Mothers Behind Bars: Defining and Redefining Self

by

Ahna Berikoff
M.A., University of Victoria, 2006

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the School of Child and Youth Care,
Faculty of Human and Social Development

© Ahna Berikoff, 2006
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.
Mothers Behind Bars: Defining and Redefining Self

by

Ahna Berikoff
M.A., University of Victoria, 2006

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Supervisor (School of Child and Youth Care)

Dr. Leslie Brown (School of Social Work)

Dr. Enid Elliott (School of Child and Youth Care)
Examining Committee

Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw, Supervisor (School of Child and Youth Care)

Dr. Leslie Brown (School of Social Work)

Dr. Enid Elliot (School of Child and Youth Care)

Dr. Annalee Lepp, External Examiner (Department of Women’s Studies)

ABSTRACT

The central focus of this thesis is an exploration of how mothers in prison construct a sense of self as mothers according to motherhood ideologies and reconstruct this sense of self as a result of imprisonment. The study, informed by feminist poststructuralism, shows how relations of power/knowledge shape the experiences of women in prison leading to marginalization. The notion of the constitution of subjectivities through discourses offers ‘other’ ways to see the lives of imprisoned mothers, destabilizing assumptions and constructed truths and challenging fixed frameworks of meaning and truth surrounding motherhood.

The research methodology employed was a qualitative approach based on ‘interpretive interactionism’. The premise of this approach was to make visible and accessible to the reader, the problematic lived experiences of the participants through their stories. The research methods involved interviews with six imprisoned women who shared stories of
their experiences being mothers. The analysis involved an interpretation of the meanings participants applied to mothering in prison, expressed by their feelings, thoughts and practice of mothering. The participants’ position as mothers within a prison institution was met with daily challenges as they sought out ways to have relationships with their children and maintain a sense of self as mothers. The research showed that even in a restricted prison environment of limited choices participants were able to be agents of choice and possibilities. The study shows that the participants resisted dominant ideologies of motherhood and maintained a sense of being mothers through connections with their children, with each other, as well as through self-reflection and harbouring hopes and dreams for the future. Feminist poststructuralism provided the tools for revealing the possibilities of alternative ways of mothering in prison that did not hinge on being either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mothers.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page ................................................................. i
Supervisory Committee .................................................. ii
Abstract ........................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ............................................................ v
Acknowledgments .............................................................. vi

Chapter 1 Introduction: Building Context................................. 1
  Insider/Outsider: Historical Connections ............................. 2
  Mothering Behind Bars: Defining and Redefining Self ............ 10
  Objectives of the Study .................................................. 14
  Significance of the Research ........................................... 15
  Outline of the Thesis ..................................................... 16

Chapter 2 Mothering Against the Current: Mothering in Prison Literature Review .... 18
  Intersecting Constructions of Gender, Race and Class .......... 28
  Critique of the Literature .............................................. 31

Chapter 3 Looking Through the Feminist Poststructural Lens ............ 33
  Subjectivity and Construction of Gender ......................... 44
  The Subject of “Mother” ............................................... 45
  Other-Mothering ......................................................... 48
  Race, Class and Gender: Informing Women’s Prisons ............. 50

Chapter 4 Negotiating Pathways: A Qualitative Approach to Research .......... 53
  Method: The Research ‘Walk’ ......................................... 57
  Power Over: Awareness and Diffusion ............................... 62
  Insider/Outsider .......................................................... 65
  Participant Profiles ..................................................... 69

Chapter 5 Analysis: Constructing and Reconstructing a Sense of Self as Mother .... 78
  Agency and Resistance: Rocking the Institution of Motherhood While Claiming a Position of Mother .................................................. 101

Chapter 6 Performativity: Demonstrating Meaning ........................ 107
  The Dinner ................................................................. 110
  The Collective: Keeping the Sense of ‘Mother’ Alive ......... 115

Chapter 7 Summary: New meanings of ‘mother’ ............................ 121
  Limitations and Areas for Further Research ...................... 127
  Implications: Creating New Visions .................................. 129
  Implications for Policy and Practice .................................. 131

References ........................................................................ 134
Appendix A: Participant Letter of Invitation ............................ 140
Appendix B: Participant Consent Form ................................... 141
Appendix C: Confidentiality Procedures .................................. 145
Appendix D: Confidentiality Pledge ....................................... 146
Appendix E: Authorization to Use Participant Data .................... 147
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My first step on this journey was sparked by my mother, Pauline, who was an inspiration for me to take further steps.

Along my journey, I met remarkable women who tolerated my awkwardness and shared with me their stories, laughter and tears, touching me deeply and giving me new ways of seeing - thank you to Susie, Kari, Lia, Sami, Sarah and Dani. Their stories are the soul of the thesis.

I am grateful to all the staff at the Elizabeth Fry Society who opened their doors to me allowing me the opportunity to become familiar with the EFry family and help out where I could – special thanks to Cindy for her time, guidance and ‘big heart’.

Thank you to my family and friends who patiently listened, offered insights, encouragement and support that carried me through rough territory.

Thank you to Vicki Mulligan and Leslie Prpich for the time they spent editing my work with thoughtfulness and care.

Gracious thank you to my supervisor, Veronica Pacini Ketchabaw, and committee members Leslie Brown and Enid Elliot for receiving my incessant question and having confidence in my abilities to complete this study.

Thank you to Daniel Scott who listened compassionately to my tangled stories of ‘beauty and grief’ and offered kind words and insights that kept me from getting lost.
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: BUILDING CONTEXT

Prisoners are not numbers. They are living, breathing people with personalities, characteristics, likes, and dislikes. In the current penal climate, as more and more people are locked up all the time, this simple observation is all too often forgotten.

(Bosworth, Campbell, Demby, Ferranti, & Santos, 2005, p. 251)

Do not judge me as a person by this one incident, because there’s so much more to me.

(Kari, participant)

My research study involves a population that is often referred to as an invisible population – namely, incarcerated mothers. Although there are a number of Canadian (Boe, 2001; Sinclair & Boe 2002; Nafekh & Boe, 2003; Faith, 1993, 2006; Comack, 1996; Bayes, 2002) and British studies (Bosworth, 2005) addressing the issues of women in prison, most studies that specifically focus on imprisoned mothers are published in the United States (Ferraro & Moe, 2003; Garcia Coll, Surrey, Buccio-Notaro, & Molla, 1998; Enos, 2001; Morash & Schram, 2002). The present study contributes to this literature.

My focus is on how incarcerated mothers negotiate a sense of self as mothers. I begin by situating myself in the context of my study, by identifying my own experiences surrounding imprisonment and the historical context that informs my research. I offer an account of my history related to the study by presenting excerpts from a paper I wrote with my mother, who experienced a number of incarcerations. The paper presents an overview of my historical connections with incarceration. The incarceration of mothers has had a significant impact on my ancestors, my community, my family members, and on me.
Subsequently, I summarize the current situation of imprisoned women and mothers in the Canadian prison system by providing statistical information and reports addressing the issues of imprisonment. In addition, the objectives of my study are outlined, including the significance of my study.

*Insider/ Outsider: Historical Connections*

My experience as a daughter of an incarcerated mother is integral to my interest in imprisoned mothers (Berikoff, in press). My mother’s experience of incarceration was rooted in political/cultural activism. As a Doukhobor living in Canada, my mother experienced a marginalized life of poverty under the pressure to conform to Canadian norms and expectations.

The Doukhobors are a group of pacifists originating in Russia. They had particular spiritual/religious beliefs and practices that were in opposition to Russian orthodoxy and Tsarist law. Consequently, they suffered continual oppression and abuse from the Tsarist government who “appeared willing as a last resort, to destroy the Doukhobors rather than condone their dissent, and, when world publicity made that impossible, it was glad to expel them” (Woodcock & Avakumovic, 1968, p.11). The Doukhobors immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s and originally settled in the province of Saskatchewan. They did not conform to Canadian standards and expectations which were in opposition to the practice of their devout faith and principles, and were determined to maintain their cultural identity and the communal lifestyle that was consistent with their principles of pacifism and religious beliefs.

Upon their immigration to Canada the Doukhobors were granted exemption from military service in support of their pacifist beliefs and practices. According to documents
in the Simon Fraser University Library Electronic Document Centre (n.d.), the Canadian government provided the Doukhobors who did not believe in individual land ownership, with three land reserves to accommodate their practice of communal living. The government shifted its stance in 1906 when Frank Oliver, the Minister of the Interior, introduced changes to the homesteading regulations that aimed to force the Doukhobors to take out separate homesteads. Individuals were required to claim title and to pledge an oath of allegiance to the Crown. The government cancelled the reserves and threatened eviction if the Doukhobors did not make individual land entries. Doukhobors were also required to become naturalized citizens, and to swear allegiance to the Crown, which most Doukhobors thought would lead to the end of their exemption from military service. The regulations were enforced in 1907, and 2,500 homesteads were cancelled. (n.p.)

In 1908 a delegation of Doukhobors purchased land in British Columbia for new settlements initiating an exodus from the prairies (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1968). Although the Doukhobors built and maintained successful communities in BC, conflicts and tensions between the Canadian authorities and the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors continued. The Sons of Freedom, a faction of the Doukhobors, were considered ‘zealots’ and were resolute in upholding of the traditional Doukhobor faith, principles and culture. Brutal attempts at assimilating the Sons of Freedom into a mainstream Canadian society included confiscating their children for not sending them to mainstream Canadian schools. Woodcock and Avakumovic write that the Canadian authorities implemented “rigorous measures of seizing the children of Doukhobor zealots in an attempt to re-educate them in to conventional good citizens” (p. 11). Woodcock and Avakumovic
further contend that even though Russia and Canada have significantly divergent systems of government, "both felt impelled to bend this small, resistant minority into the pattern of conformity" (p. 11).

The Sons of Freedom Doukhobors enacted public protests including nude demonstrations and eventually in arson which resulted in many long-term incarcerations. Woodcock and Avakumovic (1968) suggest that the violent acts of the Sons of Freedom "arose during a long battle with the Canadian authorities..." (p. 11). As a child, I remember hearing stories of my grandfather, grandmother and uncles in prison which increased my familiarity with the notion of imprisonment. During my years as a youth, my mother stepped into her role as a Sons of Freedom social activist resulting in her frequent prison terms over many years. I witnessed young children in the care of their fathers and grandparents as their mothers served time in prison. Thus, the experience of incarcerations was a familiar one throughout my childhood, youth and adult life.

My interest in exploring the experiences of mothers in prison began with a conversation with my mother. We reminisced and reflected on her experience of imprisonment and discussed my experiences during her imprisonments. These conversations resulted in a co-created story of our lives related to incarceration that demonstrated external and internal turmoil pulsing through the complex divergence and convergence of a mother/daughter relationship, our cultural positioning, and the driving force of spiritual impetus.

To make explicit my historical and biographical experiences of incarcerations I will share selected extracts from the paper I wrote in collaboration with my mother (Berikoff, in press):
A group of people stand around a blazing fire; it is 1895. The people are called
Духоборцы – Doukhobors – Spirit Wrestlers. They are a group of people moving against
the current of the established church and tsarist authority, denouncing any involvement
in killing. They are throwing their guns into the growing fire. Their voices integrate into
one voice of song, their spirits into one spirit of faith. They sing stronger as the sound of
pounding hooves draws near. They feel no fear of their impending fate. Singing...

“Отче Ны есть нане в и наземле”
(“Our father who art in heaven”)

Whips slash faces,

Slash hands,

Slash bellies, breasts and backs

Singing...

“В Саду Гефсиманском стоял он один
Предсмертною мукой томимой”
(“In the garden of Gethsemane he stands alone
before death in exhausted suffering”)

The singing does not lose its force amongst the cries and screams; the tsarist soldiers do
not lose their brutality. Blood soaks the ground. To be sure, Doukhobor history is soaked
through with loss and crisis, as well as with an indomitable spirit of triumph. “That spirit
is in you.” My mother’s words echo as I question whether this blood does indeed run
through my veins. Do I share the blood of a zealous people who denounced the
established church because they believed that the spirit of Christ exists in every person
and not inside icons on church walls, who denounced killing and therefore conscription,
who took up vegetarianism and regarded their bodies as houses of the holy spirit and
therefore avoided smoking and drinking? Some might see them as simple people, working
the soil, illiterate. They also have a spiritual richness, courage and strength. They fought
for their very survival in Russia and then again in Canada – the Spirit Wrestlers.
Doukhobors are a people so rooted in the soil, yet so often displaced. Pushed from place
to place, in their Russian homeland and later in Canada, they followed the rules of their
spiritual beliefs.

“If you don’t live by the rules there are consequences,” the Doukhobors were told.

“Our allegiance is with God not with authorities. God makes our rules, not earthly
authority,” they reply in unison.

“Then we will take your land away,” reply the Canadian authorities.

“Take it, we live as God intended, take these material things – our homes, our clothes –
just know you can’t touch our spirit.”

“Сыны Свободы” the “Sons of Freedom,” a small group that emerged out of extreme
Doukhobor idealism with enduring resolve. Going forth with demonstrated zeal over
decades of persecution in Canada, they saw a choice between two paths – oblivion or rebellion.

Doukhobor land is seized by the Canadian government.

"Take it all until we march with nothing but our nudity, we won't compromise our spirit; we live by God's law let us live by our banner 'Toil and Peaceful Life'
leave us to live simply, by the soil, in our language, prayer and song.
We do not want your schools for our children, we do not want to assimilate...let us be, just let us be."

And it is not to be.
Resistance through protests, fires and nude marches ensue.

And then
children are torn away, ripped from mothers breasts, ripped from mothers hearts
1909 :
9 men are tortured to death, dead at the hands of the Canadian authorities
1932 :
3 babies are taken from their Doukhobor mothers and neglected until they died, dead at the hands of the Canadian authorities
A mother dies in exile, her heart broken over her dead baby
And still spirit cannot be broken
My grandfather – 18 years in prison
My grandmother – 8 years in prison
My mother – 8 years in prison

My mother's imprisonment(s) extended over twenty years. Her spiritual and active devotion to her beliefs and cultural/community survival is made evident in her writing. She describes her links to her past and the history of the Sons of Freedom Doukhobors:

I was brought up as a Son of Freedom, lived in sacrifice and suffering. I often think – did I choose my parents or by some fate was I placed where I am? With all my heart I hope that one day people will look at the Sons of Freedom movement with a deeper spiritual understanding. A spiritually enlightened person would not judge, but would try to understand. Sons of Freedom started shortly after settling here in Canada. How did they come about? Just popped out of nowhere for some reason? These people chose a much
harder road to travel than the rest of the Doukhobors, being touched by prison time, leaving husbands, wives and children. Were their thoughts and feelings much different from our people in Russia, the ones that chose the same hard path? Did anyone ever think that maybe these are the same souls here in Canada and are moved by the same spirit?

This spirit moved my mother into her staunch demonstrations as a social activist, resulting in her numerous imprisonments. My experience of prison was marked by my first visit with her in the now defunct Oakalla prison in Burnaby, BC.

I remember the first time I visited you in prison. The place was so big and looked so ancient. It was gray and damp with a history alive in the stone walls, with voices whispering death. I couldn’t imagine you in that place. There we were, Victor and I (my brother) behind the glass in the visiting room, with the other visitors. Visiting our Sons of Freedom mothers, fathers, wives and husbands. I remember the really little ones pressing up against the glass looking at their moms and dads, not comprehending that those are their mothers and fathers without being able to touch them. What a relief when the guards allowed everyone into one room. The mothers taking their small children in their arms and suppressing their sadness with distorted smiles. I don’t remember what we spoke about but I know that I struggled to suppress the recurring urge to cry.

This marked the beginning of my mother’s ongoing time spent in prisons, which increasingly exasperated my relationship with her.

Mom is in and out; so many times I do not count.
It seems like so many years, I do not count.
Will she stop? Sometime. Can she stop?
I hold the back the tears pushing to escape. I wish they wouldn’t come so easily to the surface. I try to push them down and yet they tease my eyes, throat and heart. I can’t make the burning lump in my chest disappear.

The pain I felt as a youth and adult penetrated deeply into my (self) consciousness, deep down into a place of self where secrets are kept from those who don’t know. Witnessing young children without their moms and myself being separated from my own over and over extends my feelings to the many children and youth who have imprisoned parents. Even though I lived in a community where incarcerations were
not unusual, I still felt the stigma and inclination to keep quiet about my mother. It is therefore easy for me to imagine children and youth with incarcerated mothers, trying to keep their secret while pushing down their fears and shame. According to Cunningham and Baker (2004), children and youth of imprisoned mothers are an invisible and extremely vulnerable sector of the population in our communities, “invisible from policy makers, service providers, researchers and communities” (p. 3). The cost of their experiences becomes manifest through emotional difficulties such as “fear, abandonment, anxiety, guilt, and shame” (p. 5).

I had underlying biases prompting me to question mothers who end up in jail when it affects their children in so many visible and invisible ways. Therefore, I became increasingly frustrated, especially when I became a mother of two sons. I felt I could never leave my children and continually questioned how my mother could leave her children and her grandchildren.

_I support her and yet I want her to stop. She is missing so much of her grandchildren. Will she develop a relationship with them? I could never leave my children. If they were ever taken away as children were in Doukhobor history I would grieve myself to death. I look at my sons sleeping and I experience an unbearable depth of feeling._

Throughout the years of my mother’s incarcerations, frustration, pain and sadness took their toll on me and I wished it all would go away. It was enough. I found I was giving up on my mother.

_She is my mother. Maybe I don’t need any of it; maybe I don’t need her anymore. The distance is more than miles now; this distance is in my heart. I don’t yearn for my mother anymore, there are no more burning lumps in my throat or threats of tears. I can manage. I pull away from anything that identifies me as Doukhobor, as a member of the Sons of Freedom. I want it all to go away. I want to go away. I don’t want to love it anymore. And I stop. The strength of my mother isn’t my strength._
Letting go of my mother seemed to alleviate my own anxiety and pain and it made me wonder about children and youth with imprisoned mothers. When do they let go? Do they let go? If so, can they later resume relationships with their mothers? Throughout the later part of my mother’s incarcerations, my emotional distancing from her slowly decreased until the pain subsided. I reconciled with her by accepting her choices and life circumstances by understanding them. My mother too suffered because of the separation from her children as she responded to my question of whether or not she cried over her children while in prison.

Yes I cried, but you can’t let those things get to you or you’ll be sick. I prayed constantly, walking back and forth praying, always in prayer, it makes you feel lighter and you can handle it better. You leave it in God’s hands.

I realized that the love I felt for my mother did not go away, it resurfaced from the place where pain is tucked down deep in my soul. I knew that it was her faith and sense of cultural and community survival that impelled her actions. I wonder about the mothers in prison I met and have not met, as their circumstances in life surely culminated in crisis leaving them with few options but to take the actions they did that led to their incarcerations. I feel fortunate that I was eventually able to reconcile and continue to build a meaningful and enduring relationship with my mother.

My mother and I look at each other with so much love and compassion. We have come to understand each other as mother and daughter as well as two women who have struggled, changed and continue to change. As we shared our stories and allowed them to be voiced, we also allowed for forgiveness and heart. I know the blood that flows through my veins is also her blood. This life-blood is expressed through me in so many ways; in my love of life and the passion in my relationships, visions, and work. But instead of being swept away by its power I can now navigate. I navigate with tools of my heart and mind; soul and spirit, and with tools that I have not only inherited but continue to co-create.
Although I have not lived in a prison setting and have not been separated from my children, my experience of being a daughter of an incarcerated mother and my history rooted in oppression contributes to my interest in the experiences of imprisoned mothers. I felt my perspective on mothers in prison transcended the judgements and identity society applied to them as deviant and bad mothers. Nevertheless, I knew that I still had biases and felt ready to be challenged.

*Mothering Behind Bars: Defining and Redefining Self*

*Profiles of incarcerated Canadian women.*

Canadian statistics show most women offenders are incarcerated for non-violent offences. The available literature provides an overview of their general circumstances. The 2002 Performance Report for the Correctional Service of Canada for federal offenders (cited in Bayes, 2002, p. 9) reported the following statistics:

- 5% of offenders are women
- 17% of them committed a violent offence
- over 27% of them are Aboriginal
- 2/3 of female offenders from 19-34 have children, 2/3 of those women are single mothers – most will be released back into communities in less than 5 years
- 33% of women offenders had an incarcerated parent
- 80% had an immediate family member who had been incarcerated
- 59% had multiple family members who had been incarcerated
- 60% of offences committed by women are property offences
- 40% have been classified as illiterate
2/3 have physical or mental health problems

over 80% have been physically and/or sexually abused

80% were unemployed at the time of their incarceration and most had unstable housing.

According to the above statistics, most women offenders (over 80%) are charged and incarcerated because of their involvement in property crimes. Most women offenders are from marginalized groups. Most have experienced poverty and poverty-related issues. Many have either diagnosed or undiagnosed mental health issues and have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse, and many have drug addictions. Fast, Conry and Loock (1999) reported a disproportionate number of youth and adults with fetal alcohol syndrome and fetal alcohol effects are represented in the criminal justice system. Neve and Pate (2005) boldly stated that “jails are our most comprehensive homelessness initiative” (p. 28).

A report by the Canadian Association of the Elizabeth Fry Societies (CAEFS) (2004) similarly argued:

People experiencing the worst in the downturn in the economic and social trends are sent to jail. Jails are our most comprehensive homelessness initiative. People are literally being dumped into the streets or our jails, as the criminal justice system is the only one that cannot refuse people access. (p. 2)

This same report reveals that crimes of poverty are the prevalent cause of the incarceration of women as opposed to crimes of violence. Upon release from prison, it is the systemic challenges of poverty and the “compounding discriminatory factors of racism, class bias and the stigma of being labelled criminal” (CAEFS, 2004, p. 5) which
make re-integration into the community difficult for women. Another often-overlooked path to incarceration is the result of past decisions to de-institutionalize those experiencing cognitive and mental disabilities. This has resulted in criminalizing women who used to “fill psychiatric and mental facilities” (p. 2). It is apparent that “female offenders tend to be doubly oppressed – by prison and the facts of their own lives” (Mayhew, 1989, p. 40).

Between 1981 and 2002, there was an increase of approximately 75% in the number of women incarcerated in federal prisons. In addition, the population of women under community supervision has increased by approximately 68% (Sinclair & Boe, 2002, p. ii). Nafekh and Boe (2003) stated that the population of incarcerated women is “projected to increase 15.7% from December 2002 to December 2007. The population of women under community supervision is projected to increase 11.9% from December 2002 to December 2007” (p. v).

The growth of racial diversity in federal women’s prisons between 1981 and 1998 has been reported by Sinclair and Boe (2002):

- The percentage of incarcerated women who are of Caucasian ancestry decreased from 78% in 1981 to 65% in 1992. There was an increase to 71% in 1993 and a decrease to 58% in 1997 and a further decrease to 27% in 2002.

- Black representation increased from 1% in 1989 to 4% in 1998. The proportion increased to 8% in 1990 and decreased slightly to 7% in 1995. An increase occurred in 1996 (12%), followed by a decrease in 2002 (6%).
Aboriginal representation increased slightly from 1981 (18%) to 1999 (20%). The proportion of incarcerated women of Aboriginal ancestry continued to increase to 27% in 2002.

