

Reconfiguring Gendered Independence:  
Conceptual Struggles in Feminist Organizations

by

Crystal Rose Gartside

B.A., University of Manitoba, 2004

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in the Studies in Policy and Practice Program

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## Abstract

This research explores how concepts of women's independence are constituted, through neo-liberal and feminist discourses, by members of a feminist organization for women leaving abuse. Analysis of eight interviews and eight focus groups with organizational members, collected over a four year period, surface contesting discourses about individualism, choice, economic independence, collectivity and structural analyses. These discourses interact to produce complex conceptualizations of women's independence, and produced new subjectivities for women within the organization. In the data, neo-liberal and feminist influences produced an integration of self-responsibility and collectivity, creating new ways of understanding women's agency. Knowledge of these changing notions of gendered independence in organizations allows feminists to be strategic and reflexive about feminist political work within changing social and political terrain.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the women of Place Possibilities, and to all of the women with whom I have worked and played, argued and cried, been joyful, supportive, and subversive. You have all infused me with a deep passion and appreciation for the spirits of women.

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## Chapter 1. Introduction

*Cultural is political because meanings are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power. That is, when movements deploy alternative conceptions of women, nature, race, economy, democracy or citizenship that unsettle dominant cultural meanings, they enact a cultural politics.* (Alvarez et al., 1998, p. 7)

This thesis aims to understand the relationship between the meanings that are culturally ascribed to women and the political possibilities of feminist change. Specifically, it attempts to uncover the ways in which meanings about gender are constituted in a women's organization and suggests possible implications of these meanings for feminism. Since meanings and concepts are important political tools, I explore how concepts of women's independence are constituted through discursive struggles involving neo-liberal and feminist discourses. I explore these struggles in a women's organization because it is a critical intersection for social and political discourses about women. In this thesis, I argue that neo-liberal and feminist discourses are shifting concepts of gendered independence in women's organizations. This thesis will describe these conceptual shifts, and explore the discursive processes which produce them.

### *The Research Question*

I began this project interested in discovering how one women's organization has re-conceptualized their ideas about gender in this changing context and to theorize how these changes might effect the political work of feminism. Drawing on a feminist Foucauldian understanding of discourse (see the theoretical framework in Chapter 2) I analyzed eight focus groups and four interviews of previously collected data, as well as four new in-depth interviews with members of a women's organization in a western Canadian city. I conducted a discourse analysis looking for emergent neo-liberal and

feminist discourses, and explored how these discourses intersect to produce new concepts of gender. As I engaged in the data analysis, I refined my research question to focus more specifically on the concept of gendered independence. Ultimately, the research question which guided this study was: *How does one women's organization constitute concepts of women's independence using neo-liberal and feminist discourses?* The data analysis revealed that the changing context of neo-liberalism in government and society, as well as ongoing changes in feminism, create struggle within feminist organizations over contested notions of gender independence.

### *Why Concepts of Independence?*

Studies have documented the effects of changing political regimes, such as neo-liberalism, on the structure and policies of community organizations. These studies examine how government policies alter organizations' service delivery, advocacy practices, and organizational hierarchies (Ilcan & Basok, 2004; Ng, 1990). Often, neo-liberal policies manifest through funding decisions that drastically cut support to community organizations, yet require increased responsibility for state services (Eakin, 2004). The effects of neo-liberal policies have a particular impact on women's community organizations since gender analyses are threatened by the "universal citizen" of neo-liberal ideologies (Teghtsoonian, 2003). Ng (1990) and others (such as Bonisteel & Green, 2005; Lowen & Reitsma-Street, 2006) have well documented the structural and ideological changes imposed on women's organizations by decreased funding and increased regulation. There is a gap in the literature, however, about the effects of social and political regulation on *meaning-making* in women's community organizations.

The research I conducted attempts to fill this gap by exploring the concept of independence in a women's community organization. In our current social and political

world, feminist discourses and dominant political and social discourses about gender and independence are changing. At the same time, as women's organizations engage in a process of reconstituting their understanding of independence for their own everyday values, practices, and political work, neo-liberalism has placed increasing priority on individualism and self-responsibility (Brodie, 2002). These neo-liberal discourses are premised on individual capacity and desire for independence. Within this neo-liberal climate, feminist analyses of the systemic and structural oppression that limit opportunities for independence are consequently under threat. Bonisteel and Green (2005) demonstrate how anti-violence organizations have been prevented from advocating for structural change as a result of government policy changes and increased funding cuts since the 1990s. Within feminism, debate and contestation continues over emphasizing women's ability to be autonomous, versus the importance of solidarity and community. Simultaneously, issues of identity and difference complicate notions of the individual. Reconstituting gender in relation to these discursive forces is important, as it is crucial to the survival of feminism to be aware of opportunities to "reshape the discursive terrain of politics in distinctive and potentially radical ways, through personal and cultural transformations that refuse accommodation with existing institutions" (Carroll, 1997, p. 17). In order for gender to remain a relevant political tool for women's community organizations, it is important to critically reflect on the ways in which women's community organizations reconstitute ideas about gendered independence in their everyday practices.

My interest in examining questions of gender and independence in organizations has been personally motivated by my work in community organizations, both those that focus singularly on women and those that do not. In my experience within these

organizations, I have noted the ways in which neo-liberalism has shifted and changed social and political notions of gender. For example, an organization I was involved with moved from a feminist focus on “mothering” to a focus on “healthy families” because of restrictions on what types of programs were eligible to receive government funding. Similarly, new evaluative measures in the social services have begun to equate success solely with acquiring employment for clients. I would argue that contestation over concepts of women’s independence is fundamental to these types of discursive shifts. Neo-liberalism imposes assumptions about women’s capacity for choice and autonomy which, in turn, erases any of the gendered, racialized, and classed contingencies that potentially affect and restrict women’s capacity for choice. As a result, women who work in women’s organizations for the emancipation of women must negotiate these assumptions in light of their own political and feminist values.

I am also aware of the tensions that changing feminist discourses of gender bring to organizations. These tensions in organizations parallel the tensions that I feel as my own notions of gender are challenged and changed by post-structural influences about the gendered subject, and complicated by an analysis of transgender and colonization, among other issues. I would argue that as feminist and social theories bring forward fluid and dynamic understandings of gender and identity that challenge the notion of the collective female subject and the idea that women have shared experiences, organizations rethink their political approaches to working with women and for social change. As the collective female subject has been problematized and reconfigured (Davies, 1991; Weedon, 1987/1997), possibilities for collectivity and unity have also become complicated. Within feminist movements, women are asserting their desire for unity to combat the neo-liberal focus on autonomous individuals, as well as claiming women’s capacity for personal

power and decision-making. Lisa Rundle (2006) reflects this desire in her reflection on the need for moments of unity with Canadian feminism, in a popular Canadian feminist magazine called *Herizons*. Despite the complexities that accompany a commitment to feminist analyses, I firmly believe that gender remains a crucial focus and women's organizations reflect this focus by continuing to work with women under conditions of severe constraint. However, I also believe that in order for gender to maintain its relevancy, some conceptual changes are needed and are already underway in women's organizations. In this thesis, I provide an analysis of how changing concepts of gendered independence produce changing subjectivities for women within the realm of one feminist organization.

#### *Post-Structuralism: Theory and Methodology*

I have used a post-structural approach to both theory and method in this research. Feminist post-structuralism is the theoretical foundation used for understanding the social world as produced through discourse. Discourses are systems of meaning which are multiple, fragmented, and imbued with power (Weedon, 1987/1997). Political and social discourses intersect at points of contestation where multiple discourses are interpreted, negotiated, resisted, taken up, and altered to produce fluid social concepts. I assume that this process occurs at the site of women's organizations since organizational members negotiate multiple discourses to construct meanings about gender, which in turn constructs the policies, practices, and everyday work of the organization.

Methodologically, I have used feminist post-structuralism to explain the existence of multiple and contradictory realities at work in research. At the same time as I investigate how discourses work, I have also used and produced discourses as a researcher. Participants in the research similarly project multiple and contradictory

articulations of realities since focus groups and interviews are temporary and represent temporal constructions of truth and meaning. Through analysis, I have engaged with the data, imposed my own discursive constructions, and attended to the complex workings of discourse by exploring the effects of multiple and contesting discourses. As a result, I also acknowledge that this research presents only one possible version of how discursive realities might be produced.

#### *About Method*

To explore the construction of the concept of independence, I employed a discourse analysis of two data sets: eight focus groups and four interviews from previously collected research, as well as four new in-depth interviews that I conducted. All focus groups and interviews were conducted with past or current staff, board, volunteers, students, and alumnae of one women's organization in a western Canadian city that works with women who have experienced abuse. Called *Place Possibilities* (pseudonym), this organization has experienced significant change in the past five years, in that reduced funding has forced the staff to seek out new funding avenues within the provincial government. These new funding avenues have imposed increasingly restrictive funding criteria and introduced neo-liberal policy changes into the organization. As a women's organization, Place Possibilities retains an analysis of gender, and negotiates a feminist identity in a changing social and political environment. All of these conditions make it well suited to explore the question of the neo-liberal and feminist discursive influences on concepts of women's independence.

#### *Wedge Provisioning Research Project*

I conducted this research as part of a larger cross-site research project. The Wedge Provisioning Research Project is a multi-site Canadian study entitled "Women,



Provisioning and Communities,” and involves six urban sites in eastern and western Canadian cities. In this project, Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, Principal Investigator, and other researchers use the concept of provisioning as an analytical tool to develop theoretical frameworks for understanding all dimensions of the work women do in the new global economy. Provisioning refers to “the work of securing resources and providing the necessities of life for those one has relationships of responsibility” (Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2005, p. 383 ). A particular interest of the project is how women’s organizations work as collectivities to provision for themselves and for the people, organizations, and institutions they feel responsible for. (For more information on the Wedge Provisioning Research project, please refer to Neysmith & Reitsma-Street, 2005 and Neysmith et al, 2004.)

I was involved with the Wedge project for approximately one and a half years, first as a research assistant and then as a graduate student conducting my own research. This thesis uses data specifically from the western Canadian city site of the Wedge Project. As a community-based research project, Wedge established a Research Advisory Circle in 2003 with members of Place Possibilities. This Circle met regularly to direct the progress of Wedge research at this site. I participated as a member of this local Research Advisory Circle for 1 and a half years from September 2005 to its close in March 2007. As part of my work with the Research Circle, I helped to organize Wedge related materials for two Annual General Meetings of Place Possibilities, co-facilitated a focus group, and coded data for the Wedge project. My work as a research assistant with Wedge helped to focus my thesis related interests in women’s organizations, and the changing social and political context of the new global economy.

*Place Possibilities*

I explored notions of independence in one particular women's organization called Place Possibilities. This organization supports women who have experienced abuse to develop employability skills. The purpose, mission, goals, and everyday work at Place Possibilities are focused on women, and the organization retains an analysis of gender in all of their work. Its women-centred focus, experiences of change, and my personal involvement in the organization are the main reasons why I chose Place Possibilities to be the focus of this thesis.

