infected women returning to the community. Recently, they have established a satellite group called "ACE-Outside" co-ordinated and staffed by ex-prisoners (Personal communication with ACE, September 24, 1992). Similarly, a program at Riker's Island Correctional Facility, also in New York State, adopts principles of mutuality,

empowerment and activism in an education program for HIV prevention. "The Empowerment Program", like the Peer Support Team at Prison for Women, is a psycho-educational group that is based upon issues of concern to female prisoners. Although the group has a thematic structure, the authors write that "the groups often took on lives of their own, and that the discussions were more often directed by the women's lively participation than by the facilitator's instruction" (Richie, 1992: 2).

Lastly, another program at Bedford Hills, the Family Violence Program (FVP), provides groups for battered women, for adult survivors of child abuse and incest and for women with child-related crimes (Family Violence Program information package, Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, 1990). Although the groups and individual counselling are provided by professional helpers, the program topics and processes are determined by the inmates. As well, prisoners involved with the program have been asked to provide counselling and information to administrative and Security staff as well as to other prisoners (personal communication with FVP members, September 24, 1992).

Sexual Abuse and Imprisoned Women

Recently, it has been recognized that the vast majority of federally incarcerated women in Canada are survivors of childhood sexual abuse and are in need of services to help work through abuse and related issues (Axon, 1989; Adelberg and Currie, 1985; Fox and Sugar 1989; Deschepper, 1989; Heney, 1989). Recent studies conducted at Prison for Women attest to the overwhelming need for programs "which empower women to make

positive lifestyle changes within a context of education, support and recovery" (Deschepper, 1989:24). Yet, with the exception of the Bedford Hills program, very little research or literature on such programs exists. The present study is, in part, an attempt to further the literature on the needs of female survivors of sexual abuse who are in prison.

The past decade has produced a great deal of literature about feminist therapy, the therapeutic relationship, and survivors of childhood sexual abuse (Greenspan, 1983; Blume, 1990; Laidlaw and Malmo, 1990; Gilligan, 1991). This literature primarily pertains to women who have a certain amount of control over their lives as compared to women in prison. Clinicians and researchers have failed to document the unique conditions of doing feminist counselling with imprisoned women. Moss proclaims the "urgent need to overcome the lack of concern demonstrated by feminist professionals whose philosophy and goals are contrary to the results of this neglect" (Moss, 1986:184). In a study of female prisoners in Colorado Moss corroborates evidence of the high number of abused women who are incarcerated and adds that it is imperative that imprisoned womens' emotional needs be addressed if they are to return to and remain within the mainstream community. Blume also draws attention to this neglect on the part of feminist practitioners saying that missing from the research "are survivors who are in brothels, in prisons, in mental hospitals, the retarded and the disabled, women who are living in the streets -- and those who have died. In that sense, it is the most seriously damaged whose voices can not be heard" (Blume, 1990: 32)[emphasis mine].

Summary

The efficacy of peer counselling programs and self-help groups are fairly well documented in the community, and, to a certain extent, within prisons for women. The available literature suggests that prisons for women are a suitable environment for peer support programs given the amount of informal support relationships that exist. Moreover, there are clearly some innovative and alternative programs being run in prisons for women such as those at Bedford Hills and Riker's Island. With the exception of ACE, few of these programs are similar in process and philosophy to the Peer Support Team in that they are not specifically designed to train prisoners in counselling and crisis intervention skills. Furthermore, few of the studies on groups in prisons, peer support or otherwise, seem to be prisoner evaluated: it is generally researchers who provide the accounts and evaluations of the group experience. The present study offers a contribution to this literature as it details, with the assistance of the prisoners involved in the program, the extent to which the PST is successful and to document the experiences of the prisoners involved. In addition, this study will evaluate a relatively new model of treating women in prison. The PST at Prison for Women, founded upon principles of feminist therapy and an understanding of the needs of survivors of sexual abuse, provides an innovative paradigm that can contribute not only to criminological literature but to feminist counselling literature as well.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY

THE RESEARCH METHOD

The focus of this study was essentially twofold. Using a qualitative measure, a survey, I attempted to find out what percentage of the population was using the peer counselling service and how helpful the program was to them. I also conducted interviews with twelve graduates from the PST. I intended to meet with the peer counsellors twice, once to ask specific interview questions and once to show them the interview transcript and to give them a chance to change, correct, or add to their original comments. The interview guide was structured to assess three main variables: motivation for joining the PST; the group training experience; and the peer counselling experience.

The Survey of the General P4W Population

A survey was employed to elicit feedback from the entire prisoner population regarding their experiences as recipients of peer counselling and to ask for their evaluation of the program. This quantitative method preserves anonymity and allows for a wider sample range than would a more qualitative method. The questions and format of the questionnaire were adapted from a similar one developed by the PST facilitators a few years ago (See **Appendix A**). The Psychology Department periodically collects data similar to that in which I was interested, so the survey distribution and results are a joint project between myself and the Psychology Department. The questionnaire was

comprised of both multiple choice and open-ended questions. There were nine questions divided into three main categories:

Category A:

The first section of the questionnaire requested personal data about the prisoner's sentence length, time already served in P4W, security level and racial, ethnic or linguistic background. I was interested in knowing if sentence length or cultural background was related to prisoner's use of peer counsellors.

Category B:

Questions one to six were in Category B. This section had two parts based on the respondent's answer of yes or no to the first question, "have you ever asked to see a Peer Support Team member?" Respondents who said that they had seen a peer counsellor were then asked to indicate how often they had received peer support, for what reasons, and to rate on a scale of zero to five the degree to which peer counselling had been helpful. These respondents were also asked to indicate why the peer counselling did or did not help the situation. Respondents who said they had not seen a peer counsellor were asked to circle the applicable reasons they had not. It was anticipated that data from this section would be a useful assessment of the value of the service from the recipient's perspective and might provide insights for improving the program's accessibility or effectiveness.

Category C:

The only question in this section asked prisoners to indicate the person (s) from whom they typically receive emotional support. Given that several studies have illustrated the primacy of peer relationships in prisons for women, I hypothesized that a frequent response to question seven would be "friends".

Category D:

The last two questions on the survey (eight and nine) request respondents to suggest improvements for the program and provides a space for any additional comments they wish to make about the PST. It was presumed that recipients of peer support would offer a perspective on the effectiveness that would supplement that of the peer counsellors (whose recommendations would likely relate primarily to the training session).

Data Collection

Because the first time I attempted to gather data was unsuccessful I had to distribute the survey two times. Initially, I took 100 copies of the survey to a PST meeting and explained to the peer counsellors that the data from the completed surveys would be used for both my thesis and the Psychology Department in order to assess the usefulness of the program. Representatives from the Wing and Range areas agreed to distribute surveys to each prisoner in their living unit. By providing sealed boxes with a slot for the completed surveys, I ensured the respondent's anonymity.

The return rate from this distribution was abysmal (13%). After talking with prisoners and Psychology staff I speculated three central reasons for the failure of this method. Firstly, the timing of the survey distribution was extremely poor: it was the second week in December, a period that is generally busy at the prison with holiday functions and visits, as well as a time when anxiety and personal difficulties are high. Many prisoners were preoccupied with their own concerns and probably were not up to filling out questionnaires. Secondly, a family visiting day had taken place just two days prior to the survey going out to the living units. People were still recovering from that event. And lastly, the peer counsellors who volunteered to bring the surveys to the Wing and Range areas were experiencing their own personal difficulties. The woman on the Range, for instance, was getting released the following day and thus was running all over the institution talking to lawyers, completing release documents and saying farewell to her friends. She had little time to be urging other prisoners to complete the questionnaire. In prison, environmental influences figure prominently into people's lives. A plan, an appointment, a conversation can be swept away without notice because of some unforeseen circumstance. Paradoxically, despite the regimentation of prison life, conditions are often unpredictable.

I distributed the second survey the following month. This time I altered my method. Two peer counsellors from the Wing area agreed to be responsible for ensuring that each prisoner in their living area received a questionnaire and for personally collecting the completed surveys. I dropped off the questionnaire during a lock up time

when all women had to be on their unit. I returned 25 minutes later to collect the completed questionnaires from the two peer counsellors who were helping me. The Ranges were done a little differently from the Wing area because there were no longer any peer counsellors living on these units. With the assistance of the two PST co-ordinators from the Psychology Department, each prisoner was personally handed the questionnaire. As well, we stopped by each cell and picked them up when they were finished completing them. This was also during count time so all women were in their cells. Several women chose not to complete the survey, saying they wanted nothing to do with contributing to the running of the prison. The ability to exercise choice and to refuse to engage in what might be considered complicit behaviour, was significant given there are few opportunities for active resistance and decision making during imprisonment. Nevertheless, the return rate this time was significantly higher. At the time of the survey distribution there were 92 women at Prison for Women. The two women in segregation, however, are not included in this sample. The return rate was 59% (N=90).

Interview Guide

An interview guide, with pre-set questions, was used to help direct the discussion (See **Appendix B**). Questions for the interview guide evolved out of my observations and experience as a facilitator of the PST hearing women's comments about the program within the training sessions themselves, in individual counselling sessions with non-peer counsellors, and from discussions with members of the Psychology Department.

Questions also naturally evolved from looking at the program objectives outlined in Jan Heney's report on self-injurious behaviour in P4W and those in the PST Training Manual. Two other experiences further influenced my thinking about what questions to ask during interviews. I had visited Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York state and had been impressed by two prisoner-run programs and by their approach to learning and healing. After drafting an outline of questions, I sat down with a colleaque\friend and together we further brainstormed the types of questions I was interested in finding answers to. The interview guide was therefore a result of ideas, experiences and conversations (my "conceptual baggage", Kirby & McKenna, 1989) that I had amassed during the course of my field practice. In actual fact, however, the interviews often diverged from the structure of the guide although the questions typically were answered naturally through the course of the conversation.

At the start of each interview I collected personal data from the participant about her sentence length, living unit while at P4W, security level, amount of sentence served, cultural background and age. I also asked her to provide a pseudonym, a "code name", that I could use in my report to avoid revealing her identity.

The questions in the interview guide fell into five categories:

Category A:

Question One asked the woman to explain her reasons for wanting to be a peer

counsellor. This question would find out if there are commonalities among prisoners who choose to participate in the program.

Category B:

Category B included Questions two through four and were designed to assess if the group training met the objectives outlined in the PST training manual. The women were asked if the training improved their counselling skills, changed their attitudes about themselves or others, and if it helped with any of their own personal problems. Prompts were used to elicit specific information regarding how and why the participants did or did not learn new skills or change any of their perceptions. I anticipated that responses to these questions would also provide information about feelings of safety and trust in the group. Information from these sets of questions would be instrumental in evaluating if the training facilitators were meeting their goals and, if not, how to help them better do so.

Category C:

Questions five to nine fell into this category regarding the experience of peer counselling. The women were asked how often and, in what circumstances, they peer supported someone. Questions seven and eight ask the peer counsellor for an example of a counselling session that she felt was successful and one that was less successful. Question nine asks if there are any characteristics of a peer counsellor that might influence whether a prisoner is likely to request to see her, such as race, living unit, or sentence length.

Because of the prevalence of lesbian relationships at the prison, these questions did not specifically ask how a peer counsellor's sexual identity might influence a prisoner's comfort level during peer counselling. Although some women spoke to the issue on their own, information about sexual identity was not explicitly requested and thus relevant information may have been missed.

Category C questions were designed to get an idea of the types of women who use the peer counselling service and under what circumstances. If only a small number of women are using the service, responses to these questions may suggest ways to make the service more accessible to a wider range of women.

Category D:

Questions ten and eleven ask what it is like to peer support a close friend and/or someone whose past experiences are similar to the peer counsellor's own. It was anticipated that responses to Category D would shed light on some of the limitations and difficulties of peer counselling and the ways in which the peer counsellors cope with these situations.

Category E

Questions twelve to fourteen ask for the peer counsellor's assessment of the PST and how other institutional programming could be improved to better meet the emotional and mental health needs of the women at P4W.

The Participants

I completed interviews with twelve graduates from the PST. During my field placement, I had the opportunity to participate in two different training sessions. Nine of the women I interviewed were from these two training sessions and three participants had graduated from training sessions in previous years. All but one participant had at least some informal contact with me before the interview either because I was their individual therapist, had been involved in helping them through crisis situations, or because I had been one of the facilitators of the PST training sessions. I selected these twelve participants because I wanted to interview all peer counsellors living in the Kingston area. I interviewed eight women who were currently incarcerated at P4W, one who was incarcerated at the Minimum House (a minimum security residential prison for women), two women living at a Kingston halfway house, and a former PST member on parole in Kingston, whose name was given to me by a Psychologist at P4W. The Psychology Department was aware of no other former PST members remaining in the vicinity.

Three participants were Black, two of which were of Caribbean descent and one Afro-American. Two women were Native and one was East Indian. Six participants where Caucasian, one of whom identified Italian descent and another was Jewish. Sentence lengths ranged from two years to a life sentence. The ages of the participants ranged from 21 to 49 years. The mean age was 36 years. (See **Appendix C** for participant's personal data).

The Interview

At the time of the initial interviews, three women were paroled in Kingston, eight were imprisoned at P4W and one was at Minimum House. All but one of the incarcerated participants were living in the area of the prison called "The Wing" when I interviewed them. Upon incarceration, prisoners are generally placed on the "Ranges" and are permitted to apply to move to the Wing after several months. On the Ranges, the women live in cells and their freedom of movement is fairly restricted. The Ranges tend to tolerate more noise and rowdy behaviour and are divided into A Range and B Range with the latter being reserved for those who are considered a higher security risk. Prisoners living in the Wing are generally minimum or medium security and live in small dorm-like rooms that they are able to lock and unlock on their own. No graduate from the PST that I interviewed was living on B Range, although a few were on A Range during the training sessions and later moved down to the Wing.

Every interview was taped and only one participant chose to turn the tape machine off temporarily for a private conversation. With the exception of one interview that did not record on Side B of the tape, audio-taping was a successful interview method. I did not repeat the botched interview as it was a spontaneous conversation regarding groups in prisons and sexual abuse survivors, the content and feeling of which could in no way be replicated.

The length of the interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours. Although

participants said they did not mind having the interview audio-taped, many were obviously conscious of the presence of the tape recorder. Several participants illustrated this awareness by such comments as "And this is on tape so..." and "I'll give you this information so that you have it on tape." It was when the tape recorder was turned off, however, that the most fruitful and relaxed conversations took place. During five interviews I spent time counselling on current and past issues in the women's lives before the tape machine was turned on and the interview started. On one occasion, I spent over an hour with a woman while she showed me her art work and video creations. With another woman I spent an hour talking about the closure of P4W. When it is appropriate and the individual cannot be identified, I have included elements of these off-tape conversations in my analysis.

I was able to meet with eight of the twelve participants for the second interview. Of the four who were unavailable to meet, two women were paroled out of province and the other two were under time constraints of their own. Both these women, one in P4W and one living in the community, were given copies of the transcript and asked to mail me their comments and revisions. By the time I met with the eight available women the second time, one woman had moved from the main prison to the Minimum House, one was living in a Kingston Halfway House, another was living in her own apartment in Kingston and one woman had violated parole and was incarcerated at Prison for Women again. I met with the other four participants at the prison.

Only one of the participants requested information from her interview be left out of my final report and, in fact, no one else made any amendments to the transcript at all. While the women where reading over the transcripts, I left the room to allow them the freedom to cross out, add or comment in privacy. All but two of the eight participants with whom I met the second time expressed feelings of surprise that they had been so eloquent and insightful. Comments such as "It's like reading someone else's words!", "I can't believe it's me! I usually ramble on, but this sounds coherent!", "Is this really me? It sounds great!", "I guess I am smart", and "I sound so impressive!" were common. It was clear that the women were able to appreciate and value their capacity to share wisdom and to express themselves powerfully. Allowing the participants to read over transcripts is in principle a good idea because it allows them a more active part in the research process. Furthermore, it was an empowering process for the participants in this study. One participant was feeling so proud that she immediately shared the transcript with her psychologist. One of the women who was not terribly impressed with her responses felt anxious that certain comments would reveal her identity. Our meeting centred upon amending the transcript to better preserve her anonymity. The second woman remarked that she was usually more articulate and expressive but recalled that she had forgotten about our interview and was not well prepared.

The second meetings lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. Following a brief conversation about the study, which generally included questions about who would read it, when I would be finished, and the types of themes I saw emerging, we had

longer conversations about their lives, feelings and recent experiences. On several occasions I also gave information about academic programs they were interested in and offered to arrange for application packages to be sent to them.

DATA ANALYSIS

The Survey

The inmate questionnaires were analyzed to reflect the four categories into which the questions were divided. Information regarding the quality of the PST fell into two main sections: data obtained from respondents who had received peer counselling, and data from those who had not received peer counselling.

The information provided by respondents who had received peer counselling was arranged to reveal the reasons for seeking peer counselling and if, to what degree, and why, the support was helpful.