Neve and Pate (2005) reported that the “fastest growing prison populations in Canada and worldwide” (p. 19) are made up of young racialized women living in poverty. The reasons behind this increase is the “evisceration of education, health, and other social support services” (Neve & Pate, p. 19). CAEFS (2004) reported that women, especially single mothers living below the poverty line, are often faced with supporting their families without sufficient resources. In order to survive the women may resort to fraud, prostitution, trafficking and other non-violent acts, resulting in the increasing criminalization of women and mothers.

The Elizabeth Fry Society (2006) reported that women are the fastest growing prison population, made up of “racialized, young, poor women and women with mental and cognitive disabilities” (p. 1). Furthermore, they reported the “recidivism rate for federally sentenced women is approximately 22%, as compared to 59% for men. Only 1-2% of federally sentenced women are returned to prison as the result of the commission of new crimes; and less than .5% are for a violent offence” (p. 2). Madam Justice Arbour (1996, cited in Pate, 2005) emphasized that the “risks that women pose to the public as a group, is minimal, and at that, considerably different from the security risk posed by men” (p. 4).

According to a report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) not only is there an over-representation of Aboriginal offenders in the criminal justice system but, most alarmingly, “the problem is getting worse, not better” (Trevethen, Auger,
Moore, MacDonald, & Sinclair, 2001, p. 1). Nafekh and Boe (2003) reported that “Adult Aboriginal people represent approximately 3% of the Canadian population” but 16% of the federal prison population (p. 3). Trevethan, Auger, Moore, MacDonald, and Sinclair (2001) attributed risk factors to Aboriginal over-representation in prisons such as “age, unemployment and poverty” (p. 2). Furthermore, the authors documented that a significantly larger proportion of Aboriginal inmates, compared to non-Aboriginal inmates, experienced the absence of a mother or father along with negative maternal and/or paternal relations, experienced spousal abuse, and had other family members involved in crime.

There is growing evidence “in support of the hypothesis that familial variables such as the quality of parent-child relationships, familial criminality, parental illness and separation from parents, increase the likelihood of criminal behaviour” (Paolucci, Violato, & Schofield, 2000, pii). Wright and Wright (1992, cited in Paolucci et al., 2000) contend that maintaining family interest and involvement during incarceration and establishing successful family relationships after release are associated with a decrease in re-offending.

Objectives of the Study

Given the growing population of women in the prison system, questions arise about the negotiations that imprisoned women with children engage in to define themselves as mothers. I question how a sense of being a mother is constructed within federal prison environments in Canada. How do imprisoned mothers experience being mothers in relation to ideologies of motherhood? How do they negotiate subjectification
within a confined environment? How do they negotiate mothering through social relations of race, class, and gender? The objectives of the study are:

- to explore how imprisoned mothers construct a sense of self as mothers according to motherhood ideologies and reconstruct this sense of self as a result of imprisonment;
- to document how imprisoned women negotiate and resist dominant ideologies of motherhood; and
- to understand how imprisoned mothers' constructs of motherhood are shaped by (and shape) social relations of race, gender, and class as they are defined by poststructural feminist theory.

**Significance of the Research**

Since there are not many research studies centred on mothers in prison, especially in Canada, my research will make an important contribution to the existing literature and knowledge base on this topic. This research may be of value in educating academics, prison officials and staff, policy makers, judges and lawyers, and community members about the issues that mothers face in prison. My research will lead to better understandings of constructions of motherhood informed by social relations of race, gender, and class and allow people to see other definitions and ways of mothering, that do not exclude mothers in prison. Equipped with a clearer understanding of and empathy for mothers in prison and the challenges they face, appropriate supports may be provided to them and their families.
The words of the women who participated in this study will provide readers with an understanding of their individual experiences and needs, thereby raising awareness and inspiring advocacy for social change and justice.

This research study makes an important contribution to the Child and Youth Care (CYC) professional literature as it sheds light on an invisible population of mothers in prison. Professionals educated in the field of Child and Youth Care support children, youth, and adults from diverse settings and situations. Raising the awareness of CYC professionals about the issues mothers in prison confront may open up a venue of needed support and advocacy for mothers in prison as well as for their children who face unaddressed and unique difficulties. Revealing how motherhood is a social construction informed by notions of race, gender, and class through the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism can expand the meaning of motherhood and prepare the way for CYC professionals to work with incarcerated or post-incarcerated mothers in an informed and empathetic way. Child and Youth Care professionals may offer their knowledge, advocacy, and support to address the needs of mothers in prison and their children. This would be consistent with the profession's stated commitment to the principles of equity, inclusion, and respect for diversity. This study also widens the scope of CYC and establishes links with the fields of criminology and corrections.

Outline of the Thesis

In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review related to the experiences of women and mothers in prison. Each study addresses issues that women and mothers face in prison, including how their identities as women and mothers are socially constructed,
how they are situated in relation to race and class, and how they demonstrate agency and resistance within a prison environment.

In Chapter 3, I present the theoretical framework that shaped my study, specifically feminist poststructuralism. I illustrate how power and knowledge through dominant discourses and the processes of subjectivity constitute identities of gender, motherhood, and mothers in prison. In addition, I look at subjectivity from the theoretical position of poststructuralism which considers subjectivity as non-static with possibilities for change.

Chapter 4 is a presentation of the methodology I used, namely interpretive interactionism, as a roadmap to guide my study. I describe the methods I used to structure my study, including ethical considerations. I offer an introduction to the women in my study as well as a description of my experience of being an outsider and insider in relation to them.

In Chapter 5, I offer a description and interpretation of the stories the women shared with me, regarding their experiences of mothering in prison. Their stories are captured in a descriptive and poignant manner illuminating how they construct a sense of self as mothers by negotiating and renegotiating mothering in prison.

Chapter 6 is a semi-fictional performative text, which makes visible how imprisoned mothers experience mothering within a group. Performative text is a creative way to engage the reader by evoking an understanding of the women's experiences.

Chapter 7 provides a discussion of what I have discovered in my study in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review. In addition, I address the implications of my study as well as its limitations and areas for further study.
CHAPTER 2 MOTHERING AGAINST THE CURRENT:
MOTHERING IN PRISON LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I present a review of the research literature that addresses how women in prison negotiate the role of mothering. The literature, based on studies from the U.S., Britain, and Canada, addresses the issues mothers in prison face, including mothering in a restrictive prison environment, resisting and or accepting dominant discourses defining motherhood, and facing the impact of their social positioning related to race, gender, and class.

Enos (2001) conducted a study of 25 incarcerated mothers from a Rhode Island women’s prison to understand how “women construct and manage motherhood in prison” (p. 127). She looked at how motherhood is managed in prison in conjunction with the effects of race, ethnicity, drugs, and crime. Her study included African American, Hispanic and white women. Identity development in inmates was a focal point for Enos as “inmate mothers had not only to resist identity as inmates but to resist identification as bad mothers” (Enos, 2001, p. 78). The inmates in Enos’ study claimed the identity of good mothers by claiming the ownership and rights to their children, which for them was a demonstration of fitness as parents. Inmates demonstrated ‘good mother’ identities by isolating past behaviours and identities and replacing them with “current claimed identities” (p. 91). While some inmates claimed that they could be “both good mothers and addicts or criminals” others expressed that the ongoing use of drugs would result in the failure to “perform mothering tasks” (p. 91). Enos considered that inmate mothers involved in parent programs were enrolled to convince others that they were good mothers. Nevertheless, Enos contended that children “provided inmate mothers with
opportunities to assert positive identities and to claim statuses as ‘normal’ women” (p. 99).

Enos (2001) also found that inmates from different racial and ethnic backgrounds differed in the social and cultural resources they were able to access. For example, child care arrangements differed among cultural groups with the children of the African American and Hispanic women living with extended family members and the children from white women most likely placed in foster care. To maintain positions and roles in the lives of their children, inmate mothers depended on the caretakers of the children being supportive and competent. Enos suggested that families of white inmates were “less supportive of inmate mothers than African American and Hispanic families” (p. 130).

As a result of her study, Enos (2001) provided a number of conclusions and recommendations. These emphasize the need to recognize the significance of race and ethnicity when considering child care arrangements, program development and policies, offering support services to the families as well as caretaker assessments and providing “alternate sentencing programs in which women remain in the community with their children” (p. 141) which Enos believes would diminish the damage to the mother-child relationship caused by incarceration.

Coll, Surrey, Buccio-Notaro, and Molla (1998) presented the voices of mothers that were drawn from transcripts from a variety of sources including the Stone Center for Developmental Services, Wellesley College, eleven focus groups from a minimum security pre-release correctional facility, an agency providing prison alternatives, a substance abuse treatment recovery unit, and clinical observations from a minimum
security pre-release facility for pregnant women with prior histories of substance abuse. The study focused on how the “women maintained a sense of their mothering in spite of being incarcerated” (p. 261) and how they demonstrate resistance through their actions, thoughts and feelings in regards to being separated from their children.

The study found several sources of marginalization of incarcerated mothers, including the criminal justice system identifying them exclusively as criminals and being treated similarly to male inmates (Coll et al., 1998). Societal responses are reflected in the media’s portrayal of inmate mothers as “morally degenerate” which not only represents public views, but also become “internalized by the women themselves, their families, and their support systems” (p. 263). Female prisoners are often abandoned by those closest to them such as partners and family members who can prevent them from accessing their children. The majority of women prisoners have histories of childhood and adult trauma, abuse, and long-term substance use and abuse leading to further marginalization, poverty, lack of education and “destructive or immature life choices” (p. 264).

Coll et al. (1998) made the assertion that of all the “internal and external obstacles that incarcerated mothers face in their role as mothers...motherhood remains the central focus of their lives” (p. 265). The ability of mothers to have roles in their children’s lives depends on each particular institution’s philosophy of mothers and children. These philosophies range from the extreme position of not recognizing the importance of mother/child relationships to supporting those relationships. Some mothers experienced involvement in their children’s lives through taking a part in child care arrangements, communicating by telephone and having regular visits. Other mothers had lost custody of
their children and had no knowledge of their whereabouts. "The common experience for all, however, is pain, guilt, grief, and longing for the future" (p. 266). Coll et al. suggested that the "criminal justice system and the medical, mental health, legal, and social service systems that these women come in contact with should promote opportunities to parent within a supportive community" (p. 271). Supporting the role of motherhood and providing treatment programs for incarcerated mothers is an essential component of prevention rather than punishment (Lester, Affleck, Boukydis, Freier, & Boris, 1996, cited in Coll et al., 1998). Coll et al. recognized that the relationships incarcerated women have with their children, including their hopes and dreams, are seeds of resistance that can contribute to the design of both prison-based and community-based programs and services to support them in their roles as mothers.

Morash and Schram (2002) have investigated the experiences of women in prison. They considered themes, images, characteristics and theories of women and crime. Their study broadly spanned the topic of women in prison by looking at the impact of the justice system on women, sexual misconduct within correctional facilities by staff, issues of mental health, gender issues, and gender-responsive programs in prisons. They also brought attention to the cultural contexts and social constructs of motherhood affecting imprisoned mothers particularly those that declare what a good mother is which does not include mothers in prison. Morash and Schram’s study revealed that incarcerated mothers often experienced substance abuse, poverty, and "lack of knowledge about childrearing" (p. 76). Nevertheless, the researchers found that “most mothers in prison believe they are good mothers and want to create supportive homes” (p. 76). Morash and Schram showed that children, who are negatively affected by being separated from their mothers, become
hidden victims of “sentencing policies that have resulted in the influx of women into prisons” (p. 77). There are numerous challenges preventing incarcerated mothers from maintaining relationships with their children. Distance is a major factor as many institutions are located in areas that make it extremely difficult for children to visit.

Morash and Schram found that “over half of the children never visited their mothers while they were incarcerated” (p. 81). Support services are often lacking for mothers and their ability to resume caring for their children post-imprisonment may be undermined by the forced dependency that is fostered in prison. Although there are programs within some prisons that offer support for mother-child relationships they are “few and far between” (p. 99).

An important feature noted by Morash and Schram (2002) is that over half the mothers from an American Correctional Association survey said their children “were the most important person to them” (Owen, 1998, cited in Morash and Schram, 2002, p. 99). According to Galbraith (1998, cited in Morash & Schram, 2002) imprisoned mothers express intense grief, guilt, and shame associated with the pain their children suffer due to their incarceration. However, they harbour continual hope of reuniting with their children.

Ferraro and Moe (2003) interviewed 65 imprisoned women from the Pima County Adult Detention Facility in Southern Arizona in a study designed to “elicit topical life-history narratives” (p. 15). The women came from white, Latina, Black and First Nation backgrounds. Prior to their incarceration few of the women had stable housing or employment. The study explored the relationship between crime and poverty, prison as a refuge from violence and the burden of child care, addictions, child protective services
and the identity of motherhood. Ferraro and Moe demonstrated how race, class, gender, and personal biographies intersect with dominant ideologies of motherhood. They illustrated how the actions of imprisoned mothers are a reflection of as well as resistance to the dominant definition of mothers in the U.S.

Ferraro and Moe (2003) revealed that managing the demands of motherhood within the context of poverty and violence contributed to the crimes and inevitable incarceration of the mothers in the study. Many women with traumatic life histories perceived incarceration as an improvement in their lives and often felt safer from dangerous situations they faced outside of prison. On the other hand, prisons can often be sites of abuse perpetuated by “correctional staff, neglect of health, and overuse of medications” (Human Rights Watch Women’s Rights Project, 1996; Amnesty International, 1999, 2001, cited in Ferraro & Moe, Moe and Ferraro, 2003, p. 24). Ferrero and Moe found that of all the mothers who participated in the study, 80% experienced drug and alcohol addictions, resulting in the severance of their parental rights.

Many women pointed out that their “links to their children were central to their selfhood” (p. 34). Ferraro and Moe (2003) indicated that children were extensions of the mothers’ identities, “separate yet constitutive of women’s subjectivity” (p. 34). Mothers, even those who had lost custody of their children, embraced the hope and belief that they would be reunited with their children providing a “resource for hope and positive identity” (p. 37). Ferraro and Moe concluded that:

although the desire to be a ‘good mother,’ and the dimensions of that construct, may be a vector of the social control of women, it is simultaneously a grounds
(sic) from which women challenge structural and individual sources of oppression (p. 37).

Bosworth (1999) conducted an in-depth study of women in prison with a focus on the "interrelated notions of identity, agency and resistance" (p. 157). Her study documented the women’s experiences and positions within the social relations of race, class and gender. Bosworth thoroughly examined prison literature, issues of justice, care and power related to gender, and theories of identity, agency, and resistance from feminist standpoints. Bosworth argued that the examination of prisons “through the notions of agency and identity illuminates elements of the complex relationship between gender and power both inside and outside the prisons” (p. 7). In Bosworth’s opinion, engaging in feminist discussions of identity, subjectivity, and agency and notions of a sense of self that is in a continual constitutive process will prompt criminologists to pose new questions regarding the experiences of imprisoned women and reject the fixed notion of ‘woman.’

Bosworth (1999) interviewed 52 women from a number of women’s prisons in the U.K. She employed various techniques including individual and group discussions, and questionnaires, as well as spending informal time with the women in their routine activities. Although Bosworth did not limit her study to mothers in prison, she did include their issues and experiences as a number of her participants were mothers. Her investigation into mothers in prison showed that they tended to be judged according to images of “white, heterosexual, homemaking mother” (p. 107) which are incompatible with the realities of many women’s experiences. Although many mothers in her study rejected the stereotypical norms of motherhood, they nonetheless perceived motherhood
to be an integral and constitutive part of their identity. As a result of this finding, Bosworth questioned whether or not imprisoned mothers can redefine the meaning of motherhood.

The findings in Bosworth’s (1999) study demonstrate that despite the restrictions imposed on incarcerated women and their limited choices and opportunities, they remain able to resist. Therefore, it is important to consider women in prison as agents as opposed to victims to allow for the recognition of the symbolic and small-scale acts of resistance they enact. As a result of her findings, Bosworth concluded that power relations in prison are continually contested. I have argued that prisoners, in defiance of their limited choices and opportunities, strive to present themselves as independent agents. In particular, I have shown that women manage their experiences of imprisonment by drawing on their sense of self which they ground in their (feminine) identities as mothers, wives, girlfriends and lovers. In short, I have argued that identity plays a key role in women’s management of the pains of imprisonment and in their ability to resist. (p. 155)

The focal point of Comack’s (1996) study of imprisoned women is the stories the women told about their lives and their involvement with the law. Comack interviewed 24 women in a Canadian provincial prison. She considered women in prison to be an invisible minority, and she stressed the importance of allowing their voices to be heard and “breaking the silence around abuse” (p. 155). Through the women’s stories, Comack explored the marginal positions of women in prison before and during their incarceration. She emphasized the importance of revealing the “structured nature of people’s everyday lives or of the ways in which class, race and gender inequalities create particular
problems, conflicts and dilemmas and limit the choices available to individuals for managing them” (p. 34). Comack used standpoint feminism to inform her work with women in prison, enabling her to understand their positions in society and the conditions and factors that led to their conflict with the law (p. 34). According to Comack, large percentages of women in prison are mothers who are undereducated and underemployed and have histories of physical and/or sexual abuse.

The interviews conducted by Comack (1996) are powerful stories which illuminate the lives of the women in her study, revealing their social locations complicated by intersecting factors of race, gender and class. Interwoven in their narratives are painful recollections of extreme ongoing abuse and poverty that limited their options for survival. Comack discovered that for some of the women, “law violation can be located in terms of their specific efforts to resist the abuse at the time it is happening” (p. 95). Comack suggested the importance of drawing connections between the experiences of abuse in the women’s lives and their conflicts with the law. She questioned whether incarceration benefits the women and their families, or even benefits communities and society at large. Comack’s intention with her study was to “determine whether prisoning enables women to resolve their troubles” (p. 129). In conclusion, Comack stated that prison should not “serve as a haven from abuse or as one of the few places where women can access the resources they need to resolve their troubles” (p. 154). Prison, Comack contended, is not the place for women to heal from their histories of abuse. On the other hand, Comack found the women in her study to be strong, demonstrating extraordinary abilities of survival in the struggle to care for themselves and their children.
Faith (1993) introduced her book *Unruly Women* by describing the unruly woman as a renegade, as defiant, unmanageable, out of control, a rebel. “She is trouble” (p. 1). Faith offered historical and contemporary overviews of how the so-called unruly woman has been perceived through her appearance, actions, and attitudes as offensive to the dominant discourses that “define, classify, regulate and set penalties for deviance” (p. 1). Faith argued that by crossing legal boundaries, women are criminalized and punished for betraying womanhood and the failure to adhere to the law. She showed how women’s crimes transgress social norms and counter “ideological constructions of gender” (p. 2).

Faith (1993) explored crimes associated with women including prostitution, property crimes, drug-related crimes, and violent crimes and emphasized the link between victimization and criminalization. According to Faith, most incarcerated women have not committed violent crimes and “do not represent a danger to society” (p. 3).

Faith (1993) presented an historical overview of prisons as sites of surveillance and power. She looked at prisons in the U.S. and Canada with an emphasis on the notorious Prison for Women (P4W) in Kingston, Ontario, which was closed in 2000, following a damning report by Madam Justice Arbour, and the Burnaby Correctional Centre, which has also been closed. Faith described the construction of these high-security prisons as a means of protecting the public from dangerous criminals. However, in her opinion, very few incarcerated women pose any threat to others.

Faith (1993) addressed violence within prisons, including staff assaults on women that are justified by corrections officials as necessary for the purpose of enforcing security. Faith uncovered accounts of sexual assaults on incarcerated women and girls by prison staff that, although uncommon, nevertheless indicate corruption and abuse of
power within prisons. Although it is not usual for women to harm one another, they will often engage in self-injury through ‘slashings’ to “find an outlet for their intense frustrations and griefs” (p. 229). Women who self-harm have, according to Faith, histories of sexual abuse stemming from their childhoods.

Faith (1993) described mothers in prison as primarily being identified as criminals. They are treated unsympathetically by corrections authorities who express the opinion that the women should have thought of the consequences of their actions before committing their crimes. The ability to actively parent while imprisoned is limited as Faith reported that children are either placed in foster care or taken in by extended family. Although a number of federal prisons have mother and child programs, very few women accept this option because they do not want to have their children living in a prison environment. Visits with children can be limited due to families living at a distance from the prison as well as mothers not wanting their children exposed to the “tensions and humiliations that accompany the usually brief and infrequent visits within a hostile prison environment” (p. 210).

*Intersecting Constructions of Gender, Race and Class*

Each of the reviewed studies brings attention to how the lives of women prisoners are influenced by the complex intersections and implications of gender, race and class. Prisoners cannot be put into simplified and stereotyped categories when, as individuals, they encompass diversities of race/ethnicity, age, mental and physical health, intellectual capacity, educational backgrounds, socio-economic locations and gender identity (Bosworth, 1999). Nevertheless, Bosworth cited policy statements which refer to prisoners as a homogeneous population situating women in a predetermined gender
position. Bosworth (1999) considered the implementation of power and the practice of imprisonment as informed by gender, describing gender binaries as fixed notions that reinforce traditional attitudes of women in prison as constituted by passive femininity and victimization without offering realistic explanations for their needs and behaviours.

Coll et al. (1998) highlighted the importance of considering women’s varied reasons for incarceration as well as understanding the outcomes of their complex histories of social marginalization including physical, sexual and emotional abuse without gender-based presumptions and expectations framing women as caretakers and docile in nature. They maintained that feminine ideologies inform judgements put upon female prisoners without taking into account their life experiences, especially socio-economic and cultural differences that tend to be homogenized. Bosworth (1999) concluded that unless “gender stereotypes are challenged, female offenders will continue to be managed according to restrictive norms of femininity” (p. 60). She observed that imprisoned women struggle with attempts to perceive themselves as active agents when they experience constant pressure by institutional restrictions that encourage traditional passive feminine behaviour while not supporting their “independent identities and responsibilities as real mothers, wives, girlfriends and sisters” (Bosworth, p. 120). Incarcerated mothers are defined by the criminal justice system as “solely criminals” (p. 261) which informs the principles governing how the justice system manages mothers in prison by punishing them for their crimes without considering the negative consequences affecting them and their children through separation (Coll et al., 1998).

Informed by her findings, Comack (1996) determined that women in prison are an extremely marginalized population lacking in education and lacking skills needed for
employment. Many of the women she interviewed were dependent on welfare services. In Comack’s opinion, the women’s class positioning influenced their “ability to access economic resources to survive trouble and, more especially, trouble with the law” (p. 31). Women living in poverty are faced with limited choices or options to manage the challenges, conflicts, and dilemmas that arise from their locations of economic marginalization (Comack, 1996). This point is substantiated by Faith (1993) who reported that between 1974 and 1987 the number of Canadian women involved in minor property crimes, particularly shoplifting, almost doubled. She argued that this dramatic increase is a result of declining economies negatively affecting women. Faith referred to this trend as the “feminization of poverty” (p. 85). The increase in crime by women in Canada and elsewhere is “linked to property offences committed primarily by women lacking material resources” (p. 86). Faith argued “females constitute the most impoverished group of every Western society, yet females commit by far the least crime” (p. 107).

Faith (1993) states that one of the obvious “indicators that criminal justice systems do not issue fair and equal justice is that, in virtually every nation-state in the world, people who are identified with oppressed political minority groups are radically over-represented in prison populations” (p. 183). Faith argues that in societies where racist assumptions of the inferiority of particular groups are maintained, the criminal justice system, from police to prosecuting attorneys to judges and juries, are susceptible to negative stereotypes when making decisions. For example, in the United States, African Americans and other visible minorities are subject to racism within the criminal justice system. Morash and Schram (2002) have reported that African Americans with
histories of poverty and substance abuse comprise a disproportionate percentage of those involved in the criminal justice system. Ferraro and Moe's (2003) study conducted in Arizona demonstrated that "approximately one-third of Latina and African American women and one-half of American Indian women live in poverty...overall, 41.5 percent of single women with children live in poverty, which is comparable to the national rate of 41 percent" (p. 18).