Place Possibilities helps women to develop personal skills such as assertiveness, boundary setting, self-esteem, as well as career and education related employment objectives. It also raises awareness and advocates on the issue of violence against women. I chose this organization as the focus of this study because it works specifically with women, and incorporates an integrative analysis of feminism and gender into its everyday life as an organization. For example, the organization takes a deliberate anti-violence approach to the everyday interactions between staff and participants; there is a conscious effort to engage in a political analysis of gender within the organization and in their interactions with the larger environment. This organization has experienced significant upheaval in the past five to seven years since the provincial government cut funding to all women's centres and drastically reduced the types of social supports available to people in poverty. In the midst of these changes, funding for the organization has been transferred through several Ministry portfolios, thus forcing Place Possibilities to reinvent themselves to qualify for continued funding (Loewen & Reitsma-Street, 2006).

The purpose of Place Possibilities, according to their constitution dated November 22, 2002 is

(a) to provide education, training and other supportive programs for women survivors of any form of abuse, which will help them break the abusive cycle by moving from dependence and other-directedness to independence and self-directedness, and increasing their employability and overcoming barriers to employment (b) to share information with groups, organizations and the public on the needs of women who have history of abuse. (Place Possibilities Women's Organization Constitution [PWOC], 2002, p. 1).

Staff at Place Possibilities work with women to develop personal and professional skills, while supporting them with emotional, physical and financial challenges. At the same time, Place Possibilities also takes on the following list of duties: writing and negotiating funding proposals; managing organizational change; recruiting, training, and managing volunteers; and providing education about the issue of violence against women in the community. All of this work is done with limited and continually threatened funding from the provincial government and other public and private-sector funders.

In the midst of all of this work, Place Possibilities continues to use a *women focused* approach and identifies their organization as feminist. I chose Place Possibilities to explore the construction of notions of women because like many other organizations, they exist in a continually changing community of government policies and practices, as well as changing discourses about women, violence, and feminism. Within all of these dynamics, Place Possibilities continually shifts as an organization, yet continues to focus their work with women while integrating feminism, gender, and an analysis of violence into their practices, principles, and policies. In this respect, Place Possibilities seemed a very appropriate place to explore how all of these dynamics construct notions of gender and how these notions are taken up in the work of the organization.

During the year and half that I was involved with the Wedge project, I became increasingly involved with Place Possibilities. As a research assistant, I was a member of the Wedge Research Advisory Circle for one and a half years. For approximately five

months, I volunteered at Place Possibilities on their newsletter committee and helped to develop a program proposal. I volunteered partly to foster a sense of reciprocity with the organization for giving me the opportunity to conduct research with them, but also out of a personal desire to participate in the community of Place Possibilities. I did not volunteer at Place Possibilities as a formal part of my research project; nevertheless, this participation inevitably contributed to the depth of my knowledge about the organization, and the types of analysis and conclusions I have drawn. I do not consider this to be a confounding factor in my research; rather, I see it as an opportunity to obtain a richer understanding of participants, culture, and practices of the organization itself. I acknowledge that the outcomes of my research have been influenced by this knowledge. Since I do not believe in pure objectivity in research (after all, research is influenced by the experiences and perceptions of the researcher), I recognize that my work with the organization affects my perceptions of the organization, and am reflexive about this throughout my analysis.

#### *What's To Come*

The next chapter will outline the theoretical framework I employ in this thesis, by describing my approach to discourse, gender, struggle, women's organizations, neo-liberalism and feminism. Chapter 3 will describe my methodological approach, the data and discourse analysis. Chapter 4: The Findings outlines how I came to focus on independence as the central concept. It also documents the six discourses and four points of contestation I observed in the data. Chapter 5: The Discussion summarizes the conclusions of the discourse analysis, and suggests theoretical implications for subjectivity and substantive implications for organizations based on the findings. Drawbacks of this study and suggestions for further research are outlined in Chapter 6.

## Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

### *Overview of Theoretical Framework*

In this chapter I demonstrate how constituting ideas and concepts is important work in social movement organizations. This work of constituting meaning occurs through complex discursive processes. Central to this process of contestation is a point of struggle where multiple meanings are produced through social and political discourses in the discursive process. At Place Possibilities and in the context of a social movement organization focused on addressing abuse and violence against women, many discourses intersect and contest to produce meanings and values about gender. I will outline a theoretical framework for this study by first describing how concepts are constituted through discursive struggle and why it is important to understand this process. The concept of gender and the specific political and social opportunities which shape the discursive environment are also described. I then narrow the focus to explore gender at Place Possibilities, the specific organization under study, and its particular neo-liberal and feminist discursive environments.

### *Constituting Concepts*

In this thesis, I explore how one organization has constituted ideas about women's independence by drawing on multiple and contesting social and political discourses. This exploration uses Weedon's feminist post-structural theoretical work (1987/1997) which contends that discourses are the form and medium through which we construct and understand concepts in the social world. Discourses are always in a process of constituting the social world; they are taken up, resisted, altered, and used in power-infused interactions between people and institutions. Since discourses are the threads of knowledge and thought influencing the construction of meaning in society, an exploration

of discourse is crucial to my exploration of how independence is constructed in a women's organization.

Relying on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, Weedon interpreted discourses as “ways of constituting knowledge . . . social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations . . . and the relations between” all of these (Weedon, 1987/1997, p. 105). Discourses are thus symbolic systems of knowledge and values. As this definition suggests, I am not using discourses simply as a representation of language in written or oral text, but instead as the systems of knowledge and values that construct our ways of speaking about ideas and concepts.

A primary tenet of Weedon's post-structuralism (1987/1999) is that discourses are produced through language. This theory views language as an active process; instead of merely conveying or reflecting discourses, language actually produces discourses through speaking and writing. This premise is important to this research project because I use transcripts of spoken texts to explore how discourses are being produced in the moment speech takes place. Along with Weedon (1987/1997), I also assume that since discourses are constituted through language, it is necessary to explore the systems of knowledge, values, and meaning in the language of participants as they speak about their organization.

This linguistically produced view of discourse also emphasizes the temporality of discourse, as discourses are always in production through language. For example, Alcoff and Gray-Rosedale (1993) stated that “in Foucault's view the rules for formation of concepts and objects do not exist prior to or apart from the system of statements but emerge from the configurations of the speech acts and their interrelations” (p. 6). In other words, during the speaking and enacting of a discourse, the meaning of that discourse is

continually being re-made. More specifically, when discourses are used in texts, language, and interactions, they are constantly re-made in the context of other discourses. Individuals and institutions have the capacity to take up and enact discourses; during this process of enacting, these individuals and institutions also change, challenge, and re-make discourses through their everyday interactions.

*Why Understand How Concepts Get Constituted?*

In this thesis, I argue that this discursive process of constituting ideas and concepts occurs within organizations. I also claim that an exploration of this discursive process within organizations is an important contribution to feminist organizing for social change, more generally. More specifically, the process of constituting concepts of gender and its importance to the political work of the feminist movement is worthy of attention for three reasons. First, provisioning, a concept described in more detail below, situates meaning-making as challenging and important work that women's organizations undertake collectively, which affects their everyday work with women. Second, the work of constituting gender is part of the process of developing a changing feminism. Finally, other scholars, such as Walker (1990), demonstrated how discursive struggles produce conceptual shifts in the way we think and talk about women..

The discursive process of constituting ideas about gender in a women's organization can be understood as pivotal and challenging work that members of an organization undertake. Reitsma-Street et al. (2006) developed a framework for understanding the work that women in groups undertake collectively. Known as *collective provisioning*, it refers to the collective nature of securing and providing tangible and intangible resources and support for those with whom a collective has relationships of responsibility (Reitsma-Street et al., 2006). These authors (2006)

developed three major categories of collective provisioning taken on by women's groups: carrying out the work of the group, sustaining and cultivating the group, and contesting injustices. Under the second category, "sustaining and cultivating the group," there is the work of "mapping the collectivity" which figures out "group identity and determine[es] values, priorities and boundaries for the group's responsibilities" (Reitsma-Street et al., 2006, p.20). This work is essential to the maintenance of the organization and is also fundamental to "contesting injustice," the third category of collective provisioning. Figuring out the values, priorities, and meanings of the issues and concepts most important to the organization creates a framework for resisting injustices and countering dominant discourses (Reitsma-Street et al., 2006). The way an organization frames its understanding of women, gender, and violence determines the ways, for example, in which it reacts to and takes action on injustice.

It is important to note that the work of mapping the collective and determining the conceptual underpinnings of an organization's work occurs in complex ways. Though it may be a conscious or unconscious process, organizations constantly construct concepts in relation to their environment. While engaging in everyday activities, organizations simultaneously employ and constitute concepts of gender through the discourses in order to make meaning of their work. For example, in the organization under study, a discourse of violence against women is employed within its' everyday work. The staff interacts with participants in a deliberately non-violent and respectful way in keeping with an anti-violence framework. This anti-violence discourse, used in the everyday work of the organization, constructs women as respected and non-violent. Organizations may also be reflective about their discursive productions; for example, the way the organization deliberately and reflexively undertakes an anti-violence approach to interactions can also



be labeled as provisioning work. This work occurs in many ways, such as figuring out the boundaries of itself, making decisions, strategizing, and reconfiguring itself and its' priorities in relation to the regulatory environment. Reitsma-Street et al. (2006) discussed a myriad of decisions that organizations make in order to sustain their provisioning work in light of changing regulatory environments. They noted that implicit in these decisions are the ways individuals within the collective see the objective of their work together, and envision how the organization could and should be. This is the work of discursive construction in the organization; this process is shaped by contesting and conflicting values and the realities of the social and political contexts.

This organizational work of figuring out values and meanings is important not only to the social injustice work of that organization, but because it is part of the process of constructing feminism on a larger scale. Armstrong (2002) argued that feminist organization is a central site where conceptual struggle takes place and it is the process of this struggle which produces the "collective subject of social transformation" (p. 5) within feminist movements. Moreover, these conceptual processes are an essential precursor to social transformation. Armstrong (2002) maintained that it is important to focus on the "mechanisms and processes which produce feminism and its collective subject" (p.5). Armstrong (2002) also suggested that debates over pluralism construct meanings which underpin feminism; these come to define the political work of feminism. In the same way, discursive struggles over gender also produce meanings in feminism and their subsequent political effects. Examining the processes within feminist organizations allows us to see that feminism is a constantly changing process; as a result, it is necessary to explore the conceptual underpinnings that form the basis for our changing feminism. In doing so, we can link our discursive processes to the political

work of the movements and critically engage with how we, as feminists, construct our movements.