The responses from prisoners who replied they had not chosen to receive peer were analyzed for the reasons why they had not sought peer counselling.

The responses to the question regarding primary sources of emotional support was not correlated with use of peer counselling and is presented on its own to identify the main sources of support for these prisoners.

The Interviews

I analyzed the interviews for common themes regarding peer counsellor's experiences on the PST. Because of the inductive nature of this study I allowed themes to emerge naturally from the women's words. The interviews were not analyzed through pre-conceived conjectures; rather, theory emerged "during the research process" (Zimmer, 1986).

Five main themes resulted from this process. The first related to the environmental influences and behaviours that exist in the prison and was coded under the heading "Life in P4W" which contained descriptions of self-injurious behaviour, loss of control and prisoner subculture. The second theme from the interviews is categorized as "The Peer Counsellors" and includes the environmental and personal influences that motivated participants to join the PST. The third category applies to the peer counsellor's experiences as trainees in the PST which is coded as "Group Training Experience." Information in this section pertains to issues of group identification, trust, learning and empowerment. The next theme was headed "The Peer Counselling Experience" which includes counselling situations and the effects of counselling on the counsellor. The last category is entitled "Recommendations" which includes the peer counsellor's suggestions for strengthening the PST training program.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Feminist researchers in the social sciences have illustrated the significance of attempts

to share power between the researcher and the researched (Klein, 1983; Stanley and Wise, 1983; Maguire, 1987; Kelly, 1988). However, few of these writers mention conducting feminist research in a prison setting. An exception is Loraine Gelsthorpe who describes her attempts to "share power" and remain flexible while interviewing prisoners (Gelsthorpe, 1990). Her study was conducted with male prisoners and the dynamics of her being female further complicated the issue. I have found no writings on feminist methodology, however, related to research in prisons for women.

The distinction between research "on" women and research "for" women has been clearly delineated (Klein, 1983). When studying women in prison this distinction is all the more imperative. Incarcerated women (incarcerated people in general) relinquish any identity they may have had as "subjects" the moment they are convicted. They become objects, controlled, managed, and "rehabilitated", by the correctional system. Thus, principles of feminist research, with an analysis of structural oppression and focus on reciprocity and social action, is at odds with the correctional mandate. Women prisoners have few occasions when they are made to feel important and valuable. They are in prison because they are deemed to have "failed" in living life on the outside. This sense of failure permeates practically every moment of their incarceration period. By transforming research "on" prisoners to research "for" prisoners, feminist methodology offers them an alternative to their daily existence in prison.

Although the interview method is standard practice in social science research, I

attempted to challenge traditional interview practice in a number of ways. Firstly, during the interview itself I strove to give the participant as much control over the process as possible. I encouraged each participant to set the time of the interview according to her schedule. This is an unusual procedure in the prison setting as time is extremely regimented. (To my surprise, many women felt uncomfortable with this, and often asked what time was most convenient for me). During our meeting I encouraged the participant to decide when the tape recorder would be turned on and the official interview would begin. Many women began our meeting with a need to discuss issues unrelated to the interview so this procedure proved useful. Lastly, although I had prepared an interview guide, most of the interviews took on a structure of their own. I very much wanted these meetings to be enjoyable and, if possible, empowering for the women and I felt that encouraging them to express themselves in they were most comfortable was a part of this process.

A further way I endeavored to include the participants in the research process was to share with them the transcript of their interview. I had hoped to achieve two central objectives through th s process. I wanted to the participants with the opportunity to make any changes or additions to the transcript, particularly to ways they might be personally identified by their responses. Most importantly, however, I hoped to share in the process of reading their words. Since the researcher's role is to analyze, categorize and reveal other people's words, their voice can become an abstraction subject to the researcher's own interpretation. In allowing the participants to read over their transcripts I had hoped

to share with them the experience of viewing their written voices from a distance. As one participant remarked, "It gives you a different perspective. It makes you see how other people perceive what you say."

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A written agreement from the Correctional Services of Canada (CSC) was obtained ensuring that their support of the research endeavor would not dictate their right to the accumulated raw data. The Deputy Warden of P4W also gave verbal consent to allow me to interview the prisoners.

The participants were assured that their decision whether or not to participate in the study would in no way affect their status on the PST or as a peer counsellor. They were also promised that their responses would in no way be attributable to them, nor would they affect the treatment they receive from the prison administration or the Psychology Department. I also asked each participant to select a code name for themselves, and suggested that it be unique to this situation. Information regarding which peer counsellors decided to participate was also kept confidential. Participants were told that if at any point in the study they felt uncomfortable and wished to withdraw they could do so without repercussions. Explicitly outlining these points in a consent form provided reassurance and protection that the privacy and anonymity of the respondents would be guaranteed (See **Appendix D**).

The participants were informed that they would have access to the completed

study and copies of notes from their individual interview if they so indicated.

I asked each participant if she felt comfortable with tape recording the interviews. All participants said they did not mind the tape recorder and they were in complete control over the tape recorder during the interview. Furthermore, the participants were assured that no one but myself would hear the tapes. They were also given the option of having the interview tape after I had transcribed the meeting. These points were outlined in the consent form and reinforced by CSC's written assurance that they will not see the data.

The interview focused upon the PST, not the intimate details of the women's lives, and thus the chances were fairly minimal that participants would become distressed during the course of the interview. However, at the time of the interviews I was a field placement student and a trained counsellor with the Psychology Department. On only one occasion did a woman become distressed because of the content of the interview and I was able to provide therapeutic support and arrange for follow up counselling.

RESEARCH IN PRISON FOR WOMEN

Because of the suicides, P4W has received much publicity over the past few years. Recently it has been of public interest because of its impending closure. As well, prisoners are a much studied population, particularly by journalists, CSC bureaucrats and graduate students. At the time I was conducting my research, a sociologist on contract

with CSC was interviewing the women about therapeutic services, including the Peer Support Team. A film maker was interviewing, filming and working with various women. At times, in fact, I found it necessary to co-ordinate appointments with these other two women in order to avoid double booking a prisoner or asking them to do two interviews in one day. Obviously this is a highly researched population, and in fact two women I interviewed made reference to the fact that "I have been a part of many Master's theses" and "I've probably helped 25 to 30 people with post-graduate work". Another participant stated that she typically no longer gives interviews. After five years of people coming in and asking "what can we do for you?" and never seeing any of her requests come to fruition, she decided participating in these interviews is futile. She did, though, state that because she already trusted me she felt comfortable helping me with my study. Another participant revealed that "lots of people ask for my opinion" but she looks for their motive for wanting the interview rather than the specific information sought. She found my motive benign and granted me the interview.

A further environmental factor relates to the unpredictability of prison life. Whether working, living or researching in prison one must learn to be extremely flexible. Andrea Loewenstein, a woman teaching writing in a woman's prison near Boston, commented on the need for flexibility. She found that she "must modify the assignment so that it centers on the current concern, and I must be able to accept the fact that on certain days the group needs to talk and not to write" (Loewenstein in Bunch and Pollack, 1983: 34). I too, found that some days, the women needed to talk and not be

interviewed. My research was also greatly affected by the institutional climate. For example, I tried to meet with one woman on three separate occasions but because of her involvement with other people's projects as well as unexpected occurrences, we never did complete an interview. At one point we had just sat down, poured the coffee and she got called away over the prison intercom system! Such is the unpredictability of conducting research in an institutional setting.

Chapter Four

SURVEY OF THE GENERAL P4W POPULATION: FINDINGS

When the survey was conducted there were ninety-two women imprisoned at P4W. Two of the ninety were in segregation and are not included in the sample. The sample size was therefore ninety prisoners. Fifty-three prisoners responded to the survey resulting in a fifty-nine percent (59%) return rate.

RESULTS

Category A:

There was no correlation between race and use of peer counsellors. In terms of sentencing length, respondents who were newer to the prison, were most likely to not have heard of the PST and thus to not have used the service. There was no other correlation between sentence and use of peer counsellors.

Category B:

Of the 53 respondents 35 (66%) replied they had not received help from a peer counsellor. Respondents often indicated more than one reason for not seeing a peer counsellor. No one replied that they had asked to see a peer counsellor and were denied, by security, the opportunity to do so. Three of the respondents who had not seen a peer counsellor were themselves members of the PST (See **Table 1**).

Thirty-two percent (18) of the survey respondents had seen a peer cou..sellor on at least one occasion. Twenty-two percent (4) had seen a peer counsellor only once, 44 percent (8) had received peer support a couple of times and 22 percent replied that they had made use of the service many times (4). Two respondents did not reply to the question regarding the frequency of use.

NOT SEEN A PEER COUNSELLOR

Had Not Needed Peer Counselling

Thirty-six percent said that they had not used the PST because they had not needed the support. All of these respondents stated they would seek the services of a PST member if the need arose and many encouraged the team to "keep up the good work." One respondent was unsure how to get access to a peer counsellor because she lived on the Ranges and all the peer counsellors at this time were living in the Wing area. Another respondent who had not needed the help of a peer counsellor commented that she herself was waiting to join the team.

No Information

Twenty-five percent of the respondents had been unaware of the team's existence. All of these respondents requested the PST be better advertised and that they receive information about it in case they are in need of speaking with a peer counsellor.

Concerned about Confidentiality

Thirty-six percent of respondents who had not used the PST also said that they had concerns that their problems would not be kept in confidence. Fourteen percent stated that they did not feel comfortable with any of the peer counsellors presently at P4W. Two of these respondents said that they did not trust non-professional helpers and several commented on difficulties with trusting within the prison setting. "There is, from my experience in doing time, no real confidentiality in the prison system." One respondent had heard of a breach in confidentiality by a peer counsellor which then tainted her own trust in the program.

HAD SEEN A PEER COUNSELLOR

Crises

Thirty-two percent (18) of the survey respondents had seen a peer counsellor on at least one occasion. Respondents indicated many reasons they sought peer support and often circled more than one response on the survey (See **Table 2**). The most frequent reason was depression (33%) with flashbacks and urges to self-harm the next frequent (both 22%). Other reasons given for seeing a peer counsellor were anxiety about a custody battle, fear about an appeal and feeling alone.

Degree of Helpfulness

The average rating for helpfulness of the peer counsellor was 4 on a scale of 1 to 5. Scores ranged from 2 to 5, with a rating of 5 appearing most frequently. The most

common response to why the intervention helped was feeling less alone (39%) and feeling less depressed (28%). Twenty-two percent said they felt more optimistic after speaking with a peer counsellor and 17% felt less angry (See **Table 3** for additional data). Additional comments pertained to feeling validated by the peer counsellor. ("She let me know it's not entirely my fault"; "This place seems to spur people to use abuse towards each other. And it was nice to know that there are peers who don't feel that way"; "I felt safe".) A few respondents, who rated the helpfulness of the intervention a 3 or below, revealed that they had not felt understood or had not felt comfortable with, the peer counsellor. One person had experienced a breach in confidentiality after talking to the peer counsellor and another felt she could have further benefited from peer support had security staff allowed them more time together.

Category C:

Most respondents revealed two or more primary sources of support. Fifty-one percent revealed that their friends provide them with emotional support and 51% also said that a psychologist is one of their primary means of support (See **Table 4**). Few respondents (9.4%) indicated that a peer support counsellor was a regular form of support for them which suggests that friendships and professional counsellors are utilized the most frequently. However, as peer counsellors are generally used during crisis situations rather than as an on going support, the low rating in this category makes sense. Other sources of support were a counsellor (7.5%), a nurse (9.4%) and a spiritual leader (11.3%). Seven respondents (13.2%) did not complete the question regarding sources of support.

Category D:

Overall comments from respondents were positive. Many said "keep up the good work" and "continued success." One respondent revealed that a peer counsellor "has seen me though some very dark days. She's been my life line and gives me hope and courage to carry on."

Recommendations for improvement related to improving the accessibility of information about the program and the availability of counsellors. Several respondents said that the team should provide services in French for the French Canadian women. Another respondent commented on the difficulty in knowing who the peer counsellors were since the majority of them lived in the Wing, and she recommended that members be made "more available to Ranges instead of Wings or get more members in varied areas." One other person suggested that Psychology "involve inmates families and friends into PST" and two respondents ask that there be "more peer counsellors available." One respondent who did not feel comfortable with any of the present peer counsellors recommended getting new members.

Recommendations also related to Security staff's role as mediator during a crisis situation. Some respondents felt that the control staff exerted over the peer counselling process impeded the program's effectiveness. The PST Policy and Procedures states that it may, at times, be necessary for prisoners to be counselled during "count time" and after "lock up" hours. However, some women said they had not been permitted to do

so. Survey respondents commented that psychology should "educate the staff of its [the PST] importance. I get the feeling many think it is a joke," and recommended that they "disallow security any type of input. This is only psychological and has nothing to do with security." Another prisoner commented that the PST "would be a great program in this place if it could ever be run the way it's supposed to (e.g. any time, not when convenient of count or bed times, etc.)."

Conclusions

Thirty-two percent of the respondents said they had seen a peer counsellor for support at least once. Overall, 81% (N=53) of the respondents indicated that they thought the PST was a valuable program, regardless of whether they had seen a peer counsellor or not. The remaining 19% were skeptical about the quality of counselling and the preservation of confidentiality they would receive from a peer counsellor. Two respondents said they knew personally of breaches in confidentiality. Well over the majority of prisoners who had received peer counselling felt it helped to assuage feelings of isolation, depression and self-harm. If peer counselling could have been more helpful, respondents pointed to security's untimely intervention and lack of understanding on the part of the peer counsellor as contributing factors. The most common recommendations were that information about the program be made more available, that French speaking peer counsellors be included in the team, and that more Range inmates be trained in the program.

Far more prisoners living in the Wing areas replied that they had seen a peer counsellor (60%, N=22) than did those living on the Ranges (16%, N=31). Wing residents were also more likely to say they would see a peer counsellor if they needed to than were Range residents. Two speculations can be made regarding this finding. The most likely explanation, is the fact that all the peer counsellors at the time of the survey were living in the Wing areas and thus women in this living area would have easier access to a peer counsellor. Although the last team of prisoners to be trained in the program initially had several Range participants they either moved to the Wing or were released during the training sessions. Another contributing factor may pertain to length of time respondents had been incarcerated at P4W. Upon incarceration, prisoners are placed in the Ranges for a few months before they can apply to live in the Wing. Therefore many of the respondents may have been new to the prison and thus unfamiliar with the PST program and the team members. As well, the Ranges house prisoners who are considered a higher security risk and/or have participated in behaviour not condoned by the prison staff. It is common for these women to have little faith in services the prison offers.

Table 1

Reasons for *Not* Seeing a Peer Counsellor

	N=35	%
Did not need the support	13	36
Did not feel comfortable	5	14
Did not know about the PST	9	5
Not allowed	0	0
Confidentiality	13	36
Peer Counsellor	3	5.6

Table 2

Reasons *for* seeing a peer counsellor

	N=18	%
Argument with staff	2	11
Doing seg time	2	11
Argument with friend	2	11
Flashbacks of abuse	4	22
Feelings of self-harm	4	22
Depressed	6	33
Physical conflict	2	11
Suicidal Feelings	2	11
Other	4	22

Table 3

How peer counselling helped

	N=18	%
Less suicidal	2	11
Less angry	3	17
Less depressed	5	28
Less self-injurious	2	11
Better about self	5	28
More optimistic	4	22
Less alone	7	39

Table 4

Sources of Emotional Support

	N=53	%
Friends	27	51
Psychologist	27	51
Counsellor	4	7.5
Nurse	5	9
PST member	5	9
Spiritual Leader	6	11
Other	2	3.8

Chapter Five

FINDINGS: THE INTERVIEWS

I. LIFE IN P4W

> *"She taught me so much and she was so young. I really cared about Johnie...and it's sad that she couldn't resolve her inner conflict and that she took her own life."*

In May of 1990 Jan Heney and Julie Darke, both psychologists on contract with P4W, began training the first group of prisoners for the Peer Support Team. Several women who participated in this study were at P4W at the time of the program's inception and offered a sense of the prison climate during this period. They recalled that it was "a very painful time at P4W" and many women were engaging in behaviour that was destructive to both themselves and others.

> I've lived so much with violence and I've lived through four suicides here and 399 slashings - that's what it seemed to be the last couple of years - and all those attempted hangings. I thought, wow, I thought this was the bottom pit of hell.
>
> And at that point we had several suicides, a great deal of slashing and there had been some violent outbursts. And there had been a lot of women in a lot of pain.
>
> ...all the Native Women suddenly slashing and hanging, that was a really big thing for me to see.