**Critique of the Literature**

Each study I reviewed clearly demonstrated the importance imprisoned mothers place on being mothers and being able to actively mother. The studies all consider how the concept of motherhood is socially constructed and shaped by race, gender, and class. The studies show how mothers in prison resist their restrictive environments by finding ways to maintain a sense of self as mothers.

The most comprehensive studies of mothers in prison were conducted in the United States. Although there are a number of Canadian studies that address issues of women in prison the topic of imprisoned mothers has not yet been sufficiently addressed. Even though Canadian statistics show that two-thirds of imprisoned women between the ages of 19 and 34 are mothers (Bayes, 2002), there is an absence of research into the day-to-day issues faced by mothers in prison. This is especially so when considering how issues of incarcerated mothers are informed by racialized and gendered discourses.

A number of studies often presented imprisoned mothers as seeing themselves in relation to the constructs of 'good/bad' mother. For example, Enos (2001) suggested that because imprisoned mothers were not engaged in the daily care of their children their claim to good motherhood was undermined. Similarly, Morash and Schram (2002)
claimed that most mothers in prison believed that they were ‘good’ mothers. Ferraro and Moe (2003) concluded that the women they studied desired to be ‘good’ mothers.

In my study I present challenges to the dominant ideologies of motherhood by recognizing the limited actions and choices of mothering available to the women in this study as alternative and legitimate practices of mothering outside the constructs of ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother.
CHAPTER 3 LOOKING THROUGH THE FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURAL LENS

In this chapter I discuss the theoretical framework that informs my study, namely, feminist poststructuralism. I demonstrate how relations of knowledge and power, as understood from a poststructural theoretical perspective, shape day-to-day experiences of women within a prison environment complicated by social relations of race, gender, and class. I look at the dominant discourses contributing to the social construction of ‘race,’ gender, and class, including the social construction of motherhood. In addition, I review constructions of motherhood as well as present alternative practices of mothering existing outside of dominant ideologies.

In the chapters that follow, I use this theory to describe and understand how imprisoned mothers define themselves as mothers. I document how they negotiate and resist dominant ideologies of motherhood.

From a feminist poststructural standpoint, I am able to demonstrate how mothers in prison construct a subject position of being mothers and continue limited but active mothering roles that exists outside of the dominant discourses determining definitions of motherhood. I present evidence that mothers in prison are resisting stereotypical images that describe them as deviant and irresponsible and are finding alternate ways to approach mothering, revealing what informs their choices and practice of mothering.

Various feminist poststructural theorists inform my study, specifically the work of Weedon (1987, 1999), Davies (2002), Grosz (1994) and Cixous (1975, 1981, 1992, 1994). Feminist poststructuralism is described by Weedon (1987) as a “mode of knowledge production which uses poststructural theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and
strategies for change” (p. 40). From a feminist poststructuralist perspective, power exists not as a concrete and fixed idea or object to be easily described but as a relational force among people and between people and systems of knowledge understood as “patterns of discourse” (Davies, 2000, p.18). Although power often carries a negative connotation, it does not singularly exist as a consequentially oppressive or restrictive force; power is “also the power to do things, to resist, to deconstruct, to write, to create, to imagine, to laugh, to move people to tears, to experience jouissance” (Davies, p. 19). Discourses driven by the relational force of power are generated and reinforced through the expression of language both orally and written within daily social practices and interactions which contribute to the establishment of institutions (Weedon, 1999). Weedon (1987, cited in Davies, 2003) described discourses as developed in the work of Foucault as

more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and the emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourse constitutes the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases. (p. 43)

Power has been and is used very evidently around the world as a brute force perpetuating large-scale atrocities. It is also used in less coercive forms to ensure the dominance and superiority of those in power positions who may describe their actions as commendable through the application of power to correct or save particular groups from their own practices (Davies, 2000, p. 20); for example, those in prison. Feminist
poststructuralism, as explained by Weedon (1987), is concerned with how women in
society are positioned and constituted by the discursive construction of subjectivity
through the structures of social institutions and heterogeneous forms of power relations
and ways that women are not only governed by but resist particular structures of power.
The constitution of women’s experiences and positions, therefore, exists within the broad
field of “patriarchal power relations” (p. 74). Cixous (1975) defined patriarchal power
relations as organizations of hierarchy, making “all conceptual organization subject to
man” (p. 64). Weedon (1987) defined ‘patriarchal’ as referring to power relations in
which the interests of women are “subordinated to the interests of men” (p. 2). These
power relations take many forms, including the sexual division of labour and the social
meanings given to biological sexual difference. In patriarchal discourse the nature and
social role of women are defined in relation to a male dominated norm.

Women’s prisons are obvious sites where the wielding of patriarchal/hierarchical
power and control are realized by structuring women inmates’ daily experiences on
emotional and physical levels. Bosworth (2003) stressed, “prisons are, by nature, sites of
inequality, control, and oppression. They are the means by which society regulates, and
on some level hopes to transform, its criminal, its poor, its unwanted, its disturbed, and its
sometimes-violent members” (p. 137). Faith (1993) described prisons as small totalitarian
societies where even the most intimate details are under strict scrutiny, rules, and
regulation, resulting in the reduction of prisoners to numbers. This was made explicit in a
study in which Faith compiled the personal testimonies of imprisoned women, stories
which reveal their overall living conditions to be a “jumbled accumulation of agonies”
(p. 151). These included:
- The stigma of incarceration;
- The claustrophobia of confinement;
- Craving fresh air or the feeling of rain on the face;
- The deadly boredom;
- Strict limitations on physical movement and the aggravation of needing an "inmate pass" to move from one part of the institution to another;
- Anxiety about one's children (and frequently the devastation of losing them);
- Loneliness for close family members, sweethearts and community support systems;
- Nervousness from being under constant scrutiny and supervision;
- Physical and emotional problems that accompany withdrawal from alcohol and street drugs;
- Lack of anyone to serve advocacy for one's needs;
- Lack of privacy and the tensions that erupt between people in "total institutions" who haven't chosen to be confined together;
- Endless line-ups;
- Inability to get straight answers to questions;
- Paranoia about breaking what seem like arbitrary, tyrannical or, at best, coercive institutional rules;
- Fears of being punitively segregated in isolation for behavioural infractions, or likewise segregated in a prison-within-the-prison for "medical observation" or "protective" or "administrative" custody;
- Insensitivities and abuses of power both by staff and other prisoners;
- Mail and phone censorship and the risk of losing these “privileges”
- Lack of choice in such simple matters as when to eat, sleep or watch television;
- Little or no choice of diet;
- Weight gain;
- Chain-smoking as a coping mechanism;
- Having to be locked in one’s cell periodically throughout the day and facing the slot in the door for routine “body counts,” to ensure no one has escaped;
- The inability to escape from the cacophony of radios, television, people hollering at each other, the rattling of keys and clanging of electronic doors;
- Never getting a good night’s sleep because of the sounds of the institution, including the snoring, coughing, weeping and wailing of other prisoners, and because for security reasons it’s never fully dark;
- Depressions and mood swings produced by prescribed behaviour-modifying drugs;
- Cognitive dissonance from not knowing how or whether to show feelings (if you laugh too much you must be stoned on contraband drugs; if you’re too quiet you must be depressed and in need of medicine);
- Dependency and infantilization processes that accrue when one is denied the right to make any decision concerning one’s own life;
- Uncertainty of when you will be released and the realization of very limited choices in the “free” world when the time comes. (p. 151)
Susie, one of the participants in my study, wrote the following text. Susie’s words explain the way power and control exasperate the physical body, mind and spirit. She writes with a raw poetic intensity conveying the disturbing day-to-day experiences of incarceration, in light of the years of incarceration she endured as a “lifer.”

*Bad food, no freedom, locked doors, failure, inconsistency, loneliness, degraded, low self esteem, no worth, no future, uncertainty, loss of face, broke, no support, letting self & others down, slave labour, stupid rules, high expectations, begging, control issues, loss of control, no friends, no love, two faced, punishment, consequences, brainwashing, needs not met, no healthcare, no dentist, poor hygiene, getting ripped off, no respect, no dignity, hard consistent work, conditions on how much you can personally achieve or have in life, no reasons why, no answers, not getting what I want, loss of common sense, log, log, log, tears, no compassion, no one to hear, misunderstandings, despair, no energy, no motivation, 24 hour light, constant noises, problems, lack of quality rest, no room for improvement, this is what you are “allowed,” you can’t, you should, direct order, compliance, isolation, mundane, danger, settling for less than, taking what you can get, fake smiles, dirty looks, gossip, back stabbing, fear, jealousy, blind, counted, shackled, guarded, reviewed, assessed, denied, shame, guilt, no hope, showers that suck, 2nd hand air, too hot, too cold, freezing, disease, intimidation, lies, deceit, blame, waiting, wanting, death, loss, grief, concrete, written in stone, sneaking, hiding, secrets, judgement, cost, labelled, convicted, offender, risk, abuse, loud, occupied, always a catch,*
caught off guard, searching, tired, lazy, bitchy, grouchy, mean, poor, low, worse, she said, they said, did you know, you know what, guess what?, your back, what now?, not now, maybe later, push, shove, stepped on, can I please have, do you have any?, I promise, solid, top left, did you hear?, again? Stupid, helpless, powerless, ignored, put down, shut down, medicated, restricted, your call cannot be processed at this time, too bad, tragic, sad, miserable, you're late, you're locked, go lock, charged, request, blue, pink, phone, white, special, what the fuck??, where the hell??, ugh, ugly, sick, desperate, surreal, controlled, investigated, belittled, false promises, lock down, watched, no privacy, toilet two feet from bed in front of door with a window, gated, fenced, blocked, questioned, caged, berated, swore at, centred out, singled out, made do, go without, phoney, cornered, separated, programmed, told on, looked at, hidden agendas, screened, tested, swabbed, searched, frisked, stripped, ripped apart, held back, no go, let down, upset, mad, anger, hatred, sad, rage, rude, sloppy, messy, disinfected, melting pot, scum, preached to, violated, breached, stash, covered, dirty, filthy, garbage, lost, blamed, accused, sectioned, classified, reported, listened to, monitored, surveillance, discussed, disgust, unworthy, mistrust, abandoned, hurt, code blue, code yellow, stand down, speculation, suspicion, suspicious, behavioural, bagged, moved, suspended, Revoked, pulled, interview, interrogated, investigated, called down, return to, lockup, pushing of buttons, talking to walls, movement, reminded, taken, mishandled,
misguided, missed out, disrupted, confined, imprisoned, charged, alleged, allegations, flagged, misuse, written up, filed, protested, factored, preceding, trauma, shock, syndrome, systems, concealed, secured, withdrawn, double standard, havoc, revenge, malicious, and finally—payment.

These two descriptions of everyday life in prison support Foucault’s notion that the body is an element of knowledge-power relations (Grosz, 1994). Drawing on the work of Foucault, Grosz (1994) described the body as existing within history as it is a production of and in history. She proposed that relations of force, of power, produce the body through the use of distinct techniques (the feeding, training, supervision, and education of children in any given culture) and harness the energies and potential for subversion that power has constructed regimes of order and control involved in modern disciplinary society need the creation of a docile, obedient subject whose body and movements parallel and correlate with the efficiency of a machine... (p. 149)

Grosz (1994) argued that control of the subject is not achieved through systems of “ideas – ideologies – or through coercive force; rather, it surveys, supervises, observes, measures the body’s behaviour and interactions with others in order to produce knowledges” (p. 149). Those who resist its rules and forms are punished and through its punitive procedures including all institutions and processes – information is extracted to “create new modes of control, new forms of observation, and thus new regimes of power-knowledge as well as, necessarily, new sites of resistance” (p. 149). Relying on the claims of Foucault (1977, cited in Grosz, 1994) Grosz wrote “the history of punishment
can...be seen as a variable series of technologies of the body, procedures for the
subjugation, manipulation, and control of the body” (p. 151).

Foucault’s (1977, cited in Faith, 1993) characterization of prisons demonstrates
blatant power relations.

Prison is the only place where power is manifested in its naked state, in its most
excessive form, and where it is justified as a moral force...What is fascinating
about prisons is that, for once, power doesn’t hide or mask itself; it reveals itself
as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure
and entirely ‘justified’, because its practice can be totally formulated within the
framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene
domination of Good over Evil, of order over disorder. (p. 126)

Prison systems are understood as not only necessary but constructed upon
discourses of ‘justice’ and ‘morality’ which are powerful forces that generate general
public support through the discourse of common sense. Weedon (1987) spoke of societal
assumptions informing discourses of common sense that are comprised of certain social
meanings solidifying the way the world is understood. She stated that those social
meanings “inevitably favour the interests of particular social groups, become fixed and
widely accepted as true irrespective of sectional interests” (p. 77). Weedon (1987) argued
that in order to “maintain current levels of patriarchal power it is necessary to discredit or
marginalize ways of giving meaning to experience which redefine hegemonic gender
norms. These norms must be constantly reaffirmed as part of the large body of common
sense knowledge upon which individuals draw their understanding” (p. 79). With human
nature as the point of reference guiding common sense, reality can be guaranteed as
Weedon (1987) proposed that the "guarantee of the authority of a particular discourse will vary from God to science to common sense" (p. 98). So-called truths based on common sense are "often rhetorically reinforced by expressions such as ‘it is well known that,’ ‘we all know that’ and ‘everybody knows’ which emphasizes their obviousness and puts social pressure on individuals to accept them" (Weedon, 1987, p. 77). Comack (1996) has found that public discourses surrounding prisons and people in prison comprise notions about "those people behind bars" (p. 124). Dominant discourses, Comack emphasized, include the view that due to deviance and criminal actions, people in prison deserve to be in prison and undergo punishment in order to "‘pay their dues,’ receive their ‘just desserts,’ or ‘suffer the consequences’ for their actions" (p. 125).

Dominant discourses made apparent through common sense knowledge validate the fixed assumptions about the people held within the criminal justice system particularly imprisoned women and mothers.

The media, with the capacity to influence discourse, generally depict incarcerated women as "demonized and...morally degenerate" (Coll et al., 1998, p. 263). Faith (1993) observed that the bad girl of cultural stereotyping is the product of class-biased, racist, heterosexist myths. Historically and to the present, her appearance, actions and attitudes have been offensive to the dominant discourses that define, classify, regulate and set penalties for deviance. She is socially constructed as undeserving of the ‘protections’ of the women who is confined within the parameters of gender conformity. (p. 1)
Sharp and Eriksen (2003), contended that women in prison may not necessarily be considered dangerous. Rather, they are seen as a threat to the “moral conscience of the dominant group, and thus the social order, by failing to meet prescribed standards of appropriate womanhood” (p. 121). Feinman (1986, cited in Sharp & Erikson, 2003) used the “the Madonna/whore dichotomy” (p. 122) to describe women who conform to prescribed societal roles viewed as ‘good girls’ and those who are not taking up those roles deemed ‘bad girls,’ leaving them open to punishment for violating social norms. Davies (2000) considered classification to be a dangerous process, resulting in the possibility of controlling, reducing and slotting someone into predetermined norms. This is obvious in the prison environment where women undergo an automatic process of control and are positioned into a reductive category of ‘criminal.’
Subjectivity and Construction of Gender

Davies (2000) defined the experience of being a person as “captured in the notion of subjectivity” (p. 57). She went on to describe subjectivity as being constituted through discourses that position people as a result of their own and other’s activity of speaking and writing. Weedon (1987) referred to subjectivity as the “conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). From the perspective of poststructural theory, “the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations” (Henribues et al., 1984, cited in Davies, 2000, p. 55). Subjectivity therefore informs meanings of gender that are produced both socially and through various forms of discourse (Weedon, 1999). In patriarchal societies, women cannot escape the constructed notions of femininity and everything women do “signifies compliance or resistance to dominant norms of what it is to be a woman” (Weedon, p. 87). Even in prison environments women do not escape the socially constructed notions of femininity, even though their actions counter those dominant notions. Bosworth (1999) explained that the actions of imprisoned women are “interpreted through a binary notion of gender, with the result being that women’s needs and experiences are associated with notions of femininity” (p. 40). Weedon (1987) emphasized that when individuals effectively constitute themselves as male or female, according to heterosexual desire, the more the outcome of that constitution is accepted as natural. She expanded on these ideas:

The nature of femininity and masculinity is one of the key sites of discursive struggle for the individual and we need only look at a few examples of forms of
subjectivity widely on offer to realize the importance of this battle. It is a struggle which begins at birth and which is central to upbringing and education. At the centre of the struggle is the common-sense assumption that there is a natural way for girls, boys, women and men to be. This gives rise to a battle to fix particular versions of femininity and masculinity as natural. In the language of poststructuralism this can be described as a battle for the signified – a struggle to fix meaning temporarily on behalf of particular power relations and social interests. The fixing of the signifier ‘woman’ or ‘man’ relies on the simultaneous fixing of subjectivity in a particular discourse. (p. 98)

The dominant discourse of “mother” evokes images of a white, heterosexual, homemaker which is not applicable to the experiences of mothers in prison, yet it is the image by which they are often judged (Bosworth, 1999, p. 107). The judgements aimed at imprisoned mothers present them as irresponsible by abandoning their children through committing a crime (Morash & Schram, 2002). Nonetheless, the identity of ‘mother’ is integral to and perceived to be constitutive of an imprisoned mother’s identity (Bosworth, 1999). Bosworth found that “motherhood remains a crucial element of the social construction of femininity” (p. 148).

The Subject of “Mother”

Motherhood can be understood as a site of subjectivity constituted through historical discourses and social relations producing a set of assumptions of what is a good mother and social expectations of what a good mother does. Weedon (1987) suggested that mothers are expected “to meet all the child’s needs single-handed, to care for and stimulate the child’s physical, emotional and mental development and to feel fulfilled in
doing so” (p. 34). A dominant discourse on motherhood that has taken on mythical dimensions is the ‘Good Mother’ representative of “Perfect Mother, All-Powerful Mother, Natural Mother, and Martyr Mom” (Villani, 1997, p. 117).

DiQuinzio (1999) described the ideology of motherhood as ‘essential motherhood’ that constructs motherhood as “natural and inevitable” (p. xiii) requiring women to approach child care with exclusive and selfless attention based on the assumption and expectation that a woman is psychologically and emotionally capable of empathy, knowing the needs of others and sacrificing herself for them. This concept of ‘essential motherhood,’ as DiQuinzio illustrated, denies individual subjectivity to women and mothers and therefore becomes problematic.

Throughout most of the twentieth century, a longstanding motherhood ideology that has been accepted as universal is based upon an idealized and unrealistic model of motherhood drawn from the white, American, middle-class context (Glenn, 1994), without taking into consideration differences among mothers such as race and class. This dominant ideology of motherhood that developed within the boundaries of patriarchy and is highly racialized, classed and gendered, is representative of the dominant view of motherhood, and as such it is presented as inevitable and unchangeable. Glen (1994), made the point that women then become locked into what is assumed to be a natural state of biological reproduction while being denied identities outside of the mothering role. While this social construction of mother, and especially the discursive classification of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ mothers, may appear to make sense, it sets up expected norms that “have little to do with the real lives of mothers” (Marotta, 2005, p. 23). Dominant discourses set up unrealistic expectations for mothers to abide by, often without adequate
support, thus complicating a mother’s ability to parent without feelings of guilt,
deficiency, depression and or stress (Horwitz, 2004).

Even if mothers desire socially accepted positions of motherhood, Ferraro and
Moe (2003) suggest that its achievement significantly depends upon being able to access
adequate resources of “time, money, health, and social support” (p. 14). Furthermore, the
authors state that a considerable “proportion of mothers negotiate their child rearing
through obstacles that undermine their efforts to be ‘good mothers,’ both on their own
terms and in the eyes of the state” (p. 14). Therefore, motherhood as determined by
patriarchal notions of family appears to be “more of a privilege for some women rather
than a right for all women” (Molloy, 1992, cited in Ferraro & Moe, 2003, p. 14).

Understanding how the stereotypical and dominant concept of motherhood is
constructed provides clarity on the situation of incarcerated mothers and why they are
generally designated as “unfit mothers, and therefore among the most despised of
women” (p. 73). Beckerman (1991, cited in Morash & Schram, 2002) stated:

The female felon offends society’s idealized vision of women as all caring,
nurturing, and attentive to their children. She therefore poses a threat to the
established social order unlike that presumably posed by male felons. The female
felon’s criminal activities raise concerns about her ability to be a ‘good’ mother.

(p. 74)

There are insurmountable obstacles placed before incarcerated mothers to practice
mothering that is endorsed by public opinion. According to Coll et al. (1998), most
publications depict incarcerated mothers as “inadequate, incompetent, and unable to
provide adequately for the needs of their children. After all, how can a person with a
criminal record be a good mother?” (p. 257). It is assumed that, “within the criminal justice system (for the most part)… you cannot be both a criminal and a good mother” (p. 262). Coll et al. (1998) found that common assumptions describe incarcerated mothers as not caring about their children’s well being, and that by not upholding their role as parents they have chosen to abandon their children by their involvement in crime. However, the mothers that took part in the studies that I have cited emphasized that their children are the most important part of their lives.

Other-Mothering

Wane (2004) described the ideology of motherhood as not only addressing gender roles and behaviour but also privileging “specific locations within the social relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability” (p. 235) which typically are drawn from white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class contexts, without considering obvious differences specified above. Hardy and Wiedmer (2005) considered the dominant ideology of motherhood as a “monolithic model” which remains a persistent representation notwithstanding its intolerant stance on issues of “sexual orientation, class, and race and to the real diversities in mother’s lives” (p. 4). Given the over-representation of African-American, Hispanic and Aboriginal people in North American prisons, it is interesting to look at ways that those cultures have constructed mothering which is distinctly different than the dominant North American model.

DiQuinzio (1999) described African-American childrearing practices as divergent from the dominant ideology of motherhood as it acknowledges and involves the participation of family in child care including “fathers, grandparents, aunts, and other kin” (p. 208). Collins (2005) described the traditional mothering role in African-
American communities as fluid and interchangeable between biological mothers and other women offering child care which is termed “othermothers” (p. 152). Collins pointed out that othermothers share in the responsibility of child care regardless of kinship although grandmothers, sisters, aunts, or cousins may act as othermothers. There is an understanding, Collins emphasized, that in those communities it is not wise or even possible to expect one person to shoulder full responsibility for mothering a child.

African-American mothers who are imprisoned generally try to avoid having their children placed in foster care, considering it the “worst of all options” (Enos, 2001, p. 60). In her study of mothers in prison, Enos found that families and extended family members of Hispanic and Black incarcerated mothers were willing to provide care for their children as well as offer support to the women. This support, however, depended on the family’s available resources and if resources were exhausted then the foster care system had to be utilized. They found that white women used foster care for the placement of their children more often than Black or Hispanic women.