Scholars like Gillian Walker (1990) examined the link between discursive processes and the political implications of particular conceptual shifts. She showed how the discursive struggles between different conceptualizations of wife battering in the 1970s produced the public discourses of the issue. Her findings conclude that contestations within and outside of feminism reconfigured the issue of *wife battering* into *family violence*. Using institutional ethnography, Walker (1990) delineated the process of how psychosocial discourses of male aggression articulated by therapists, social workers, and other professionals, interacted and contested with feminist analyses of structural sexism and female dependence on the male wage earner. She also described the contestation that occurred among those working from a feminist perspective. Within the women's movement in Vancouver, activists at the Transition House and on a provincial task force committee debated different ideas about the problem of wife battering. The conceptual shift from wife battering to family violence in Vancouver at that particular time emerged from the process of contestation among various discourses which framed the issue and the resulting political action. Walker's research (1990) demonstrated how discursive struggles within feminist organization constitute important feminist concepts, articulating how the concept is taken up politically by feminists within the larger social and political realm.

#### *Concepts are Produced Through Struggle*

Having established that the work of constituting concepts is crucial to the social change work of feminist organizations, I turn now to the process by which gender becomes constituted. First of all, multiple and contesting discourses intertwine at points

of contestation to produce transitory and unstable ways of understanding gender. This discursive struggle occurs in women's organizations because these are sites within feminist social movements where social, political, and feminist discourses are taken up and debated in everyday work with women. I end this section by detailing the social and political discourses that participate in the conceptual struggle over gender in women's organizations.

*Discursive Struggle: Points of Contestation*

Social, political, and feminist discourses are the threads of meaning and knowledge, which intersect through the interaction of people and institutions. In these interactions, people take up, resist, alter, use, and remake discourses. As these processes occur, multiple and contradictory discourses are drawn upon to build meanings about social concepts such as gender. Ultimately, multiple discourses struggle with one another to produce contested and unstable social concepts.

Discourses produce concepts through the interactions among people and institutions since multiple and contesting discourses are used as tools to understand the social world (Weedon, 1987/1997). There are many different discourses that circulate and most often, discourses exist simultaneously and are often contradictory. People rely on these multiple discourses to explain and understand the social world. Since this understanding is based in multiple and contesting discourses, it is neither unified nor coherent, and potentially contradictory and always changing (Foucault, 1972).

Discourse theory uses a decentralized framework of power. The interchange of discourses is the medium through which social organization is produced. In this way, "discourse is something that you do rather than something to which you are subjected" (Mills, 1997/2004, p.79). Discourse is an active process people, as people alter, change,

resist or remake discourses as they use them in interactions with other people and institutions. A crucial element of discourse theory is that people and institutions such as organizations and the government, play a significant role in constituting concepts in our social world. Furthermore, people in organizations not only adopt dominant social and political discourses, but they reject, remake, alter, and negotiate them. Mills (1997/2004) named this an “interactional relation of power, rather than imposition of power” (p.79). Instead of seeing power as a monolith held by certain powerful members of society, power is exchanged through the interactions among many discourses.

Dominant discourses, those used and advanced by those who have substantial social, economic, and political advantage, do, however, hold more power and influence in general simply because dominant discourses emerge through the interactions of powerful and dominant social institutions. Althusser (1984) described how discourses become powerful as they are circulated by powerful state apparatuses, such as the government and educational institutions. Alternative discourses may be developed in opposition to these discourses, but they often remain marginalized because the people and institutions which create and perpetuate alternative discourses, often hold less social power. For example, those who are racially marginalized or belong to oppositional social movements such as feminism hold less social power. In my research findings, I discovered that much of the discursive struggles in these marginalized organizations as exemplified by Place Possibilities, resist and remake dominant discourses by creating new and alternative discourses with new conceptual understandings. Although these new and alternative discourses become part of the discursive field within feminism and politics, they often remain marginalized because they do not circulate within dominant and powerful social institutions.

In this research, I have chosen to explore the intersection point at which individuals interact with multiple and competing discourses. I have named this moment of intersection a *point of contestation*, and looked for these points of contestation in order to explore the process of how a concept is produced through the intersection of discourses in an organization. Points of contestation attempt to capture the moment of struggle, where individuals within an organization negotiate how many different discourses integrate to form a particular understanding of gender.

*Women's Organizations are a Site of Discursive Struggle*

Since I have established that concepts are produced when discourses interact, it is now necessary to establish and explore the site from which these discursive struggles coalesce and emerge. Although discourses technically have no spatial or geographic boundaries in that they circulate in all aspects of the social world, I have chosen a woman's organization as a tangible site to experience and identify the discursive process in action. As a site where many social, political, and feminist discourses are debated, taken up, and resisted through the everyday work of the organization, women's organizations use gender as an important concept around which they organize their goals, mandate, work, and strategies. Furthermore, since women's organizations are part of larger feminist social movements, the discursive struggles that occur within them form part of the discursive struggles within feminism in general.

As I have already mentioned, discourses are used, produced, and integrated into concepts through interactions among people and institutions. In organizations, people and institutions interact on a regular basis, dialoguing about the everyday work of the organization, strategizing, applying for, and following the criteria of funders, as well as working with women and delivering services. In all of these interactions, discourses used

by staff, volunteers, participants, funders, and regulatory bodies assume particular meanings and values. As people debate goals, activities, policies, funding sources, as well as other issues, different discourses are taken up, used, resisted, and adapted by those who are part of the organization. This process produces understandings of gender, which is a critical concept mobilized in women's organizations. In this research, I examine how staff, volunteers, and participants of a women's organizations talk about their everyday work, how they develop goals, objectives, and priorities, as well as develop values and identities as an organization. Talking about these organizational activities demonstrates how members of the organization use discourses to constitute meaning and values around gender. In this respect, the organization is an important site of this conceptual struggle.

As a social movement organization, the discursive struggles emerging in an organization produce concepts of gender that are part of the larger social movement. Armstrong (2002) argued that feminist organizations produce the conceptual ideas that comprise feminism in general. In this respect, organizations are important sites for conceptual construction within social movements. Social movement theory identifies social movement organizations as those organizations participating in the development and enactment of social movements. Social movement literature argues that social movement organizations are an important site where the framing of movement agendas and concepts occurs (Chesters & Welsh, 2005).

#### *Mapping the Struggle: Political and Cultural Opportunities*

Within a women's organization, there are internal and external forces at work which shape the discursive process of constituting concepts of gender. Individuals within the organization bring multiple personal, political, and cultural discourses to bear on the organization's discursive struggles. Dominant political and cultural discourses also create

a regulatory environment in which organizations exist, make policies, and carry out activities. Social movement theory offers the concepts of political, cultural, and discursive opportunity structures to describe the political and cultural discursive environment in which organizations exist and constitute meanings, values, ideas, and concepts. In this research, I attend primarily to neo-liberalism and feminist political and cultural discourses within the discursive environment.

### *Political and Cultural Opportunities*

The political and social contexts in which organizations exist mutually infuse discursive meaning-making within a social movement organization. Social movement theory's concepts of political and cultural opportunities provide a framework to illustrate how political and cultural systems produce discourses and meanings which in turn, affect the construction of a social movement organization's discourses and meanings (Hallgrimsdottir, 2006). Government policies and other political mechanisms construct a particular environment in which women's community organizations exist. Dominant social and political discourses also construct and enforce acceptable behaviours and ways of being within the organization. This relationship is reciprocal in that movements produce knowledge and meaning in the form of an organization's mission, values, and social actions, which influence the context of political and social opportunities (Whittier, 2002). Social movement theory highlights the complex process of meaning-making in organizations by recognizing the agency of social movement actors. An important part of meaning-making within organizations are the decisions and actions of actors or members of the organization; these strategically located individuals collaboratively construct the gendered subject in a particular way through absorbing, contesting, and integrating

external discourse and meaning to recreate, alter, and create new systems of knowledge within organizational discourse.

*Political opportunities.* New social movement theorists have developed the concept of political opportunity structures to provide a way of understanding how “institutionalized politics” contribute to the construction of meaning in social movements (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996, p. 2). The political opportunity structure consists of the current context of political ideas, policies, opportunities, and constraints which form the political environment a social movement is embedded in. Though the word *structure* may seem to imply that this political context is static and monolith, but other theorists including myself do not agree. For instance, McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald (1996) demonstrated that once social movements act upon the political opportunity structure through pressure, protest, service provision or awareness raising, political opportunities are indelibly altered. Political opportunities and social movements mutually constitute each other in an ongoing and dynamic process. The political context is highly relevant to the study of women’s community organizations in Canada, because of the complex power relations between the state and organizations which have shaped the development of the women’s movement in Canada (Schreder, 1990). Conflicts over right to autonomy versus the right to adequate support and funding by the state have characterized this relationship, and have played an important role in shaping the Canadian welfare state, as well as women’s community organizing today.

Kathy Teghtsoonian (2003) demonstrated how political regimes create changes in government bureaucracies which subsequently impact the discourses of organizations. She discussed the impact of neo-liberalism on women’s policy agencies within the government, particularly examining the policy changes instituted by the incoming Liberal



government in 2002 in British Columbia (BC). Within government structures, bureaucrats and politicians represent women's interests; since there have been changes in how women's interests are represented due to the political enforcement and entrenchment of neo-liberalism, a conflict within government concerning the importance and relevance of a gender analysis has emerged. The capacity for governments to engage in gender analyses are diminished as women's policy structures and representatives are eliminated under the guise of neo-liberal progress. This erosion subsequently has decreased support and imposed neo-liberal discourses on women's community organizations.

The political opportunities offered by neo-liberalism have also constructed a welfare state in which some citizens are deemed "deserving" of state support and others "undeserving". The lines of entitlement to state support such as welfare are drawn using gender, race, and class demarcations, in that entitlement is tied to masculine identified forms of independence and racialized citizenship rights. For example, veterans, primarily male, are entitled to pensions and medical and disability benefits based on their highly valued contributions to society. Immigrants to Canada who may require financial and medical support, have not demonstrated their capacity for independent employment (a standard established by a discourse of hard work and a value placed on waged employment), nor are their contributions highly valued. These immigrants are considered undeserving and a drain on our state welfare system. On the other hand, those who contribute to and access employment insurance are considered deserving of this support because they have demonstrated a capacity for independence through waged employment. This deserving status associated with waged employment discounts the contributions women make outside of waged employment, as well as the fact that many people who arrive in Canada as immigrants are denied access to employment, thus

excluding them from this deserving status. These examples of a state welfare system based on notions of deserving and undeserving citizens demonstrate how neo-liberal discourses construct political opportunity structures.