At the time Heney was conducting her study, there were two female psychologists on staff, both of whom had waiting lists of at least eight months. Heney recommended that more Psychology staff be hired, and specified that since the majority of prisoners were survivors of sexual abuse that the new counsellors should be females. Currently, there are two full-time and three part-time psychologists at P4W. As well, three counsellors experienced in issues of sexual abuse and sexual assault work one day a week each. All mental health staff, with the exception of one, are female and view their work as coming from a feminist therapy model. Since additional mental health staff have been hired and the Peer Support Team was established, prisoners have had available considerably more support than previously and no more suicides have occurred. Many of the women I interviewed, particularly those who had bee incarcerated at P4W during the time of the suicides, revealed a great deal of respec nd appreciation for the Psychology Department.

> Psychology, that's the most important thing that is happening in that institution right now. I can say that because I'm a second offender and I've seen a lot of difference...When I was first here...there was a lot of slashing going on at the time. Jan Heney was coming in...
>
> I find that the increase in the Psychology Department, support staff, community people, have helped a great deal...it's sad that six women had to give up their life to get it. I always say six bodies went under the rug. We swept them under there. And there is no more room now. They ran out of room so they had to sit up and help us...'cause I could have been number seven, I've been there. It's been close.

Although the availability of mental health support has improved markedly, the women I interviewed described many problems still confronting prisoners at P4W. These

problems pertained to both the prisoners themselves and the nature of the carceral environment. Women spoke of common problems that influence the emotional and mental health of prisoners. The most pervasive of problems pertained to the fact that most prisoners have survived childhood abuse and/or partner abuse, the prevalence of self-injury among inmates, and the atmosphere of fear and distrust that is endemic to P4W.

Sexual Abuse and Violence

> *"The most - in prison - the most evident theme is people dealing with child abuse or sexual assault. Somebody getting to the point when things are starting to come back. Being afraid. Just being afraid..."*
>
> Former PST member

The Canadian Status of Women (1989) report that as many as ninety percent of female federal offenders "may be victims of physical or sexual abuse." The Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (1990) found that eighty-two percent of the population at Prison For Women have been either physically or sexually abused prior to incarceration. Fifty-four percent of prisoners that Jan Heney interviewed disclosed childhood sexual abuse (Heney, 1989). Although these figures indicate a high prevalence, Heney suggests that in regard to sexual abuse in particular, they be considered conservative for two reasons: women are often hesitant to disclose sexual abuse to an unknown interviewer; and women who have no conscious memory, due to repression or dissociation, will not be accounted for in these figures. Kelly (1988) also recommends that "if prevalence [of

sexual violence] is being studied, reference to the commonness of forgetting and minimizing should be made and the impact this will have on reporting must be acknowledged" (158). My experience counselling at P4W confirms this conviction. I suspect the number of female prisoners sexually abused as children is closer to 80-85% and that well over the majority of prisoners have been assaulted by male partners.

The experience of peer counsellors at P4W corroborate these findings. Robin [2] told me that "most of these women I see have been abused one way or another." Michelle found "that 95% of the women here have suffered some sort of abuse" and Patches noted that her experiences as a peer counsellor "just sort of substantiates other research that so many...have some history of abuse."

Over the past decade, researchers and clinicians have outlined the affects of violence on the "battered woman" (Walker, 1979; Browne 1987; Kersti and Bograd, 1988), the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse (Herman, 1981; Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Blume, 1990), and the psychological trauma resulting from sexual and physical violence in general (Kelly, 1988; Herman, 1992). Among the most common of repercussions are an impaired sense of safety and personal boundaries, feelings of overwhelming powerlessness and immobility, difficulties with trust, and self-hatred. It should be noted that although behaviour associated with these emotional and psychological affects can be destructive (self-injury, eating disorders, dissociative

[2] Names of peer counsellors are pseudonyms.

disorders and risk-taking), during the traumatic experience they functioned as important resistance strategies.

Prison intensifies the psychological effects of being subjected, either as a child or an adult women, to sexual and/or physical assault. The controlled and punitive setting replicates the dynamics of any abusive relationship in which the victim is without power or dignity. Michelle, a peer counsellor, commented that memories of sexual abuse are frequently recalled in the prison environment because "there are a lot of different triggers that make these things start happening." Seabreeze further illustrated the effect incarceration may have on abused women. Lesbian partnerships are common and fairly accepted at P4W. Many prisoners, whether or not they were lesbian identified on the street, find comfort and support in relationships with other incarcerated women. Often these partnerships are their first experiences of "unconditional love" and play a significant role in helping ease the isolation of imprisonment. Sometimes, though, a woman's past experiences of male violence can undermine these relationships , as Seabreeze points out:

> If they've been abused all their life, they've got no control and [in prison] they're still being controlled. A lot of people run to relationships because they are lonely, because they want to be controlled by that relationship...they need someone to be nagging on them, they need someone to hit them...if you love me you'll hit me. And it's sad to see. Good people going down...

Much of the behaviour commonly seen in prisons for women are actually attempts to avoid "going down." They are self-protective strategies that function as a way to alleviate

feelings of despair, guilt and self-hatred that so often accompany experiences of abuse. Self-injury is a common method of temporarily alleviating these feelings.

Self-Injury

Heney found that 60% of prisoners interviewed at P4W had engaged in self-injury at some time in their lives (Heney, 1989). Prior to Heney's report, Security staff at the prison commonly responded to a prisoner's self-injurious behaviour by placing her in segregation. In segregation, or "seg", the woman would be stripped of any sharp objects and closely monitored by camera. Prison policy considered self-harm, or "slashing," a security concern, rather than a mental health concern. On February 23, 1989 a letter written to the Kingston Whig Standard by Beverley Auger, a prisoner at P4W, read:

> When a woman slashes herself within an inch of her life, she's put in shackles and handcuffs and dragged off to segregation (for security reasons)? This woman was barely conscious. Who was she a threat to? I was in segregation when they practically carried her in.

Self-injury is often misunderstood as being an attention-seeking device, a manipulative tool, or an attempt at suicide (Heney, 1989; Herman, 1992). In reality, clinicians have found that self-injury is actually a coping strategy to deal with feelings of powerlessness related to childhood sexual abuse (Blume, 1990; Herman, 1992) and is a familiar practice in institutional settings such as prisons and psychiatric facilities and, although less frequently, in non - institutional settings (Ross et al.,1978). Further, Heney's report outlined the ways in which incarceration exacerbates feelings of powerlessness and thus increases the likelihood that survivors will self-injure. She recommended that rather than

placing the distressed prisoner in segregation, prisoners who slash be given immediate access to a mental health professional or PST member.

Peer counsellors who were unfamiliar with this type of self-destructive behaviour initially found it unusual.

> P4W is not your average place. There are a lot of things that go on around here that I wasn't aware of...it wasn't part of my everyday life...like slashing, and self-injury...

Peer counsellors frequently spoke of supporting prisoners who self-injure through crisis periods. They felt they had profited from the PST training because it clarified the way self-injury functions as an anxiety-reduction technique or, "the release part of it." Survivors of childhood sexual abuse may self-injure in an attempt to restore psychological and emotional equilibrium during times of high anxiety or stress. A feeling of powerlessness and a sense that "bad things are going to happen" that can not be controlled - a lesson learned directly from the abusive relationship - underlies the behaviour. By controlling the timing and means of the "bad thing," the survivor regains a sense of power and balance (Heney, 1989). The woman may cope with feelings of powerlessness by dissociating, or psychologically separating herself from her body, a tactic often used to survive the actual abuse during childhood. Self-injury may be a desire to reconnect with ones' own body - a desire to ensure that one can feel. In this sense, it is a life-preserving measure (Herman, 1992). Although clinicians have not always understood the function of self-injury, many survivors themselves have had little doubt.

Bob, a peer counsellor, expressed her appreciation that the Psychology Department at P4W perceives slashing to be a mental heath concern.

> I've always known that people slash; they slash to relieve tension, to relieve anger, or just to take it out on themselves. They don't do it to kill themselves!...Psychology is totally aware of the situation...which is really really reassuring to me.

Other peer counsellors came to understand how to relate to prisoners when they are feeling like they want to self-injure.

> I've learned that you don't just say give me your blades, because that's that person's control base. It makes me aware that slashing is not always an attempt at suicide.
>
> ...if the bottom line is we can't stop it then at least our final recourse is...if you're going to do it, at least be careful. Make sure you're using a clean whatever...at least be safe while you do it.

Several women spoke of the relationship between using drugs and incidents of slashing. Robin described the prison atmosphere when there is a large amount of drugs available: "Pills are deadly, especially Valium. It's like a war zone in here." Seabreeze, an ex-prisoner, elaborated this sentiment:

> When the people get high over there...they have a train. One will slash, the other will hang. Or four or five will slash all at once. That affects a lot of people because a lot of people are scared...

Fear and Trust

> *"Torture in prison is not inflicted by means of the bars, or the walls...prison is doubt. And doubt is the most certain of tortures"*
>
> Nawal el Sa'adwi,
> Egyptian feminist, medical doctor and ex-political prisoner

Fear was a frequent theme to emerge from descriptions of incarceration. Many women said they find it difficult to trust in an environment characterized by fear, insecurity and uncertainty. As one prisoner remarked, P4W is "not very conducive to a good atmosphere of trust or of comfort or of understanding."

Brownmiller (1975) and Morgan (1989) have demonstrated the ways in which the threat of male violence functions as a powerful tool for keeping women compliant. Similarly, the abused child lives with uncertainty, unable to ascertain when or under what circumstances she will be assaulted (Herman, 1992). The unpredictability of the abuse, like the unpredictability of male violence for the adult women, ensures her subordination. A similar principle operates within the prison setting. The enforcement of rules is often arbitrary and is subject to the whim of a given Correctional Officer. Thus, although one never can be sure, the threat of punishment is constantly imminent. Furthermore, knowledge is sometimes used as a powerful tool for psychological control. I saw this principle in effect many times when prisoners were placed in segregation and, despite persistent requests, information was withheld about their release into the main population. Similarly, requests for privileges or visits were often met with ambivalence and ambiguity.

Although the flexibility of rules may potentially benefit the prisoner, the inconsistent use of power may invoke strong feelings of anxiety. A peer counsellor

described how her attempts at creating a life of safety and predictability were undermined by the fear of authoritarian rule.

> I had established a life, gotten into patterns for me of studying, set myself up a routine, and then was aware that it could be all swept aside by a misplaced word to the wrong person at the wrong time.

Descriptions of life in prison resonated with allusions to a pervasive distrust between prison authorities and prisoners. With distrust and unpredictability comes fear, particularly for survivors of childhood physical and/or sexual abuse, who have learned that inconsistency is the nature of relationships and that an inability to control events can be life threatening (Blume, 1990; Herman, 1992). The descriptions of instability in prison often resounded with echoes of the abusive childhood environment.

> ...you constantly lived in a state where there was a threat of violence. It was constant. And sometimes it was coming from other prisoners but there were other times it was coming from staff. The threat of violence, you never knew when you'd be charged, how serious the charge would be...

Not only is the prisoner subject to the rules and regulations of the prison administration, but so too must each prisoner wrestle with the demands of a code of behaviour dictated by the prisoners themselves. This code of behaviour is known as the "Inmate Code." "Code" followers maintain a sense of loyalty to other prisoners who adhere to the code, refuse to interact unecessarily with prison guards, abhor those who "rat' on other prisoners and enforce a prisoner hierarchy within the institution. Many peer counsellors spoke of fears around failing to adhere to "the inmate code," particularly

in reference to associating with prisoners considered protective custody or "PCs." (Although the label "PC" refers most commonly to women who have been convicted for crimes against children, it is sometimes applied to prisoners who are "rats" - who have taken the side of the institution over that of a prisoner or prisoners). Several years ago the prison administration began allowing protective custody prisoners to live with the general population. The pressure not to associate with protective custody inmates is sometimes automatically internalized.

> You know a lot of times when you're in here you can't really talk to a protective custody inmate. You can't really be seen near them. I was the same way. But not because I wanted to, but because of the code.

The first few groups of women trained as peer counsellors for the PST spent many sessions attempting to reconcile thier belief that all prisoners deserve access to support, with the intricacies of the inmate code. Some women, those who followed "the code," felt that they needed to have the right to decline a request for counselling from someone labelled "PC". Even for those who did not adhere to the inmate code, being a PST member still posed complications. The standard of ostracizing prisoners labeled PC can feel so intense that one woman had serious reservations about joining the PST because she knew she might be asked to counsel someone who is labelled protective custody.

> ...the sense that you could be in jeopardy by talking to certain women...I wasn't used to engaging in battle and defending myself...It bothered me a whole lot when I put myself in a situation where what I was doing was a confronting a person whose first choice in how to settle something was how I saw my life dissolving!

Currently, the PST encourages peer counsellors who feel they can not counsel a given women for any reason to frankly decline. The program also has a firm policy that women labelled PC be admitted to the PST. For these women, too, belonging to the PST can further complicate life in prison. Lincoln said that "PC" prisoners must "get into the mode that, yes it [attack] could happen at any moment and you must be prepared for that."

Although some women spoke of fears related to their physical safety, others spoke of the uncertainty about one's psychological and emotional safety, for instance the fear resulting from the fact that suicide is "always such a close option."

> Fear is one of the worst things to deal with...Whether a person has a fear of being attacked, or whether the person has a fear that they're never going to make it out of Prison for Women alive. These are real deadly fears...it's a fear we live with...Will I be one of those people who takes my own life?

Many women spoke of protecting themselves behind the shield of the inmate code or by emotionally withdrawing.

> ...if you really want to do your time, and come out all right and not get involved in the politics they have here, don't talk to PCs.

> I keep myself busy all the time, so no one really knows what I'm up to. Every time some one tries to figure me out I switch on them. I swear...don't ever try to figure me out, you'll get confused!

Compounding the issue is the life experiences the women bring to the prison. Many women have come to believe from their personal relationships, that even those who say "I love you" can not be trusted. Experiences of male violence and of childhood abuse, seriously undermine a woman's sense of being safe in the world. Thus, before even

arriving at the prison many of these women have had life experiences that have given them the message that it is dangerous to trust.

> I came from the garbage can of [large urban city]! The snake's pit. Everybody was fucking everybody, everybody was stealing everybody's dope, everybody was shooting everybody...I was at addiction research at least nine times in one year.

Yet most prisoners nevertheless seek the comfort of relationships with others. Some women talked about the conflict between fearing of being hurt (either physically or emotionally) and a desire for connection and community.

> I think everybody wants a close relationship, but it's real hard....You know we're all here mainly because we've been abused, mistreated, we've abused ourselves, done drugs. And that clouds your - you're not willing to trust. So that you've got a lot of outside forces that make it even more difficult...it's very hard in here. I find it hard."

One of the unique aspects of P4W is the prison administration's tolerance of physical contact between prisoners. Typically, prison prohibitions against physical and sexual contact between prisoners reflect an intolerance of same sex relationships and function as a social control tool to enforce heterosexual attitudes and practices. Members of ACE, the prisoner run program for HIV infected prisoners at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York state, explain the impact the "no-contact" rule can have upon peer counselling relationships between prisoners.

> You're talking to a woman in crisis who needs comforting You reach out to give her a hug and the C.O. [Correctional Officer] may come over to admonish you, "No physical contact, ladies" (Women of Ace, 1990: 153).

Prisoners at P4W take advantage of the "magnanimous" administrative attitude by finding in physical closeness a sense of sharing they may not be able to achieve otherwise.

> A lot of people will hug each other, women will sit with each other. You will see them walking with each other. And I wouldn't even necessarily use the word friendship. The women are probably, some of them, unconsciously consoling each other. They can be physically close. They use a lot of that. Visit each other. Sit on each other's beds.

Women distinguished between relationships they would term friendship and those considered acquaintances. The reason for this distinction, they said, was because friendship connotes a certain degree of intimacy that some women find rare in prison. Most prisoners have "been hurt so much in the past...the trust factor is very low with a lot of women." They use their physical presence as a safer offering - "a kind of warmth" which "does a lot to offset the hostile nature of the prison itself."

Volunteers for the PST discovered that participating in the training provided another alternative to "the hostile nature" of the prison. Through the group experience the women discovered a new model of relating to one another that they previously found lacking in their lives.

> I was never in a prison situation where women dealt with stuff. Never...four years on my last sentence [at another prison]. And you just didn't deal with anything...Everyone is just walking around angry and very frustrated. You just don't walk up to someone and ask them...how are you, are you okay? We didn't even talk that kind of language.
>
> I learned through Peer Support that there are some very very caring people...And its been a mind blower for me because I just thought it wasn't there anymore.

The group training experience provided an opportunity for prisoners "with a lot of scars" to "let down our guards" and discover the goodness in one another. Trainees arrived to the program with a genuine desire to help but, in the process, they began also to heal their own scars.

II. THE PEER COUNSELLORS

> *"That was a big one for me, the suicides, because of the ones that took place in here...that I was closely involved with. Not seeing the signs or just not knowing. How maybe to prevent it from happening again."*
>
> PST member

Volunteers for the PST came from all different backgrounds and experiences. Their ages, race and ethnicity, education levels and sentence lengths are diverse. There are commonalties, though, in how and why these prisoners chose to participate in the Peer Support program. These commonalties fell into three main categories: difficulties with professional mental health services; the desire to further develop counselling skills, and the personal therapeutic value of the group training.