The traditional values practiced by Aboriginal peoples regarding family also differ from the dominant discourses surrounding motherhood and care of children. The Canadian Families and Corrections Network (CFCN, 2003) recognized Aboriginal views on family and reported to the Commissioner’s Directive of the Correctional Service of Canada:

Extended family includes not only those family relationships that exist by birth but may also include significant others who are not related by birth, but are given the title of grandparent, parent, brother, sister, aunt, uncle or other relative. (p. 26)
The CFCN (2003) study reported general assumptions surrounding parents in prison that describe them as not having a place in their children’s lives and their children may not be well cared for. This is in contrast to Aboriginal practices of family which includes the understanding that “the parent is still central in the child’s life” (CFCN, p. 26).

*Race, Class and Gender: Informing Women's Prisons*

Sudbury (2005) described prisons as “intimately connected to global capitalism, neoliberal politics, and U.S. economic and military dominance” (p. xii). She documented the explosive overcrowding of women in international prisons, including Nigeria, the U.S., Russia, Britain, Australia, Mexico and South America. “In all countries just mentioned, oppressed racialized groups are disproportionately targeted by the criminal justice system. The crisis of women’s prisons can therefore be read as a crisis for working class women of color and indigenous women worldwide” (Sudbury, 2005, p. xiv). Canada is not excluded from this list, and despite Canada’s repeated top placement in the United Nation’s ranking of countries that are most liveable, it is also recognized as imposing oppressive conditions on First Nations peoples (Faith, 2006). Faith reported than in January 2004, the Canadian Human Rights Commission affirmed that “Canadian prisons are breaching prisoners’ human rights and that Aboriginal women in particular are vulnerable to abuse” (p. 274). Colonial rule in Canada continues to inform the incarceration practices toward Aboriginal peoples, which exemplifies the institutionalization of racist policies (Martel, 2001, cited in Faith, 2006). Faith (2006) identified racism as a widespread phenomenon in criminal justice systems. She stated that Blacks and Hispanics in the U.S. and First Nations and Blacks in Canada are more often
than whites, who commit similar crimes, "convicted, imprisoned, held in solitary, denied parole and rearrested upon release" (p. 4).

Class intersects with race in the justice system as poverty is a common factor among imprisoned women and if they were not poor upon entry into prison they generally will be when they leave (Faith, 2006). Faith equated prisons in Canada and California with prisons globally in that they "operate on the principles of confinement, deprivation, labelling, discipline, subordination and retribution" (p. 341). Although prisons in Canada appear more attractive compared with the now closed Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario (P4W), especially when one is past the "walls, fences and coiled razor wire" (p. 341) the changes are cosmetic while the purpose of prison continues to be one of degradation and submission of the prisoner (Faith, 2006).

Sharp and Eriksen (2003) argued that women under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system are not necessarily perceived as dangerous. They are instead perceived as threatening the "moral conscience of the dominant group, and thus the social order, by failing to meet proscribed standards of appropriate womanhood" (Sharp and Eriksen, p. 121). They stressed that prisons are populated by increasing numbers of minorities and women. This is affirmed by Neve and Pate (2005) who found that the fastest growing population within Canadian prisons and worldwide are "poor, young, racialized women and girls" (p. 19). Faith (2006) reported that relatively few middle-class women are incarcerated and when they are, it is usually for crimes of fraud or for the killing of an abusive spouse. Faith observed that the crimes of middle-class women do not reflect desperate efforts to survive, drug use, or violent impulses.
In Canada, Neve and Pate (2005) identified an overlooked yet high proportion of vulnerable women who have cognitive and/or mental disabilities. With the continuation of the deinstitutionalization of people suffering from cognitive and mental disabilities, especially in relation to the depletion of resources, the result has been dumping them onto the streets without adequate support only to be swallowed up by the “wider, deeper, and stickier social control net of our criminal justice system” (p. 28). Once in the prison system, they are often characterized as the most difficult prisoners, yet, most of these women and girls “pose the greatest risk to themselves and their own well being” (p. 28).

Weedon (1999) suggests that in accordance with poststructuralism shared identities are not the result of belonging to particular groups informed by race, class or sexual orientation; they are instead “discursively produced in relation to hegemonic discourses which privilege whiteness, heterosexuality, and the middle and upper classes. Moreover, they are open to change” (p.106). Overall, it is obvious that women in prisons are caught up in the perpetual web of the justice system that determines their destination and experiences according to their gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status. Nevertheless, change is possible even in prison, which is made evident by looking through the lens of feminist poststructuralism which makes explicit relations of power and knowledge and how they can be utilized to realize agency and resistance.
CHAPTER 4 NEGOTIATING PATHWAYS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO RESEARCH

I have employed qualitative research methods to inform and guide my research study. More specifically, I used the qualitative methods of Denzin’s (2001) “interpretive interactionism” as a roadmap, guiding my study through the twists and turns of research. Interpretive interactionism involves the “attempt to make the problematic lived experiences of ordinary people available to the reader” (Denzin, 2001, p. xi). The researcher employing interactionism interprets the experiences, meanings and representations of those engaged in the research experience.

Interpretive interactionism aligns well with feminist poststructuralism as both are based on the postmodern premise that objective, value free knowledge is not possible. Knowledge is understood as being closely related to power where those holding power “determine how knowledge will be defined” (Denzin, 2001, p. 51). From this perspective, knowledge is a reflection of “interpretive structures, emotionality, and the power relations that permeate the situations being investigated” (Denzin, p. 51). Both the closely connected interpretive methodology and poststructural theory employed in my research recognize that the meanings embedded in a person’s story are shaped by the “effects of particular systems of power and discourse” (Denzin, p. 80).

The women in my study have all experienced the effects of oppression and marginalization prior to and during their imprisonment. They have lived under extreme duress, as a result of power relations that are constitutive of gender, class, and race discrimination resulting in oppressive attitudes and actions within society and the justice system. In using the interpretive interactionist methods proposed by Denzin (2001), it is
important to examine the relationship between the subject’s personal issues and public institutions created to address those issues. Working from the personal stories of the women in my study I relate their personal troubles to the public prison institution. From this standpoint, it is then possible to provide “the foundations for social criticism and social action” (Denzin, p. 5). Through a text that can educate the reader, broaden perspectives and disrupt biases, it can be a call to action which is one intention of interpretive work. Taking a position or taking sides is expected in interpretive work and I have no difficulty in stating my position as an advocate for mothers in prison, which I hope is clear within the text of this thesis.

There are six overall steps guiding the interpretive process (Denzin, 2001) that informs the methodological pathways of my study.

1. Framing the research question.

My research question or main objective is to explore how imprisoned women construct and reconstruct their sense of self as mothers in a prison environment. According to Denzin (2001), it is important to locate the problematic experiences to be studied in one’s own personal history. My life experiences in relation to that of the women in my study is instrumental to supplying “greater substance and depth” (Denzin, p. 71) to my study, allowing me to define and contextualize the phenomenon under study.

2. Deconstructing and analyzing critically prior conceptions of the phenomenon.

Existing research studies need to be provided to demonstrate how the phenomenon has been studied, defined and analyzed, including the preconceptions and biases informing how the phenomenon is understood (Denzin, 2001). I provide this in my
literature review, which addresses the issues of mothering in prison complicated by dominant discourses on motherhood as well as social relations of gender, race, and class.

3. Capturing the phenomenon.

"Capturing the phenomenon involves locating and situating what is to be studied" (Denzin, 2001, p. 74) in the context of those being studied. This involves gathering participants’ personal stories and presenting their experiences as contributions to understanding the research objectives in question. By means of engaging with the women in my study, I was given an opportunity to cognitively and emotionally experience their lives through their stories and make visible their experiences of being mothers in a prison setting. By having the opportunity to do my practicum in the Elizabeth Fry Society residential home (Columbia Place) for women on parole from federal women’s prisons, I was able to spend time and interact daily with the women in their ‘home’ environment. My time and interactions with the women gradually evolved into a rich experience conducive to the development of meaningful relationships allowing me to share in the lives of my participants by collaboratively sharing biographical, practical, and emotional experiences generating “authentic emotional understanding” (Denzin, p. 139). My research experience aligns with the goal of interpretive interactionism to “build true, authentic understandings of the phenomenon under investigation” (Denzin, 2001, p. 140) namely the sense of self experienced by mothers in prison.

4. Bracketing the phenomenon.

Bracketing the phenomenon is the process of “uncovering, defining, and analyzing” (Denzin, 2001, p. 1) the elements of the phenomenon in question. This
process is demonstrated in the analysis portion of the thesis where I locate and interpret
key expressions within participant stories that are directly related to my research
objectives.

5. Constructing the phenomenon.

Once the phenomenon under study has been ‘bracketed’ it is then essential to
bring the elements into a cohesive whole, demonstrating the inter-relatedness of the parts
that define the study (Denzin, 2001). Within my analysis and findings I show how
particular elements of the women’s stories inform and build on each other culminating in
a cohesive picture of how they construct and reconstruct a sense of being a mother within
a prison environment. This is especially demonstrated in Chapter 5.

6. Contextualizing the phenomenon.

By means of contextualization, acquired knowledge of the phenomenon under
study can be made accessible to individuals by locating it within their personal
experiences and social environments. “Through contextualization, the researcher reveals
how ordinary people experience the phenomenon” (Denzin, 2001, p.79). This requires
using thick descriptions of the participants’ lived experiences that can be interpreted
using a rich variety of research methods including “performance texts, autoethnography,
poetry, fiction, open-ended and creative interviewing, document analysis, semiotics, life
history, life story, personal experience and self-story construction, participant
observation, and thick description” (Denzin, p. xi). It is through the means of these
creative and in-depth research methods that interpretive interactionism endeavours to
“capture and represent the voices, emotions, and actions of those studied” (Denzin, p. 1)
focusing on life-altering experiences that shape the meanings persons attribute to
themselves and their lived experiences.

It is Denzin’s (2001) opinion that a reader can only feel or understand what the
writer is conveying if the writer experiences the feeling. To ensure this, I made use of
open-ended interviews that captured “thick description” of the participants’ personal and
problematic life stories, which I conveyed through the use of poetry and performative
texts in order to bring the reader into an emotional understanding of the participants’
experiences. Thick description is a rich and detailed “description that captures the
meanings and experiences that have occurred in a problematic situation” and is used by
interpretive interactionists to create the “condition for interpretation and understanding”
(Denzin, p. 162).

Method: The Research ‘Walk’

Setting.

My research study took place at Columbia Place located at the Elizabeth Fry
Society facility in New Westminster, BC. Columbia Place is a residential program for
women on parole, probation, remand, or conditional sentences from women’s federal
prison institutions. Services available at Columbia Place include intensive supervision,
individual support and goal setting, educational activities, and emotional support for the
women. The program houses up to fourteen women at a time with ten staff and three
volunteers. It is funded by Corrections Services Canada (personal communication, S.
Bayes, 2005). The Elizabeth Fry Society required me to complete confidentiality consent
forms and a criminal record check before the commencement of my research.
Step one: Stepping into the Elizabeth Fry Society.

Before the commencement of my research study, I completed a practicum as part of the requirement for my MA degree at the Elizabeth Fry Society, spending most of my time at Columbia Place. The practicum extended over a period of six weeks from mid-September to the end of October 2005. I spent approximately 6-10 hours, 5 days a week at the site. During my practicum, I learned about the origins and the history of the Elizabeth Fry Society (hereafter EFry) as related to their support and advocacy for incarcerated women. I learned about the services they provide to children, youth, and families impacted directly or indirectly by incarceration, substance abuse, and poverty and how they liaise with other services in the community to promote strong networks of support for those in need. In addition, they offer education related to the justice system for students and community members through Douglas College in New Westminster. My main focus while at EFry was to provide support for the women and staff in Columbia Place. My tasks, therefore, were related to the daily needs and functions of Columbia Place. They included creating relationships with the women, being available to attend to their needs which included driving them to appointments, assisting with general house tasks, being available for conversation and spending time together. I provided support to staff members by learning and maintaining Columbia Place protocols and activities and I engaged in debriefing. I also attended various meetings and offered my support for their campaign to acquire funds for a centre for children of offenders. I learned about the importance of EFry in the women’s lives reflected in the words of one of the participants in my study.
I have the only support in my life here. Some of the women have lost it all and re-built their lives and now they are giving back. They went through it, they have come out the other side and now they are giving back. That’s the road I’m following.

Within a week of beginning my work at Columbia Place, a comfortable rapport developed between the women residents and myself. My practicum experience and the relationships I developed with the women is described in more detail in the section “insider/outsider: the outsider.” By the end of the practicum, I realized that the possibility of proceeding with my research study with the women hinged on the relationships we had developed.

When my practicum was complete, both the University of Victoria and the Elizabeth Fry Society approved the ethics proposal for my research. I arranged for an EFry staff member to inform the women in Columbia Place of my intention to conduct a research study. The women were invited to a meeting where I described my research study and consent procedures and invited them to participate in my study by engaging in interviews/conversations that would be audio recorded. A number of women demonstrated interest and interview times were arranged in private either by a staff member or by me.

Data collection: A collection of voice

Each woman participated individually in an interview, which was held in a private room at Columbia Place. Before starting each interview, I discussed the consent form with the participant to assure she understood the research and her involvement in it before she signed the form. I began each interview session by briefly describing my own interest
in the research study as well as my history and experiences of incarcerations in my family and community. The duration of the interviews varied from approximately 1.5 – 4 hours. I conducted one audio recorded interview with each participant, in addition to a number of conversations with the participants during the study that were not audio recorded but were written up as field notes.

I introduced the topic of the interview, which was related to their experiences as mothers in prison and allowed space and time for the participants to reflect on their experience and express their feelings and insights. I adapted the form of ‘interactive interviewing’ as a guideline for my interviews which is described by Ellis, Kiesinger and Tillman-Healy (1997) as an “interpretive practice for getting an in-depth and intimate understanding of people’s experiences with emotionally charged and sensitive topics” (p. 121). Interactive interviewing involves a collaborative process of communication between researcher and participants (Ellis et al., 1997). This interview method considers the importance of the feelings, insights, and stories of both researcher and respondent, thus both share in the interview process. Although Ellis et al., recommend multiple interviews, I was able to augment formal with informal conversations with participants during my research study as well as develop meaningful relationships with them during my practicum. The ongoing development of relationships assisted me in understanding the participants in an emotional and cognitive manner, which led to the unfolding of richly detailed interviews intertwined with “vulnerability and emotional investment while working through the intricacies of sensitive issues” (Ellis et al., p. 122). The interviews often took the form of conversations where there was a flow of sharing, observations and questions between the participants and myself. As the interviews progressed within an
already “intimate and trusting context” (Ellis et al., p.122) there was much that was mutually revealed generating a growing understanding of each other. My own sharing was a form of self-disclosure that not only contributed to “humanizing and equalizing the research relationship” (Oakley, 1981 and Reinharz, 1992, cited in Reinharz & Chase, 2003, p. 80) it helped the participants feel at ease to share their stories.

Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker (2003) discuss interviewing as an art, which “entails framing questions in a way that allows interviewees...to maintain their dignity while they tell the stories that are important to them. This means allowing subjects their humanity” (p. 146). This is especially true in a prison environment, where I needed to be attentive and sensitive to the participants, their stories, feelings and insights. Bauman (2002, cited in Bosworth et al., 2005) asserted the importance of recognizing that individual connections are meaningful for those who have been “symbolically and literally removed from the world through incarceration” (p. 261). Bauman went on to emphasize the importance of listening and allowing for their voices to be heard, which is often difficult to attain on their own. Bosworth et al. (2005) suggested that by “forming coalitions with those inside, by listening to them, and by bearing witness to their experiences, scholars may draw attention to their basic humanity. And this, after all, is often what is lost in public discussion of crime and punishment” (p. 261).

When trust was established between the participants and myself there was an open space that allowed me to follow them “down their diverse trails” where a “wellspring” of interest in their narratives was expressed (Riessman, 2003, p. 332). The interview sessions took on a conversational quality where we shared our experiences and insights and as the interviews/conversations unfolded naturally, they often veered off the topic of
their mothering experiences in prison. However, there were times during some of the interviews when I did prompt and guide the discussion to elicit personal stories related to mothering in prison, posing questions such as: What are your experiences of motherhood in prison? How is it supported or suppressed? What messages do you hear about mothers in prison? How do you think others see you as a mother? I also used prompts to deepen or maintain conversation such as: Can you describe that? What does that mean to you? Can you tell me more about that? Nevertheless, I attempted to set a tone during the interviews that would take on the form of a conversation with a “give-and-take” (Denzin, 2001, p. 66) interaction between myself and the women in my study.

Power Over: Awareness and Diffusion

There was an obvious and inevitable power differential that existed between the participants and myself. For example, I was able to leave the Columbia Place premises at any time; I had academic and employment opportunities they did not; I had independent living accommodations; and overall I had more choices and options in my life. I consistently engaged with my participants in a collaborative and respectful process of listening and sharing to diffuse as much as was possible existing power differentials. For example, the participants had the freedom and opportunity to withdraw from the research process at any time, including the withdrawal of data, withdrawal of parts of the data, changing data, or making additions.

Several times, upon my arrival to the mainland from my residence in Victoria, the participants with whom I had a scheduled interviews would either have forgotten, be engaged in different plans, or just did not feel up to an interview. In these cases, I would accept these situations remaining open to opportunities to just spend some informal time
with the participants. It was important for me that the participants had a choice whether or not to engage in the interviews, especially if they did not feel inclined or well enough to participate.

During the interview sessions, I made it clear to the participants that they need only disclose what they felt comfortable sharing. If they said something they did not wish recorded they were able to tell me to shut the recorder off or shut it off themselves as it was located close to them. One participant did shut the recorder off a number of times during an interview when she began to cry. When each participant felt she had shared enough, she was able to end the interview. Therefore, the time frames for each interview varied.

The participants are considered to be from a ‘vulnerable’ population. Taking this into consideration, I spoke to the Elizabeth Fry Society staff in Columbia Place to ensure the women would receive necessary support for any emotional or psychological discomfort that might arise from the interview process. I took great care and attention with the participants to ensure they felt supported by me before, during, and after the interview sessions. They did feel at ease with me, which allowed them emotional freedom and space to laugh or cry, fall silent, pose questions to me, share their opinions, insights and stories. I believe both the women and I gained personal insights and learning through the process of mutual reflection and sharing of experiences. I did not witness any of the participants experiencing harm as a result of the interview sessions other than being prompted into further reflections and feelings.

Two participants gave me a number of journal entries they wrote in prison related to their feelings about experiences with their children, their feelings related to being
mothers and ability to mother. I copied the journal entries, removed any descriptive characteristics and returned their original copies. Both verbal and written narratives became a source of data, which I used for interpretive analysis.

I hired a transcriber to transcribe the audio recordings. After the transcription was completed, I delivered the transcripts to each individual participant who was available at the time or passed them on to Columbia Place staff to give to the participants that I could not reach. Participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts, and prior to that I explained that they were able to delete, add, or change any dialogue in the transcripts. No participant took the opportunity to make any changes in their transcripts, which made me wonder if they considered me a friend and academic who they could trust with their stories or perhaps they were apprehensive to offer their opinions. Personally, I believe that their lives were often too complicated to take the time to read the materials as well as make changes. I believe they trusted me with their voices and that I would present their voices with care.

Confidentiality with participants was ensured in the following manner: participant names were not be used on any of their collected data or in the thesis; this included any revealing characteristic descriptions. Any names used in the thesis are pseudonyms.
Insider/outsider

Interpretive interactionism requires researchers to thoroughly immerse themselves in the phenomena they intend to interpret and understand in order to elicit meaningful interpretations of human experience (Denzin, 2001). Immersion in my study of imprisoned mothers stems from my historical and cultural roots linked to the Doukhobor people and a Doukhobor social activist group distinguished as the Sons of Freedom. My familiarity with incarceration begins with that history and culture, culminating in multiple experiences of having community and family members spend time in prison. A detailed summary of my historical and current connections with oppression and incarceration is provided in Chapter 1.

Insider/outside: The outsider.

My initial experience of doing my practicum at Columbia Place was that of an outsider coming into the ‘home’ environment of the women in the residential facility. I immediately felt like a foreigner intruding into their home. They had not asked for me to be there and could not ask me to leave. In the initial days in the residential home, I was given – curious looks, suspicious looks or worst of all, no looks. Even though I was already familiar with experiences of social awkwardness, this experience reached an excruciating height of awkward self-consciousness and extreme discomfort. Questions raced viscerally through me...

“What am I doing here? Am I crazy? Should I quit this now?”

I felt awkward and transparent in the presence of the women and knew I could not cover up those feelings with any attempt at bravado or façade, as that would surely dash
all opportunity of relating to them. Therefore, I accepted my awkwardness and
discomfort and did not try to mask it. In the first week I spent many hours ignored, only
approached by a few of the women who had less prison time than the others. During my
interviews (post-practicum) Sami (one of the participants in my study) and I discussed
my initial time and feelings at Columbia Place.

Sami: I reached out to you cause I knew you felt that way cause that's the way I
feel.

Ahna: That's the way I feel. I was so transparent. I was so obvious.

Sami: And that is because you're honest and genuine... As far as genuine honesty
I understood how women come out of jail. They don't trust... so they saw that you
were genuine.

Kari (a participant in my study) described the need to be genuine within a prison
context.

In prison, it was so important to be what they call 'straight out' and
because trust is such an issue in prison. At Columbia if you were being
genuine and being yourself then yea the women would pick up on that.

I was glad I persevered as a rapport did begin with the women, quicker with some
than others and by the second and third week, I had become an accepted presence. My
interactions with the women accelerated as I became involved in many of their regular
activities such as cooking, baking, lounging in front of the TV, becoming involved in
many conversations and listening to many personal stories with heart-wrenching content.
Our conversations were broad and ranged in topics from discussing difficulties and
challenges they suffered before and during their prison experience as well as their current
situations. I heard stories of substance use, self-harm, physical and sexual abuse, poverty, as well as stories about their children, stories which were at times extremely sad and touching although good memories — joyful and humorous — were shared as well.

The residents not only became accustomed to me but also came to trust me. I felt that at times my position as an outsider shifted to that of an insider. Becoming more of an insider was not only due to who I am and my ability to relate, but it also hinged in great part I believe to my history of having an imprisoned mother. This was especially so as most of the women I met, knew or knew of my mother during her incarcerations. When this information was revealed, their perspectives shifted and I was swiftly moved into a position of an insider. I was moved by their expressions of compassion and concern for me as they stated how hard having a mother in prison must have been for me. I dealt with their expressions with silent surprise because the suffering I endured in my life could not, in my opinion, amount to the suffering they endured and continue to endure.

The women who knew my mother shared with me many stories of their knowledge and encounter of her and those “Douks” which felt like an endearment rather than a derogatory term. They admired the “Douks” for their fearlessness in enacting protests and demonstrations in prison resulting in oppressive and painful punishments. The “Douks” they said were also very nice to everyone and this was a relief to hear. The stories not only shed light on my mother’s experience in prison; they also had me in fits of shared laughter as well as sadness.

The relationships between the women and myself developed, some deeper than others, yet all delightful, all genuine. Although they had all learned of my intended research study, it was at the point when relationship and trust had been developed that a
number of the women expressed interest and intention to become involved. I learned that the voices and issues of imprisoned mothers were not heard. They were willing to offer me their stories and their voices and become part of my study.

Witnessing their sincerity and need to be heard, I realized the necessity of honouring and valuing the women's stories and experiences. This sense of responsibility seemed immense and I suffered over my ability to uphold it. They trusted me, but I wondered if I could trust myself. Could I proceed with my study with the respect, integrity, and care that was essential? I felt a dichotomy of appreciation and fear to be trusted with their vulnerabilities, which were expressed through their eyes, hearts, souls and stories.