*Cultural opportunities.* Other theorists have expanded the notion of political opportunity to the cultural context. Hallgrimsdottir and Benoit (2007) suggested that cultural opportunities offer a way to interrogate how the social environment facilitates movement activists' abilities to construct politically effective meanings for the movement. Similar to political opportunity structures, cultural opportunity structures situate the cultural ideas, values, institutions, and practices within the social context of the movement. Moreover, cultural opportunities emphasize that these elements of the cultural context influence the meanings and values that a movement develops, and these meanings and values are then re-inscribed upon the dominant social culture. Dominant discourses of the larger culture have an impact on the meanings and values that movement organizations integrate into their discourses, as do the dominant ideas within a movement such as the feminist movement.

Whittier (2002) documented important changes in the women's movement from the 1970s to the new millennium. She described how changes in both dominant and feminist ideas and values altered the discourses of the movement from "celebrating universal sisterhood to seeing gender as inextricably tied to race and class and an inability to generalize about women's experiences" (Whittier, 2002, p. 304). In other words, these changing notions of gender within the feminist movement are the cultural productions of the movement. Whittier's work (2002) demonstrated the changing nature of conceptual meaning-making within feminism. This changing meaning-making is part of the cultural

opportunity structures within which women's organizations exist and which they mutually influence.

Kohli's discussion of the regulation of race within shelter organizations (1993) made reference to the external social notions which organize race. She argued that shelter organizations and the individuals within them internalize dominant discourses of racism which leads a shelter to enact similar forms of abuse and oppression (Kohli, 1993). In her article, Kohli (1993) clearly articulated the influences of the cultural opportunities about race on the internal dynamics of feminist organizations.

#### *Political and Cultural Opportunities as Discourse*

The discursive process of meaning-making integrates social and political opportunities to produce discursive tools that are used by the movement. Hallgrimsdottir (2006) referred to discourses as "the linguistic and semantic tools pervasive to a historical setting" (p. 525). These linguistic and semantic tools, or discourses, must be understandable to those both inside and outside the movement, but must also align with the currently existing meaning and values in a movement, in order to be taken up by those within the movement (Hallgrimsdottir, 2006). Hallgrimsdottir (2006) provided an example of how cultural opportunities contributed to the successful constitution of a particular movement discourse. In the Knights of Labor movement of the late 1800s, movement activists promoted the idea of arbitration over striking as the most effective means of achieving change to labour policies. Those advocating arbitration aligned the "civility" of arbitration with manliness, which was a dominant discourse of the time. This cultural discourse appeared as a result of a newly developing middle-class increasingly concerned with redefining masculinity, which fell between the traditional boundaries of capitalist owner and labouring producer. Hallgrimsdottir (2006) demonstrated how the

labour movement took up the dominant discourses of masculinity to gain support for their cause of “civilized” and “manly” arbitration over the “wild” and “uncivilized” practice of striking and revolution. She also explicated how cultural opportunities interact within a discursive field to produce a social movement discourse.

Roxanna Ng (1990) documented in detail the process of how political opportunities (particularly state rules and policies) impose upon and become integrated within the culture and discourse of a women’s organization. She described how an organization becomes responsible for delivering a state service when entering into a funding contract with the state. In this way, the state becomes a part of the organization since the state’s relations of ruling can be found within the organization. Political opportunities not only act on an organization from the outside, but because of the requirement to follow the state’s regulatory practices, these discourses are internalized and begin to shape the organization from within.

*Political and cultural discourses under neo-liberalism.* Although there are multiple discourses that circulate in our political and social environment, for focus and brevity’s sake, I have identified neo-liberalism as an overarching discursive formation underpinning current political and social discourses. Discourses of neo-liberalism play a substantial role in both the cultural and political environment of women’s organizations. In the following paragraphs, I define neo-liberalism and then identify specific discourses under neo-liberalism that have particular relevance to the research question at hand.

In the 1980s and 90s, a profound political shift occurred away from Keynesian welfare state policies in Canada. This political shift renegotiated both “foundational political conventions and cultural forms” (Brodie, 1994, p. 7). Broadly speaking, this new set of political and cultural discourses governing and regulating society is known as neo-

liberalism. Neo-liberalism is a discursive formation (a set of related discourses) which redesigns government and social priorities to reduce government economic regulation, increase the role of the private market, reduce social spending, and position Canada competitively within the changing boundaries of globalized trade and influence (Brodie, 1994, p. 7; Lerner, 1999, p. 5). Brodie (1994) argued that this shift towards neo-liberalism is “eroding the very political identities and public spaces that empowered the second wave of Canadian feminism” (p.7). Brodie (1994) also supports my premise that these neo-liberal shifts have a profound effect on the political and cultural discursive fields of feminist organizations.

The first discourse of neo-liberalism is the *discourse of privatization*. This discourse is touted as part of the neo-liberal goal to reduce the space of the public and the political, and increase the space of the private – in particular, the private market and the family spheres (Brodie, 1994). Indeed, a focus on increasing the power of the private market is fundamental to neo-liberalism. Accompanying the increased space of the market is an increased emphasis on the private and personal. Neo-liberalism advocates that the nuclear family is the most important and fundamental unit of society. In this respect, I would suggest that this discourse is a mechanism for social regulation, as it enforces traditional feminine, masculine, and hetero-normative roles in families.

A *discourse of individualism* also reinforces the primacy of the family unit. This discourse emphasizes the responsibility of individuals and families for themselves (Brodie, 2002, p.43). It not only encourages a move towards thinking about individuals divorced from their environmental and collective context, but it also suggests that families should be self-sufficient and take care of themselves. It is argued that emphasizing individual responsibility will reduce the need for social supports and

services. At the same time, under the guise of community empowerment, responsibility for welfare services is offloaded from the state to individuals in communities. Both of these measures result in more responsibilities for women in families and in community organizations. Since there is an absence of shared public responsibility for others, this discourse also undermines opportunities for universal public programs. Under neo-liberalism, for example, the national Family Allowance program, which provided financial support to all families, was eliminated (Brodie, 1994, p. 17). This program was replaced with the child tax benefit, which is means-tested (rather than universal), and thus administered to those who have a predetermined financial need. A universal child support program such as Family Allowance acknowledged the work of all women and families in caring for children, and the entitlement of all families to compensation and financial support defined the collective responsibility of society for the care of children. In contrast, means-tested child benefits assume that most families can and should provide for children themselves, and only those who are unable should receive support.

This increased focus on individual self-responsibility invariably leads to a *discourse of self-reliance and hard work* under neo-liberalism. This discourse aligns with individualism in that it sees all people as isolated individuals who can be successful and self-reliant if they work hard enough. In other words, this discourse assumes that poverty can be avoided through hard work and self-reliance; consequently, those who have not pursued these ideals deserve neither help nor support. The discourse of self-reliance is dangerous because it attributes poverty to individual character defects which in turn, delegitimizes gender, race, class, and colonial analyses of poverty.

The broad discursive formation of neo-liberalism contains many discourses, and discourses of privatization, individualization, and self-reliance have particularly salient

impacts on the discursive environment of women's organizations. In Chapters 3 and 4, I will, I will examine how these discourses specifically manifest in the data pertaining to Place Possibilities.

*Feminist political and cultural discourses.* Within the discursive formation of feminisms, there are also many discursive threads that contribute to the political and cultural environment of women's organizations. Feminist discourses play a major role in the construction of gender in women's organizations since feminist values and meanings are typically at the core of these organizations, and many kinds of feminism are debated and used within organizations. These debates also reflect those ongoing in the larger movement. Feminist discourses are found within organizations, but are also present in relationships with other organizations, in institutionalized feminism in government agencies such as Status of Women in Canada, and in research relationships with universities. I identify four major threads of discourse present in our contemporary feminisms. These discourses, which have undergone extensive debate and change within the movement in the past thirty years include: a focus on pluralism and inclusion, increasing analysis of the female subject and subjectivity, an increasing focus on anti-essentialism and post-structuralism, and a decreased legitimacy of women's issues politically and socially. Each discourse raises issues about defining the parameters of gender in feminism; thus, each of these discourses represent the terrain and the tools of feminism which organizations use to reconceptualize gender.

The politics of identity has been a site of debate and contestation within the women's movement since the 1980s (Armstrong, 2002). As the second wave of feminism worked for important changes in women's social and political rights and freedoms, it became increasingly evident that the women's movement was speaking on behalf of

certain women at the exclusion of others. Attentive to this, those within the movement worked hard to analyze the dynamics of race, class, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, and nation in the movement. Discourses developed reflecting a desire for diversity, inclusivity, and a movement that supported the experiences, claims, and actions of many different women. Butler (1990) articulated the terrain of this debate in the following terms:

feminist theorists are now confronted with the problem of either redefining and expanding the category of woman itself to become more inclusive (which requires also the political matter of settling who gets to make the designation and in the name of whom) or to challenge the place of the category as a part of a feminist normative discourse (p. 325).

Many feminists have found the idea of inclusivity and diversity problematic, and use theories of anti-racism, post-colonialism, and intersectionality in an attempt to reconfigure feminism and difference (see Razack, 1998; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Crenshaw, 1994). The issues of identity and difference remain a strong force within feminism, and discourses of pluralism and inclusion, along with intersectionality, anti-racism, and post-colonialism, take up the issue in different ways.

Alongside the complications of identity and difference, a theoretical focus on the individual subject of feminism has developed. Academic feminists such as Butler (1990) have increasingly focused on the individual processes of subjectification through which women become subjects and objects of oppression. Rooted in psychoanalytic theory, the notion of subjectification is built around an analysis of the self and is highly focused on the individual. Weedon (1987/1997) defines subjectivity as an individual sense of self or more specifically, as the thoughts and emotions which construct one's sense of self in relation to the world. More succinctly, the subject is the individual who is enacting subjectivity. Some feminists have argued that a focus on individual subjectivity removes



from the forefront the collective and political change potential of feminism (Armstrong, 2002). Subjectivity is a strong discourse in current feminist theory, but it is also contested by other theorists and by the collective work of feminists outside academia.

To summarize, pluralism and inclusion seek to expand or reconfigure the general category of women, and subjectification attempts to interrogate the internal nuances of that category. Post-structuralism and its challenge to the establishment of gender categories is yet another thread of discourse within feminism which problematizes the concept of gender. Post-structuralism is anti-essentialist in that it rejects the idea that anything or anyone can be identified in stable, coherent categories such as “man,” “woman,” “Black,” or “White”; rather, it insists that identities are multiple, fluid, and constantly shaped and changing within our discursive environments. Some feminists have argued that post-structuralism allows for a more nuanced understanding of oppressive power dynamics (Weedon, 1987/1997); however, it has also eliminated the need to essentialize or assign a fixed subjectivity to women. The subject of post-structuralism is fluid and dynamic which means that women’s perceptions and experiences cannot be taken to represent absolute truths about reality. Subjectivities are produced through changing and contradictory discourses which in turn, produce changing and contradictory subjectivities (Weedon, 1987/1997). Other feminists have argued that removing the category of woman eliminates a subject position from which to argue the material and tangible effects of oppression and work for political change (Brodrigg, 1996). They argue that post-structural theorizing produces a problem for feminism in that it removes the “who” from the analysis of oppression. For example, we must then ask who is being oppressed?, and by whom? Some feminists have argued that these complications of gender and identity, and the rejection of a fixed subjectivity for women is detrimental to

feminism since fluid subjectivities and multiple identities potentially reduce opportunities to organize around a common cause within movements (Brodribb, 1996). Feminist standpoint theorists have adopted a version of the liberal humanist subject: women as subjects with coherent, fixed identities (Hekman, 1999). These identities vary according to intersecting class, race, sexuality, and ability categories, but hold that women have a fixed sense of self within these categories which can be accessed and understood through hearing their perspectives and experiences.