Mental Health Services

Presently at P4W there are no people of colour on the mental health staff. Until recently, a full-time Native counsellor provided support for Native Canadian prisoners, organized cultural ceremonies and performed some case management duties. However, she is no longer at the prison and her position remains vacant. Native Canadians at P4W comprise a disproportionate number of prisoners and several reports and studies have pointed to the need for culturally appropriate programming (Adelberg & Currie, 1987; Heney, 1989; Task Force for Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). Interestingly, none of these studies mention specifically the needs of Black prisoners at P4W who, based upon my observations and conversations with Black prisoners, also comprise a disproportionate

number of the prison population. Several peer counsellors addressed the need for culturally specific support: someone with whom they share common experiences of racist oppression and culture. [3]

> A lot of the Black women, the majority of them that I speak to, don't come to Psychology...there's no black person down here to speak to so they don't come. Some days you get up and you do feel discriminated against and I don't want to go to a white person and say, these f'ing white people just get on my nerves...how does that person feel about you saying that?

The absence of mental health providers with whom Black women feel comfortable means that many Black women are released from prison without receiving counselling. Therefore, commented Renee, these women are not dealing with the "issues in their life" that carry the potential for the "same things to keep re-occurring that could possibly bring them back." The need for counsellors whose cultural backgrounds reflect the diversity of the prison population was a repetitive theme throughout the interviews. For some prisoners it provided an impetus to join the PST.

> I inquired, I said are there any Black Peer Support members? And they said at the present there was no members that were Black. And I said, well, I want to be on this training team.

> I started to see Angela [a Native woman] every night in segregation for half an hour, sometimes an hour. I'd go out to the yard with her...As far as I knew there was nobody here that was a Peer Support Counsellor that is Native...So that opens a door for my race.

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[3] Most frequently, participants highlighted the importance of culturally appropriate peer and professional counsellors. The need for lesbian or lesbian-positive support was not mentioned by the participants. Prisoners at P4W are generally aware that many of the mental health staff self-identify as lesbian and therefore may not feel a lack of lesbian positive support from these professionals.

Most women were acutely aware of the need for prisoners to have access to people with whom they can identify. A white peer counsellor said:

> There are things about Jamaican, Trinidadian, Pakistani that I wouldn't understand anyway. So maybe a safe factor for them is to go...to their own folks.

Peer counsellors most often provided support for prisoners from similar cultural backgrounds as their own. Tina remarked that "it's like they can relate to you because you're a foreigner. Spanish people, for example. And even some of the Black girls, they can really relate." Another prisoner said "its all Native women...They come to me a lot. They catch me anyplace!"

A feeling that other prisoners were more likely than prison employees to understand and empathize with their problems impelled others to join the PST

> If you're an authority figure and you say to them I want to slash or hang myself, they don't understand!...It was like...a con helping a con. It wasn't a con and a psychiatrist...at least a con can go to the inmate's house and at least there's an inmate there.

> I heard about Peer Support and people going into seg to counsel people. Inmates counselling other inmates...I've never seen this before! Because, like, who better? The prison population...are not going to trust somebody on the other side of the fence, as we see it. And this was a very unique situation where inmates were given a certain amount of training, a certain amount of trust.

The most common refrain I heard during the interviews was "I've been there." Almost every woman interviewed communicated this sentiment, if not that exact phrase. Most

frequently, it was said in regards to feelings of suicide. Lincoln said that during training she herself was suicidal and "wasn't sure if I was going to make it through or not." Because of her "being there" she felt women she counselled could relate to her better because "they really opened up...they knew I understood." Another peer counsellor, Lisa, explained, "I toy with myself. You have to decide, shall I do it today or shall I not. And if you have enough strength to get up, that's the main thing." All the women I interviewed found the strength to get up and to join the PST because, "I knew if someone else was feeling like I did, they're going to need me to pull them through."

Develop Counselling Skills

When Jan Heney interviewed prisoners about self-injurious behaviour, she found that there was an informal network among self-abusers who counselled each other during crises. The purpose of the PST was to legitimate and validate this peer support and to provide a reserve of prisoners to be available for any type of crisis intervention. The desire to obtain information to more effectively support prisoners in crisis was a common reason for volunteering for PST training.

> I had been counselling a great number of women, and sometimes you feel you're not doing it right, you're not giving them what they need, or you don't really understand the problem fully...there were a lot of things going on in the institution at that time. Lots of slashings and all those suicides!

> [Jan] wanted to help us...refine our methods of counselling. And actually go through a training process. And that's the reason I got involved, because there are so many women in there who need...each other. And if you've got certain people you can count on and know they're going to be there, that's even better.

Counselling was a career path that had previously interested many of the women in this study. Prior experience in community programs and agencies equipped them with some of the necessary skills for peer counselling.

> I was going to Poundmaker's Lodge. I was a counsellor in training...And that was really good because I was an alcoholic and I sat in on the groups, learned the techniques they were using...It was wonderful because we had at least a hundred people. So I mean, our circles were big!
> I had done work with mentally and physically challenged children and adults in special schools. I had done that as a teaching assistant for two years...

Not only did these prisoners have an active interest in the helping professions prior to imprisonment, but all had themselves seen a therapist for at least some period during the time they were incarcerated. They were a group, then, familiar with and supportive of the counselling process. Michelle, for instance, had been in conflict with the law and various community agencies for the past ten years. At P4W she "had a lot of women coming to me with stuff." She joined the PST hoping to avoid replicating some of the negative experiences she herself had had with therapists.

> ...because of my own therapy I was doing I realized...how important it was to me to have a therapist that was very effective and was good at counselling. I always felt a little fearful that I can harm them [other prisoners] as much as I can help them, because it had happened to me a number of times in my life.

It was not until she was incarcerated at P4W that Michelle said she finally experienced a positive therapeutic relationship with a professional counsellor. Although many

prisoners who volunteer for the PST have had some association with members of the Psychology Department, participating in the PST allowed for a different type of relationship to emerge. Getting to know the psychologists in an arena outside the counselling room helped to break down barriers between "client" and therapist.

> I saw women who are professionals, who were counsellors, who in my mind before that, oh they've got it all together, they don't know what I'm feeling...but I saw women just being themselves...and that was really something brand new to me!

Personal Growth

The topics covered in the PST training manual are chosen because of their relevance to imprisoned women and to the lives of women in general. Most prisoners found that although they were training to help others, the sessions had such a personal component and were so centred on group sharing, that they were also deriving personal therapeutic value from the training.

> it started out as a group to teach us counselling skills to help other people which, in turn, we found helped ourselves, because many of the problems discussed in the training sessions were problems we had ourselves. And after resolving your own problems, it makes you a stronger person and you do have more of an ability to help others.

P4W has a very small population (approximately 110 prisoners) and it is often difficult to maintain a sense of privacy or anonymity. Confidentiality is an extremely high priority for prisoners, particularly regarding their use of therapeutic programs. The issue of confidentiality came up time and time again during the interviews. Some women waited

until they heard from current trainees before they themselves volunteered for training. Soon after the first group of women were trained as peer counsellors in May 1990, the specifics of the program filtered out to the main prison population. Women heard that the training provided a "huge amount of really helpful information" and found that group members demonstrated a clear commitment to preserving the confidentiality of the participants.

> I think it was probably their reports to me - they weren't breaking confidentiality, it was about their experience, nothing anybody else said - that impressed me. The sense of confidentiality that they brought from this.

The Psychology Department at P4W is known for its commitment to prisoner confidentiality. As such, it is considered as somewhat distinct from the rest of the institution. A common refrain about the Psychology staff is that you know "what is said in there, stays in there." Page (1979, in his research on unstructured counselling groups in prisons, suggests that a prerequisite for a successful group is "the freedom the group facilitator must have to conduct groups without being impeded by custody or other institutional personnel" (277). A contributing factor to the safety level in the PST training is the Psychology staff's distinct role in the institution and dedication to preserving participant confidentiality. Bob recalled an incident in PST regarding a possible breach in confidentiality among peer counsellors. She was vehement that the group facilitator's immediate response to the problem indicated to her that the group could be trusted.

> For me, you get it right from that. Something was done about it. So for someone like myself that has been very insecure with the safety factor, then it starts coming and you know this can be trusted, you know that something will be done, it's not bullshit...

The trust that prisoners had in the group facilitators created a place of safety in which participants had "a great deal of freedom to say what [they needed] to say." The dedication to maintaining group safety was clearly carried forth by the team members. Many revealed a deep respect for the preservation of confidentiality during the training sessions.

> I'm not as naive as some people say I am. I'm observant in some ways ..Someone would have said something to me and I never had any, like no one ever betrayed my confidence...

> I can honestly tell you with God as my witness...nothing that any of this group has shared to date, have I heard outside this group. Not a word...I could go on and on with these same people for another two years of counselling or doing the group, that's how safe I feel.

In PST confidentiality is without a doubt the essential precondition for a successful group. When the women are certain that what they share does not leave the room, they feel comfortable to "open up" and begin to confront difficult and personal subjects.

Another component of the training that influenced group participation relates to the structure of the training process. Most prison programs tend to be a static process of education, with the facilitator being the sole voice of experience and wisdom. The PST training is unique in that it draws upon the experiences and knowledge of the participants

and provides room for reflection. This process enables participants the freedom to explore their own feelings about the topics.

> ...there's more conversation, there's open discussion...a lot of these groups you go to, there are issues that come up also, but you don't get a chance to ever speak about them because **it's not that kind of group**...it's cut and dry, it's done, it's time to go, and you leave.

As a result, participants found they were deriving great personal therapeutic value from the group training. Prisoners were urged by previous trainees to "take the group for yourself." Therefore, many peer counsellors viewed the training as a supplement to the individual therapy they were already engaged in.

> The training itself covered topics that I found interesting and that I was working on. Mainly sexual abuse, violence, prejudice, suicide, drugs. And I thought it would be a good opportunity to do some work myself and to learn from other people.

> The parts about sexual assault and the child abuse sections...really helped me to continue what I was discussing individually, in a group setting.

Other reasons for joining the team had very personal origins as well. Bob was hoping that the Peer Support training would help her communicate better with her partner because "I've found in here, our communication skills aren't always the best...sometimes we're hearing but not listening." Francis remarked that it was during a crisis of her own that she realized the value in talking to someone and decided to join the team.

> ...when I was in seg...I came down and saw Alex [a psychologist] twice, and that was the first time I ever showed my emotions...I felt better afterwards. I never used to trust people. I shocked myself...I never shared. Even if I had a problem, I didn't have no problem.

In "seg", prisoners are placed in a cell for twenty-three hours a day. They are permitted to shower every other day, are given one hour of exercise daily, and eat their meals in their cell. Generally, they are denied access to other prisoners, with the possible exception of an approved PST member. Thus, when a prisoner is doing "seg time" she is at her most vulnerable and in need of crucial support.

The PST is intended, in part, to compensate for the times when no one from the Psychology Department is working - during evenings and on weekends. These are times when peer counsellors are busiest because "weekends seem pretty long in here...when people are bored they start to think about everything...when segregation ends up being full it always seems to happen on a weekend." Before volunteering for the team, some women were initially introduced to the team when they themselves had been put in segregation. They found that talking to a PST member helped support them through their 'seg time' and decided they wanted to do the same for others.

> It's strange how I got involved with PST...I was in seg! And [a PST member] used to come up to visit me, and I found she really did help a lot. Because I really did need someone to talk to, someone who would listen. And when I came out and I saw that it worked for other people, I said to myself, we need more Black people in there.
>
> I had just gotten here and I was in seg already...I was there feeling like I wanted to die and every thing else. Feeling really degraded and really disgusting. The camera on me every time I wanted to use the bathroom...So in walked this girl and I thought, where is she going? I hope she don't think she's sharing my room!...And she says, hi...I'm still thinking, I'm not sharing my room with you! And then she told me she was on Peer Support and I really didn't know what she was talking about. But any way, we started talking and I really started looking forward to those little visits. It was all the things she was saying that were important, plus she was of my race. So when I got out...I asked, how did

you get into that [the team]?

Frequently, women learned about the PST through the reports of other prisoners. Although the Psychology Department advertises the program and distributes flyers throughout the institution, the most effective way of advertising the program is through the prisoner grapevine. Often, just seeing which prisoners are on the team and how they conduct themselves within the institution is an influence to join.

> I think what inspired me most was I seen lifers that are doing a long bit...you'd think a lot of them would think, i don't care, I've got my own gear to think about. But they ain't saying that. People should look at that. I highly respect that.

Many "lifers" - prisoners serving life sentences - are and have been members of the PST. Five of the twelve women I interviewed were serving life sentences either in P4W or on parole in the community. Susan commented that because "there's a lot of short-time people that barely finish the sessions before they get parole...the burden of counselling falls on the lifers because we are here the longest."

Regardless of the initial impetus for joining the team, peer counsellors overwhelmingly spoke of a wealth of skills, opportunities, and personal satisfaction, they derived from the training session. Women with diverse histories, experiences and perspectives, came together with a common goal and found, despite their personal preconceptions, that they really were not all that different. Nor were they alone.

III. THE GROUP TRAINING EXPERIENCE

"They accepted me for who I was...they didn't say, you can't come in because you're a violent offender or you're a dealer or anything like that."

Former PST member

Any feelings of isolation or alienation a woman may feel upon her incarceration are inevitably enhanced by the prison environment. The structural conditions and administrative procedures at P4W can inadvertently sustain feelings of disconnection. For instance, the classification system that defines prisoner's security level and program needs, institutionalized racism, the system by which prisoners earn certain privileges and the inmate code discourage alliances between prisoners. However, the women in this study felt that PST training provided a welcome contrast to the divisive nature of the prison by offering a sense of commonality and by helping to increase the prisoner's self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy. Peer counsellors identified three primary effects of the group training experience. They found that training helped them feel less isolated; influenced a change in relationships; and assisted them in feeling empowered to make personal changes.

Less Isolated

By far the most common response to the training experience was a sense that "I'm not the only one". Whether this was in regard to childhood experiences, suicide attempts, coping strategies or personal fears, peer counsellors expressed feeling validated by the

group sessions.

> I learned almost every woman you meet, they've been through a similar situation. Like close, very close. You think they've been into your life!
>
> You don't mind telling them what happened in your life. I had no hesitations saying I was abused...and nobody sat there and laughed, because we all went through something in our life.

One reason for feeling validated was the sense that they were not alone, that others had similar life experiences to their own. The sharing of similar life experiences is often a crucial step towards breaking feelings of isolation, particularly when healing from childhood sexual abuse.

> You'd rather experience the pain again than sit there and talk to somebody about it. Knowing that you're not the only one. You're looking around and you see other people - maybe they weren't abused but maybe they could have had suicidal thoughts...You're all in it together.

Renee said that feelings of racial isolation were also reduced.

> The session that really got me was when you had Hagar [a Black woman from the community] come in. Just having another person and having her speak and listening to her. I...felt more relaxed, more empowered.

Renee later delivered a presentation on racism to a new group of trainees because she felt so inspired from this previous workshop: "So when Julie asked me to do this session on race I thought, yeah, I'll do it!"

One of the most common ways that women felt their isolation recede was by

seeing themselves reflected in the program content and discussion. Many women felt that the training manual and the discussion topics validated the way they felt about issues and experiences in their own lives.

> ...it also kind of enforced something in me that I always believed in but I always felt nobody else felt that way. That the bottom line is it [suicide] is the person's choice. And if they really have their mind made up, and this is what they are going to do, there is nothing you can do to change it. And I think at one point you have to be able to recognize that and walk away from it and at least give them the respect and dignity to do what they're going to do.
>
> I've been in the situation in prison, 'oh she's slashing just leave her alone. I hope she cuts her throat'. And at that time I didn't know a whole lot because I was just settling into prison...I just had to live with it, knowing in my heart and in my head it wasn't right [emphasis mine].

"Knowing in my heart" has been referred to as women's "subjective knowledge" (Belenky et al., 1986). It is a way of understanding and interpreting reality based upon the senses - upon ones' gut feelings. In a study of 135 women, Belenky and colleagues found that a personal acceptance and trust of ones' "subjective knowing" powers led to turning points in the women's lives. These turning points reflected "when women become their own authorities" (Belenky et al.,1986:54). In a world that champions the supremacy of scientific and rational thought, intuition is looked upon with suspicion: it is not seen as true knowledge. Yet women have had great difficulty in locating themselves within the "truths" deemed to be universal and are thus in a double bind: what is defined as reality rarely reflects our experiences yet when we locate our inner voices to make sense of our experiences we are told it is mere conjecture. The PST validated the women's intuitive knowledge, giving their knowledge a legitimacy they

were not finding elsewhere. The group experience assisted trainees in finding the truths within themselves, rather from the "authority" of others. This point is all the more poignant when considering the situation of children experiencing sexual abuse. Most children "know in their heart" that what is happening to them feels wrong. Yet the voice of authority -- the abuser -- and all other adults who fail to protect her are telling her otherwise. A survivor of childhood sexual abuse learns earlier than most, not to trust her inner voice. When a survivor finds her subjective knowing powers legitimized, she begins the healing journey.