Thankfully, the time I spent with the women during my practicum dispelled my fear and changed my assumptions about them as women and mothers. I broadened my understanding by using a feminist theoretical perspective to assist me in understanding both the women and my own initial beliefs and constructions of motherhood. I enjoyed being with the women and regarded my interactions and growing relationships with them as extremely genuine and tender. It became easy for me to relate with them without the notion of their imprisonment as an obstacle to our relationships. I did not ever ask what their crimes were. This is a protocol I was glad I adhered to as Faith (2006) explains “prison etiquette does not encourage inquiry into another’s crime; it is understood that this is a private and sometimes painful matter” (p. 1). Any curiosity soon dissipated and became irrelevant.

The end of my practicum transitioned into the beginning of my research study with willing participants. I knew that without the time to build relationships during my
practicum I would never have been able to approach any of the women to be part of my study. I know through my experience that one cannot waltz into the lives of incarcerated or post-incarcerated women and expect candid and meaningful stories. It is unrealistic. This was one of the many ‘eye-openers’ for me.

Participant Profiles

Six women participated in my study. Five had spent over two years in a federal women’s prison. One woman had spent time in a pre-trial facility and was waiting to be sentenced to the federal women’s prison. They ranged in ages from their early twenties to late fifties. Each participant had either one or two children whose ages ranged from 3 to over 40 years of age. Five participants are Caucasian and one is Aboriginal.

After the completion of my practicum, I was welcomed back by the staff and the women of Columbia Place who agreed to participate in my study. The number of women in Columbia Place had shifted somewhat, with some residents leaving the home to live in nearby communities and some, unfortunately, returning to prison. By this time, I felt comfortable within the home, even among newcomers. Five women Kari, Lia, Sarah, Sami, and Susie had come to know me during my practicum. I met Dani after my practicum upon her arrival home from prison.

Kari had spent a number of years in prison while her infant son and teenage son were with their father. Unlike many mothers she was able to maintain contact with them through visits during her incarceration. Kari and I had known each other during my practicum and we had already had many conversations about her experiences as a mother, before and during her time in prison as well as my experiences as a mother. Kari’s love and affection for her children were apparent during our many conversations. She spoke of
memorable times with her family, her concerns for them, her struggles to become healthy with an outstanding inner strength and understanding of her circumstances and shifting social positions before, during, and after prison. Kari’s thoughtfulness, insights, openness and honesty contributed greatly to my study.

Dani, a spirited young woman and mother, was pregnant while in prison. Initially, her time in prison was spent outside of BC even though her family lived in BC. Dani birthed her baby in a hospital and was sent back to prison the day after her daughter was born only having one day to spend with her baby. Her mother was able to look after the baby while Dani was in prison for 27 months. Dani shared her story with me three days after becoming reunited with her daughter. I noticed that during our interview Dani’s daughter kept very close to her, demonstrating an obvious ease with her mom.

Lia had spent many years in various institutions and prisons, throughout most of her daughter’s childhood. Her daughter is now a young adult. Lia suffered from mental illness and required medication during her incarcerations. Her obvious fragility was strengthened by her open humour and sweet nature. Lia and I had established an easygoing relationship where we spent time in thoughtful conversation made lively by our mutual enjoyment of humour and laughter. I couldn’t imagine her doing time in prisons.

Sarah is a young woman with a sweet and shy nature, soft-spoken, with a keen sense of humour and firm resolve to do well in her life by accomplishing her goals of furthering her education and reuniting with her son. Previous to her conviction and prison time, Sarah was raising her young son on her own. Her enjoyment of her son was reflected in her memories of the times they spent together. She spoke of her son with a
mixture of pride, hope, love, joy, and great sadness. Tears would often make her eyes
glassy and her voice strained. Sarah’s experience ‘on the outside’ included struggling as a
single mom living in poverty and exasperated by severe depression. During an
excruciating period of depression she desperately sought help for her condition, but was
not taken seriously by the service she approached. It was during this despairing moment
that she committed the actions for which she was convicted. Sarah’s son was taken into a
foster home. She has had no contact with him for four years. Unlike the other women
who could speak about their children in the present, Sarah only had memories to draw on.

Sami is a striking Aboriginal woman. Following her conviction, she spent time in
prison and more recently in a halfway house awaiting the outcome of her sentencing. She
knew that her sentence may be lengthy, and instead of being on her way out as the others
who spoke to me were, she was on her way in. Sami’s openness, sincerity, and gentleness
made it easy to get to know her and appreciate the atrociouss history she has had to
endure. Sami has a long history of drug and alcohol addiction. She suffering sexual abuse
at the hands of her stepfather and uncle and took her first drink of whiskey at the age of
ten. Sami left that abusive environment and began living on the streets that led to a path
of drug and alcohol abuse and addiction and continual experiences of sexual abuse.
During her pregnancy, she abstained from taking drugs and alcohol and had a healthy
son. Sami raised her son as a single mother living in poverty for eleven years. Although
Sami was an attentive mother throughout her time with her son, she resumed the use of
drugs and alcohol, which often compromised the care and attention she could offer her
son. After turning eleven, her son opted to live with his dad. At the time, Sami thought
this was a natural decision on his part, that being a boy, he would want to relate to his
dad. In retrospect, she realized that although he was never physically abused, the living situation that her son was exposed to was becoming intolerable for him which prompted him to leave. Her son lives in a foster home in Eastern Canada. She reminisced about her son, remembering the many enjoyable times they shared as well the hardships.

Susie is an older woman, very slight but exuding a tenacity and will that I have rarely seen. Although her tough exterior initially intimidated me, in time I was happy to experience her sharp wit, intellect, and warmth of spirit. One of the bonds that Susie and I share is the time she spent in the same jails in which my mother was incarcerated. Susie had many stories to tell me that I had not heard before, stories that gave me insight into my mother’s experiences. We often spent time sharing our experiences of my mother and those Douks (Doukhobors) as she called them. We often laughed heartedly and at times fell silent.

Of all the women with whom I had conversations, Susie spent the longest time in prison – she was a ‘lifer.’ She had spent time in Kingston’s notorious P4W and her lengthy time in prison extended well beyond the time of the other women I spoke with. Susie experienced extreme oppression and abuse at the hands of prison staff. Her life story warrants the writing of a book and I felt honoured to have her take the time to tell me her story. Susie had her daughter when she was sixteen while she was on the run from a youth detention centre for females. It was there where she had started doing her time from the age of twelve for “incorrigibility” – continual running away from home and foster homes. She had run from the detention centre up to 96 times.
Insider/outsider: The insider.

Each participant felt at ease and the open-ended interviews drew forth a wealth of stories. To validate my sense of 'insiderness' Sami was quick to note in her interview/conversation when she looked at me candidly and commented:

*How can anybody relate? No really I mean that's exactly why you're here because you can relate and I believe that.. nobody else can relate. They can have a passion and a love to do this but I mean you did it, you went through it first-hand...you are like the child of all the mothers here.*

This statement prompted me to question how I saw my role and how the women perceived my role. It became apparent that my experience crossed over into the lives of the women that involved the development of increasingly complex relationships. I was seen as someone who had similar experiences; I represented 'their' child; I was a friend; I was a researcher; I was a nurturer; my role shifted and changed in the eyes of the women and in my own eyes as well. I was gifted with their trust that required a high degree of responsibility and care on my part for them as well as for myself. I realized that I was drawn into a site of developing relationships based upon a genuine sense of being which I was continually challenged to not only demonstrate but also 'be,' and I needed to be careful not to become lost in the complexity of emotions and devotion.

The lines of researcher and researched became vague and more difficult to distinguish. The distinct warnings of my academic advisors to maintain appropriate distance and avoid personal over-involvement with my participants became increasingly difficult. I could not find my way along the blurred boundaries described by Gordimer (2000, cited in Atwood, 2002):
Powers of observation heightened beyond the normal imply extraordinary 
disinvolvement: or rather the double process, excessive preoccupation and 
identification with the lives of others, and at the same time a monstrous 
detachment...The tension between standing apart and being fully involved... (p. 29)

The tension described by Gordimer of “standing apart and being fully involved” 
relates to the challenge researchers face in becoming involved with the subjects being 
researched. I grappled with the question of how I could stand apart from the women and 
yet remain fully involved. Where was this tension of in-between? And how could I find 
my balance in the in-between space? I relate this to the question of how a researcher is 
able to maintain the position of both the insider and outsider. Naples (1997) described 
“insiderness” and “outsiderness” as interactive processes and not “fixed or static 
positions, rather they are ever-shifting and permeable social locations” (p. 71). My 
position with the women as an insider/outsider involved a fluidity. I could never fully be 
either the insider or outsider but was sometimes the insider and sometimes the outsider 
depending upon the overlapping of our particular social locations, past experiences, as 
well as the level of trust, affinity, and understanding ‘between’ us. The initial distance 
between the women and me which defined me as the ‘other’ in relation to them and them 
as the ‘other’ in relation to me had appeared to be diminishing. One of the participants, 
Susie, who took the longest time to relate to me and displayed obvious resistance to being 
interviewed or brought into conversation about being a mother, asked me before a 
potential recorded conversation, “Tell me Ahna what has this experience in EFry given 
you?” I was taken aback by Susie’s question and after a short reflection I responded,
“Well, I feel that the distance between me and you and me and the other women in my study has been continually diminishing.” While saying this I gestured a wide space between my hands then collapsed that space as my hands slowly began to meet—not quite all the way. I felt unsure about my feelings regarding this, maybe this was just my hope or false observation, but Susie’s response assured me “That is exactly what is happening, now turn on the recorder!”

I felt I had fluidly crossed over the boundaries of researcher and subject, into the development of actual friendships with some of my participants. This increased my ability to work with the women as an insider, although I knew that with my limited knowledge and experience of the kind of lives they had in and out of prison, my entry would remain partial and at the most, fluctuating. My partial “insiderness” was enough for them to trust me, share with me, and immerse me into their lives of excruciating tender and painful stories. The experience brought about a multitude of painful gifts that troubled me and undermined my ability to contain those gifts. One of the ways I attempted to deal with my seemingly unbearable feelings was to write.

*Feelings rush to one point then another – faster stronger pushing up against the insides of my skin. What do I do with this? No place, no peace for this. I can’t cry, I can’t laugh. Am somehow held hostage to the stories, lives, emotions, images mutating inside of me seeking asylum – or something. Ravaging through me because I cannot still them, I cannot make sense of them, I cannot either – hold them. They bruise me and I have no tools. They go to places they shouldn’t go because I don’t know how to put them anywhere else. Words, tears, creaking laughter, coughs
and smoke, and it's o.k., it's o.k., but no it is not o.k. And so I love them.

And I am scared as they invite me into the cauldron of their lives, stories, memories, scared that it is too much, or not enough. Scared of the broken pieces I am given – broken pieces ready to be part of a mosaic of beauty. I am an artist – an artist for broken pieces.

I became a bearer of stories that told of lives exasperated by physical and sexual abuse, drug and alcohol use as means of coping, living on the street, rape, rape and rape, severe depression and despair, mental illness, oppression on the outside and inside. There was in each case a culmination of circumstances that eventually led each individual to committing a crime. I came to believe that most people, myself included, would have behaved in like manner, if we were faced by similar circumstances. Thus, my research, my thesis, grew into an experience and process that often felt out of proportion to my ability. I often slipped into a sense of inability and often into sadness.

Have I taken on more than I can realistically handle? How do I contain it?

How do I manage?

On the other hand these feelings fluctuated with an excitement that I was engaged in a study that was at once powerful and meaningful for me. I knew that these elements were essential to my desired growth and living in ways where I could be passionately and meaningfully engaged. This engagement felt like sustenance for my intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth and going into the depths also meant experiencing increased clarity of being.

An integral element of interpretive interactionism is social justice. Denzin (2001) argued that an important criteria that interpretive work requires is a call to action by
preparing a foundation for "social criticism and social action" (p. 5). It is my hope that through my representations of the participants in my study, I show the reader lived realities that need not only attention but changes from the personal to political.
CHAPTER 5 ANALYSIS: CONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING A SENSE OF SELF AS MOTHER

My impression, gathered from my conversations with the women in my study, is that stepping into prison must be like walking into a world that turns you upside down and pulls the rug out from beneath you. It must be like walking through a looking glass into the reversed side of existence, surreal yet real, where you learn to find your bearings. In prison you learn how to draw on attributes of self you may not have had to access before. How much of your self from the other side can you maintain? How accessible is the other side? Crossing over to the other side of the looking glass, with no turning back, Kari relates her experience of entering the prison for the first time.

...the feeling I experienced was standing in front of the desk and admitting there was a feeling of having lost everything and um that was pretty ...
that was a pretty horrible feeling to have lost everything and all of a sudden I'll be in a prison and have your, you know, photograph taken, turn your head this way, turn your head that way, then go to the shower and, you know, sort of have to uh strip down and know that even though the guards were women that they could come in look at you anytime and I did feel a certain degree of comfort when I finally got to the unit that I was living in and wasn't sure what to expect...

The women in my study all have diverse backgrounds which inform their sense of self and according to feminist poststructuralist theory, they are constituted and reconstituted by various discursive practices which are externally imposed and internalized. Davies (2000) spoke of discursive constitution as a collective where "female
subjectivity is made possible because as ‘women’ they are spoken into existence through the same collective set of images, metaphors, and storylines as other women” (p. 75).

How are the selves the women bring with them impacted by walking through the looking glass? How can their selves as women, mothers, daughters, partners, and friends be realized and reinforced within a prison environment that reduces and categorizes them solely as criminals? Maintaining a strong sense of self is fraught with challenges in prison and adding to the challenges are the emotional assaults on the women from society. As Kari revealed, they are sensitive to the attitudes of people beyond the prison gates:

Society just naturally jumps to judgment, you know, you’re a women, you’re a mom, you have a family and you, oh God, you’ve done this? You know they are far more ready to accept a man committing a crime, and going to prison than a woman committing a crime. Because she’s the one, you know that should be at home doing the cooking and doing the looking after the kids and keeping the family together. They can’t look at anything besides, yeah, the offence...the majority of them wouldn’t be thinking, okay what happened in this woman’s life to lead up to this point. I was sure I had ex-con flashing on my forehead, you know, just like when I was out on bail, I was sure that I had something flashing on my forehead...there isn’t enough information out in the – it’s not a subject that the people want to talk about so there’s not enough information out in the community about the prison system or the fact that you know, quite a percentage of women are just, you know, pretty regular everyday people.

We’re human, and most of us are pretty nice people.
Sarah shares her experience with a health professional who, upon speaking about her crime, reported “what kind of mother would do that?”

*I said, well you weren’t there. I would tell people – I’d like to see your life, how cushy your life is. I lived a lot harder life than you and I’d like to see how you would do in my situation if you were in my shoes. I would say that. How was your life compared to mine? That’s the thing too, they are quick to judge. They don’t look at reasons why, they just think oh my God how could you do that.*

An integral part of the women’s sense of self that they experienced before and during imprisonment is their identity as mothers, even when they are under attack by uninformed and misinformed public opinion. Public opinion often reflects motherhood discourses that imply expectations and assumptions that women will “naturally take care of children of all ages and the belief that women’s ‘maternal’ qualities can and should be extended to the non-mothering work that they do” (Weedon, 1997, p. 60). Entering the prison system assumes that a woman abandons her mothering role by venturing outside of prescribed notions of motherhood established through dominant discourses. Obviously, a mother’s role changes drastically within prison, but it is not necessarily severed. A mother’s sense of being a mother and position as a mother may continue through the limited opportunities prison offers. Davies (2000) described how through the experience of claiming a particular subject position “a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines, and concepts that are made relevant within the particular discursive practices in which they are positioned” (p. 89). The women I spoke with continued to maintain
positions of 'mother' informed by their past, yet could not remain fixed in that subject positioning as the prison environment required a reconstitution of the position of 'mother' according to the limitations of prison and the discourses in their environment as well as the discourses they participate in (Davies, 2000).

Kari.

Kari's initial contact with her children was communication by telephone. She called home as much as possible to talk to her mom, husband, and eldest son. That was the most accessible way to continue communication and draw on their support for her to feel a sense of self as a mother, wife and daughter, apart from the generalization of self as 'criminal.' During Kari's initial months in protective custody, phone calls were her only way of learning how her children were, of feeling them through hearing their voices, and maintaining a relationship with them. Albeit limited, this was an important way to continue 'mothering' in an active manner. This became a reinforcing link leading to new and surprising ways to relate to her son she had not anticipated. The conversation I had with Kari took a turn toward amusement when Kari described a phone conversation with her son. It began when she would join the other women to watch TV and they would at times be watching World Wide Wrestling. Wrestling was a program that Kari did not normally watch before her prison time.

While I was in protective custody, I got more and more into the routine and more relaxed. I would talk to my eldest son on the phone and the one thing that he really enjoyed on TV was WW wrestling. Well I couldn't believe that this was something that the girls on the unit really enjoyed on TV, so Sunday, Monday and Thursday there was wrestling on TV –
Monday smackdown, no Monday raw, Thursday smackdown and so I got on the phone with my son and I said, "You'll never believe what I'm watching on TV," and he goes "What's that mom?" And I said "Wrestling," I said, "WWF" and there was at least ten seconds silence on the other end of the phone and he said, "Mom I just never thought we'd be having this conversation." Normally, at home, if he had his friends over or we were at a friend's place and the younger people were watching wrestling, I would pop my head in the room and just kind of roll my eyes and then leave. So for him to be hearing that his mom was into wrestling was so funny, we had some pretty fun conversations after that, like, "Did you see him fall on Monday?" or "Did you see smackdown on Thursday?" Kari and I both laughed, releasing any tension lingering in our conversation. So yeah our conversations after that sort of included that and they always included how he was doing at school and how things were at home. As my other son got a little bit older, his dad would put him on the phone, it would basically just be "Hi mom," and I'd say, "Love you," and he'd say, "Love you mom."

Kari's elder son related to her as his mother, as he did before she came to prison. Although their relationship involved limited contact, they found another dimension of relating that opened up a new and unexpected site of dialogue through shared experience. Kari's son remained a constitutive factor in her life, contributing to her positioning as a mother.
After several months in protective custody, Kari was moved to a maximum security prison. This move provided Kari with an opportunity to have visits from her family. Kari’s expression while relaying her story reflected the relief and joy she felt to be with her children in an atmosphere where they felt comfortable.

The first visit was just so great. In the maximum security building, the visiting area is a big room but at the very back in the corner is an area for people with small children to visit. There was a couch and toys and it was kind of away from the others a little bit, so it was enjoyable. I could get down and play with my younger son and have some close time with him and that was really—that was important and also while I was down there with my younger son, my older son and I could talk as well because there’s 12 years difference between my kids and they are at totally different stages, so here’s my eldest son in high school and dealing with much different issues, teenage issues and my little guy is just worried about what toy he’s going to play with next, he is happy to see his mom but, oh wow, there’s a toy I haven’t seen before. So yeah mom’s here, but look at that!

Kari’s sense of being a mother within the prison context was reinforced through consistent visits during which Kari was able to attend to her children. Visiting with her children made her mother self, tangible, validated, and real, and not experienced only through memories and longing. Kari’s children were constitutive of her subject position as a mother, enabling her to resist the prison and societal imposed label of a criminal.
Maintaining relationships with her children was a determined intention Kari had before going to prison, which speaks of her continued sense of identity as a mother throughout her prison experience. Of all the participants, Kari was the only one who initially received regular visits from her children.

*I was determined even before I went to prison to keep the relationship between my kids and me strong and to do as much as I could for myself there and while on parole towards the time when I would be released because in my life I was so used to always doing for others and not caring for myself. I learned that if I don't take proper care of myself, I can't take proper care of my kids and in saying that my kids were always well taken care of. They had, you know, everything they needed but to my detriment because I didn't take care of myself properly. I didn't get enough sleep. I would buy them clothes and things they needed but didn't always do the same for myself.*

Kari speaks of her time as a mother before entering the prison system. It is reflective of how mothers are expected to fulfill their role as mothers according to dominant discourses. Marotta (2002) discussed dominant cultural scripts that teach cultural values that are internalized and inform one’s sense of being. These scripts, she contended, socially position individuals and attempt to “reproduce a universal motherhood” (p. 278) in individual mothers. A mother’s happiness and fulfillment, Marotta stated, is expected to be contingent upon their children while she exercises “self-control, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice” (p. 279). For example, prior to her time in prison, Kari tried to attend to all her children’s needs while overlooking her own mental
health. Dominant ideologies on motherhood set up norms “for mothers to meet which have little to do with the real lives of mothers” (Hardy & Wiedmer, 2005, p. 23). Nevertheless, it was her well-established sense of self as a mother along with the supported relationships with her children that enabled Kari to find ways to mother within the confines of prison, no matter how limited. Kari was able to adapt to her changing role in her children’s lives and find, within the limits, ways to continue being and feeling like a mother through phone calls and visits. She was determined to take care of herself, to become healthy and become aware of her internal struggles, and to find the tools and awareness to work through those difficulties. In expressing her intention to take care of herself, Kari realized that being a mother does not mean giving yourself so totally that you compromise your health. Kari’s perspective on what it means to be a mother took a shift to include broader meanings.

*I would phone on Sundays and Wednesdays and talk to all three. Talk to my husband and my two kids and ah I would write but not very often... on special occasions I always sent cards to the kids but usually I would say what I had to say to them on the phone—they would write and as my time at BCCW went on there was still that struggle between doing things for myself and wanting to be at home but it kind of eased a little bit and once we got into more of a routine as far as visiting was concerned. Six months after I got to the prison I was able to start having weekend family visits—they have visiting apartments there. So I was able to start having—for the first little while once a month, weekend visits in the apartment and my husband and my kids would come Friday afternoon and then we had until*
Sunday afternoon. At first it started at once a month for six months and then if there was more of a demand, the frequency went down so it would go to once every six weeks or every other month depending on the demand for the apartment. It was really great to see both of my kids for more than two hours every month.

It would be amazing. There was a VCR and TV. It was just like a regular apartment except, the door was a driven door and if you wanted to go outside into the courtyard, we had to phone and say we are going out into the courtyard. We would watch movies and my husband could bring in food so I would do fun regular family stuff like cook pancakes for the kids on Saturday and Sunday morning. Oh it was just such a great thing, such an appreciated – appreciated thing and then when the demand for the apartment went up in between these visits my husband would bring the boys for a regular visit. When I moved into an open living unit, which was minimum security, it was a huge change. It was basically well I kind of describe it like a dorm basically and we all had a key to our own room and, you know, they weren’t huge by any means but we had a bed and a desk and a closet and nice big window and a little bit more freedom. We could walk around outside on the grounds and visits were a lot nicer there. Visits were either in the kitchen area or the living room and the big living room area had a big fireplace and when my husband would bring the boys my younger son loved it in the big rocking chair by the fireplace
and we would just rock in the rocking chair and kind of watch the
fireplace and he would talk to me.

Having family visits appeared to have given Kari a sense of relief and normalcy. She had opportunities to do normal activities with her family, reminiscent of the times they shared prior to prison. Kari describes the changes in her environment as less restrictive with visits from her family taking place in a comfortable setting. Kari felt able to feel and express herself as a mother with more ease; perhaps it was an opportunity to fit into the role of mother prescribed by the dominant social constructions of motherhood evocative of her mothering role prior to imprisonment.

Dani.

Dani describes how she was able to maintain a connection with her daughter through phone calls to her own mother who would fill Dani in on what her daughter was like, what she was doing and how she was developing. Journal writing was another way Dani kept her experience of her daughter real.