The final thread of discourse that pertains to feminism is the decreased legitimacy of women's issues in our social and political fields. Heavily influenced by neo-liberal discourses, a system of values and a way of constructing knowledge which de-legitimizes gendered oppression has been on the rise. Naming feminism and women's issues as a "special interest group," governments cut funding federally and provincially to Status of Women Canada in 2006 and all women's programs in BC in 2004, respectively. Labelling the work that feminists do as political lobbying for *advantage* as opposed to seeing this work as necessary for ensuring *equality*, has conceptually de-legitimized the systematic oppression women experience. This discourse has had a substantial effect on the material lives of women's organizations since it has become the grounds for the federal and provincial governments to take away core funding, as well as research, and project grants. Public and private funders have restricted their funding criteria, preventing programs which acknowledge systemic gender disadvantage, making it very difficult for women's organizations to survive and to continue their work using an analysis of gendered oppression.

All four of these discursive occurrences within feminism— pluralism and inclusion, analysis of the female subject and subjectivity, anti-essentialism and post-

structuralism, and decreased legitimacy of women's issues —have altered the terrain and the tools with which women's organizations use to conceptualize gender. Within feminist theory and practice, debates about race and transgender have also affected organizational policies and practices. An increased focus on individual analyses within feminism (along with an increased focus on individualism in neo-liberalism), as well as post-structural complications of the category of woman, have changed the theoretical tools with which women's organizations can build ideas, concepts, practices, and policies around their work with women. I do not wish to make evaluative statements about the various merits or disadvantages of these theories; rather, I raise them in order to assist in mapping the various threads of discourse within feminism that construct the opportunities for women's organizations to re-conceptualize gender.

### *The Concept of Gender*

Gender is the primary concept explored in this research. This concept is fundamental to women's organizations, as their focus on women necessitates an analysis of gender. In this research, I take apart the concept of gender in women's organizations in order to explore how multiple and contesting discourses produce understandings of gender. In order to do so, I would like to establish some preliminary parameters about gender in this work. First, I see gender as an analytical process; it is a dynamic and changing concept that is an important organizer of social relations. Gender is also used and produced at multiple layers of the social system, and interacts with other social organizing processes such as race and sexual orientation. As my research progressed, I have chosen to examine one specific aspect of gender: *constructions of gendered independence*.

I make a distinction between gender as a binary identity category and gender as an analytical category which organizes social relations. I reject a definition of gender that simply represents essentialized male and female behaviours or identities. For example, I am not preoccupied with the question of distinguishing masculine and feminine leadership styles or ways of structuring organizations. Instead, I view gender as an important concept organizing social structures and relations within these structures. Taylor (1999) defined gender as a “set of cultural beliefs and ways of interacting with others” (p. 9). This active definition describes how gender is a process rather than a static identity category that defines one as essentially male or female. Instead, gender is an active medium where understandings of masculinity and femininity get defined, altered, challenged, and reconstructed through ways of interacting with others, and through all of the interacting layers of the social system. Scott (1986) interpreted gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and a primary way of signifying relationships of power” (p. 1067). Both of these definitions view gender as an *analytic category* which frames social processes. In Canadian society, gender is a very powerful social organizing tool; not only do we understand how men and women should act and behave, but we also organize our world views, institutions, and relationships around the value and meaning we assign to gender. In other words, gender is used “to articulate the rules of social relationships or construct the meaning of experience.” (Scott, 1986, p. 1063). It is this powerful, yet dynamic, organizing concept that I examine in this research.

Concepts of gender are used and produced within our mechanisms of social organization. This research demonstrates how many layers of social and political discourses intertwine to produce concepts of gender. However, it is worthy to note that

although this research focuses on concepts of gender within an organization, this construction of gender is influenced by many different layers of the social system since constituting gender as a concept occurs in many places within the social system, as Walby (2004) described. In her work, Walby (2004) outlined four interlocking elements that incorporate; (1) the overall social system; (2) political regimes - such as market led and welfare state; (3) domains of economic, polity, and civil society; and (4) social practices and discourses. She also argued that,

gender relations are constituted by all of these levels, rather than there being one privileged level. As the nature of gender relations change at all these levels, so do conceptions as to what constitutes women and men, and perceptions of what might constitute their cultural, political, and economic preferences and projects (Walby, 2004, p. 10).

This conceptualization of gender highlights the way in which gender can be created, maintained, changed, challenged, and organized by multiple layers of economic, political, and social policies, discourses, and practices. It establishes the systemic order that constructs gender relations, but also explains how the construction of gender is multiple, varied, and emerges from both formal political and economic, as well as informal social and cultural roots. This project attempts to understand how gendering is constituted within the layer of women's community organizations within civil society, but also brings in other layers of formal and informal social and political contexts.

The most dominant and powerful discourses organizing gender within all layers of the social system are those that argue for biological and naturalized differences between men and women, according more social value and power to the characteristics which are assigned to the male gender. Generally speaking, these discourses dominate within all layers of the social system because they are produced and perpetuated by powerful and traditional social institutions such as education and science.

A feminist conceptualization of gender is not complete without explicating the other interlocking categories—race, class, nation, sexuality, ability, age, etc.—that play a role in constituting the multiple and dynamic social concepts of gender. Viewing all of these as analytical processes as well (e.g. racialization and heterosexism), it becomes clear how the processes of organizing society according to race, class, and sexuality are central to gender. I do not mean to imply that an interlocking analysis requires only identifying multiple standpoints or positions within these social categories. Instead, I refer to Williams (1994) and Razack (1998) who both argued that intersectionality sees multiple and moving identities as useful and relevant ways of organizing experience. This dynamic and process-based approach to interlocking identities demonstrates how processes of racism and sexism intertwine to shape the experiences of women of colour (Williams, 1994). Jiwani (2006) demonstrated how intersections of race and gender construct a particular experience of violence. She argued that the violence women of colour experience does not simply depend on the universal or common experience of gendered violence; rather, it is more dependent on the racial and colonial forces operating at that moment, whether those forces are even recognized as violence, and who gets to determine the appropriate intervention for the violence (Jiwani, 2006). In this way, racial and colonial forces (such as immigration laws that restrict women's mobility) along with dominant conceptions of gender which view women as sexually accessible, shape the discourse of violence imposed on women who fall within these racial, colonial, and gendered intersections.

As my research project progressed, I became aware that gender was a very broad concept to explore. As I read through the interview and focus group data, it became clear that there was a strong connection between my inquiry about gender and participants'

responses in regard to women's independence, choice, autonomy, and collectivity. Since these are the themes that I draw out in my analysis, I would like to discuss how they remain conceptually within this definition of gender. I understand independence to be an important aspect of women's roles, identities, and behaviours in the social world. For example, as a woman, I have developed beliefs about my opportunities for choice and decision-making, and take actions in the world that are based on these beliefs. My beliefs have developed out of socially sanctioned discourses about capacity for autonomous individuality, as well as experiences of social regulation and oppression. In my feminist practice working with women and within the feminist movement, I have brought a personal desire for autonomy, belonging and collectiveness, and an analysis, more generally, of other women's ability and desire to be autonomous. Along with these, my feminist practice also contains an analysis of the structural oppression that restricts autonomy and decision-making in women's lives. All of these ideas about autonomous individuals, collectivity, and structural oppressions are socially constructed and are an important part of understanding women's roles, identities, and behaviours in the world. These beliefs about autonomy, independence, individualism, and collectivity shape perceptions of womanhood in the feminist movement, and they are an important framework for understanding gender relations. Ultimately, I demonstrated how concepts of gendered independence within a women's organization debate and remake forms of subjectivity for women, thus producing particular forms of gender relations through their work as an organization.

#### *Constituting Concepts of Gender at Place Possibilities*

The purpose of this section is to apply all the concepts I have discussed above—gender, neo-liberal, and feminist discursive opportunities—to the particular site of this

research project. In Chapter 1, I described Place Possibilities, the organization under study, in more detail; here, I would like to demonstrate that Place Possibilities does indeed engage with the concept of gender in the context of feminist and neo-liberal discourses. Gender is an important organizing concept in the organization, and it is highly intertwined with an analysis of abuse and violence against women. There are particular events that highlight the presence of neo-liberal and feminist discursive formations in the environment at Place Possibilities which contribute to its' constitution of gender.

### *Gender at Place Possibilities*

Place Possibilities is a community-based organization that works specifically with women who have experienced abuse. It retains a central focus on women through its specific work with women and its ongoing debate and dialogue about the role of men in the organization. Place Possibilities consciously identifies itself as a feminist organization and implements feminist practices in its everyday work. Since Place Possibilities works specifically with women who have experienced abuse, its' focus on women is explicit. Furthermore, while members acknowledge that men and women can both experience abuse in relationships, Place Possibilities emphasizes that women benefit from being in the company of other women who have experienced abuse as they work through issues arising from abuse. Although Place Possibilities works exclusively with women, it does not use a specific definition of *women* when determining who may participate in the program. Place Possibilities emphasizes that women who are abused come from “many different backgrounds – all ages, all races, all income levels and all levels of formal education” (Place Possibilities Volunteer Manual, 2006, p. 5).

Although there is no specific definition of women offered by the organization, on several occasions members of the organization have debated the role of men in the



organization. This has included debates about allowing men to participate as voting members, allowing men in the physical space of the building, and the inclusion of transgender staff members. Within all of these debates, parameters around the concepts of women, men, and gender relations have been contested, resisted, taken up, and remade.

Since Place Possibilities identifies itself as a feminist organization, it uses feminist principles in its everyday work. Although many changes in the past several years have affected the organization's structure, capacity, and programming, it strives to ensure that "decision-making is a shared, open and collaborative process striving to achieve a balance between board and staff with input from volunteers" (Place Possibilities Volunteer Manual, 2006, p. 8). In its everyday work with women, Place Possibilities brings "feminist, person-centred principles to counseling and facilitation" (Place Possibilities Volunteer Manual, 2006, p. 8). Place Possibilities' focus on women and its identification as a feminist organization consequently persuaded me that gender is a central concept at work and piqued my curiosity about how gender is actually being constituted in such an organization.