Becoming one's own authority can be a method of finding control for incarcerated women. Burke (1992) found through interviews with female prisoners in Indiana and Maryland that many women experienced visions and premonitions during incarceration. Many times it was through these intuitive processes that prisoners maintained a sense of connection to the outside world and a feeling that they could somehow control events. Trusting these feelings was an important part of surviving the powerlessness induced by prison life. Francis, a prisoner at Prison for Women, illustrated the primacy of subjective knowledge in her life when she said "I went against my instincts once and it just messed me up. That's why I'm here."

Many women said that they had been distanced from their true feelings for quite some time, whether it be because of drugs, fear, or self-protection. Feeling validated and less isolated through the group process helped them have faith in their beliefs and find

safety to express themselves. After analyzing one's own past experiences and present relationships, the next step is to *articulate* these perceptions, to share their investigation of the world (Belenky et al, 1986). The peer counsellors I interviewed spoke of finding voice

> ...the more I talk about things the better I start feeling. For years I wasn't able to talk about anything...and when I started opening up, I felt a lot of anger and the hatred I had inside slowly start leaving.
>
> I never used to speak...[PST] will help you communicate. You're going to be so built up inside...You might feel like an asshole, 'cause you ain't saying it right, but spill it out...I feel that any individual - they have a right to speak on how they feel, but some of them feel they can't do it. By PST, when we are voicing our opinion, maybe that will encourage others to do the same thing.
>
> Usually I don't have anything to say. I usually sit there like a dummy, just vegetating away! I'm starting to open up now. I'm starting to feel free.

"Starting to feel free" allowed the women to take emotional risks and to share with the group things "I haven't talked about since maybe I was ten". As a result, says Lisa, she was able to find her authentic voice.

> I wouldn't have had that strength if I wouldn't have taken peer support...To be truthful with myself. That's important, to be truthful with yourself."

The structure of the training program also contributed to the peer counsellor's alliances with different women and their comfort level with expressing themselves. Structurally, the PST program is arranged to reflect the on-going nature of learning. After a peer counsellor has graduated from the PST training she is asked to attend subsequent training

sessions with new PST volunteers. The graduated members are responsible for parts of certain workshops and for sharing their experiences as peer counsellors with the new trainees. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian educator, wrote that "the unfinished character of men [sic] and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education be an ongoing activity" (1972:72). Peer counsellors expressed a similar philosophy and said that they felt that returning for further training is one of the most beneficial aspects of the program.

> ...that's the greatest thing about PST, because you get to come back...when you go back the second time, there is so much more to be said because of what you learned the last time and it's like on the job experience, you know? And the training just keeps getting better...There's more people with new experiences and different ideas.

Similarly, Tina likened the training manual to a Shakespearean play because of the depth of information and new meanings the reader brings to the text each time she reads it

> There's a lot of information in those chapters. If people really wanted to take that manual and study it over, not just read it one time. Just like you read Shakespeare, say Othello or Hamlet, you read it once, you don't grasp it the first time. You just have the structure, the outline, the basics...reading it twice and asking for the old members to return is an excellent idea.

Participants in the PST training spoke forcefully about the positive impact that repetitive sharing with different prisoners had upon feelings of isolation, security to express themselves, counselling skills and learning constructive coping skills. Susan remarked that "it is the experiences of the women involved" that broadens understanding of women's "different pain."

A central motif of the PST training experience was the navigation of divisions due to differences in status, race and crime. Peer counsellors suggested that this was a result of being exposed to women of varying backgrounds and perspectives and to information about structural discrimination and prejudice. One result of this sharing, says Francis, is that "you're not judgmental towards people...You just try to be open-minded at all times. I think that's the greatest part of it."

Changing Relationships

> *"It was like opening the window on a very black day and the lights are coming in."*
>
> PST member

For many of the peer counsellors, relationship boundaries that they previously considered fixed and static began to seem permeable. An interesting theme that emerged from the interviews was a feeling of improved relations with prison staff. The PST has recently begun to invite Correctional Officers to join in on the training sessions. (The decision to involve Correctional Officers in the PST training was initiated by the prisoners themselves). By participating in the training process the Correctional Officers become "honorary" PST members. The prisoners decide which officer to select based upon feelings of personal comfort and the officers' receptivity to the program. Although there are four of five male officers, PST members prefer inviting in women because of the difficulty discussing topics like sexual abuse and assault with men present. Participants felt that including Correctional Staff into the training program improved staff/prisoner

relations by allowing them to get beyond the stereotypes attributed to both parties and to interrelate, less as keeper and prisoner, but as people.

> ...it's positive learning having them in there...you try to view them just as that person in that room, and not look at them as the staff, pigs, screw whatever...And they see us, too, as people, human with feelings.

Although, in theory, peer counsellors are permitted to counsel prisoners in crisis, the reality remains that Security staff must approve the meeting if it is after lock-up time and/or on a different living unit. Security staff also may use their own discretion to decide if the prisoners engaged in peer counselling are considered a security threat. PST members must be skilled at diplomacy and compromise if they are to obtain regular access throughout the institution and if the reputation of the team is to remain unmarred. Members of The Aids Counselling and Education (ACE) program at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility have had to struggle with similar problems regarding peer counselling. As at P4W, these prisoners write that "the reality is that we've been doing it in our daily lives here through informal dialogue" and have been "struggling for the legitimacy of peer counselling" (Women of Ace, 1992: 154). ACE has finally been able to secure formal legitimacy from Columbia University where supporters are developing a special certification program for peer counsellors in prison.

The PST has been plagued by problems in being regarded as legitimate counsellors in the institution. Many attempts have been made to inform Security staff of the program training and purpose. As well, the PST sponsors special events such as an

annual December 6 memorial service for the fourteen women murdered in Montreal in 1989, and workshops on International Women's Day. The PST graduation ceremonies are also quite public and selected members of Security staff are invited to attend. These efforts, combined with the Correctional Officers as "honorary PST members," have helped the team gain credibility. Consequently, many women I interviewed said that, although there had been some difficulties with correctional staff, their interaction with the officers was improving. Many peer counsellors commented on improved relations even with Security staff who were not in the PST training. One reason for this improvement is that the PST gives women and officers a neutral topic about which to communicate.

> ...quite a few guards would stop me and say, are you on the Peer Support Team?...they wanted to know more about it and stuff. And it opened up a lot of things because it allowed me to talk to them, which I had not done previously...I thought, maybe they do care! Maybe you do know where I'm coming from. Because, you know, most of them are women any way.
>
> I've found it rewarding myself...Yuanita is a special needs person...and just the interaction with the guards, taking me aside and saying you know what you're doing is really good, she really likes you, you really handle her well...

When Security staff offered appreciation of the work carried out by PST members, peer counsellors felt valued by those charged with guarding them. Peer counsellors felt that Security staff were better able to recognize their individual skills and worth - a recognition obfuscated by the perception of prisoners as mere "convicts." Robin remembered when a more genuine relationship began to evolve even before she officially

became a peer counsellor. During a time of extreme tension and despair at P4W, as a result of six suicides, Robin was asked to help emotionally support certain women.

> I think the last suicide here was Lorna...I was on the street, and I came in to see Natalie. She was going through a really rough time...we ended up meeting in custody for an hour...and as I was getting ready to leave the institution one of the sixes [Security staff]...said, could you please stick around for a couple of hours? There's some women we would like you to talk to. So they let me just roam around the institution and I went down to the Wing...so I spent half and hour with each woman...that's how my interaction with the staff got better.

Peer counsellors spoke of the ways in which the Peer Support training helped break down barriers between prisoners as well. Another boundary that was penetrated was divisions along racial lines. For women of colour prison life is simply an extreme manifestation of life in the outside white world. All but a handful of prison guards and all prison administration are white. One woman, using the Minimum House (a low security residential prison located across the street from P4W) as an example, explained how an environment that reflects the values of the dominant culture can influence a prisoner's personal comfort level.

> I'd have to say the Minimum, it's probably kind of a Waspish milieu...It didn't reflect qualities of other cultures in any way shape or form...We all had to be very clean and very tidy and every thing would match. And all the staff is white...so if you were Oriental, you didn't match! And a Black person didn't really match...I think psychically, these things mean we don't fit in.

It is difficult to find understanding and commonality in a hostile environment and in one that institutionally enforces white supremacist attitudes. As Libra said, to "get rid of

some of my prejudice...is very difficult to do in here."

Many women I interviewed, both white and non-white, pointed to the Peer Support training session on racism as pivotal in changing their racial perspective.

> I'm certainly glad that Peer Support made it different cultures...just having those two Black girls in there and a bit of Renee, things that I thought I knew and understood about the Black culture, I certainly understand it better now...The way Renee explained it that day, it made perfect sense. I couldn't see it any other way but the way she said it...that opened a whole new light on me...where I come from we're all thrown together anyway, Blacks, Whites, Hispanics, no one stops to look at what the other one is feeling or...thinking.

Not only did information and sharing about racist oppression influence feelings about others, but it also contributed to self-understanding and reflection, particularly for the white PST members.

> It wasn't reading about racism in a book. It was sitting with women of colour and being aware that racism is part of my heritage as a white...how can I go from just knowing to incorporating that into my behaviour in my life? You don't do that in one lesson, it's on-going.
>
> I'm certainly not without prejudice, that's a life long ambition. But at least I can recognize it and accept that it's there and accept that I'm trying to work on it.

Another frequently changed attitude related to the code of behaviour towards protective custody inmates. Despite the pressures and fears around associating with these types of prisoners and the difficulties in personally dealing with the issue, the women I interviewed almost universally found ways to relate to protective custody prisoners. This ability to find commonality was a powerful impetus towards contradicting the inmate

code.

> And, you know, you really begin to think, I feel pain from being here and doing my time, never mind a person that's being segregated...That must be really difficult...
>
> Then I go, why am I doing this? Because doing his, I'm only hurting them more. And we all have feelings...you don't know what made them do it. Sometimes people do things that you don't know what made them do it in the first place. It can be several different reasons.

Several women used their own life and cultural experiences as a means of connecting to the lives of women with child-related crimes.

> I've had four kids, I've been junked up, stoned, I've been down right fucked, and that's putting it plain...my kids got shipped off a lot! But thank God they did or I'd been in here probably being a PC too. I mean, you leave the stove on, you leave the curling iron on, anything could have caused it.
>
> I've become more tolerant...I've found a lot of prejudice in my life because I've been a drug addict so long, an unwed mother, a prostitute...
>
> Maybe being Black...knowing that I live through that discrimination, still do every day, try not to discriminate against any one else...

Although some women interviewed did not feel capable of actually counselling PC inmates, all found ways of internally bridging the gap between prisoners and used common experiences of oppression to do so.

Just as the previously rigid divisions between prisoners and prison personnel gave way to complexity and identification, women's descriptions of both the inmate code and the prisoner's lives and behaviours took on new dimensions. For instance, Robin turned

the "con code" o.. its head by reframing the moral nature of child-related crimes.

> When you think about it, ours [crimes] aren't any less severe. Any less damaging. The only difference is the age. If you think of somebody murdering an old man...that man is just like a child too! Because of the cycle of life. You're born, then you're a teenager, you're this and then in the fourth stage you're a child again. There's no difference. So if people would start listening to the teachings and what they're taught, they'd understand that..

Similarly, Patches pointed beyond the adherence to prisoner codes, to the complexity of prisoner's attitudes towards one another. Using the example of a young pregnant prisoner whose baby was taken away from her two days after she gave birth, Patches explained the ways in which the correctional system can perpetuate divisions among prisoners.

> I think there has to be respect for women who have experienced huge amounts of loss around their own children. Putting them in contact [with protective custody prisoners], I don't think it's particularly responsible to expect that woman to be able to intellectualize it. Those psychic cords are just going to be tugged to the hilt by some people....I think the pain of tearing a mother away from her children is so deep. I think that it's one of those things that can be a trigger for a rage that is probably based on really healthy instincts of mothers loving their children. So when that has been so grossly offended it will come out at somebody else. In this case, the system offended that, yet another woman may wear it because she can be a target whereas the system can't.

Patches vividly presents the ways in which systemic oppression can serve to promulgate divisions between the oppressed and thereby can escape being confronted on its own failings and abuses.

Freire submits that "problem - posing" education "strives for the emergence of

consciousness and critical intervention in reality" (Freire, 1972: 69). As participants explored the reality of systemic and personal discrimination, they began to experience an improvement in their relationships with one another and with prison Security staff. Furthermore, they also began to exert their own "critical intervention in reality."

Empowerment

As a result of the PST training, many women spoke of feeling better about themselves overall - a feeling which led to making positive changes in their life circumstances. In prison, the ability to control one's life is seriously curtailed, yet there are some ways to feel empowered within this context. The seemingly "little" things take on huge proportions and can be instrumental in influencing a prisoner's sense of self. Many of the examples of making choices based upon what was best for them, resulted from a clearer sense of an autonomous self. For some, it was a release for the pressures of family experiences, that helped them achieve this sense of autonomy.

> ...like you're brainwashed. It's inside your blood...I've been here almost ten years and I feel I'm so independent in my thinking! I write essays, and it's like thoughts that you wouldn't believe are strong. And yet my emotions are the same like I was a twenty year old kid...the way you think about your family...in relation to family, I learned from PST...listening to other people...it's not my fault, not my responsibility.

Kelly (1988) found, in her study on the effects of male sexual violence, that abusive men often employ a "logic of reversal of responsibility" (179) to justify their violence. This is also a psychological manipulation common to abusers of children. The abused woman or child can internalize this blame, particularly if she receives few contrary messages

elsewhere. When a woman relinquishes responsibility for being assaulted, she acquires a more realistic perception of her ability to influence the behaviour of others. She is able to see herself as separate from others; she finds her autonomous self.

Many women spoke of their experience in the PST training as helping them have more faith in their ability to protect their autonomy. This faith manifested itself in an improved self-image and ability to define personal boundaries. Tina and Michelle speak of two different ways their relationship with peers began to change as they learned to state personal limits.

> .. no one ever went into details that it was okay to say no....but I've always felt it, like, why is it that people always walk all over me?...Why do people treat me like a doormat?...What,is it written on my forehead?...and in Peer Support a lot of the girls were very blunt, right open. Some of the things they said, after I listened to them, one time, two times, I've gotten to the stage where I say 'I need it, or I don't have time'...
>
> I'm getting assertive. And people asking for my advice happens a lot. But they need to work out their own issues. Because what I might suggest for them to do might not be right for them...I think a lot of women have all been doing what we've been told to do all our life and it carries over into every relationship and every friendship.

Morgan (1989) speaks of the constant threat of violence as the "democratization of terror." Living in an abusive relationship can impede a woman's ability to be assertive for she has learned that to assert her position can have dangerous consequences (Kelly, 1988). Women who have "been doing what we've been told to do all our life" learn this, in part, because of either the threat of or actual occurrence of male violence.

Awakened feelings of assertiveness and self-possession were also a powerful influence towards combating the inmate code. In making more personal decisions, some women found a way to actualize their feelings about protective custody inmates by standing apart from the prevailing climate of intolerance. They chose, despite the pressures to do otherwise, to make choices for themselves and remain true to their own convictions.

> I was at a point for me where I was starting to make choices for myself, not for any other reasons, and I knew I needed to be on the Wing. I needed the quiet, I needed the space and I didn't want to handle the Ranges anymore. So I went and I had to accept living in the same living unit as these women [Protective Custody inmates]...It changed my viewpoint on it...
>
> ...one day we had that group we were supposed to start up and a PC was in there...And then somebody came in and blew up. And this person [the protective custody inmate] got asked to leave. I got right choked. I was pissed off!...I said, we are taught to respect people. We are taught to take anybody into what we are doing, not to judge people...I was really really mad!..and I never went back.

Prison life, with its regimentation and isolated community of women, can make it difficult to feel motivated towards change. One hears over and over again that a prisoner is "just doing my time." It can be tempting to let time take over and run its course. Some women pointed to the training as helping them obtain the motivation to do more than "just time." They felt positive enough about their future to start looking towards release.

> I think that Peer Support has been really helpful to me...I could still be up there [on the Range] and been overly aggressive and not-care attitude

> and still looking towards staying here. Whereas now I feel a lot of the stuff has helped me towards wanting out.

A factor in looking to the future was the feeling that life had meaning -- that there was hope. Sometimes that hope was enough to keep a woman physically, as well as spiritually, alive.

> I was dealing with my own suicide during the training, and I wasn't sure if I was going to make it through or not...I felt like I was needed and that I could possibly be useful. It kept me hanging on day to day.
>
> I was determined to get out of there no matter what...and I was scared of that place because you can only put up a fight by yourself for so long...And I was getting weak...PST gave me hope. I was going to give up. But I didn't...I think that's what it was that helped me, I got involved with others.