Hello again my sweet little angel. Days have gone by and I miss you more than ever. I look at your picture and all I can feel is lonely. My mom has taken you and you are in a better place with the woman you will soon get to know as grandma. My heart is broken and can only be fixed the day I get to hold you again. I keep on thinking about the first day I ever got to hold you for the first time. I was filled with the greatest feeling of love and I knew I have been changed for life after carrying you for 10 months. I remember your every kick and how I would read and sing to you. It was the best gift I have ever had seeing you -- a gift from god and the choices I
would have to make are only good for the both of us and it makes me so happy. Love Mom

Hi Daniela. Just dropping a line cause you popped into my head. Oh my baby girl I miss you so much. I talked to you the other night but you are only a few weeks old so you would not understand but that is o.k. as long as you hear my voice. When you were in my tummy I use to read to you. I read this book “The Bear Next Door.” I think you liked it cause you would kick and move lots whenever I would read it. My stomach would be all weird cause I was so small you could see your every move. It was so cool, it would make me feel so warm and proud of the changes. I used to think I would never be able to cause I was scared of change of being lost...You are my other 50% and that gave me a chance to look at what I’m doing with my life. I would like to thank you Daniela for the other 50% of my life.

...I need to fight hard to get out for good to have a real life with you not the ones I can only dream of and that’s why I’m changing for the better...I love you...Love Mom

Davies (2000) described an aspect of poststructuralism involving the creation of a space that enables one access to an imaginary world through the process of speaking and writing. Dani’s journal creates a space where she is able to express herself to her daughter or the idea of her daughter. Through writing in her journal, she can envision the presence
of her daughter and the hopes she has of their eventual reunion. This act of writing and imagining is itself constitutive of Dani’s self as a mother.

*I did up her little journal but then I just, I don’t know, I just put it down, I was like, I can’t do this... because it hurt and I put it out of my mind so I could keep on doing my programs so when my mom would send pictures for me, I’d look at them and I’d keep on looking “like that came out of me?” I would make her stuff all the time. Like I made her blankets and clothes. I took parenting programs in there and I liked it ‘cause I don’t believe that there’s nobody that is — or like you can never learn enough about parenting. I liked going to the parenting groups.*

After Dani gave birth to her daughter, she was given only one day to see and hold her. Other than this brief experience, Dani had no memories to substantiate her sense of being a mother. By Dani’s mother sending her photographs and telling her stories about her baby, Dani had other ways to piece together a sense of her daughter. In addition, it made sense to Dani to take parenting courses that could provide her with parenting skills. Dani’s sense of being a mother would be further constituted through the parenting course which would offer current discourses on ‘mothering’ “many of which are produced by experts, through whom power passes such as physicians, psychologists, and psychiatrists” teaching mothers the meaning of being a ‘good’ mother (Marotta, 2005, p. 18). This was enough for Dani to position herself as a mother in the present as well as knowing that particular position would continue into the future when she would be reunited with her daughter upon her release. Dani was being shaped by various messages surrounding her ‘self’ as a mother without any past experience informing her subjectivity.
Lia.

Lia communicated with her daughter through the telephone and irregular visits. I always talked to my daughter. I always called her especially at the old prison where we were allowed to call more often than we were allowed in the new prison. She came up to see me – her mommy back in the early days – in the 80’s. Her dad brought her. We had a very strong relationship, even though I was in prison her whole child life and her grown-up life too. She would come to visit me herself when she was older. Though most of the time she wasn’t out here when I was in jail. She was living far from this area with her dad and her dad would bring her out here for visits. I didn’t get to see her a lot when she was growing up when I was in prison. Oh no, sometimes I would go a long time without seeing her.

Lia had no doubts or hesitations in declaring her strong relationship with her daughter, of being her mother. Her claims to being a caring and active mother were natural for her within the prison context in which she had been living over long spans of her lifetime. Lia was able to construct her own beliefs about herself as a mother that contested the dominant discourse of motherhood and accommodated the inconsistent contact she had with her daughter.

I wasn’t there all the time for my daughter and I tell her all the time, how I’m sorry mom wasn’t there all the time for you, I’m sorry I spent so much my time in jails and institutions, I’m sorry I wasn’t there. It’s tough having a mother coming in and out of prison all the time, you think that’s not
hard on a child? It is. Very hard. It lasted a long time in her lifetime for
her to cope. There wasn’t much I could do dear, I wasn’t well half the time
in jail. I was very sick. I was on medication, I was not well, I was not
doing good. Kind of out-of-it half the time.

Lia knew that her condition leaned itself to the struggles she faced for so long in her
life. She felt powerless in it. Yet the one place that she felt she had some autonomy and
distinctness as a women and mother was the love of her daughter that she kept alive
throughout her tumultuous institutional experiences. Lia’s subject position as mother,
informed and shaped and limited by her environment as well as shaped by her own
choices and feelings allowed her a strong sense of self, mother “self.”

She says she’s accepted it and she’s forgiven me a long time ago and that
means more to me than anything. She forgives me and yet I’m still
worrying if she’s okay. Because I always wonder is my daughter suffering
because of what happened? I’m constantly worried about it. I tell her all
the time “Oh I’m really sorry, I hope you’re not going to be like me.” “Do
you blame me because I was locked up so long in and out of institutions?”
She says, “No mom, I don’t blame you. No, I love you mom.” My daughter
says she loves me—that means more to me than anything. I love her so
much. My baby. I don’t care; I don’t care how old your child is it’s always
your baby. And you will always worry that your child will turn out like
you. I think that’s the number one thing.
Lia’s concern over her daughter turning out like her was an obvious point of worry and stress for her. She felt powerless to do anything except express her love for her daughter through her feelings, words and time she could spend with her.

Sarah.

Unlike the other women who could speak about their children in the present, Sarah only had memories to draw on. She speaks about the times they enjoyed together.

*We went swimming and I took him ice-skating and everything. We caught the bus to go to school. We would ride bikes to school on nice days. He looked so much like me and older ladies would say “Oh your brother is so cute, how old is he?” I would get that all the time.*

Sarah has a distinct sense of herself as a mother. She had memories that validated her experience of being a mother from the initial eleven years she spent with her son. At the time I spoke with Sarah she had not had any contact with her son for four years, yet her sense of being a mother did not wane. One way she found to support her sense of mothering was to further her education from a grade six level in order to relate to her son when they could be reunited. Sarah thought he was becoming smarter than she was and therefore was preparing for their eventual time together.

*I’m going for my G.E.D. and I’m writing better but I only have a grade six education and he’s doing well you know and I’m sure he’s going to be a lot smarter than I am so I am going to get active here because if he’s going to live with me he is going to have questions.*

Sarah is employed and found it difficult when others at work spoke about their children. During those times Sarah was silenced.
I can’t even join in the conversations, my situation is so different. When I asked if she mentions that she has a son...I do yea...but it’s hard because I can’t just say “yea we did this the other day” you know.

Although Sarah’s sense of mothering had not disappeared, it was frustrated by the impossibility of seeing or communicating with her son. She was left always wondering about him. She wondered about him in the present, what he looked like, how tall had he become, what changes he was going through and how would they be together.

I wanna get well enough so I can get back on my feet...and I miss him so much, wholly. It’s four years.... Sarah stops, her words are expressed slower, quieter in her strained voice. I wonder you know what kind of music he likes. When he was little, I would just listen to the radio and he would enjoy that but he’s gotta have his own music taste now right? What are his likes and oh boy and it is so...what kind of clothes does he wear...

Sarah begins to lightly cry but continues... it’s not fair – I miss him so much...It keeps going through my head I never would have done it if I was feeling better...

Sarah’s constructed sense of what it is to be a mother stems from years she spent with her son, prior to her imprisonment. Sarah took care of her son under the conditions of poverty. For Sarah, being a mother meant taking care of her son even if she couldn’t always take care of herself. Sarah’s position was similar to Kari’s as she experienced self-sacrifice and sought fulfillment through her children and perhaps struggled to achieve the standards of motherhood that society dictated which could not be adapted to her situation of poverty.
According to Davies (2000), selfhood is constituted in the “continuity of a multiplicity of selves” (p. 89). Davies suggested that poststructuralist discourse involves the “move from the self as noun (and thus stable and relatively fixed) to the self as a verb, always in process, taking its shape in and through the discursive possibilities through which selves are made” (p. 136). Both Kari and Sarah found that possibility of movement in the discovery of other aspects of themselves that could be developed, such as Sarah’s educational pursuits and Kari’s intention to achieve a healthy state of being. Within these new roles or subjectivities they both could still express themselves as mothers, outside of the rigid and unrealistic institution of motherhood.

*Sami.*

Since her incarceration, Sami has had no contact with her son, who was living with a foster family. She reminisced about her son, remembering the enjoyable times they shared and how she was able to overcome her challenges of addiction and poverty to raise him as a “really good mom.”

*I used to go the PTA meetings and I used to go early in the morning because he wanted to do track, so I’d run with him before school started. Eleven years I raised him on my own. I was a really good mom for a long time until the last two years. Sami’s memories also include the difficult times. I worked myself off welfare right. But there were the times I’d be passed out drunk, you know, and he’d have to grab a sandwich for dinner – that wasn’t fair. He’s seen fights but that was in the last two years before he left. I failed him. I had to come to terms with that, I failed as a mother. My addiction, I wouldn’t give up my addiction. What kind of life
did he have with me? I was passed out drunk, work, drink, pass out, drunk, work, drink, pass out drunk...I mean I failed him and I've seen that and then I worked so hard out here to do good and I feel like I've failed in everything.

She had assumed that he would not want to have anything to do with her – that she failed him. A short while after our conversation, Sami was briefly reunited with her son when his foster father flew with him from eastern Canada. After the visit, Sami described her relationship with her son,

Oh it's great now. I talk to him every Sunday now...when he came out I found out that he never was mad at me. I just assumed that our relationship was gone. Now it's beautiful. He loves me unconditionally, he's a kind soul, he's really been a good boy. "Shit happens" is what he says, he sees me doing so good now. He actually thinks I have a lot of courage and strength. He's very proud of me. He's with a good foster family and they, they're genuinely really good people. He is involved in music, he wrote his own song and put it on a CD. He plays the guitar. He's doing well in school. He's working for independent living and he wants to come back here. He wants to come back and be with me. So that gives me hope for the future. I really had nothing or nobody. I didn't really have a care, give a shit, you know. But seeing him now changed it all. Knowing that he loves me, he doesn't hate me for what happened and he wants to come back and that did a turn about – I have somebody in the world who cares. It changed everything. Seeing him has changed
everything. Because I really—I have the strength and the honour to try and get through as best I can but it’s pretty painful...and he’s turned it...Sami cannot control the tears streaming down her cheeks, she stops speaking, composes herself enough to continue...Seeing him just gave me hope and seeing how beautiful he is, he’s such a kind soul and he’s so polite and respectful, he’s just a really genuine, genuinely nice person. He has my heart and my soul so, you know, I’m glad, I’m glad, he’s got good dreams, he wants to go to college, he’s playing the guitar...

Sami accepts the fact that her son is being raised by a foster family; she feels confident that he is treated well and receives what he needs from them. Nevertheless, the relationship that she is able to have with him gives them both hope that they can be together in time. Sami speaks about the support she receives from her son and contemplates what it would be like if she did not have it,

Oh, if I didn’t have it now I’d be dead. I wouldn’t go on, I wouldn’t run, I wouldn’t run. I’m not going to run away from nothing. I would just...

Sami breaks down and speaks amidst her light sobbing...tired of it all, the whole pain of it all but it’s him, right, that’s changed that...like I say, I’m not kidding when I say it was always in my head that I, you know, I can bail right? Seeing my son put a flip on that. I can’t have him go through that right? That’ll kill him inside. He’s got a dad that doesn’t care and a mom who does care but killed herself, so I mean I can’t do that to him. But I do have the motivation to do well in the prison to get out so he can come back and live with me. That’s the motivation and I have that now. I can
only do better you know. When my son comes out he's going to have a positive role model, he thinks I have a lot of courage.

As Sami says, her son “put a flip on that” in that the relationship with him turned so much around for her. Coming back into her life with feelings and intentions to be with her gave Sami a sense of life, hope and future. Her intention to recover from her addictions and become a positive role model is her primary goal even in the face of adversity. It was through her time in prison and the halfway house that Sami came to see more clearly the destructive path she was on, accept that she was an addict and work hard to get better. Her motivation to get better was indeed her son, as well the other women in the halfway house, staff and residents, who supported and were integral in arranging for her son to visit. Before they became reunited, for a short period during her time in a halfway house, Sami held little hope that she would ever see her son again.

Sami raised her son for eleven years before he left her home to live with his father. Even though Sami struggled in her life with addictions and poverty, when she became a mother she was initially able to raise her son in what she considered a normal environment as a good mother. Sami's constructions of 'mother' reflected the dominant discourses of motherhood as she found work to support her son and herself, she abstained from drugs, participated in school activities, and maintained a 'normal' household. This changed as she resumed the use of drugs and was not always able to take care of her son who moved in with his father. With her continued dependence on drugs, and spending time with people who supported her in her drug use, Sami eventually committed a crime leading to her incarceration and time spent in Columbia Place before her sentencing. She gave up on the hope of being with her son and felt fortunate when he came to visit from
across Canada. Resuming a relationship with her son became a source of hope, meaning and purpose to go on living. Sami was able to re-establish a relationship with her son even if it was limited by distance and her incarceration. She did not speak of their relationship in conjunction with needing to be a good mother; she spoke of the relationship they were building together. DiQuinzio (1999) considered the relationship between mother and child as mutual and reciprocal with a continuous constitution of subjectivity described as a “paradigmatically human relationship” (p. 245).

Susie.

I was by myself; I didn’t have anybody; I didn’t have an old man or lady, no nothing. I was by myself and then I got into an armed robbery and I got two years on it. My kid was apprehended and then sent out to my mom’s.

It was my mom and dad that brought her up.

Susie was eighteen when she was sentenced to do time in a federal prison. When I asked if she was tough – tough as nails – she responded:

Yeah, you had to be, you had to be – especially being lawfully under age, right, but I couldn’t jump up and say, “Well I’m only eighteen, you know,” because that’s kind of sucky, so yeah you have to go in there with the attitude that nothing fuckin’ matters, that you’re not going to take any, you know, you’re just not going to take anything, right...

Susie had to take on a tough persona in order to survive her time in P4W. This tough exterior lent itself to her self of sense as tough as well as smart, throughout her many years of incarceration. She knew that her daughter was taken care of and Susie had to take care of herself, she had to survive.
Her mother raised Susie's daughter as her own and up until she was six, she thought that Susie was her sister, the one she visited in prison. Susie's life was a long and complicated path of incarcerations. Her will and tenacity are obvious at first encounter and I could barely imagine the increasingly complex twists and turns of her life. Even though Susie rejects the notion of being a mother - you are assuming that everyone has a motherhood gene - she shared with me the connection she had with her daughter throughout her life. She was there for her daughter whether through phone calls or visits and she could not refuse her any help she was able to give. Susie's labyrinth of 'crimes and punishments' did not allow for a consistent relationship, let alone a nurturing one. Susie did not feel like a mother, perhaps she had no idea what that was supposed to feel like; perhaps the claim to motherhood did not make sense to Susie or maybe it was easier for her not to accept the ideology behind the label of motherhood as they were too unrealistic. Perhaps Susie was just being realistic according to her lived experience which the dominant concept of motherhood could not acknowledge as it remained suspended outside of the dominant notion of common sense.

What mother things did I do? I wasn't there – I was completely out of the picture. I had no other choice...like I wasn't going anywhere fast.

Nevertheless, Susie did feel connected to her daughter and speaking about her daughter evoked in Susie feelings of sadness. When asked how she felt about her parents raising her daughter, Susie responded by saying,

I just didn't think about it...I just do not go there...just go there at birthdays and Christmas, you know...

What would happen if you did go there?
Oh fuck, I guess I didn’t dwell on it but if I did, if I had, I think I would probably would have flipped out...you know...um did a lot of crying, you know, um...but not a lot of ‘what ifs,’ I’m just not a what-if person, deal with it, this is it, deal with it, you know...

Throughout her daughter’s life, which became a reflection of Susie’s, there was a continuous relationship and support from Susie. Susie carried on a sense of obligation and connection to her daughter that comes through as a reflection of her subjective identity as a mother. Even though Susie’s practice of motherhood differed vastly from the dominant ideologies of motherhood and even if she denied having a ‘motherhood gene’ perhaps it still shaped her as a mother.

*She never sat for long, she only ever did less than 30 days. I would never let her sit. Even in juvenile, I used to go get her. I’d go in there with the attitude that we were going to settle this right – “if you’re going to run away then you’re going to be responsible for it, right?” But that never happened because she’d start to cry, “Please mom take me out,” and the judge would say, “Is anybody going to take her out?” I said, “Nope.” She would be in that little box over there. “Mom please! I’ll never do it again, I promise! Please I love you?” So I’d bring her out and we’d get outside the courthouse and she’d start, “Why are we going this way?” “Cause we’re going home.” “Well I’m going back”...and fuck the first red light she’d be gone. Very wilful, just like me.*

Aside from Dani, each of the women expressed the memories they had of when they were with their children prior to imprisonment. The women’s subject positions as
mothers were acquired through the "accumulation of the memory, conscious or unconscious, of subject positions and the psychic and emotional structures implicit in them" (Weedon, 1987, p. 112). All the women were in some manner connected to their children whether through phone contact or visits or through memories and hopes for a future together. They also were all informed, to varying degrees, by dominant discourses related to the institution of motherhood.

Agency and Resistance: Rocking the Institution of Motherhood While Claiming a Position of Mother

In the above discourses, it is evident that the women maintained their sense of self as mothers in ways that surpass prison boundaries with the possibility for agency that exists with respect to other aspects of self within prison. The women were able to challenge the dominant discourse of mothering by mothering in alternative ways that, although limited, enabled them to continue feeling like and being mothers. Davies (2000) described poststructuralist theorizing as offering space to question and counter dominant discourses, practices, and common sense knowledge.

Although the movement and freedom of mothers in prison is restricted especially with respect to the possibilities available to them to actively mother, they nonetheless can be thought of as having agency. Davies (2000) contended that an agent could be defined as someone who is able to speak with "author-ity, who takes up the act of author-ship" (p. 66). The above stories demonstrate the participants' positions as mothers and ways of authoring mothering within a prison structure, which included relating to their children through telephone conversations, on-site visits, letter writing as well documenting their experiences through journal writing. According to Davies, agency requires the
discursively constituted individual to be present in and accessible to a "subject position in which they have the right to speak and be heard" (p. 66). Once a mother crosses through the gates into prison, it does not mean she is stripped of her former selves, including that of being a mother. She can still be present in the subject position of ‘mother’, which is perpetuated through an internal process of feelings, a sense of self derived from past experiences and memories prior to incarceration and expressions of writing and communicating with her children as shown above. Given the restricted environments in which incarcerated mothers live, they have minimum options but utilize creative ways to mother or engage in other ways and activities that resist the fixed identities of criminals or deviant mothers. By recognizing multiple expressions, Davies argued, “no discursive practice, or positioning within it by powerful others, can capture and control one’s identity” (p. 67). Bosworth (2002) found that the women in her study “drew much of their strength, agency, resistance and sense of self, from their roles outside as mothers, wives, girlfriends and daughters” (p. 105). I agree with Bosworth and would further claim that women are able to continue those roles in prison, albeit in fragmented and limited ways that challenge dominant ideologies attached to those roles. Not only is agency possible, it is necessary in order to survive the challenges, obstacles and pressures of life in prison. The women in my study demonstrated their ability to assert agency. This enabled them to resist the notion that because they are in prison they forfeit the claim and ability to mother.

Dani had attempted to realize her subject position as a mother within prison by having her daughter with her. When she was eventually transferred from the interior of Canada to the federal women’s prison in BC, she was made aware of the mother and
child program in the prison. Dani applied to have her daughter come and stay with her in the mother and child program and she was given an adjoining room beside the mother and child unit. She describes how she had expected to be accepted into the program with her daughter.

*And then when I got to the federal prison in BC everything was a go, everybody thought that I was going to have my baby with me [in the mother and child program in the women’s federal prison]. The warden, everybody was on my side of it and it just got put down to the social worker and her saying “yes” and then I would have had her because my family and my workers out here and stuff were all supporting it and the whole institution thought it was going to happen. Then all of a sudden the social worker just judged me on my past and it was – “no”. That was one of the times that I cried over her. I was trying so hard, I had no incidents, nothing, like nothing to even say I’d gone back to my old ways. It was a complete turn around, everybody in there was just shocked. Well it’s not like I freaked out or anything. I just said okay but the walk back to my house – I was in the mother and child house. I was in the room that had the connecting door and so I was just sitting in my room and stuff and crying and looking at the door, the back door that’s never going to open, kind of thing, no matter what I do.*

Being denied the opportunity to have her daughter come and live with her was a despairing experience for Dani. It was a moment of either giving up or going forward. Dani worked hard to get back to her daughter. Dani had spoken of getting out of prison
not for the sake of freedom but for the sake of her daughter. Dani resisted the decision of the social worker, continued to build on her sense of being a mother and desire to mother as a motivation to move forward in her life.

_Nobody cares, no one’s going to... it’s not like they are going to open the gate for you...so just get your stuff done and get out. That was my main focus, so then we could be back – reunited._

During the time I had spent with Dani in conversation she had only recently been released and was at her home with her daughter. Her daughter kept playfully close to her mother. Dani spoke of her initial arrival home.

_When I came in the door she just came right up to me and held me forever._

_This is what I worked for._

The impenetrable walls around the prison define the women’s identities in prison, yet the women give “alternative interpretations of the meaning of the material and symbolic choices open to them giving them some possibility of resistance” (Bosworth, 1999, p.150). Resistance in this sense was the women’s ability to mother and claim the subject position as mother while at the same time adjusting meanings to fit their situations of incarceration. All the participants had in different ways maintained relationships with their children, even if it appeared more symbolic than tangible, as is the case with Sarah. They all had connections with their children and were able to find ways to sustain those connections that illustrates their individual ways of being and interpreting their roles as mothers. Cixous (1981) described women as individuals with authority, who can transform existing discourses, invert, invent and break old patterns. Each woman needed to find new ways to mother, to invent new ways and challenge old
patterns of mothering which is shown in the various ways the participants demonstrated their ways of mothering, including journal writing, telephone conversations, visits, making clothing for their children, writing letters and cards, furthering their education, and experiencing feelings of love and hope. DiQuinzio (1999), recommended that feminist theorists need to recognize and "theorize ways in which the subject position 'mother' is variously and contradictorily constituted, so that the experience of being mother is more or less partial, divided, fragmented, and even incoherent" (p. 244). This is a reflection of how the women 'do' mothering, finding the possibilities to mother that appear inconsistent and fragmented and perhaps without making sense to those able to mother according to dominant ideologies of motherhood. These are women who demonstrate courageous mothering especially when faced with day-to-day challenges reflected in Faith's (1993) and Susie's descriptions in Chapter 3 of the exasperating experiences in prison that undermine a sense of self.

O'Reilly spoke of motherhood as a "male-defined site of oppression" yet she contended that "women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power" (p. 59). Power, Davies (2000) suggested, can be "the power to do things, to resist, to deconstruct, to write, to create, to imagine, to laugh, to move people to tears..." (p. 19). The ways women find to mother are integral to the constitution of a sense of self, as a mother as well as positioned in their other selves as daughters, sisters, and partners, that reflects their 'humanness' as opposed to being fixed into the exclusive identity of a criminal. Kari stated, a lot of times you get feeling like a number.