### *Abuse*

At Place Possibilities, the issue of abuse and violence against women is strongly linked to the organization's values, as well as to the analysis of gender and women's experiences. Since abuse figures so strongly in the work at Place Possibilities, it influences the construction of gender in the organization. Although abuse is a strong focus of the organization, it is nevertheless a contested concept in the organization, the women's movement, and society in general. In order to provide context for how the organization perceives and uses gender, I will briefly describe how abuse is conceived in the organization, as it relates to a gendered analysis of violence against women.

Place Possibilities' organizational documents (such as the constitution, pamphlets, brochures, and manuals) focus much attention on the impacts of violence on women's senses of themselves, life experiences, and opportunities. There is agreement that abuse creates significant personal and systemic barriers for women. In its public documents such as brochures and handouts, Place Possibilities focuses generally on the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of women. In more detailed documents such as the organization's Volunteer Manual, Place Possibilities specifies that there are many types of abuse including: child abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, abuse by intimate partners/spouses, psychological and emotional abuse, and social and economic abuse. This broad conceptualization of abuse incorporates elements such as social and economic marginalization which are not legitimized forms of abuse in the larger social discourse.

On the issue of gendered violence, Place Possibilities publicly states that "in the main, men abuse women. Men who abuse can be of any age and race. They have different levels of education. They may be a husband or ex-husband, boyfriend or ex-boyfriend, lover, son or a complete stranger" (Place Possibilities Volunteer Manual, 2006, p. 5). While this document clearly states that most violence against women is caused by men, it also acknowledges that violence is not limited to male-female relations: "Abuse does not only happen to women and children; it may also happen to men in heterosexual relationships" (Place Possibilities Volunteer Manual, 2006, p. 5). Nonetheless, it is evident that Place Possibilities uses an analysis of male power and privilege to conceptualize violence against women and the social relations of gender.

Although the public documents appear clear and uncontested, the data used for this thesis revealed that organizational members have varying analyses about the gendered nature of abuse in that some emphasized the role of male violence more than

others. All participants, however, seemed committed to the idea that women experience significant trauma from abuse, and consequently, women must be supported to end the cycle of abuse. These varying analyses reflect analyses in the women's movement in general (Walker, 1990), and may also be influenced by the de-legitimization of gender analyses in government funding requests for proposals and in social discourses about violence.

In the interview and focus group data, some participants commented that abuse has become a more legitimate issue as the years have progressed. However, other participants argued that it is still ignored as a social issue: "there is a great deal of silence and denial around it. It takes a real adult to acknowledge that it exists and people suffer from it . . . I think there is a blindness, a purposeful blindness to that" (Existing data, 2003, p.9). For instance, funders do not see the long term effects of abuse as a legitimate barrier to employment. The government considers abuse to be a legitimate barrier for women on income assistance, but only up to six months after the abuse occurred. However, at Place Possibilities, women are not even considered to be stable enough to go through the program until they have been out of an abusive relationship for at least six months. Participants in this research suggested that although the abuse of individual women has become less tolerated by society, women are increasingly accorded responsibility for not leaving abusive relationships. One participant explained that in this way, women continue to be blamed for the violence since they are told that it is their responsibility to leave. Indeed, Place Possibilities expects that women may leave and return to abusive relationships multiple times before they permanently leave. This phenomenon of focus on women's responsibility for leaving abuse is connected to the neo-liberal discourse of individualism and self-responsibility.

At various points in the data, abuse was generalized to abuse of the organization by more powerful institutions and systemic abuse of marginalized groups of people. As a women's organization, Place Possibilities has experienced cuts to funding and increased restrictions on its participant selection criteria, curriculum, and membership. Participants claimed that these regulations imposed by government funders are abusive and leave the organization in a situation where they have limited choices and autonomy, characteristics of a woman's experience in abusive relationships. Participants also argued that increased regulation and de-legitimizing identity categories was a form of abuse of marginalized groups. In reference to the province-wide referendum on treaty issues, one focus group participant commented that "we have the whole making a decision for a small, very barriered group of people with legitimate rights to this province . . . this sends a message that it's okay to bash invisibles" (Existing data, 2003, p.10). The researcher synthesized these comments by posing this question to the group: "[in the current discourse] can you make lots of people poor, but you can't hit somebody [anymore]?" and group members affirmed this question as an accurate interpretation (Existing data, 2003, p.10). These comments highlight how the organization generalizes individual abuse and connects it to structural systems in a way that is at variance with neo-liberal discourse.

#### *Context of Neo-liberalism at Place Possibilities*

Neo-liberalism has altered some of Place Possibilities' policies, selection criteria, curriculum, and everyday work over the past five years. In this section, I identify some of the tangible impacts that neo-liberal policy cuts and changes have had on Place Possibilities, and suggest how some of these impacts may influence the discursive environment of the organization. Although there have been instances of neo-liberal influence within women's organizing and within the community of Place Possibilities, I

will identify one particular event in the recent history of Place Possibilities: the movement of Place Possibilities' funding from the provincial Ministry of Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services to the Ministry of Human Resources in 2003 (Lowen & Reitsma-Street, 2006). This event precipitated four major changes in the policies and program delivery at Place Possibilities, which have set the stage for the current discursive environment at the organization.

In 2003, the provincial government cut all the funding to women's programs in the province, with the exception of limited funding for short term crisis support and intervention services (BC Coalition of Women's Centres, 2003). Since Place Possibilities received funding from the Ministry of Community, Aboriginal, and Women's Services at that particular time, their funding was consequently cut. Lobbying and advocacy by the organization and others in the community convinced the provincial government to move Place Possibilities to the Ministry of Human Resources portfolio. Under this portfolio, Place Possibilities was classified as a job employment service, a new classification that led to significant alterations in the structure and activities of the organization. On the whole, these changes were highly debated within the organization and many organizational members were unhappy with these changes. When reduced to a choice between implementing the changes or closing Place Possibilities, organizational members; however, chose to remain open and integrate some of the changes into the organization, while still resisting these changes in many ways. The provincial government's neo-liberal discourses of viewing women as a special interest group not worthy of government support and the need for increased accountability measures are represented in the changes described below.

Under the new contract that Place Possibilities negotiated with the Ministry of Human Resources, the three 15 week modules were reduced to two consecutive modules. This change significantly reduced the length of the program and also prevented women from taking modules separately, with time off in between for health care or child care. These two impacts—reducing the overall time span of the program and requiring that modules be consecutive—affected the organization’s ability to support women in a sustained and long term way, a problem considering that the organization strongly believes that healing from abuse requires time and sustained support.

One participant in a focus group commented on the curriculum changes made under this new funding contract. She noted that the organization had to focus its’ curriculum more on hardcore employability skills such as job searching. Place Possibilities remained committed to their holistic approach, incorporating an analysis of the effects of abuse and empowerment; however, it became more difficult to do this holistic work with an increasing focus on employability. This focus on employability aligns with the neo-liberal work ethic discourse and the belief that if one simply works harder, one can gain employment and be successful. The systemic oppression caused by experiences of abuse is consequently accorded less legitimacy.

Finally, under the new contract Place Possibilities was paid on a per client basis; if the client didn’t finish the program, the organization did not receive full payment for that client. This policy made the organization dependent upon the retention of students for its core budget. Moreover, this type of policy is reflective of market-based regulation designed to motivate the profitable *bottom line* – in this case, the number of people no longer on income assistance. This policy increased the pressure on Place Possibilities to encourage outcomes such as minimum wage employment, as well as less meaningful

training and work opportunities. Only specific employment related quantifiable evaluative measures are considered legitimate. This policy has undermined Place Possibilities' commitment to helping women imagine their futures, obtain meaningful employment in safe and supportive environments, and provide a good quality of life.

These four effects of neo-liberal funding contracts are just a few of the ways that neo-liberal discourses shape the work of Place Possibilities. Increased market-based outcomes, accountability, and a work ethic approach are all discursive threads operating in Place Possibilities. The members of Place Possibilities engage with these discourses as they negotiate concepts and carry out the work of the organization under these constraints.

#### *Context of Feminism at Place Possibilities*

As I have described, feminist theory and practice have undergone dramatic shifts in the past thirty years. These shifts, including an increased focus on subjectivity, identity, and difference, have also manifested in the practices of women's organizations. The discursive shifts within feminism can be traced through debates and dialogue within the organization. Two major debates in regards to the role of gender in the organization demonstrate feminist discourses at play at Place Possibilities.

Debate over gender emerged in one particular event which evaluated the status of men in the organization. When Place Possibilities began, it was open only to women members who had been staff, board, or participants of the organization. With increasingly rigid funding requirements and the pressure for agencies to have open memberships in order to receive support, Place Possibilities had to reassess its membership criteria. A meeting took place in approximately 2004-2005 where some members adamantly argued that men should be able to support the organization through membership, and some who

argued that it was crucial to role-model independence from men for women in the program, by restricting their membership exclusively to women. Influenced by the funders' membership requirements, the decision was made to open up membership to men and women, but all potential members were required to sign agreement to the principles of Place Possibilities to ensure that their values align with those of Place Possibilities and guarantee that those participating in the decision-making of the organization share similar values. Debates over the participation of men requires evaluating and re-conceptualizing what it means to be women and men, and the implications and repercussions of organizing gender in particular ways. These debates occur because of the diversity of feminist voices within the organization and reflect some of the theoretical shifts which discourage essentializing categories of woman and man.

When the issue of transgender staff was raised at Place Possibilities, threads of feminist discourse were taken up to debate gender. A transgender woman approached Place Possibilities about applying to work as a staff member. Staff and board discussed the issue, and eventually came to the conclusion that someone with a male history might be upsetting and damaging women in the program who were healing from abuse at the hands of men. Debating the issue of transgender inclusion raises many threads of feminist discourse, including both fluid and static identity categories, pluralism, and inclusion. The presence of contested debate around the issue of transgender participation in a women's organization elucidates the interchange of feminist discourses within Place Possibilities.

### *Conclusion*

Presenting the concepts and theoretical frameworks in this thesis has revealed how and why conceptual struggles over gender take place in women's organizations. I



began by validating the importance of conceptual work to women's organizations – both for the organization and for the women's movement. I then described how this conceptual struggle occurs at the site of the organization where the interchange of multiple social and political discourses happens. Focusing specifically on the concept of gender, I mapped how neo-liberalism and feminism have created social and political discourses affecting the construction of gender at Place Possibilities. An understanding of gender, neo-liberalism, feminism, discourse, and struggle is necessary as we carry on to further explore the discursive process of meaning-making at Place Possibilities.