"Getting involved with others" was the avenue through which many peer counsellors found a sense of self-worth and autonomy. The life experiences and the prison environment work against the establishment of trust and genuine relationship. As women began to share each other's experiences and perspectives a sense of trust evolved.

> I always told myself I'd never let people get close to me...And my mom told me that too. She said you're like a cow, she says, you give a bucket of milk and then you turn around and spill it. 'Cause if I see someone getting close to me I push them away or I go. And I've stopped doing that now.
>
> It built my self-esteem up because it made me feel 'part of' and made me feel responsible...They trusted me. They believed in me. They're giving me a chance. That's what we all want all our life, to be given a chance...That's a big thing to get trust!

Women commonly find personal empowerment by obtaining responsibility for helping

others because it "helps erode the belief that they are dependent" (Belenky et al., 1986:47). Entrusting prisoners with responsibility demonstrates a confidence in their abilities and in their knowledge. Implicit in the prison correctional mandate is that prisoners be assisted in being less dependent. Lee Axon, a researcher of international correctional programs, writes that the "ultimate goals of female corrections" are "aimed at fostering a sense of independence, responsibility and self-worth" (Axon, 1989: 11). Yet practically every aspect of prison life runs counter to this goal. The PST is unique in giving responsibility to prisoners, an act that validates their ability to cope, their strength and their independence.

IV: THE PEER COUNSELLING EXPERIENCE

The counselling experiences recounted by the peer counsellors, without a doubt, dispelled the notion that peer counsellors are not "legitimate" counsellors. Women spoke movingly of helping prisoners through difficult times and of the emotional impact such support work can have on the peer counsellor. Again, a frequent theme related to the struggles with powerlessness and control that are so integral to the prison setting.

Peer counsellors themselves distinguished between "formal" counselling, which are times when counselling is arranged through Security or Psychology staff, and "informal" counselling when prisoners directly ask for support on their own or when the peer counsellor is present at the time of an incident. The types of crisis situations the peer counsellors described ranged from a conflict with prison staff, to family problems, to recovered memories of sexual abuse. Despite the specifics of the issue, a common pattern was a feeling of powerlessness on the part of the prisoner in crisis. Michael Basch suggests that "throughout life, the feeling of controlling one's destiny to some reasonable extent is the essential, psychological component of all aspects of life" (Quoted in Pinderhughes, 1983: 331). Clearly, incarceration denies the prisoner this component of psychological health. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, powerlessness due to experiences of violence prior to incarceration are magnified within the prison setting. Thus, the peer counsellor's intervention occurs on several levels: in assisting the prisoner in finding control over her present circumstances and in helping her to deal with past

issues that inevitably arise during crisis situations.

Powerlessness and Control

In an article on empowering disadvantaged families, Elaine Pinderhughes writes:

> When the environment in which people live is nutritive, they flourish. There is a goodness-of-fit which facilitates growth, development, and realization of potential. When the environment is not nutritive, people actively strive to change it or themselves, or both, to achieve a better fit [emphasis mine].

Survival in prison entails distinguishing between the areas of your life you can change and that over which you have no control. Prisoners serving a very long sentence, in particular, tend to go through a period where they have a tenacious hold on the outside world. In her research on women serving life sentences, Jose-Kampfner identified this period as the beginning of the "anger stage" during which the prisoner becomes acutely aware of the reality of her prisoner status. During this stage, writes the author, the prisoner discovers that "you make it harder on yourself trying to control what you can't control" (Jose-Kampfner, 1990: 115). Susan, a peer counselor at P4W, poignantly illustrated this point in relation to family. The problem, she said, occurs when the prisoner recognizes that although she can have contact with her family, she no longer has influence over their lives.

> Family problems are really intense here. Because people think they can manage their families from in here. You can't. There has to be a line of letting go...And it is hard for a mother to give up control or say so or input to their children. Mine are older and they've put me in my place by saying to me, 'two phone calls a month don't make you a mother.'

Another peer counsellor also described a situation in which incarceration amplified family problems. She explained how a phone call from a family member can trigger unconscious memories of abuse.

> ...you'd be listening to what was objectively a family problem...maybe she had been advised of somebody's death...it would bring to mind that maybe the people that were contacting her...may have abused her...I don't think the women are necessarily aware of where the emotions are coming from initially. It's because we get the training and can hear into the pain...it just comes back to them. The anguish. And that's were the huge powerlessness comes from...And from that it's easy to see where suicide comes so close.

Pinderhughes defines "empowerment" as "the ability and capacity to cope constructively with the forces that undermine and hinder coping, the achievement of some control over [ones] destiny" (1983: 334). Likewise, peer counsellors spoke of helping prisoners locate their personal power within a coercive environment. They spoke of helping to empower them.

In any situation, whether it be related to abuse, to prison staff, or to family, peer counsellors spoke of the need to help women regain a sense of balance. It was when she no longer felt she could control anything, that the prisoner would give up hope.

> ...it's okay for her not to feel control...She may not have control over that, but there are other areas of her life where she does have lots of control. A sort of sense that the bad news is a piece of her life, it's not all of her life...bringing a bit of stability to get you through that immediate moment...Because when you lose that sense that's when thoughts of suicide happen.

Michelle spoke of the unpredictability of recovering memories of childhood abuse because "it doesn't always happen when you're in therapy. And sometimes being in therapy that day makes you click on something that night." Similar to Patches' description of restoring stability, Michelle said that:

> ...during the time I'd be talking to someone they would go from totally falling apart to strength. Like, yeah okay, I'll get through this. I don't feel good about it, I don't like what's happening, but I'll be all right...I think the biggest thing is to calm the person down. To say okay, you're sitting here. Nothing is happening to you right now. You're safe.

Michelle makes an important distinction between encouraging the woman to accept her circumstances and assisting the woman to cope with her circumstances. This subtly is significant because it highlights the goal of peer counselling as being to validate the prisoner's concerns and assist to her in finding alternatives, rather than to assist the prisoner to adapt to the problems of imprisonment.

Peer counsellors spoke of adopting a problem-solving approach when counselling a distressed woman. They "look at it, see what it is...what can be done about it and what you want to do about it." In this endeavor the peer counsellor and the woman in crisis are relating as equals. The hierarchy between "counsellor" and "client" is diminished as the two prisoners enter into a critical dialogue about the problem. Freire's "problem - posing" approach considers "dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition that unveils reality" (1972: 71). Together the prisoners unveil the problem and search for possibilities.

The PST training on counselling skills was an influential session for many peer counsellors. Several women said that prior to taking the training, they had commonly helped women by making decisions for them or actually taken action on their behalf. Peer counsellors pointed to the PST training as pivotal in teaching them empowerment techniques to foster women's self-reliance.

> There was an incident in the Wing...Because of the way the screws handled the situation, I got myself involved. I proceeded to take the inmate to the work board, did all the talking for her, got her a job, got her out of lock down, and took her back. What I've learned from Peer Support is that I've got to let people more or less tell me more. And let them take the first step instead of me doing it.
>
> But now, after taking the training, I've learned you're not really helping the person - I mean, you may be helping the person, solving the problem, but you're not helping the person if they have a long time, to eventually do it themselves.

Peer counsellors learned that taking action for a woman in crisis can actually disempower them. Vividly aware of the dangers of feeling completely without power, peer counsellors said the key technique was to help the prisoner find options for action. "You have to make them feel like they've got options...The thing is never to take the decision away from somebody...help them get motivated to make decisions and changes themselves."

Frequently, peer counsellors found that because so many prisoners suffer from lack of self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy, they also feel immobilized. Many women said that showing their own belief in the woman's goodness, strength and ability to cope helped to instill feelings of self-confidence in the distressed prisoner. For

instance, one woman I interviewed encouraged a suicidal prisoner consumed by memories of sexual abuse, to remember the strength she exhibited to survive in the first place.

> ...think of what happened to you in the past and you're still here today. If that was the case you would have done yourself in a long time ago because you were ashamed and humiliated about what happened to you. But you can't be that ashamed and humiliated because you're still walking and breathing today, so life ain't that bad.

Libra illustrates the significance of drawing on strengths to help others through a crisis.

> I tried to get her to look at some of the positive things she's got in her life...all the bad points you see, look at this, here are your strong points that I see...if you can show them a little piece, a little crumb, they'll run away with it.

Libra herself was given "a little crumb" during a difficult time of her own. She drew on the memory of her own shattered self-esteem, "I was so confused because my emotional crisis had just come to full tilt and I...had no self-respect," and recalled that having someone who believed in her had helped increase her confidence and feelings of self-worth.

Peer Counsellors can be confronted with some very serious and emotional events. Lincoln recalled when her intervention was not successful in convincing a prisoner to remain alive.

> One time in particular I felt like I failed, that I didn't do the best that I could...I lost her. And that was really really taxing...I just don't think

> anybody could, except herself, really pull her out of that, she just didn't want to be here anymore. And unfortunately you have to respect that...ultimately it's their decision.

Almost all the peer counsellors spoke of counselling suicidal prisoners and said how precarious the situations felt to them. Many counselling sessions are intense and emotionally trying. It is important, then, that the counsellors pay attention to their own emotional state and to get the support they, too, need for themselves. One peer counsellor had initially been skeptical about establishing a peer support team fearing that it "would add tremendous amount of stress to their [prisoners'] lives to be under some sort of obligation" to counsel prisoners. However, after having been a PST member for several years she said that, in fact, the PST is enhancing the lives of peer ccunsellors because it is

> ...offering outlets and offering additional support. And what is happening is that women are empowered by this experience. They are not ending up more depressed, or more suicidal...It's hard and it's tough but it is empowering as opposed to debilitating.

Effects on the Counsellor

One of the central focuses of the PST training is ensuring that the peer counsellor is able to separate her own issues and opinions from those of the woman she is counselling. Because women prisoners have much in common this can sometimes be a delicate balance. Peer counsellors I interviewed said that they had been able to use their rcommon experiences as a vehicle for empathizing and understanding with the woman in crisis. They were conscious, though, of maintaining emotional distance, as their first priority

was to support the woman.

> I've talked to a few girls who wanted to talk in confidence about their sexual abuse...not that you have to reiterate your experiences, but sometimes you say yeah, I can relate a bit to what you are talking about...
>
> ...you don't really get into it about you. You just remember what happened to you and how you felt. And you can say, I know you're feeling scared. In a way, you are going back to how you felt and you're bringing it out. So then it is easier to relate. You're there for that person, so you have to block that personal shit out.

Sometimes, though, counselling someone else can provoke feelings and memories in the counsellor of which she was previously unaware.

> I've had some very very draining and touching sessions. And sessions that woke up things in me I had not seen...sometimes I get a little aggravated because I think I have something dealt with and then something comes up...There seems to be more and more layers all the time.

Similar to the recognition of the reality of on-going education, peer counsellors found that their own healing was a continuous process. Consequently, many spoke of learning to take care of themselves after an intense training workshop or a difficult counselling session. There is a firm emphasis upon self-care in the program, a process that many women have difficulty with. A component of taking the time for self-care is feeling that you are deserving of good treatment and worthy of the effort. Many women, and prisoners particularly, have had few experiences that have instilled in them feelings of self-worth. Peer counsellors spoke of the training sessions as significant in reassuring them that they do deserve to take care of themselves, that "I'm not as bad as people told me I was."

In addition, the peer counsellors said that they owed it to the prisoners they were counselling to be in good emotional shape and to refuse to counsel someone if they were not feeling up to par, "because if I'm going through a depression or a rough time of my own I'm not going to be that useful to anybody else." This means that if they are not feeling emotionally together or are simply exhausted, they must be sure to tend to their own emotional needs first.

> I have one woman who actually really drains me. Every time I go into her room she starts talking about her abuse...her sexual abuse...she's gone through so much...It's really draining!...I sit there and I come out and my head is reeling! So I've taken two days off.

Similarly, if a peer counselor has difficulties with the particular prisoner in need of support, the peer counsellors must say no" to counselling them.

> Like my situation with women that are PCs. Until I felt that I could do it properly and effectively, and the woman could definitely get what she wanted and needed at that moment, I wouldn't do it...You just can't. Your personal biases are going to get in the way...and that can do an awful lot of damage to a person.
>
> If you can not give one hundred percent, you can say no...Whatever the reason may be, honesty is better than giving the person who needs help, who deserves better than just treating them like I'm here because I have to be, not because I want to be.

Overall, the peer counsellors felt that the training process significantly helped to improve their counselling skills. They spoke of the importance of sharing the struggles of incarceration together and of the personal satisfaction obtained by offering peer support. Often, the signs that they had been helpful were subtle, but sometimes "just the person saying I'll see you tomorrow, I promise" was enough.

V: RECOMMENDATIONS

Peer counsellors offered five main suggestions for improving the strength of the PST program. Many of these recommendations also reflect their thoughts on strategies for improving other kinds of prison and community programming that would better meet the emotional and mental health needs of female offenders.

Recommendation I: Longer Training Session

The most common suggestion for improving the PST was to extend the length of the training session. Currently, training workshops are held twice weekly for three hours each. The training session extends for six weeks. Women who requested that the training be extended felt that they did not always have sufficient time to assimilate the intense and sometimes overwhelming information. "It's a lot to go through in a short period of time. It's a lot to take in...some of the topics, there is more about that particular topic, especially when you hear people talking." In order to address this problem, women suggested that the program facilitators comb through the training agenda and "make adjustments depending on the topic. Sit down and decide if this topic needs to be longer, or maybe we don't need to spend so much time on this topic."

Most women commented on the benefits of group discussion during the PST training session. However, because of time restrictions and the fact that group facilitators need to present certain material, it is not always possible for all trainees to have a chance to speak. One woman remarked that for those prisoners whose "personalities...are quiet"

vying for speaking time can be a challenge. "The world is made up of loud people, quiet people, medium people. But always the loud ones get heard." Other women suggested that the training be extended simply because they found comfort in the group and wanted to continue group meetings. "You get to the point where that's what you live for..that's where you feel comfortable, that's were you get your stuff done...when it ended, nobody wanted it to end!" One peer counsellor proposed that the length of training be extended to "eight or ten" weeks to compensate for some of these problems.

Recommendation II: Information About the Existence of the PST

Several women commented on the inaccessibility of information regarding the peer counselling team. Originally, an elected PST chairperson would inform all newly arrived prisoners about the peer counselling program. Currently, however, there is no PST orientation and prisoners must rely upon word of mouth to find out about the service. One peer counsellor said that being introduced to a PST member when she first arrived at the prison would have helped to assuage fears about incarceration at P4W. Disconcerting rumours tend to circulate around provincial prisons regarding who and what federally sentenced women will encounter at P4W -the "big house."

> I remember coming from 'the West' [Toronto West Detention Centre] and crying all the way on the bus. 'Cause, to me, you're leaving that whole world behind and...this is my new world, this whole prison here...if I had another inmate that was a peer come and speak to me...and let me throw some questions at this person, as opposed to what I heard the last few weeks in the Metro West...

Women also felt that "more advertising" like "posters to be up all the time around the

institution" would also improve the accessibility of the program.

Recommendation III: Correctional Staff in the PST Training

The recommendation to involve Correctional Officers in the PST training has already been implemented but several peer counsellors emphasized the importance of continuing this practice. ("I think one of the most interesting things is bringing the Correctional Officers into it."). A common reason for wanting to include Security staff in the training was a feeling that the experience improves the guard's attitude towards and interaction with, the prisoners. Michelle remarked:

> I know [a guard] was in the first training session...you see if you watch her, her whole attitude about how she treats women [is much different] than some of the other people who haven't taken the training.

Prisoners reported witnessing a positive change in how guards who participated in training interacted with the prisoners on their living unit and contributed this change to the opportunity for the officers to witness their humanity in a group setting. A PST graduate commented that these guards come to understand "that we are human beings first, before we're prisoners." Renee advised that "they should aim for every training session, when possible, to get one or two staff...involved. 'Cause the more [staff] you have going through the training session, sooner or later, it's going to spread."

Recommendation IV: Community Involvement

The peer counsellors emphasized an appreciation for community involvement in the PST

training workshops and proposed that other prison programs invite in guest speakers. Some team members, though, felt that they would have been more "inspired" had ex-offenders and ex-addicts also be invited to speak of their experiences of "making it" on the outside. Some felt that they would be better able to identify with someone who had actually experienced incarceration and/or was a recovered drug addict. "I'm not saying you have to know what a broken arm feels like to fix it, but if you've had a broken arm you certainly can understand the pain."

Women also felt that inviting ex-prisoners or ex-addicts to present training workshops would help strengthen their ties with the outside community and to people with whom they share more in common than they do with "professionals." It was also suggested that ex-PST members be invited back to "talk about what day parole is like, talk about what it's like out there if you have a drug problem...what kind of counselling...what it's like to look for a job." In this regard, one peer counsellor proposed that group members "have a little more say in who comes in."