Kari spoke of her initial act of resistance when her urge to write prompted her to find a way around prison restrictions.
I would be getting bits of paper from wherever I could and because when you’re inside you have to pretty much fill out a form if you want to go to the bathroom, we always used to joke about that in there, so I, I’d take some of the forms and just flip them over and write on the back. For the first little while I just had this feeling like I wasn’t going to stop writing.

Dani’s words reflect the resistance she engaged in when she was denied having her daughter come stay with her in the mother and child program; instead of giving up Dani decided she would fight even more and that I wasn’t going to let go for nobody.

Kari’s and Dani’s need to exert their power through resistance are examples of how women find ways to use their power in their day to day lives through the act of writing and imagining and striving for future goals. Through asserting their agency the women find ways to survive the harsh reality of prison and maintain their sense of selves as mothers and extraordinary women. The following chapter illustrates a scenario of sharing that brings forth messages of insight and understanding of being a mother in prison.
CHAPTER 6  PERFORMATIVITY: DEMONSTRATING MEANING

In this chapter, I discuss an alternate way of presenting my participants' stories, namely through performative text which is a method frequently used in interpretive interactionism. I present the collective voices of women involved in my study, by orchestrating their voices in a semi-fictional form to illuminate their messages and meanings, and broaden and deepen the perspective and engagement of the reader. "The Dinner" scene and discussion following, demonstrates the collective support and identity in which the participants engage.

When I sat down to read the stories the women shared with me, it was obvious that embedded in those words were emotions of anguish, joy, playfulness, boldness and fragility. What I experienced and envisioned when I read their words was a rich mosaic of beauty, of treasures coloured with depths of being in the world from the edges -- the margins. The women navigated within an oppressed place -- prison -- yet their words showed me that they needed to be simply who they are: heart-filled, talent-filled women, friends, sisters, daughters, and mothers who struggled to survive in an unforgiving and restrictive environment.

"The Dinner" scene was inspired by an actual group dinner that took place during my practicum where the subject of the women’s children and the challenges of being mothers in prison were expressed. The sentiments expressed at the original dinner were similar to what I put together in the following performance. The italicized text between participant dialogue reflects my own internal reactions and sense of what the women experienced when speaking about their children, which I present in poetic fashion. The words of the women in the text are in large part their own, derived from the interviews
and any additions or changes I made were to maintain a creative and comprehensive flow to the dialogue. The spoken stories – spoken to me more from the place of storytellers than interviewees – are “closer to poetry than...to sociological prose” (Tedlock, 1983, cited in Richardson, 2003, p. 516). The women’s stories were deep and full of emotion, tragedy, and hope, which I felt were elements contributing to a comprehensive and creative presentation.

In my own search for a way to use language, I am drawn to Cixous’ (1992) search for a “language, that would not arrest, frame or squash but that would simply let things enter, come close to each other and diverge again...one that would let the other, as person or thing, simply be” (p. 80). My intention in bringing the women’s voices together was to allow those voices to meet while retaining their simplicity, integrity, and identity. I wanted to honour the women in my study through my understanding of their meanings, and in my attempt to show their stories and experiences as mosaics reflected in intensity – and reach the reader through the channels of the heart. One of the ways I attempted to do this was through creative and poetic voices, a “poem, as Robert Frost articulates it is ‘the shortest emotional distance between two points’ – the speaker and the reader” (Richardson, 2003, p. 515). The poem, Cixous (1994) observed, can then represent what is exposed, revealing truth:

What is most true is poetic. What is most true is naked life. I can only attain this mode of seeing with the aid of poetic writing. I apply myself to ‘seeing’ the world nude, that is, almost to e-nu-merating the world, with the naked, obstinate, defenceless eye of my nearsightedness. And while looking very very closely, I copy. The world written nude is poetic. (p. 3)
I consider the words of my participants, which I gathered into a fictional setting as ‘written nude.’ The messages and feelings within those words appeared exposed because of the transparency within prison, the naked life. The beauty of their words is in their simplicity; the message is clear without overtones of pretension allowing the undertones of emotion and reflection to become obvious.

The methods of performative texts represented in the shape of poetry, dialogue, or story are a means of “living into and through the lives of others” (Denzin, 2001, p. 138) which I propose offer a powerful method through which to reveal not only the depths of experience but to reveal the power relations and discursive constitution and reconstitution of self. Denzin described performance texts as “storied retellings that seeks the truth of life’s fictions via evocation rather than explanation or analysis” (p. 16) where writer/reader, performer/audience can meet in a place where experience, emotion, and action are shared. The women’s words transcend analysis. Rather, the message shifts in creative malleability producing “authentic emotional understanding” (Denzin, p. 139). The women’s text is brought to life allowing the reader to follow in emotional engagement evoking compassionate if not empathic understanding.

Rather than get ‘stuck’ in what Denzin (2001) called a “narrative line” (p. 18), I want to explore the mosaic of stories as a creative process that mosaics are. I want to capture the splinters of light, the reflected colours, the breaks, cracks and wounds and give them words, or paint them in a way with words that a performative text will allow. In this way, I believe that I can look into their lives by seeing and understanding their experiences from their perspectives (Denzin, 2001). I want to avoid any attempt at domination, but rather I want to walk and speak from within (Cixous, 1992) their
experiences before any attempt at translation. Richardson (2003) stated that “there is no single way – much less one ‘right’ way – of staging a text. Like wet clay, the material can be shaped. Learning alternative ways of writing increases our repertoires, increases the number and kinds of audiences we might reach” (p. 521). I do not see the use of creative methods as a step outside of the social sciences. Rather creative methods, as Richardson (2003) expressed, allows one to “hear, see and feel the world in new dimensions,” (p. 516). Performative texts are methods of analyzing social worlds that are both practical and powerful.

The Dinner

Five women sit around a thick wooden table eating dinner together. The conversation moves sporadically from topic to topic until Sarah’s comment captures everyone’s attention.

Sarah: I wonder how my boy is doing?

Always wondering and never really knowing

Kari: It sounds like he is in a good place, that he is doing well.

Sarah: I hope so, I don’t hear much about how he is and it’s hard not to know all the time, you know. And when you know they aren’t doing o.k., then it’s hell, just hell.

I want to know – I don’t want to know – hell all the same

Dani: I know, it’s like when you know they are doing o.k. then you can get on with things that you need, to get better, the programs and stuff.

Kari: Yea, you can even feel happy sometimes.

Sometimes

Sami: Sure, but how do you get passed feeling guilty? I mean am I allowed to feel happy when my son might be suffering?

Kari: Well we all need in some way to become healthy. We need to be healthy for our kids, for when we get out. Hey Sami you just heard from your boy.
Sami: He is doing so good. He is doing good in school and playing guitar – playing his own music. He is in a good place with really good people, they support him. I’m glad he’s there, it’s so much better than before. It’s not like that for all the kids that’s for sure.

Kari: That is great, you must feel good about it.

Sami: It makes everything so much easier.

Sarah: We want good things for them and we try and work hard so that we can one day give them those things ourselves, you know – the caring and the stability.

Kari: The hugs. Playing with them. Watching them grow and change.

Dani: Yea, I missed so much of my daughter growing up – you know those first years and I make her stuff all the time like blankets and clothes.

Lia: My life is for my daughter. She says she loves me and that means more to me than anything.

(Cathy who does not engage in the conversations leaves the table. She has two daughters that she hasn’t seen since they were very young, it was years ago and nobody asks about them – she never talks about them.)

Susie: You know you guys are talking like everybody has a motherhood gene. Cause when I had my daughter I was still a kid myself and I wasn’t ready for no kid. And I didn’t feel like a mother, like what kind of mother things did I do? I was going no-where fast. My mom raised her. Boy when my daughter found out that I was really her mom she was so mad, she felt betrayed. But I never raised her.

Oh but I cried for her, answered her calls, gave her what I could whenever I could, enough or not enough, don’t know if that is what a mother is, I don’t think so
Sarah: We have so much going against us. How do you deal with struggling all the time to survive? Before prison I could only buy enough for my son and even then I couldn’t buy all the food – you know really good nutritious food that he needed. And clothes, I couldn’t buy myself anything at all and always ‘used’ stuff for him. I worry about those things for when I get out – how will I manage?

So much effort to get so little
it seems never enough
will it ever be enough?

Kari: There isn’t much support out there let alone in here. But Sarah you’re really putting an effort to get your diploma.

Sarah: Yea, when I get out I want to be able to really talk to my boy, he must be so much smarter than me by now. I imagine him as a little boy but he’s a teenager now. He must be so tall, he must love his own kind of music – I haven’t seen him in so long – God it’s hard. I miss him so much... it’s not fair...

Cracking voice,
depth breaths trails off,
she closes her eyes,
words escape strained

What if he doesn’t want me? What if he hates me for what I did? We were together until I ended up in prison. We did everything together... we rode bikes together, we rode to school together on nice days. We didn’t have a very big place... we had fun...

Sami: You have good memories. He has those memories too.

Sarah: I hope so... do you think so?

I wanna know it’s true,
tell me it’s true

Sami: Yea... You know I’m afraid that when I get out everyone will judge me, that everyone will know what I have done and where I have been.

Sarah: You know what I think? That I don’t care what anyone thinks, because they haven’t been in my shoes, they don’t know what I have been through. They have no right to say anything or judge me.

You haven’t been in my shoes
You looking at me with your cushy lives
You don’t know what it is like

Sami: Yea, but they will and they do.

Kari: I know, but that does not define who I am as a person, there’s much more to me than this one incident. And the majority of people don’t think about what happened in a woman’s life that led up to that point. We’re human, and most of us are pretty nice
people. You know I can’t take back what I did. I wish it never happened. I am doing my time. But do I need to be punished all my life? I feel like I have some kind of sign on my forehead that says ex-con that everyone can see.

Hey you!
Ex-con
Yea you!
Ex-con

I am taking responsibility for what I did but I struggled. It wasn’t recognized until after my offence happened that I was severely depressed but once I got put on the right medication it was like night and day and here I had been struggling for a good ten years just thinking I had a more difficult time doing things than other people. Too bad though that the treatment started in prison. I often think that maybe I wouldn’t be here if I was treated before my crime. Now I’m dealing with the guilt of not being able to be at home and help my kids in everyday normal ways you know, like with homework or driving my son to his sports games.

Left behind somehow,
way behind
Making my way back
slow, muddy, sad...
getting there...

Sarah: Yea well the only reason that I try so hard especially at school and going to parenting classes and group is for my son. He’s the reason, cause when I get out he’ll be there and because I am still his mom and I want to be his mom and be with him and help him.

We gotta be together again
Will he wanna be with me?
I try and I hope for that all the time

Sami: If it wasn’t for my son there would be no reason to go on. He’s the light at the end for me. There isn’t any other reason to hang on. Sometimes I just want to end it. I can’t take the guilt and the pain in my life. Damn, so many drugs for so long and all the crazy things I did and so much pain and shame following me from my childhood.

So many rapes
I was just a little girl
How could he?
Whiskey at ten
Streets to escape
So many rapes
How could they?
Drugs and no escape

But I don’t want my son to live his life knowing his mom killed herself, he has enough to endure already. And he loves me, he says he loves me...

Words...slow...down...become...softer...
...and that I'm courageous because I am taking responsibility for what I did, I am not trying to hide it or blame it on something else. I did what I did and I pay for it a thousand times a day.

Yea I did it
I own it a thousand times a day.
I am punished a thousand times a day,
Knife plunged deep, twisted
There you go – there you go
Blood sprays, spays, runs
My own knife, my own blood,
A thousand times
Plunged into my own body
Into my soul

I can't even forgive myself and it all hurts so bad. But he loves me and he is worth going on for and getting better, because I know we will be together when I am done my time...

Silence wrapped in pain wrapped in silence

Kari: Hey Dani, looks like you’ll be out soon.

Dani: Oh yea, almost there. I tried hard, I showed them all right. They didn’t want to let me have my baby even though there is a mother and child program. They denied me and I was trying so hard. I had no incidents or nothing. I cried, I just couldn’t take it and I fell apart. I was just sitting in my room and crying and I knew the door would never open no matter what I do.

Closed doors bang shut with an echoing “no” for trying
They don’t open the “no” doors

Then I decided I would fight even more and that I wasn’t going to let go for nobody.

Who the fuck do they think they are?
Thinking they could stop me?

I did everything I needed to do – all the programs and parenting classes – anything to get back to my baby. Every since my baby was born and she went to my mom, I knew I needed to get back to her. My mom’s been raising her but my baby – my little girl – she knows I am her mom.

Sarah: There is so much we miss out on...

Kari: Yea, we can only do what we are able to. At least there is the visiting.

Lia: Are you kidding? Sometimes I would go a long time without seeing my daughter, and I cried. I think it’s the hardest thing for any mother to go to prison and not see their child or hear from their child, especially when the child is a long ways away and I’m talking about a long ways away. It’s very hard, you just think about your child all the time.
Sami: Yea I know. My son lives right across the country. I am afraid that when I do get to see him he won’t recognize me and I won’t even recognize him.

Kari: Oh you guys... I am sorry to talk about seeing my kids. I know it’s heartbreaking for you. You are right and I am so lucky my children can come and visit.

Sami: It’s all right. You know I am glad your kids can come to visit as well as all the other kids because I enjoy it too, we all enjoy the kids even if we can’t all see our own. It makes me feel good to see them come, it reminds me of my own son. It reminds me that I am a mother too, but it does make me miss my son so much more...

Sarah: Well, some of us don’t even know how our children are or even where they are. Some are in foster care and there is no access. Like my son. At least I know he is o.k. and that I will see him again. I don’t know how someone can keep going when they don’t know anything about their kids. How do you keep them out of your mind, your heart?

How? I don’t know. It’s blindness, darkness, heart aching or not aching, not anything or maybe everything.

Kari: That for me as a mom is heartbreaking and if it is heartbreaking for me I can only imagine....

The Collective: Keeping the Sense of ‘Mother’ Alive

It was my intention, creating a performative text, to choreograph the women’s voices in relation to each other and demonstrate how important it is for the women to relate and relay to each other their stories of their children as well as their personal feelings, insights, and challenges. This appeared to help reinforce their sense of self as mothers, especially within the confines and restrictions in prison that limits the opportunities to voice their felt experiences and reinforces separation anxieties.
There are a number of obstacles that prevent mothers in prison from sustaining relationships with their children. Children might be living at a distance from the prison; the women have limited phone access to communicate with them; and their children’s caregivers might be reluctant to bring the children to the prison for visits. Kari describes herself as fortunate because she was able to see her children regularly as they lived only a few hours from the prison. Unfortunately this is not the case with many incarcerated mothers, yet they enjoyed the presence of other children. Kari explains:

so many of the women were from central BC or northern BC and they did not get to see their families. I talked to lots of women in my time there and there were some kids who were in the foster care system, some who were with other family members like grandparents or aunts and uncles but there was a certain percentage of women whose kids had been taken and they didn’t know where they were, and that for me as a mom was heartbreaking, and if it was heartbreaking for me I can... So when kids came in it was a big deal, you know, especially if they were a mom they loved seeing kids and I mean visits happened every week so if it was a week that it wasn’t, you know that my family wasn’t coming over, I loved to see the kids.

Kari expresses how seeing women’s children was also enjoyable for her. The presence of children, even if not one’s own, evokes images, memories, and feelings of one’s own children which reminds and reinforces the sense of being a mother.

That was really important and then every once in awhile we’d have – usually in the summer, we would have a social and we could invite – I
think it was up to four or five family members and friends and we’d have out in the back of the OLU [open living unit] picnic tables and some tables with umbrellas and we’d barbecue. So it would be a longer time to visit and we could actually introduce our children to each other, to the women I was living with which was a good experience and they really enjoyed that especially if they weren’t seeing their own kids. Because most of the women there were moms, there was usually every weekend kids coming and going with dads or grandparents or whatever it was so it was almost a daily topic of discussion. Even though there was some pain involved, it was pretty much almost daily, you know, somebody would have heard from their child or even their grandchild and because you become a type of family there, you share this. Somebody would get a letter with pictures of their kids or grandkids and right away we would be sharing it with the rest – we shared everything.

Some of them would talk about their kids and their future plans about when they would get out and hopefully get their kids back at some point. So that was really a positive thing and even though they didn’t have their kids and they weren’t seeing them a lot of times, they would talk about them and the things that they had done together and then I would share what I used to do with my kids. A lot of times keeping that mom – the mom part of me alive was talking with other moms... keeping it real for me and I knew that when I got out I would be going to a half-way house and I
would be able to begin having a passes and start having a real relationship with them again.

Sharing through dialogue with the other moms gave Kari a sense of keeping her mom part alive and real, which in turn was constitutive of her and the other’s sense of being mothers. This demonstrates the significance of the emotional reality that mothers require to keep their sense of being mothers active through sharing, even if it evokes painful feelings and memories.

Lia becomes animated as she relays to me the way mothers were able to interact with their children and families through organized visits, which reflects Kari’s experience of group sharing.

I think every woman would talk about their children. That’s all they ever did. “Oh I have a little girl, oh I have 2 or 3, I have a little boy, I have 2, 3, boys, I have a...”...at Christmas...we used to have in the auditorium the big ah, the big Christmas party. Because when all the families could come with their children—that was a special time, because you had your families, plus you had your children and you used to have really good special times like that, so that was a very special time for women in prison to enjoy not only the kids but everybody else and you see other women with their kids, it was quite nice. “Oh this is my little girl.” or “This is my little boy, oh come see my little boy...do you want to see a picture of my little boy, want to see a picture of my little girl, oh these are my twins.”

Lia’s experience of a group of mothers maintaining a continual involvement with one another surrounding the relationships they have with their children is a reflection of
Kari’s experience. Davies (2000) described how individuals constitute and are constituted by the discourses within the collectives they belong to. Individuals speak from positions made available within the collective, “through the recognized discourses used by that collective, and the desires made relevant by those discourses” (p. 66). It is clear that the mothers have found resources and support through their interactions with one another. They demonstrate how important sharing is to keep mothering real. The women share the common experience of having children and the challenges of mothering in prison, and maintaining their identities as daughters, granddaughters, wives, girlfriends, and sisters. Bosworth (1999) found that the women in her study “drew much of their strength, agency, resistance and sense of self, from their roles outside as mothers, wives, girlfriends and daughters” (p. 105).

Horwitz (2004) identified mothers coming together in acceptance and respect as a type of “united sisterhood” (p. 55) able to challenge impossible and inaccessible dominant ideologies of motherhood. Hooks (1984) speaks about women bonding with one another on the “basis of shared strengths and resources. It is this type of bonding that is the essence of Sisterhood” (p. 45). Coming together as a group to share and at times to witness the children and families of others opened up the possibility of recognizing and identifying with the multiple selves of each woman. Kari described that, you become a type of family there. Somebody would get a letter with pictures of their kids or grandkids and right away we would be sharing it with the rest, we shared everything. The women coming together in common experience; a group representative of family or sisterhood is a united force standing up against label often attributed to women in prison, that of ‘criminal’, or as Kari expressed it, you start feeling like a number.
I have used interpretive interactionism to present the women's stories using thick descriptions of their lived experience and I have applied the theory of feminist poststructuralism to reveal the messages conveyed by the them. Expressive texts framed by feminist poststructural theory clearly and powerfully show how mothers in prison negotiate their sense of self as mothers within an oppressive system constituted on the premise of power and knowledge. I have demonstrated how the women in individual or group dialogue have access to power by resisting the common discourses that define them as deviant or bad mothers. The women's voices convey the message that although they struggle with not being able to actively mother as they may wish, they maintain their sense of self as mothers by validating their positions as mothers. They show that power, knowledge and subjectivity are not fixed ideas (Weedon, 1998), that the fixed notion of what a mother is can be challenged in seemingly small but resourceful and flexible ways, including the mutual support offered through listening to one another, looking at each other's photographs of their children, and understanding the challenges and joys they share and validating the relationships they have with their children. They counter the dominant discourse of the bad or deviant prison mom and show that they are caring mothers, caring women. Weedon (1987) proposed that while the subject is a "crucial site of fixing meaning, subjectivity is also a site of potential revolution" (p. 89). For mothers in prison, this site of potential revolution can mean accepting and supporting the relationships they have with their children, accepting that mothering can have different expressions and meanings and accepting that mothers in prison are indeed mothers.
CHAPTER 7 SUMMARY: NEW MEANINGS OF ‘MOTHER’

Society needs to move away from old ideas of what makes a woman a woman and what makes a mother a mother

(Kari, Participant)

The intent of this thesis was to emphasize how mothers in prison construct a sense of self as mothers in relation to the dominant ideology of motherhood and reconstruct this sense of self as a result of imprisonment. Drawing on the works of feminist poststructural theorists, I illuminated the process of subjectivity—infomed by relations of power and knowledge—that imprisoned women experience. The effects of power and knowledge are made evident within the dominant discourses related to motherhood and to mothers in prison. Power relations are revealed within the criminal justice system, highlighting the racial, gender and class biases that are justified as a moral force and therefore upheld by traditional beliefs and practices within the justice system.

The literature review explores how women and mothers negotiate a sense of self in restrictive prison environments while being faced with marginalized conditions related to race, class and gender. In the US African Americans and other visible minorities with histories of poverty and substance use make up a disproportionate percentage of the prison population (Morash & Schram, 2002) while in Canada there exists an over-representation of Aboriginal people in prisons (Trevethen et al., 2001). Faith (1993) reported, “females constitute the most impoverished group of every Western society, yet females commit by far the least crime” (p. 107). Mothers are portrayed as being up against insurmountable obstacles produced by situations of poverty and racialization; often exasperating these situations are challenges with drug use, physical and or sexual

Findings from the literature emphasized how important children are to the mothers, as Ferraro and Moe indicated that the mother’s “links to their children were central to their selfhood” (p. 34). The studies consider how dominant discourses of motherhood and of mothers in prison shape the way imprisoned mothers identify themselves as mothers. Enos (2001) described the imprisoned mothers in her study as resisting identities as ‘bad mothers’ by replacing past behaviours and identities with that of ‘good mothers’. Morash and Schram (2002) found that “most mothers in prison believe they are good mothers” (p. 76).

There are few Canadian studies devoted to the issues of mothers in prison. This thesis will therefore be an original contribution to the area of study related to women in prison within Canadian contexts. What distinguishes this thesis from other studies related to mothers in prison is approaching the notion of mothering and sense of self as a mother through a feminist poststructural perspective. Informed by this theory, it is shown that mothers in prisons have a sense of being mothers and can practice mothering within the prison system, though still informed by elements of the dominant discourse of motherhood. This study offers insights into the realities of mothers in prison through their stories that demonstrate their ability to be agents by claiming motherhood in prison. Although their roles and activities of mothering in prison were fragmentary and limited, they were able to redefine their subject positions of mothers in order to adjust to a prison environment.
Dominant messages in society attempt to reduce the identity of women in prison to that of ‘criminal’, especially mothers in prison who are seen as deviating from dominant notions of motherhood. Kari made this evident through her experience of being judged by preconceived notions expressed as,

\textit{you know, you’re a woman, you’re a mom, you have a family and you, oh God, you’ve done this? They can’t look at anything besides, yeah, the offence. The majority of them wouldn’t be thinking, okay what happened in this woman’s life to lead up to this point. I was sure I had ex-con flashing on my forehead...}

Sarah knew all too well the judgements targeted at her,

\textit{They are too quick to judge, they don’t look at reasons why, they just think oh my God how could you do that.}

Although the women in the study experienced extreme guilt and grief for their actions leading to incarceration and the impact these had on their children they were also able to understand their positions and locations that contributed to their actions, specifically, their positions situated in and jeopardized by poverty, sexual and physical abuse, drug use, mental illness and depression. As Kari described: \textit{it’s not like one day someone decides to commit a crime, there can be years leading up to that point.}

I examined the discourses of motherhood and considered how the ideology of motherhood shaped the positions that were accepted or rejected by the participants in my study. Dominant discourses shaping the concept of motherhood expect mothers to care for their children with total and selfless attention (DiQuinzio, 1999). This expectation has “little to do with the real lives of mothers” (Marotta, 2005, p. 23) and is unrealistic for imprisoned women. A feminist poststructuralist theory invites and makes visible
multiple perspectives by demonstrating the subjective reality of individuals and the constructs shaped by discourses that are “open to continuous redefinition...which is constantly slipping” (Weedon, 1987, p. 106).