## Chapter 3. Methodology

### *The Research Approach: An Overview*

In this thesis, I explore the discursive production of gender in a women's community organization. I use discourse analysis to investigate gendered notions of independence in a data set consisting of eight previously collected focus groups, four previously collected interviews, and four newly conducted interviews. The data consisted of interviews and focus groups with board members, staff, and participants at Place Possibilities. This data was collected as part of the Wedge Provisioning Research Project in which I participated as a research assistant. Data was collected over time, as part of the Wedge Project from 2003 to 2006 during my time as a research assistant. In 2007, I collected more data as a thesis student with permission of the Wedge Research Advisory Circle. As I carried out this research, I used feminist, anti-oppressive, and community-based research practices along with a feminist post-structural methodology. These methodological frameworks have helped me to make decisions about relationships of power, political commitments, and epistemological priorities during the course of my research.

### *Personal and Theoretical Commitments*

Personal and theoretical experiences and commitments have shaped my research question, design, and analysis. It is necessary to share these personal and theoretical commitments with the reader in order to elucidate how my own particular discursive environment has impacted this research. My commitments to feminist, anti-oppressive, and community-based research have all shaped the research question I have chosen, the interviews I conducted, and the analysis I performed. I have used feminist research

practices to negotiate relationships of power in research, while remaining grounded in emancipatory and anti-oppressive practices throughout the research process. I also have retained a central focus on community and local action with community-based research practices. Finally, the edicts of post-structuralism have framed my commitment to multiple truths. All of these practices reflect my personal and theoretical commitments, and have allowed me to focus on feminist political change throughout my research.

### *Feminist Research Practice*

Feminist research practices prioritize thinking about power dynamics in research relationships (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Attending to power dynamics is part of my personal commitment to create research that brings power to women instead of taking power away. Feminist research analyzes and attempts to acknowledge and minimize power relations. In my research, I acknowledge that there are complex workings of power present in many phases of this research; when defining the research question and engaging in analysis, interacting with participants during interviews, and working in conjunction with the organization, power is at play.

I argue that a fundamental source of power for researchers is their ability to define the goals, intentions, and outcomes of a research project. Researchers have the power to decide what knowledge they want to construct and the values on which the knowledge will be based. For example, I have developed a research question and adapted methodologies based on my own ontological and epistemological priorities. This has given me power as a researcher to define the research interests, and the power to shape and interpret the experiences of the participants. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) reminded me that my powers to establish research interests and designs are also colonial, and that any type of Western research introduces a particular set of cultural knowledge, values,

and assumptions. For instance, my feminist research interests and frameworks impose colonizing western practices and values, such as an implicit focus on the individual in society. Feminist practice has made me cognizant of my power and privilege to set research agendas, and as a result, I have situated this research in my own personal and theoretical priorities as a way to attend to, though not eliminate, this power dynamic.

Feminist methodology suggests that power is inherent in every relationship, including the relationship between researcher and participant (Oakley, 1990).

Traditionally, feminist research has argued that the researcher holds exclusive power over participants during research. Although all relationships contain power dynamics, feminist research practices attempt to make explicit these relations of power, and to share power more equally among researcher and participants. Relationships of power depend on how researcher and participant are positioned in relation to each other and the larger social world. Aside from the relationship between researcher and participant, there are other elements or positions that potentially affect the researcher-participant power dynamic. For instance, the social position and status of the researcher and the participant, as well as differences in economic status, employment status, and social class, can cause power to be exchanged in different ways between researcher and participant.

In this research project, I interviewed four women who were staff, board members, volunteers, and past clients of a women's organization. Each participant had a variety of roles in the organization; some were in paid positions and some were not, some were past clients and some were employed, and some were working professionals who had been past clients of the organization. Traditionally, my status as a student would accord me less power than those who are professionals within the organization. On the other hand, I would have a higher status than those clients who were participants in the

program and primarily on income assistance. However, Place Possibilities as an organization works hard to mediate power relationships and to break down these hierarchies to value all the women who participate—whether they be staff, board, or clients—as equal members in the organization. This ethic of the organization extended into our relationships as researcher and participants, and I felt a sense of equality and mutual exchange with all four of the women I interviewed, despite our relative inequities. Although power was inevitably present in all of my exchanges with participants during interviews, these power dynamics were made more equitable by the philosophies of Place Possibilities, as well as safeguards I introduced into the research process.

During the interviews, I put in place multiple safeguards to attempt to reduce my power as a researcher. These included ensuring the comfort of the participant by giving them the opportunity to choose where they would be interviewed; all four participants chose to conduct their interviews in local coffee shops. I ensured that all participants had the opportunity to speak broadly in response to the open-ended questions I asked. I also made a point to share my own thoughts and ideas, while still giving primary space to participants (Oakley, 1990). This was to engage in mutual sharing during the interview and to minimize the sense that I was simply collecting information from the participant. Fundamentally, feminist research believes that data collection should be “a sharing of ideas and philosophy and experience and symbolic expressions . . . a sharing of self” (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p. 68). In this research project, I shared my ideas and opinions as participants reciprocally exchanged their ideas and opinions. I hope that our conversations were mutual exchanges of ideas, knowledge, and information based around a set of open-ended questions. This mutual exchange was intended to allow both the researcher and participant to feel they gained something from participating in the

research. All four new interview participants commented genuinely and without prompting that they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on Place Possibilities and their work with the organization. Based on these comments, I am optimistic that participants left the interview feeling mutually engaged and respected.

Feminist research practices have been central to collecting data in the Wedge Project as well (Reitsma-Street, 2003). The Wedge Project has endorsed similar aforementioned mechanisms used during my own interviews in order to mediate power dynamics within interviews and focus groups. A central way of mediating power relationships in the Wedge project has been to establish a Research Circle composed of representatives from the organization. This Research Circle guided the research process in order to ensure that it remained accountable to the community organization. The Research Circle provided an opportunity to reduce these power dynamics by giving the organization a venue to guide and critique the process, and also mediated interactions with the organization to ensure appropriate and respectful relationships. Research questions were prepared in consultation with the Research Circle, and the Circle provided feedback on interview and focus group transcriptions and preliminary analysis of results. My research project, including the question and recruitment methods, was reviewed and approved by the Research Circle; they felt that my research question was useful and important to the life and work of the organization. Having my research question and design approved by the Wedge Research Circle was important to my personal commitment to minimizing my control as a researcher over research agendas and to working in a collaborative fashion that increased the organization's ability to guide research conducted about their work and policies.

*Anti-Oppressive Research*

I have used anti-oppressive research methods to prioritize emancipatory practice throughout my research. Anti-oppressive research practices require that the political goal of emancipation be central during all parts of the research process. This means that from formulating the question and design of the project, to data collection and analysis, the political goals of creating critical work to alter oppressive power dynamics have been prioritized. Potts and Brown (2005) defined anti-oppressive research to be that which “recognize[es] our own privilege and work[s] to dismantle the unjust systems that keep us in that privileged space” (p. 258). Anti-oppressive research practices also supports my belief that research is inherently political, and the goal of feminist research is to invoke change and challenge oppressive systems. I have employed anti-oppressive practices by conducting a critical analysis of women’s independence and connecting this analysis to the political work of feminist movements. Moreover, I have used anti-oppressive practices when I engaged in building relationships with the organization and its participants. Anti-oppressive practice has also operated in the Wedge project since it centralizes relationship-building and uses its outcomes for the purpose of change.

I have attempted to centre emancipatory practice by maintaining a critical focus on gendered dimensions of independence. In the focus and design of my research, I prioritized the political implications of changing gendered notions of independence for the work of the feminist movement. Although this work is theoretical, it uses theory to examine and alter oppressive systems by encouraging deconstruction and reflection about notions of gender. I will use my research to suggest how the feminist movement might react to and employ these critical reflections in their everyday work for social change. The results of my thesis research will be made available to members of the organization,

so they might use this analysis to reflexively inform their work as an organization. In this way, these research outcomes will contribute concretely to the project of feminist social change.

When I formulated the research question and conducted interviews, I worked to break down the privileged position of researcher. Instead of reaffirming traditional notions of the knower and known in research, I worked to build a relationship with the organization and its participants. This relationship-building is central to the emancipatory practice of anti-oppressive research since “the ethics of anti-oppressive research reflect a commitment to and respect for people and relationships as well as for action and social justice” (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 269). I spent approximately 50 hours working as a volunteer at Place Possibilities as a means of establishing a reciprocal relationship with the organization. I also participated in the Wedge Research Circle as a research assistant, which allowed me to build mutual respect with those involved in my research, as well as respond to Place Possibilities’ interests and priorities.

The Wedge project has served as the model upon which my anti-oppressive research practices are based. The Wedge project implemented clear guidelines providing the community organization access and use of research data and outcomes. Also, the Wedge project fostered a sense of reciprocity with Place Possibilities in the form of presentations and reports which can be used by the organization for funding and lobbying purposes. These Wedge guidelines provided the organization with the “right to a transparent research process, and their right to as much involvement or control as they choose” (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 269). For instance, one paper on performance-based funding measures (Loewen & Reitsma-Street, 2006) was used successfully by the organization to acquire more funding for a term period. Since relationship-building is



critical to the Wedge project, establishing a Research Circle with members of the organization demonstrates their commitment to a transparent research process and a desire to establish a professional relationship based in mutual respect.

### *Community-Based Research*

In addition to the emancipatory practice of anti-oppressive research, I am also committed to community-based research. Reitsma-Street (2002) understands community-based research as research which “puts the community at the centre” and is “aimed at changing local debates and policies” (p. 69). My research project is based in a local community which allows me to focus on the local debates and policies via the Wedge Research Circle, as well as my involvement in the community and the organization under study. The Wedge project and my own research are committed to foster research which will contribute empirically to the local politics of the community and organization.

Being a part of the Research Circle and volunteering with the organization under study (as well as with other organizations within the community), helped me to focus on this organization and the community of non-profit organizations and women’s groups. I was an active member of the Research Circle for approximately one and a half years from September 2005 until its close in March 2007. Participating in the Research Circle allowed me to become an invested part of the community and build relationships with members of the organizational community. Moreover, volunteering at Place Possibilities and with another related organization allowed me to build relationships within the larger community. I consequently found a place within the community and felt a vested interest in understanding its dynamics. In this respect, I believe that I became a part of a wider community comprised of women and anti-poverty organizations, to which Place

Possibilities belongs. My sense of belonging made me highly committed to the community of Place Possibilities.

The Wedge project has established connections with communities by building long term relationships with community organizations; these relationships respect the organization's right to guide the research project by employing research advisory circles, thus fostering a sense of reciprocity with the organization. My research was reviewed, approved and guided by the Victoria Wedge Research Advisory Circle, which operated actively between 2003 and 2007, consisting of members of the community organization under study. The Research Circle also approved research procedures for all of the data I used in this study. The Wedge project also gave regular feedback to the organization, by sharing findings and providing opportunities for members to debate these findings. Feedback to the organization occurred in the form of: short summaries of the research distributed to members, longer reports posted on their website, meetings with staff and board, a presentation at their AGM, and four articles in the organizational newsletter. Food was also provided for all participants at research meetings and focus groups. By investing in the organization and the community, both I and the Wedge project have deliberately positioned community organizations to be the focus of our research.