Recommendation V: PST On the Outside

Many women expressed the need for a formal peer support team to be established for women once they leave P4W. They felt it would be helpful as a support group for the peer counsellors as well as a valuable service for newly released women.

> You have women who are coming out who have spent seven years of their life on the inside and she's coming out and she's by herself. It is scary!...have a Peer Support Team out here with women to say, 'I know what you're going through, I've been there.'

Informal peer support continues on the outside, particularly in the half-way house where "we are forever keeping each other up, supporting each other...we wouldn't still be out here if we weren't." The pressures of release can be extreme and several women spoke of difficulties coping with the amount of therapy sessions, half-way house meetings, job interviews, and academic classes, that many are required to attend. One peer counsellor described her initial release period as "suffocating." "When I first came out I had all this stuff I had to do...I was going nuts!...I was ready to go back to prison...the pressure was just unreal!" One of the contributing difficulties for parolees is a stipulation in their parole conditions called the "non-association clause." This clause prevents women from associating with people who either have, or are suspected of having, a criminal record. In many cases, people with whom they are prohibited to associate are the very people who supported them through their prison sentence. The non-association stipulation sometimes forces women to carry on "clandestine" meetings in order to continue the friendships and support that recently paroled women often need. Women felt that a formally sanctioned Peer Support Team on the outside would provide a valuable post-release support. One ex-prisoner told me, "you write a [funding] proposal...get the money, and we'll do the work."

Chapter Six

DISCUSSION

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the Peer Support Team at Prison for Women. Four primary research questions were explored in order to determine: (1) if prisoners in the general P4W population were profiting from the PST; (2) if the training session was in fact meeting its goals of helping participants cultivate their counselling skills and gain a fresh perspective on women's lives; (3) if trust and group cohesiveness was established among peer counsellors; and (4) how racial and cultural issues figured into the PST program. Interviews were conducted with women who had volunteered for and been accepted on the Peer Support Team. They can not, therefore, be assumed to represent the perspectives of the entire prison population. Future qualitative research is needed involving prisoners who have received peer counselling in order to supplement the peer counsellor's evaluation of the program. In addition, there is so little literature detailing participant-evaluated prison programs that comparability to similar and contrasting programs is also limited. Of the existing literature, however, there is some indication that the PST's approach to learning and support during the training, the validation of the concept of peer support, and the adoption of a feminist analysis of violence and oppression in women's lives, has been found effective elsewhere.

The results of the survey indicated that the majority (81%) of respondents valued

the existence of the program even if they had never used a peer counsellor in a crisis situation. Of the 53 survey respondents 13 did not feel comfortable using the service themselves because of concerns for confidentiality. The peer counsellors themselves said that during the PST training they learned counselling skills, established trust within the group context, and experienced positive changes in their self-concept and in their perceptions of others. Participants said that they appreciated the ethnic and racial diversity of the group participants and that hearing women of colour speak of their own experiences helped them achieve a better understanding of racial oppression. Non-white peer counsellors said that they share a common cultural background with the majority of women that asked to see them for counselling. The results of the study suggest that the concept of peer support and the approach to program training have important theoretical implications for mental health services in prisons for women. The PST poses a challenge to conventional attitudes about female offenders and offers, in its philosophy and structure, an alternative paradigm for prison programming.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Several theoretical considerations about group programming and the mental health needs of female prisoners emerged from this evaluation. The first theoretical concern relates to the nature of the PST training group. Although peer counsellors said that they personally profited from the PST training process, the primary purpose of the program is to gain the skills to help others. As such, the PST training involves professional facilitators who present educational material and guide group discussion. This differs from traditional self-help groups whose "structure and mode of operation are under the control of members" (Lieberman and Bond, 1978). Peer counsellors said that because the educational material and discussion is relevant to their concerns and experiences, the training helped them with their own problems. In addition to the educational component, the PST training also provided a supportive atmosphere in which group members could share and explore their own experiences. Sultan and Kiefer (1986) call this type of group, both educational and therapeutic, a "psychodidactic support group" and implemented such a group in a North Carolina women's prison. These authors find that conveying "personally relevant information helps to provide a better cognitive framework for clients to interpret their own personal experiences" (1986: 469). Similarly, Judith Herman (1992) refers to "psychoeducational" therapeutic groups that are "highly cognitive and educational rather than exploratory" (230). She suggests that psychoeducational groups are especially effective in creating safety for survivors of traumatic experiences and are most useful in places such as "a psychiatric hospital inpatient service, a drug or alcoholism detoxification program, or a battered women's

shelter" (230). Herman uses self-help groups as an example of the types of groups designed to develop emotional safety. These groups do not focus on in-depth exploration of the trauma itself. Rather, they offer a cognitive framework for understanding symptoms that may be secondary complications of the trauma, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, and other self-destructive behaviors. They also offer a set of instructions for personally empowering survivors and for restoring their connections with others...(Herman, 1992:230).

Herman's psychoeducational group resembles the structure and content of the PST training group which presents, as an informational backdrop, trauma-related symptoms common to sexual abuse survivors. Peer counsellors said they acquired counselling skills from the information, experienced a decrease in isolation, felt empowered to make changes in their own life and began to develop the skills and self-esteem to take better care of themselves. Underlying the descriptions of the personal effects of training was a sense of trust and safety that had been established within the group context.

This model for training prisoners to be peer counsellors involves a further dynamic. By presenting information within a cultural and societal framework, the PST facilitators provide a context in which participants can interpret their own experiences as women. This method of understanding and conveying information adds a "conscious-raising" component to the program. The PST training manual states that:

Each of us internalizes the oppression originating in the outside world

> and, all too often, we create our own punitive climate within. Recognition that much of our self-portrait is created by misogynist, racist, heterosexist, and classist systems, frees us to challenge and reject distorted images of ourselves and others. The PST reflects women's recognition of common experiences and a refusal to remain isolated from, and silent with, each other. When we take our healing into our own hands, we reclaim the power stolen from us, as our own."

One of the results of "conscious-raising" element, was an increase in the participants understanding of cultural and racial issues and an increased tolerance for women convicted for child-related crimes. As well, participants said they gained a sense of personal empowerment through sharing common experiences of oppression and abuse with group members, facilitators, and guest speakers.

The model of education and support used by the Psychology Department is based upon how the group co-ordinators view the needs and experiences of female prisoners. Inherent in the program philosophy is a belief in the prisoner's rights and capacity to actively take part in their own healing and survival. Another premise of the PST is that psychological stress is a natural effect of incarceration and does not necessarily mean the prisoner is "sick" or in need of psychiatric help. The PST therefore legitimizes the informal counselling that regularly occurs among prisoners and validates their capabilities to support one another through crisis periods. This view of female prisoners differs from conventional notions of women in conflict with the law. Historically, female offenders were thought to be aberrations of womanhood and/or psychologically unsound (Dobash & Dobash, 1936; Bardsley, 1987). In 1900, for instance, Cesare Lombroso and Enrico Ferrero espoused the theory that all women are inherently evil and have criminal

tendencies. Lombroso and Ferrero claimed that a woman's "maternal sentiments" prevents the majority from acting upon their criminal and libidinal impulses, and from wreaking havoc on the world's justice system. However, if a woman lacks natural feminine characteristics, her latent criminality will surface.

> ...when piety and maternal sentiments are wanting and in their place are strong passions and intensely erotic tendencies, much muscular strength and a superior intelligence for the conception and execution of evil, it is clear that the innocuous semi-criminal present in the normal woman must be transformed into a born criminal more terrible than any man. (Lombroso and Ferrero quoted in Adelberg & Currie, 1987: 49).

This quotation suggests that, according to these authors, female criminality posed less of a threat to the security of law and order, than it did to the security of the status quo. Although Lombroso and Ferrero were writing in 1900, similar presumptions can still be found today. For example, Page's (1984) treatment recommendation for drug-addicted female prisoners resounds with echoes of the nineteenth century criminologists. Page submits that when women become "members of the drug culture" they "give up traditional sex roles easily...because they regard these roles as boring" (14). Treatment for these women, he says, should focus on changing the way they perceive "the sex roles of women and the positive contributions that women can make to society" (14). Page, as did Lombroso and Ferrero, regards women's rejection of "traditional" feminine roles as a psychological disorder and advocates treatment that will help women appreciate their circumstances.

How female offenders and their crimes are understood inevitably influences the

type of prison programming provided for them. The PST co-ordinators view many of the emotional and psychological needs of women prisoners within the context of their experiences as women. Specifically, an understanding of the psychological effects of violence against women and child abuse guides both the PST training program and the individual counselling provided by the Psychology Department. Central to the peer counselling program is the recognition that survivors of childhood abuse have been robbed of their power at a very early age and that, in order to cope with painful experiences, they may "embrace values that ease their frustration, that give them a sense of power" (Pinderhughes, 1983: 333).

With the exception of the Family Violence Program at Bedford Hills, which has not yet been formally evaluated or documented, there are few programs specifically designed to help female prisoners heal from sexual and physical assault. The same approach to helping women confront their experiences and current problems adopted by the PST has, however, been advocated in several recent reports. Deschepper (1989) asserts that therapeutic programming in prisons for women should reflect an awareness of the traumatic effects caused by experiences of violence. She further suggests that prison services be modeled on community programs for female survivors of violence, because of the potential that these groups have to "strengthen the common bonds between all disadvantaged women in society at large" (Deschepper, 1989: 31).

In contrast to traditional models of therapy that define psychological health as the

capability to suppress affect, to be autonomous and self-reliant, and to be oriented towards individual achievement (Ferguson, 1984), the PST program emphasizes relationship and interdependence. Peer counsellors said that by inviting activist women into the training sessions and by offering the participants a space to learn from and about each other, they felt a strengthened connection to one another. Often, the peer counsellors spoke of finding voice and a sense of autonomy through this connection. During the last decade feminist psychologists have highlighted the Eurocentric and sexist bias inherent in the medical model of psychological health and its essential inapplicability to women's emotional growth and development (Surrey, 1991). Carol Gilligan and her colleagues have found that it is through women's relationships with others that they flourish emotionally and discover personal independence. Gilligan writes that "women's experiences of connectedness to others leads to enlarged conceptions of self, morality, and visions of relationships" (Gilligan, in Surrey, 1991: 52) and Janet Surrey writes about what she refers to as "the self-in-relation." The self-in-relation refers to the recognition that "for women, the primary experience of self is relational, that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships" (Surrey: 52). This concept was illustrated by the peer counsellors who felt that by "getting involved with others" they were able to secure a sense of autonomy, self-worth and empowerment. Feeling connected to other prisoners, to the Correctional Staff, and to the Psychology Department, helped to increase self-esteem and self-growth. The relationships they established and the women to which they were exposed, provided "exceptional role models" of strong women and healthy relationships, and helped to reinforce the common

experiences of women. Furthermore, strengthening the connections between the outside community and female prisoners can be even more fruitful, as the peer counsellors recommended, if programs include "role models" who are ex-prisoners and/or ex-addicts. Doing so would enable current prisoners to feel a deeper affinity with these women and may better address their present concerns.

Although a woman-centred perspective towards healing is adopted by the peer counsellors and the mental health staff, it is clear that imprisonment compounds the issue of recovery. Peer counsellors spoke of the arbitrary enforcement of prison rules, the power imbalance between prisoner and keeper, and the pervasive threat of danger as elements that replicate the dynamics of the abusive relationship. The prisoners at P4W are some of the most seriously damaged women in Canada (Mclean, 1991) and incarceration inevitably intensifies any pre-existing psychological and/or emotional difficulties. Peer counsellors said that the most prevalent problems confronting prisoners were feelings of powerlessness and extreme anxiety, feelings that often brought back memories of abuse. The peer intervention was important because the team members worked to provide the distressed prisoner with options in an environment where few resources for coping are available. (Jan Heney speculated that self-injury is common even among prisoners who were not regular slashers before incarceration because the sense of powerlessness is so high and options for coping so few). Peer counsellors said that trying to contain anxiety by helping the woman restore a sense of personal efficacy and control, is the primary goal during crisis intervention. Because the aim of peer

counselling is to help women with issues that arise during incarceration, one of the peer counsellors said that, in a sense, the program can be seen as merely offering a "bandaid" to cover up the larger institutional and societal problems that effect the women.

> I see the Peer Support Team in the sense of passing out band aids in the middle of a battle field, when what we really want to do is end the God Damn war!...so here we are protecting the system from the anger of women...The thing is again, I'm living in the here and now. The prisons and the whole social structure would have to change. And I am not prepared to sacrifice my sisters...

Although she supports the idea of the team, this peer counsellor said that from a radical perspective, the PST can be seen as being complicit with the system: prisoners and mental health workers are helping women survive imprisonment rather than protesting against, or changing, the internal structure and ideology of the prison. This observation points to the obvious limitations of the PST in terms of how much actual change can be brought about by the program. The PST works within the confines of the prison system and offers a service to help prisoners deal with the negative effects of incarceration. The program tries to compensate for an inadequate correctional system and a society in which women and children are often abused. If, as Patches commented, "we offer no help and just let the place implode upon itself" public outcry and concern may lead to large structural change. Yet, the costs of this approach are too high. On an individual level, the PST has the survival of the women as its primary agenda. As Michelle, observed, the most useful aspect of the program is that "it's keeping a lot of women alive." Despite the constraints imposed by the institution, the program's efficacy is apparent. Although the program has limited power to actually transform prison conditions the PST, as the

peer counsellors repeatedly emphasized, is able to provide a temporary contrast to some of the oppressive characteristics of the prison environment. This contrasting experience also has practical implications for group and individual therapeutic programming in prisons for women.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The model used for the PST training and program implementation has practical implications for prison programming. Interestingly, some of the most salient problems confronted by prisoners during incarceration, although by no means rectified, were addressed and countered during the PST training. The first of these problems relates to the issue of peer relationships at P4W.

Both the survey respondents and the peer counsellors drew attention to the importance of peer relationships in coping with incarceration. Survey respondents said that they frequently received emotional support from prison relationships and that they felt it was important to share the experiences of incarceration with someone who knows what it is like. Peer counsellors also spoke of the significance of peer relationships in their lives and of the positive impact of sharing experiences and receiving support from other prisoners during the PST training. Several studies have illustrated how relationships between female prisoners can help ease the pains of incarceration (see literature review) and can be a powerful impetus towards organizing for change (Clark and Boudin, 1990). The participants in this study confirm these findings and point to the effectiveness of a program that capitalizes upon the informal support network among female prisoners. Although the peer counsellors who were interviewed repeatedly referred to the significance of peer relationships, they also spoke of the many factors in prison that impede the establishment of warm, mutual and interdependent relationships. In addition to environmental considerations, participants also said that many prisoners arrive at P4W

having had few models of healthy relationships in their own lives. They said that the PST training was helpful in this regard because it encouraged relationships based upon honesty and mutuality, provided an opportunity for women to get to know one another on a fairly intimate level, and provided positive examples of co-operative efforts and powerful women. As Patches said, "there aren't many places in prison...where you get role models...It's one of those intangible things that is very very useful. Immensely valuable."

Although many participants (both in the survey and the interviews) indicated the usefulness of the peer counselling program, many said that the common experience of imprisonment was not always the only criteria for feeling comfortable with a peer counsellor. Frequently, similar cultural or racial backgrounds were mentioned as important contributions to the effectiveness of the PST service. Some peer counsellors spoke of the safety they themselves felt, before they joined the team, when receiving peer counselling from a prisoner with the same racial heritage. As well, peer counsellors who were of colour revealed that the women they most often counselled were from the same cultural background as themselves. Similarly, Berg (1988) found in a study of college peer counsellors, that a common racial background helped increase the perceived helpfulness of peer counselling. In addition, he found that white peer counsellors had to work harder and disclose more personal information than did non-white counsellors, in order to achieve intimacy with Black clients. Significantly, at the time of this study, all of the professional mental health providers at P4W were white. Three of the non-white peer counsellors said that this fact influenced their desire to join the team because they

wanted to provide their own people with someone safe to talk to. Several French-Canadian women, as well, indicated on the questionnaire that they did not use the peer counselling service because none of the team members were French speaking. These findings and the peer counselling literature suggest the importance of a common cultural heritage in enabling prisoners to identify and feel comfortable with both professional and peer mental health providers.

Racial dynamics and cultural issues in the PST training also surfaced as a common theme during the interviews. Practically every participant offered an appreciation of the diversity of PST members and felt it contributed to their understanding and feelings of comfort with women from cultures different from their own. Again, they said that this experience provided a welcome contrast to the typical prison experience in which "they try to segregate you, put barriers between the different groups." The exposure to racial issues in the group training also influenced the way peer counsellors related to other prisoners outside the group setting. Several women spoke of a new appreciation for the unique experiences of Native and West Indian women and an understanding of how "different ethnic people react to different situations." This aspect of PST training also has implications for prison programming since it points to the possibility of improving relationships among inmates from varying backgrounds by allowing them the space to learn from one another's experiences.