Having a sense of self as mothers and defining the meaning of being a mother in prison was sustained by the women in a variety ways. For example, Kari maintained a relationship with her children through continuous phone calls, letters and visits with them; Dani discovered a sense of self as a mother through journal writing, learning about her daughter during phone calls with her mother, looking at photographs of her daughter, and making her blankets and clothing; Sami reminisced about her son and communicated with him through phone calls; Lia had frequent visits and phone calls from her daughter; and Sarah looked to the past to remember the time she lived with her son and to the future with her decision to pursue her education in order to prepare for the time she envisioned spending with him. Through their stories the women expressed their emotional realities of concern, worry, memories, hopes, dreams and love for their children making visible their sense of self as mothers. They identified themselves as mothers whether or not their claims of ‘mothering’ made sense outside of the prison walls. Weedon (1987) suggested that by recognizing the potential of multiple discourses and meanings there is “a measure of choice on the part of the individual and even where choice is not available, resistance is still possible” (p. 106). The women rejected dominant discourses that identified them as deviant, unfit mothers and solely criminals, by asserting not only their identities of ‘mothers’ but as friends, partners, writers, artists, and advocates. Kari clearly expressed that society needs to move away from old ideas of what makes a woman a woman and what makes a mother a mother.
Two thirds of women in prison are mothers (Bayes, 2002). They make up a distinct population in prisons experiencing similar positions and challenges. The participants in the thesis demonstrated how mothers as a group supported each other in maintaining a sense of self as mothers. Weedon (1987) suggested that groups increase their social power by resisting dominant norms and producing “alternate forms of knowledge” (p. 111). The thesis shows that the mothers relating together in a group was integral in keeping their sense of mothering alive through sharing stories of their children and families, being in the presence of each other’s children and families and sharing their thoughts, ideas, concerns and emotions. Kari stressed that *a lot of times keeping that mom – the mom part of me alive was talking with other moms*. The women’s subjective positions as mothers were constituted by dominant motherhood ideologies, redefined to adjust to a prison context and reinforced by their collective activities in conversation and connection.

It was apparent that the relationships the mothers had and were able to continue to develop and maintain with their children were integral to their sense of self as mothers. They were able to determine the meaning and practice of their roles as mothers that although limited in prison was still possible. By defining and redefining their positions as mothers they demonstrated their agency and choice in prison that was not determined by fixed notions of ‘good mother’ or ‘bad mother’. Instead of becoming fixed in notions of dominant discourses of either/or or good/bad, the thesis was informed by feminist poststructural theory which illuminates the notion of subjectivity, the possibility of redefining self and attaining change through agency and resistance. The women exhibited agency by challenging the status quo through creative and courageous
mothering (Weedon, 1999, p. 123). They were mothering against the institution of motherhood by redefining and claiming roles as mothers in a prison context from which to express and realize a sense of self as mothers. In most cases, this sense of self as mothers hinged upon connecting with their children, not always in tangible ways but symbolically as well, for example in journal writing, recollecting memories and harbouring and expressing feelings, thoughts and hopes that supported their sense of being mothers. DiQuinzio (1999) suggested that contradictory accounts of mothering contribute “something important to our understanding of mothering” (p. 247).

All the children of the women in my study had other primary caregivers whether it was the father, extended family or foster parents. The women accepted that their children were taken care of by others, that they were not and perhaps would not be the primary caregivers of their children; nevertheless, they could still claim identities as mothers. How they construct a sense of self as mothers can be illuminated by feminist poststructuralist theory revealed through their efforts to shift and broaden notions of motherhood to include their experiences of mothering in prison. I do not suggest that all the mothers in my study or all imprisoned mothers in general will, or will be able to, or will choose to take up a primary care-giving role with their child(ren). What I do think is important is for the women to have opportunities and support to be primary caregivers if they choose or if not, to be supported in maintaining relationships with their children.

My personal journey in exploring the lives of mothers in prison, of interacting with them, of gathering their voices, has been a journey of growth and discovery. I discovered the struggles, hopes, dreams, and abilities of the women in my study. I experienced shifting and broadening perspectives of them as women and mothers. This
thesis began with my story and my mother’s story integrated into a dialogue that sought to discover intersections of understanding between us. I was inspired, ‘set a fire’ metaphorically speaking, and prompted to step into the stories of other mothers with prison experiences. I felt spirited into what has been a tangle of beauty and grief, steeped in emotion and illuminating new perspectives and insights. The process of writing this thesis developed into interactions and relationships that offered the opportunity of understanding between a former child of an imprisoned mother and mothers from prison. It is with a sense of honour and respect that I have gathered voices and stories into one story that has become an integral learning experience for me.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

With the completion of my thesis I realize that this journey is only a small step or precursor to larger studies. The thesis begs many unanswered questions, and leaves unaddressed areas of interest. Instead of an end, it may prompt more attention, research and journeying forward.

My study does not reflect the stories of the First Nation populations who are over represented in the criminal justice system. Only one woman in my study was First Nations. I did not present a comprehensive picture of First Nations experiences and struggles in relation to and within the prison system, which is an important area to make visible and one that is deserving of attention and understanding. I also did not expand upon First Nation’s perspectives of family and mothering that can reveal significant knowledge of alternative discourses and practices. Moreover, given the growing numbers of minority groups placed in prison broader issues of race and racism are essential to address.
Issues of race cannot be overlooked when looking at the situations of women and mothers involved in the criminal justice system. Adelberg and Currie (1993) understand the law, courts, police, judicial system and prisons as being defined by racism. This position is strengthened by Faith (2006) in her argument that “racism is endemic in criminal justice systems” (p. 4). Faith stated that those living in poverty, as well as members of racialized minorities, especially if they live in low-income neighbourhoods, are more vulnerable to surveillance, arrest, conviction, imprisonment and parole denial than are middle-class people who break the law, white middle-class people in particular. (p. 339)

Canada, Faith (2006) contended is more likely to arrest, convict, imprison, hold in solitary confinement, deny parole and re-arrest upon release First Nations people and Blacks than whites. This is not surprising, as there exists an overrepresentation of First Nations people in the criminal justice system (Nafekh & Boe, 2003; Trevethen, et al., 2001). Findings from the Elizabeth Fry Society (2005) show that there is a rapid increase in the prison population of women who are racialized, live in poverty and experience mental and cognitive disabilities. A population of women that needs attention and study are those with mental and cognitive disabilities. CAEFS (2004) reported, “women who used to fill psychiatric and mental health facilities, are now being criminalized” (p. 3). They asserted that as the state decreases support services and increases security and control interventions the result is an increase in the criminalization of the most marginalized. This, CAEFS stated “has a profound impact upon the inherent inequalities of women and girls, especially those who are poor, racialized and who have mental health issues” (p. 4).
The scope of my topic was very specific and limited. A broader perspective would have included the backgrounds of the participants, their historical contexts and consider how that has informed their current positions as mothers. It also would have been beneficial to look at how post-incarcerated mothers have continued their roles as mothers outside of prison. These are potential and important areas requiring exploration.

**Implications: Creating New Visions**

It is important to listen to the voices of those with experiences in prison when considering the realities within prison and the many changes that need to be made. Weedon (1999) suggested that it is by means of subjectivity that communication and action take place and that visions of difference within society are required for social change, which is often initiated and shaped by “marginalized groups” (p. 107). Weedon (1999) argued “new forms of identity are both personally and politically important in resisting sexist, racist and heterosexist definitions of individuals and for imagining a different future.” (p. 106). Kari articulated the effects prison has on women and mothers:

> I do not believe that even with more serious crimes that prison is the proper atmosphere for rehabilitation or whatever you want to call it. A lot of times it is not nurturing, it is not rehabilitative. Women come out in a worse situation than when they went in and, unfortunately, depending on the amount of time they are in and the associations they make, helps them be a better criminal when they get out and that’s the truth. I do not believe that being locked in a cell is the way or a mom being taken from her family and put somewhere so there’s not still that daily...I think they should take responsibility but not by being locked away in a cell.
There is not enough information out there – it is not a subject that is
generally talked about so there is not enough information out in the
community about the prison system or the fact that you know, quite a
percentage of women are just, you know, pretty regular everyday
people...we’re human and most of us are pretty nice people.

In prison the voices of the women are often silenced. They need to be heard and
their needs and challenges taken seriously by those working with them, such as
corrections staff, including program directors, health practitioners, guards, volunteers, as
well as those creating policies and programs for them. It is only through listening to the
women, for whom decisions are made, programs created, rules and policies developed
and implemented that constructive, beneficial, well-informed changes will be made. With
the vision of the women coupled with actions of the decision makers, prisons can
reconsider the incarceration of mothers and develop strategies and programs to support
them in their roles as mothers, individuals, and community members. Education begins
with the women’s stories, which have the capacity to shift people’s perceptions and
challenge their biases and assumptions.

This thesis can contribute to existing literature on motherhood and on mothers in
prison, by building upon available studies and offering a specific focus of mothers in
prison by revealing important ideas and new perspectives. This study does not originate
from the vantage point within dominant discourses of motherhood, namely ‘good’ or
‘bad’ mothers. My approach was to discover how women negotiate mothering without
attending to label their positions or practices as mothers. This allowed them to relay
their experiences to me without the dualistic notion of ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ Rather, their experiences, although informed by dominant ideologies, included the ability and necessity to adjust and redefine their positions as mothers according to their prison experience. This created a space for flexibility and emotional freedom for them to share their stories and mothering initiatives with me and enabled me to see their resistance and legitimate roles as mothers – perhaps outlaw mothers.

This study can contribute to a feminist analysis of motherhood and to the consideration of mothering that is unorthodox, and has a new vision, taking into serious consideration mothering practices informed by race, culture, and class. This opens a space for questioning how mothers, families, and communities of different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds practice caregiving roles. This also prompts us to see and understand how mothers experiencing poverty negotiate their roles as mothers that involve the task of helping their children survive. Expanding upon this study would contribute to resisting dominant ideologies based upon unrealistic expectations and assumptions of mothering and creating new discourses.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Prison policies need to consider the mother-child relationship and provide support and opportunities to maintain consistent contact with their children. Coll et al. (1998) stressed the need for acknowledging, respecting and supporting imprisoned women who have relationships with their children, face many barriers, and are “redefining their mothering role while in prison” (p. 270). Offering the women opportunities and space to speak and be heard without pathologizing and judging their behaviours can shift
dominant thinking surrounding their positions as mothers in prison and open up avenues to discuss innovative ideas for changes within the prison environment.

Changes in the criminal justice system at the policy level need to re-consider separating mothers from their children. It is imperative to create policies that stop sentencing women and mothers who are not a threat to society, and implement alternate methods of sentencing. Alternate sentencing and reintegration into communities could include: healing circles, restorative justice, educational and or training opportunities, and community supervision options such as transition houses providing family support. Faith (2006) recommended a support system of “family, community or friends” (p. 345) to help with community reintegration. Alternate community programs would mean fewer women in prison and consequently a downsizing of prisons would take place. Allocating funding from the costs of containing women in prisons to community programs would alleviate the financial burden for communities and government. Moreover, Canada could become a model of alternate practices in the criminal justice system and demonstrate a high standard of care and adherence to human rights.

Women under the jurisdiction of the criminal justice system and their families are a marginalized and often invisible population unless they are negatively highlighted in the media, which evokes and perpetuates fear and distain from communities. Prisons then become an acceptable location to contain a growing number of women and mothers, resulting in the growing number of children with mothers in jail. The children truly are invisible victims as the number of children who have incarcerated parents or have been affected by incarceration is unknown. Bayes (2002) found that this question has never been addressed in Canada. She reported,
No province or Territory officially recognizes the problems for children related to parental incarceration nor do any recognize that the child of an incarcerated parent is at risk of criminal justice involvement or provide any training for social workers regarding the risk profile for these children. (p. 34)

The School of Child and Youth Care emphasizes the care and support of children, youth and families, and is guided by principles of “inclusion, social justice and ethical practice” (n.d.). Therefore, providing support for those involved in the criminal justice system would be an important contribution of expertise, advocacy and care that Child and Youth Care practitioners could offer.

Practice informed by feminist poststructuralism would provide practitioners the opportunity to recognize and challenge their biases and assumptions about mothers in prison. Learning about how relations of knowledge and power shape the daily experiences of women in prison which are complicated by social relations of race, gender, and class would broaden and deepen practitioner perspectives as well their approach in practice. This study presents stories that are embedded with challenges and sadness but also of determination, hope, agency and resistance. It offers the field of practice a window into the lives of incarcerated mothers to understand their challenges, needs, and strengths. This thesis can, I believe, lead the practitioner to think about issues of social justice. It can be a call to action.
REFERENCES

Canadian Justice System. Vancouver, BC: Press Gang

Atwood, M. (2002). Negotiating with the dead: A writer on writing. Cambridge, UK:
Cambridge University Press.

Retrieved April 7, 2005, from
http://www.elizabethfry.com/A_SNOWBALLS_CHANGE.pdf

social and cultural movement. Qualitative Inquiry.

Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Press.

Thomas (Eds.), Women in prison: Gender and social control (pp. 137-153).
London: Lynne Rienner.

prison research views from the inside. Qualitative Inquiry, 11(2), 249-264

Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies. (2004). Standing committee on the
status of women. Retrieved April 25, 2005, from

document to address the needs of families of offenders: Safety – respect and
dignity for all. Retrieved June 10, 2005, from
http://www3.sympatico.ca/cfcn/EngConsultation.PDF

Cixous, H. (1975). *Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement*. Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press.


Crimes and punishments. In C. G. Coll, J. L. Surrey, & K. Weingarten (Eds.),
*Mothering against the odds: Diverse voices of contemporary mother* (pp. 225-
276). New York: Guilford Press.

*Motherhood and space: Configurations of the maternal through politics, home,
and the body* (pp, 149-159). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.


Retrieved April 7, 2005, from


DiQuinzio, P. (1999). *The impossibility of motherhood: Feminism, individualism, and the


O’Reilly, A. (2004). We were conspirators, outlaws from the institution of motherhood: Mothering against motherhood and the possibility of empowered maternity for


http://edocs.lib.sfu.ca/projects/Doukhobor-Collection/history.html


APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT LETTER OF INVITATION

Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self” that is being conducted by Ahna Berikoff. Ahna Berikoff is a graduate student in the department of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and you may contact her or her supervisor, Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw through Columbia Place staff members.

This research project will look at the experience of motherhood during imprisonment. Research of this type is important because of the opportunity it has to bring attention to the issues of imprisoned mothers as a distinct prison population with unique needs. Attention of this sort is important to address with Corrections Services, Government and communities to contribute to social and policy changes for imprisoned mothers such as: alternate sentencing and encouraging and supporting family relationships. Your participation in this research study will contribute to the above initiatives.

By participating in this project you will partake in two interviews that will take up to approximately 1-2 hours each. You will also spend some time reading and editing the transcriptions of the interviews that may take up to 2 – 3 hours of your time. The total time commitment may range from 4-7 hours. You may also share any writings on the topic in the form of stories, poetry or journal entries.

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your experiences of being a mother in prison. Ahna Berikoff will conduct a briefing session in Columbia place on (date), where you can learn about the research and ask any questions you might have. Your participation in the research study and your identity related to the information you share will be kept confidential. If you are interested to participate and want more information you may speak to Columbia Place staff about contacting Ahna.

Sincerely,

Ahna Berikoff
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Department of Child and Youth Care

Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Mothering behind bars: Defining and redefining self”, that is being conducted by Ahna Berikoff.

Ahna Berikoff is a graduate student in the department of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions through Columbia Place staff members.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Child and Youth Care. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw. You may contact my supervisor through Columbia Place staff members.

Purpose of research:

The purpose of this research project is to complete a masters’ thesis. The research project will look at the experience of motherhood during incarceration. In addition, I will examine how poverty, ethnicity and gender further impact a sense of motherhood by conducting interviews with incarcerated and post-incarcerated mothers.

Importance of research:

Research of this type is important because of the opportunity it has to inform and facilitate dialogue between Corrections Services, Government and Communities related to issues of incarcerated mothers as a distinct prison population with unique needs (especially mothering issues/needs). Informed dialogue can contribute to social and policy change for incarcerated mothers, i.e. alternate sentencing, encouraging and supporting familial relationships. This is an area of little known research, and therefore this research study would contribute to a needed knowledge base and initiate other related studies.
Your participation:

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your former experiences of being a mother in a prison institution. You were selected as a participant in this research study because you showed interest in the research study (through an informational poster and briefing session) and volunteered to become involved in the research.

With your agreement we will meet in a prearranged space determined by facility staff members. I will go through the consent form with you and you will be able to ask any questions or express any concerns for me to address. Upon signing the consent form you will be involved in an open-ended interview with me, related to your experiences as a mother in prison. The interview process will be conversational and you will be able to ask me questions about my own experiences and about the research. I will use an audio-recorder to record the interview in order to have an accurate account of it. I anticipate the interview will range from 1 to 3 hours. After I transcribe the data I will send you the transcripts to read and if you choose you can change, delete or make any additions to the data. I will schedule another meeting time to discuss any data changes or to share additional personal accounts which I anticipate taking 1 to 3 hours. I would like to collect any journal entries, poetry or stories you might have or want to write to contribute to the research, which will be returned to you after I read and copy them.

Your personal information:

Anytime that your personal writings or transcriptions need to be handled by facility staff when they are transferred between you and myself, the material will be sealed in envelopes, and they will not read any of the contents. Facility staff will sign a confidentiality form stating they will not read document contents and will not discuss any knowledge of your involvement in the project, amongst themselves or with others.

Risks and benefits:

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time required for the interviews.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include the possibility of experiencing emotional or psychological discomfort. To prevent or to deal with these risks you are asked to only share information that you are willing and comfortable to share. You are not expected to share information that may cause emotional upset. If you do experience either emotional and or psychological discomfort you will have access to counselling and support from the Elizabeth Fry Society.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include the opportunity to share your experiences and concerns that could lead to further studies, awareness, support and advocacy regarding incarcerated mothers’ and their children.
Compensation:

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given $60. It is important for you to know that it is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants and, if you agree to be a participant in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. If you would not otherwise choose to participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you withdraw from the study your data will not be used in the research and will be destroyed unless you give permission for it to be used. If you give permission to use your data you will sign an authorization form confirming your permission. You will be given an authorization form to sign along with the consent form. If you withdraw from the research study you will still receive the amount of money stated above.

On-going participation:

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will ask you to initial your previously signed consent form in any subsequent interviews.

Protecting your anonymity:

In terms of protecting your anonymity I will not use your name in any discussion, data or thesis. Any names used will be pseudonyms. Any information you share with me will not be discussed with anyone outside of the research study aside from my thesis supervisor. I will remove any identifying information of yourself and others in your personal writings that you share with me, and therefore ask that you do not include any identifying information in your personal writings.

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by ensuring that no one other than myself will have access to the data you provide. Any written or recorded data will be kept in a locked cabinet at my home residence. All data stored in my computer will be accessed through a password known only by me. All data will be coded without any using identifying names; a code sheet used to identify data will be kept in a locked cabinet separate from the coded data. Data from this study will be disposed of after a period of five years. Written data will be shredded and electronic and audio taped data will be erased.

There may be limits to protecting the confidentiality of your data, if you choose to speak to others about the research project and information you have shared with me. There are also limits to protecting your anonymity. Staff members will be involved in the research by assisting with contacting me about your interest in participating, setting up interview
times and places. Staff members will sign a confidentiality agreement that states that all
involved staff members shall keep confidential the names of all participants as well as
any information that can identify them. In addition, staff members will not discuss
amongst themselves participant involvement in the research study.

Other limits to protecting the confidentiality of your participation in the project is
whether or not you had committed to participation with others present, during the briefing
session I offered to introduce the project.

**How I will use the project information:**

The results of this study will be incorporated into my thesis, presentations and or
published articles. If I wish to use the data for further studies you will be contacted to
sign a consent form. If you cannot be reached the data will not be used. You will be asked
to sign an authorization form allowing me to use your data if you decide to withdraw
from the project. The authorization form will be provided to you to sign at the same time
you sing the consent form.

**Contact information:**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include Ahna Berikoff and
Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw. They may be contacted through Columbia Place staff.

You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might
have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria
through Columbia Place staff members.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of
participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions
answered by the researchers.

__________ Name of Participant ______________ Signature ______________ Date ______________

* A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher. *

__________________________

I wish to review the transcripts of the interviews

____Yes    ____No

I agree to have my interview audiotaped

Please check here
APPENDIX C: CONFIDENTIALITY PROCEDURES

Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self

Confidentiality Procedures for all staff members from the Elizabeth Fry Society (Columbia Place) who are involved in assisting with participant involvement in the research study.

Researchers at the University of Victoria are committed to the principle that the confidentiality and anonymity of each individual participant must be protected.

All staff members involved in assisting with participant involvement in the research study must sign the Confidentiality Pledge.

All involved staff members shall keep confidential the names of all participants as well as any information that can identify them.

Staff members will not discuss amongst themselves or with others participant involvement in the research study.

In the instance that staff will be transferring documents from the participants to the researcher, or from the researcher to the participants, staff members will not discuss amongst themselves or with others any knowledge of document contents. To ensure confidentiality all documents will be transferred in sealed envelopes. Staff members will not open and/or read document contents.

If you have any questions about confidentiality issues, please contact:

Ahna Berikoff
Email: ahnab@uvic.ca

Dr. Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw
Email: vpacinik@uvic.ca
APPENDIX D: CONFIDENTIALITY PLEDGE

I hereby certify that I have carefully read and will cooperate fully with the Statement of Policy and Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality for the project “Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self”.

I will keep completely confidential all information arising from the study concerning individual respondents to which I gain access.

I understand that violation of the privacy rights of individuals through unauthorized discussion and disclosure may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties.

I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality

Print Name: ________________________________

Signature: ________________________________

Date: ________________________________
APPENDIX E: AUTHORIZATION TO USE PARTICIPANT DATA

UPON WITHDRAWAL FROM THE RESEARCH STUDY

“Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self”

Upon my withdrawal from the research study entitled “Motherhood behind bars: Defining and redefining self” conducted by Ahna Berikoff in the department of Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, I authorize Ahna Berikoff to use the data from my interviews and other written work in her research study towards her masters thesis, subsequent journals, articles, conferences and presentations. My confidentiality and anonymity will continue to be protected as outlined in the consent form.

Print Name: _______________________________________

Signature: _______________________________________

Date: _______________________________________