Sharing personal experiences was a crucial element of the peer counsellor's

assessment of the effectiveness of the PST training. Many felt that the program's practice of using the women's own experiences as a departure point for investigation of larger concepts greatly contributed to the personal benefits they derived from the group. Peer counsellors said that this, too, runs counter to typical prison programming in which a pre-set agenda is imposed upon the group. (An example is the Cognitive Skills program which is a pre-fabricated program developed at the National Headquarters of Corrections Canada and is implemented at P4W and the federal male prisons). The learning model adopted by the PST facilitators is similar to that upon which "The Empowerment Program" at Riker's Island is based. This program in a New York prison for women is designed to help prisoners explore AIDS related issues. The facilitators of this group have found that creating "the opportunity for participants to describe and compare their life experiences," provides the "raw material from which a common analysis can be drawn" (Richie, 1992:5). The "Empowerment Program" uses Freirian principles of education which the facilitators say is "particularly useful in working with 'marginalized' groups in society" and "helps to work against the despair and hopelessness that sometimes characterizes these groups." This, too, was a sentiment echoed by the PST members and suggests the effectiveness of this model of learning for programs in prisons for women.

An interesting aspect of the PST that differs from "The Empowerment Program" is that participants not only have the opportunity to share experiences and develop their counselling skills within a group context, but they are also able to operationalize their

discoveries by offering peer support to women in crisis. The experience of peer counselling provides the occasion for prisoners to be proactive. This element of the program also contrasts with typical prison experiences. Rarely in prison does a person take an active role in the conditions of her imprisonment - she is typically acted upon. Ferguson (1984) writes that one of the characteristics of a bureaucracy that perpetuates client dependency is the client's alienation from the bureaucratic processes that influence their lives.

> ...one can not demand to be included as a participant in the political process itself; to be a recipient is also to be a spectator (146).

A program like the PST or like ACE (Aids Counselling and Education) at Bedford Hills, endows prisoners with some control over their experience of imprisonment and removes them temporarily from the "spectator" role. The ability to take part in one's own decision-making, support, and education allows the women to be agents in at least some part of their lives, an ability, as the peer counsellors illustrated, that can be a powerful inoculation against despair.

Trust of the program co-ordinators and of the group participants was another frequently mentioned theme during the interviews. Many peer counsellors spoke of their own personal difficulties with trusting others and the ways in which the prison setting is inhospitable to trust. Prisoners said that establishing trust in groups for women in prison is difficult because of both environmental and personal influences. Women's experiences of child abuse, violent partnerships, racism, negative experiences with authority, and the

coercive prison environment are all influences that need to be considered when planning therapeutic programming in prisons for women. Recently, I was presenting a workshop on treatment for sexual abuse survivors in prisons, and a woman in the audience commented that she found it "really really sad' that some female prisoners have difficulty trusting one another and that the prison "should do something about that." As social service and mental health workers it is important to remember that inmates are not voluntary clients. They did not come to prison because they wanted to "work on issues." (I was forcefully reminded of this fact on those occasions when clients were escorted to therapy appointments in handcuffs). Given their personal histories and current circumstances, it is not surprising that many prisoners are wary and distrustful, an attitude which, in fact, seems to be a sensible protective strategy. However, peer counsellors indicated that they did feel trust and group cohesion during the PST training session. Participants said that the primary reasons that they felt trust was because of the shared experiences of participants and feelings of genuine caring they sensed from the members. They felt that the group training provided a place in which their vulnerabilities were respected and in which they could speak of their own personal difficulties. Peer counsellors also said that this experience was unique in their prison experience. In other prison groups, either there was little time for group sharing and discussion or the nature of the group seemed irrelevant to their concerns or experiences. This finding reiterates the usefulness of a "psychoeducational group" that provides time for personal sharing and the dissemination of relevant information and has as its primary agenda, the creation of group safety.

Generally, the more relevance a program has to the participants the higher the likelihood that they will feel an investment in its success and continuation. ACE at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, for instance, is prisoner-developed and implemented, and is enjoying much success and publicity. Program members have elicited the help of local universities and community agencies and have secured funding to hire civilians to help with program maintenance. Group members have also published articles in journals and have recently written their own Aids education manual. These prisoners are firmly committed to ACE and like the PST, devote a large portion of their time to assisting women in crisis. The rewards and benefits of such programs also go beyond that which is gained behind prison walls. Members of ACE have found employment in the outside community as AIDS counsellors and have established their own post-release counselling centre for HIV and AIDS infected ex-prisoners. Members of the PST also spoke of continuing to access and enhance their counselling skills even after leaving prison. In the halfway house, peer counsellors play a vital role in assisting adjustment back into the community. On a personal level as well, PST members found that participation on the team "was like a huge gift of life skills...the information translated into types of living skills, now that I am on the street and doing other things, [that] has be invaluable." The benefits of groups like the peer support program at P4W sustain a life outside the prison bars. "I feel like I'm still part of the team now. It's not something I'll ever lose," a fact suggesting that the PST training carries with it more than just an avenue through which to survive incarceration. Peer counsellors presently living in the community revealed the lasting changes participation in the program has had upon their lives.

Most prominently, women interviewed for this research indicate the usefulness of prison groups modeled like the PST training group. The only group of this sort at P4W, the PST training stands out as unique in its philosophy, structure and content, and as being most relevant and useful to the women in this population. Future prison programming in prisons for women would likely benefit from a similar model of group work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

This study has pertinent implications for future therapeutic programming in prisons for women. For social workers, too, lessons may be drawn regarding positive approaches to group work and ways to better address the needs of female offenders. This is a critical period in the history of federally sentenced in women in Canada because of the current plans to decentralize the federal prison and to establish five smaller prisons across Canada. The plans for the new prisons indicate movement towards a new and alternate approach to prison programming (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1989), a fact that holds potential for social workers and schools of social work located in the vicinity of these new facilities.

With a few exceptions, the social work literature lacks reference to female prisoners or ex-prisoners. Iglehart and Stein (1985) speculate that because of the self-contained nature of penal institutions, social workers may not perceive incarcerated women as potential clients. Further, community mental health and human service agencies may be unaware that their services are needed and can be implemented behind the prison wall. However, several of the peer counsellor's suggestions for improving the quality of the peer counselling service and post-release support, reveal specific avenues through which social services organizations might offer improved services and assistance.

Many participants in this study emphasized that access to information about the PST program should be improved and that security staff should be better informed and

more supportive of the program. A useful exercise for outside agencies involved in new prison programming would be to meet with the Security staff early in the planning process, to both inform them of the purpose of the program and to ensure that the new program will operate without conflicting with the prison schedule (Iglehart and Stein, 1985). I would further suggest that Correctional Staff be consulted about their perceptions of the kinds of programming needed. Certainly, this effort should be without the requirement that the program be in any way accountable to Correctional Staff or be an instrument of the correctional system. Yet, such a process may elicit the co-operation of front-line security personnel by allowing them input into the program and may influence their inclination to support and inform inmates about the availability of programs.

Social workers can also be instrumental in assisting prisoners to actively define and implement their own peer-based services and to help secure the autonomous existence of such a program. One of the aspects of the PST group that peer counsellors most appreciated was the ability to return to future PST training sessions. They felt that returning for continued learning offered a sense of continuity and a renewed connection to other prisoners. In addition, participants also felt that their first experience of training was too short and requested longer training sessions. This finding suggests that programs structured in such a way as to nourish peer support, counselling, and education carry the potential for the group to continue on its own. Once women have been trained and have gained peer counselling experience they could continue to meet and fulfill the goals of the group themselves. Guidelines for the intricacies of such a peer-initiated program

could be gleaned from the ACE (Aids Counselling and Education) program at Bedford Hills, whose members solicited the help of outside professionals and now run the program alone.

Social workers and human service agencies are also likely candidates to help provide non-probationary post-release services for women reentering the community. A recommendation that emerged from this evaluation was that women who are released from prison need better supports in their efforts to meet their probation requirements and remain out of prison. Although it is clear that newly released prisoners are in need of adequate job training and opportunities, formal education, and financial assistance, participants in this study asserted that recently paroled women could also greatly benefit from a peer support group designed to help women re-adjust to life on the outside. A group of this sort would allow ex-prisoners to share information on housing, employment, and support services and to gain emotional support from one another. Just as the PST training helped prisoners decrease feelings of isolation, a post-release support group carries the potential to do the same.

Social workers can also advocate for the involvement of ex-prisoners in programs within correctional institutions. A frequently mentioned suggestion for improving the PST training session was to invite previously incarcerated women to speak to the group about their experiences of re-entering the community. Similarly, according to the program co-ordinator of The Family Violence Program at Bedford Hills Correctional facility, one

of the contributing factors to the program's success is that she herself is an ex-prisoner (personal communication, September 24, 1992). Her prison history, she said, helps break down barriers between "expert" and "client" by emphasizing a common bond and experience. Social workers can foster this bond by requesting the assistance of ex-prisoners in program development efforts and by encouraging prison administrations to allow these women access to currently incarcerated women. Schools of social work, as well, can advance this agenda by providing incentives for ex-prisoners to enroll in Bachelor's and Master's courses and by encouraging student field placements, as does Carleton University, in correctional facilities for women. Burden and Gottlieb (1987) further suggest that social work programs include courses on women in conflict with the law to inspire social work students towards a practice in prisons for women.

The findings that emerged from this study suggest that the roles social workers can play in assisting female prisoners are as manifold as incarcerated women's needs. The theoretical and practical implications that arise from this program evaluation highlight the need for alternative approaches to programming for women in conflict with the law and illustrate the positive role that incarcerated women can take in their own healing and program needs.

Conclusion

The vast majority of federally sentenced women in Canada are survivors of childhood abuse and/or male violence. The participants in this study poignantly described how the

prison setting recreates the power imbalance, sense of insecurity, degradation, and fear that is inherent in most abusive relationships and that can impede a woman's ability to heal her emotional scars. A crucial precondition for healing from traumatic experiences of violence and abuse, as the recent literature on trauma and victimization has clearly illustrated, is an atmosphere of safety in which a woman can possess feelings of self-efficacy (Browne and Finkelhor, 1986; Blume, 1990; Laidlaw and Malmo, 1990; Herman, 1992). The results of this study show that, despite the overall punitive prison climate, the PST training helped create an atmosphere in which team members felt accepted and empowered. The women's approach to peer counselling, as well, reflected an awareness of the long-term psychological effects of severe abuse. This awareness guided their attempts to help restore equilibrium and control to the prisoner she was supporting. A firm understanding of the dynamics and psychological effects of violence and the attempt to provide restorative experiences of empowerment, is a rare finding in prison programming. The PST stands as an innovative and powerful model of peer support programs and as a model for theoretical and practical treatment approaches for incarcerated abuse survivors.

Several researchers have questioned whether it is possible to heal from psychological trauma while a woman is incarcerated (Ross and Fabiano, 1986; Deschepper, 1989). Certainly, most characteristics of the prison must change before it is a truly therapeutic environment. Yet until that time, the findings from this study, the programs at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, and the relevant literature suggest that

there are possibilities that could pave the way towards an alternative approach to prison therapeutic services. If one of the criteria for a program's effectiveness is that it allows for female prisoners "to take back their lost power and [to regain] a sense that one exists" (Loewenstein, 1983), as does the Peer Support Team, then perhaps the healing journey has begun.

Appendix A

SAMPLE SURVEY

The Peer Support Team program is organized by the Psychology Department at P4W. The program trains women to give support to other prisoners during crisis situations and to help women who may just need someone to talk to. In order to know if the program is meeting women's needs, we need to hear from each of you. We would appreciate hearing your opinions about the Peer Support Team so that we can find out what is working well and make any improvements you feel are necessary. We appreciate you taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please do not put your name on the questionnaire.

Sentence length _____
Time already served_____
Security level_____
Race\Ethnicity\Language_____

1. Have you ever asked to see a Peer Support Team member?
   _____No
   _____Yes

   If you have **NOT** seen a Peer Support Team member, is it because: (Please circle all that apply)

   a. You haven't needed to?
   b. You don't feel comfortable with anyone on PST?
   c. You didn't know about the PST?
   d. You weren't allowed to see a member of PST?
   e. You were concerned about confidentiality?

Are there other reasons why a woman may choose **NOT** to talk to a Peer Support Team member when in distress?

2. If you **HAVE** seen a Peer Support Team member, how often have you seen someone? (Please circle one answer)

   a. once
   b. a couple of times
   c. many times

3. What was the reason you saw a Peer Support Team member? (Please circle all that apply)

a. argument with prison staff or administration
b. doing seg time
c. argument with friend
d. flashbacks of abuse
e. feelings of self-harm
f. depressed
g. physical conflict with another inmate
h. suicidal feelings

Other reasons?_____

4. How helpful was the Peer Support Team member?

0 1 2 3 4 5

Not Helpful Very Helpful

5. If Peer Support counselling helped, was it because you felt: (Please circle all that apply)

a. less suicidal
b. less angry
c. less depressed
d. less self-injurious
e. better about yourself
f. more optimistic
g. less alone

Other reasons it helped?_____

6. If Peer Support counselling **DID NOT** help, was it because: (Please circle all that apply)

a. you did not feel understood?
b. you did not feel comfortable with the counsellor?
c. the counsellor was unable to spend enough time with you?

Other reasons peer counselling **DID NOT** help?_____

7. Who do you go to for emotional support most often? (Please circle all that apply)

   a. friends
   b. psychologist
   c. counsellor
   d. nurse
   e. Peer Support Team member
   f. spiritual leader (Elder, Priest, Rabbi, etc.)

8. Can you suggest ways to improve the Peer Support Team Program?

_____

9. Any other comments?

_____

Appendix B

INTERVIEW GUIDE: PEER COUNSELLORS

Code Name _____

Personal Data:

Living Unit _____
Sentence Length_____
Time Served_____
Race\Ethnicity _____
First Language _____
Age _____

Category A

1. Could you start by telling me a little about your reasons for wanting to become a peer counsellor?

Category B
Questions about group training experience

2. Were the training sessions useful in helping you develop your counselling skills?

   (Prompt: Specific skills and how training influenced understanding of peer counselling, what topics most useful, was she prepared for the actual peer counselling experience).

3. The PST training covers a lot of topics related to women's lives. Did the experience help you deal with any of your own personal issues? Did it influence your feelings about yourself?

4. Did the training session change your view of any types of people or on any specific issues?

Category C
Women they support

5. What types of crisis do you usually help women with?

   (Prompt: How does she deal with it?)

6. How often do you peer counsell someone?

7. Can you give an example(s) of a peer counselling session that you feel went particularly well?

   (Prompt: Nature of crisis, changes seen in the women in crisis).

8. What about a example of peer counselling in which things could have been done differently to make it more beneficial? What could have been done differently?

   (Prompt: institutional influences, personal state of mind, inexperience)

9. Do you think a woman's race, living unit, sentence length or age reflect whether or not she is likely to ask to see a peer counsellor? Why?

Category D
The Peer counselling experience

10. Have you ever been asked to peer support a close friend? What was it like?

    (Prompt: role confusion, boundary issues).

11. As women counsellors, we often share similar experiences to those we counsel. Have your own personal issues ever been triggered while counselling someone? If so, how did you handle it?

Category E
Recommendations and comments about therapeutic services at P4W

12. Because of your familiarity with the various aspects of the PST program, I would like to get your input into ways in which the program might be improved. What would you like to see in future training sessions, program structure, etc.?

13. In addition, you are best able to advise what should remain the same. Could you say a little about what is working well with the Peer Support Program?

14. Are there any other changes in current programming that would allow the institution to better meet the emotional or mental health needs of women in P4W?

Appendix C

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS'S PERSONAL DATA

AGE

20-30 years	3
30-40 years	4
40-50 years	5

Mean Age: 36 years

RACE

Black	3
Caucasian	7
Native	2

SENTENCE LENGTH

2-5 years	4
5-10 years	2
10-25 years	1
Life	5

Appendix D

CONSENT FORM

I _____ agree to participate in the evaluation of the Peer Support Team at Prison for Women conducted by Shoshana Pollack of the Carleton University School of Social Work. I am aware that the interview will focus upon my experiences as a member of the Peer Support Team and as a peer counsellor.

I understand that participation in this study will involve:

1. A total of two meetings: the first meeting will be an interview during which I will be asked questions related to my experiences as a peer counsellor and a member of the Peer Support Team. The second meeting will be an opportunity to make any changes, clarification, or amendments to the written record of the first interview.

2. Audio-taping of the interview. The tapes will either be returned to me or destroyed and I will have control over the tape recorder to decide what gets recorded and what does not; and

3. The information gathered from the interview will be used in an evaluation report. The report will in no way identify me, affect my status on the Peer Support Team, or the help I will receive, either presently or in the future, from the Psychology Department.

I understand that I am free to contact Shoshana Pollack (Psychology Department, Prison For Women) should I have questions or concerns regarding the study.

I also understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, without consequence.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____

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