Since this thesis is embedded in the community of Place Possibilities, its analysis and outcomes focus on local debates and policies. Although this research draws heavily on theoretical models of the social world, I use theory to build a model of the social world that is directly related to the social and political environment in which Place Possibilities exists. I asked questions about the effects of government funding and social ideas about violence, women, and feminism on the organization. In the interviews and focus groups, I learned about Place Possibilities' relationships with other women's

organizations, government workers, advocacy organizations, and businesses. The interviews and focus group data reflect the experiences of people who are highly involved in the organization and its community. I have focused my analysis on constructing ways of thinking about the dynamics of this local environment. It is my hope that organizational members find my proposed theories useful for thinking about their organization, and that the outcomes of the research may prove helpful to the debates occurring with their own organizational policies, government funding policies, and in the larger social community.

### *Feminist Post-Structuralism*

The final personal and theoretical commitment I would like to outline is my belief that there is no one truth about reality which can be captured by research. I believe that there are multiple truths about reality since reality is constructed out of different commitments to various values and systems of knowledge. For instance, our values and systems of belief and knowledge construct the nature of an experience, and thus construct a truth about reality for us. Post-structuralism has thus provided a methodological framework within which to situate my research. This post-structural belief in multiple truths aligns with my feminist and anti-oppressive commitments because it disrupts the notion that there is one dominant truth (typically representative of dominant social groups), and the idea that women's perceptions and experiences can be represented simply by one's identity as a woman. These disruptions allow for a more emancipatory and complex understanding of power that contribute to feminist political strategizing.

Feminist post-structuralism is a "mode of knowledge production which assumes that language, subjectivity and social processes and institutions are all relative social constructions" (Weedon, 1987/1997, p. 40). Post-structuralism advances the idea that

there is not one universal truth based on a cohesive understanding of reality; rather, there are multiple truths based on difference (Strega, 2005). It uses the concept of discourse to explain how systems of power, meaning, and knowledge construct relative and varied realities. For example, Davies (1991) argued that “our existence as persons has no fundamental essence, we can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses” (p. 42). Discourses are therefore threads of meaning which intertwine to construct realities. Moreover, discourses are in a constant state of change; they are constantly being constructed, reconstructed, altered, resisted, and taken up by people, interactions, organizations, institutions, policies, and practices. Understanding that multiple realities are created by multiple and changing threads of discourse allows feminist post-structural research to interrogate the complex workings of power. Acknowledging multiple truths and complex workings of power also leads to a more nuanced understandings of women’s lives in feminist research.

Weedon (1987/1997) posits a feminist post-structuralism whose objective is to understand “the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyze the opportunities for resistance to it” (p. 40). As I understand it, Weedon (1987/1997) identified her theory as feminist post-structuralism because it aims to use the diffuse nature of power in order to investigate how power operates to create marginalization based on socially produced categories of gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability. Having a more complex understanding of the working of power in society allows us to develop more effective means of changing these dynamics of power. Analyses of power for the emancipatory work of political change in communities are therefore central to the personal and theoretical commitments presented in my research.

Many have argued that post-structuralism is antithetical to feminism because it prevents women from claiming accurate and concrete knowledge about women's lives based on a particular set of accrued female experiences (Brodrigg, 1996). This commitment to a concrete women's reality has been very important for projecting a unified women's voice into the political arena. My version of feminist post-structuralism maintains that multiple and relative versions of reality are necessary to provide women with the capacity to construct, deconstruct, take up, or alter social categories such as women, lesbian, queer, etc. As Linda Alcoff (1996) argued, "location is not a fixed essence and . . . there is an uneasy, undetermined and contested relationship between location on one hand and meaning and truth on the other" (p. 106). Alcoff (1996) also suggested that one's social location does not determine how one perceives and understands the world. In this way, assuming that identity produces fairly unified perceptions of reality is a disservice to the complicated web of interactions that produce meaning for women. For instance, Smith (1999) argues that colonization is one discursive process which constructs legitimate (western) systems of knowledge in research, and thus the resulting meanings and concepts produced through research depend on these systems of knowledge. Feminist post-structuralism, in this respect, aims to explore the complexity of multiple truths and meanings that produce and infuse power.

#### *Ontological and Epistemological Struggles*

Although feminist post-structuralism has provided an ontological framework in which to situate my research, it left me with two major methodological struggles I had to resolve during the course of this research. One struggle was between valuing the perceived realities and experiences of women (important to shift the gendered power dynamics in research) while at the same time, discursively analyzing these perceptions

and experiences. The second struggle was the fact that research uses and produces the very thing (discourse) that I was trying to deconstruct in this research. I resolved both these struggles by building two mechanisms into my research that helped me to recognize and integrate multiple truths into my analysis.

These struggles are tied to the differing ontological beliefs between post-structuralism and standpoint theory in feminism. Post-structuralism assumes that there is no one reality; since perceptions of reality are constructed out of discourse, this theory allows for dynamic and fluid concepts of gender and women. However, post-structural theory potentially undermines and discredits women's perceptions and interpretations of their own experiences, as the researcher proposes discursive interpretations of the perceptions conveyed by women in interviews and focus groups. On the other hand, standpoint and radical feminism argue that it is possible and indeed important to claim a subject position as a woman through identifying with multiple and intersecting identities, whether it is White, Black, Indigenous, lesbian, etc. (Brodribb, 1996).

Although I accept post-structuralism's notions that reality is created through discourse and women's experiences are constructed through subjectivity, I also believe that women's interpretations of their own experiences, conveyed through interviews and focus groups in research, are incredibly important and valid. However, I would argue that these perceptions of experience emerge out of their own discursive environments. Even though I value participants' perspectives, I nevertheless recognize that all perspectives are discursive constructions. I therefore believe it is beneficial to critically examine these perceptions to see how they are shaped by discourses, as well as propose other discursive perspectives based on how dominant discourses shape perceptions of reality more widely. In this research, I have attempted to convey both the perceptions of participants, as well

as the discursive constructions which underpin these constructions. I have accomplished this by demonstrating how different discourses—both those used by participants and those which may unconsciously underpin the perceptions of participants—intersect at certain points to produce new and dynamic concepts and subjectivities.

Due to my multi-faceted role as researcher (designer, creator, and interpreter of knowledge in research), I recognize that I have introduced my own discursively constructed perspectives to the research. I would suggest that there are actually three layers of discourse occurring throughout a research process that employs discourse analysis: (1) the discourses produced by participants to describe and understand their experiences, (2) the dominant discourses produced by social and political forces, and (3) my own perspectives that are produced in my discursive environment.

As per my research question, in this analysis I have examined the second layer of discourses, the dominant discourses produced by social and political forces. However, the first and second layers of discourse are at work as well. In the analysis, I have brought the values and priorities resulting from my discursive environment to my interpretations of the perspectives the participants share. By interpreting the data, I have the capacity to reconfigure their perspectives by prioritizing certain experiences and knowledge, while discounting or reframing others. In doing so, I potentially devalue the ontological truths of the participants, the first layer of discourse in the data.

At the same time as conducting an analysis of the second layer (the dominant social and political discourses), I also have created and used discourse throughout the research process. This may appear to confound the discourse analysis because I cannot take apart a discourse without imposing my own subjective truths. I acknowledge that the process of researching and writing is a discursive one, in that it is not possible to exist

outside of discourse (Gill, 1995). I have integrated a framework into my methodology to attend to these multiple discourses and capture some part of this complexity. In order to attend to all three layers of discourse which are simultaneously constituted by the discursive process, I have developed two methodological approaches to document the discursive effect I have on the research, as well as to articulate the multiple truths in the analysis. These two methodological approaches are as follows:

1. I have made every attempt to note contestations and places in which participants' perspectives varied from each other, and were different from my own.
2. By deconstructing the discursive process itself, I have also made multiple truths the central focus of this thesis. I have examined how multiple truths—from participants, government funding proposals, social values and beliefs—might come together. Using a point of contestation as an analytical tool has allowed me to provide one interpretation of how multiple discourses might align, resist, and contest each other to produce a concept. I present only one particular interpretation (my own) of how these might all come together, and I acknowledge that this research represents only one possibility in the realm of unlimited discursive possibilities. However, this interpretation does allow for multiple and contesting discourses (among participants, as well as between participants and myself) to be included.

Though not perfect, these methodological approaches have helped me to reconcile the power inherent in conducting a discourse analysis on the perceptions and experiences of women, while attempting to use and value multiple levels of ontological truths. Using feminist post-structuralism to reconcile these struggles has allowed me to better perceive how discourse analysis, which examines multiple layers of truth, reality, and discourse,



can situate the complex workings of power for the purpose of challenging and changing these power dynamics.

### *Overview of the Research Design*

This thesis employed a qualitative research design using interviews and focus groups with staff members, board members, and past and present participants of Place Possibilities. Undertaken in conjunction with the Wedge Provisioning Research Project, this research used two sets of data—existing data from the Wedge research project and four new interviews conducted by myself—to explore the discourses and points of contestation that constitute notions of independence at Place Possibilities.

### *Existing Data*

I chose two sets of data in which to explore the discursive construction of women at Place Possibilities. The first set of data of eight focus groups and four interviews were collected by other researchers in the Wedge project. Place Possibilities staff members, board members, volunteers, and past and present students participated in the focus groups and interviews. The table below describes this data set.

Table 1. List of Focus Groups and Interviews in Existing Data Set

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Data Source and Focus</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number of Pages</b>
1	June 4 2003 AM	FOCUS GROUP Responsibilities, activities, changes, strategies, future?	Total: 6 4 Staff 2 Students	10
2	June 4 2003 PM	FOCUS GROUP Same as above	Total: 3 1 Staff 1 Student 1 Board	8
3	June 6 2003	FOCUS GROUP Same as above	Total: 1 1 Board member	18
4	June 24 2003	Focus Group Building on initial three, feedback on provisioning map, changes, strategies	Total: 6 4 Staff 1 Board 1 Student	29

5	November 24 2004	FOCUS GROUP Changes in the past year, questions for future research	Total: 4 Research Circle members 1 Staff 3 Board members	26
6	June 3 2005	FOCUS GROUP Activities, changes	Total: Over 20 Alumnae, staff, participants	56
7	May 10 2006	FOCUS GROUP Individual women provisioning activities and one question asked about how the organization provisions, how does it figure out its provisioning work?	Total: 14 Current and former students	26
8	May 15 2006	FOCUS GROUP Feedback on provisioning activities, boundaries, figuring out	Total: 12 - 15 4 former Board members 5 Staff 1 Student 2 Current Board members 1 former Board member provided follow up comments on the transcript	43
9	June 23 2005	INTERVIEW Impact of performance based funding	1 Board Member	7
10	June 25 2005	INTERVIEW Same as above	1 Staff Member	11
11	July 5 2005	INTERVIEW Same as above	1 former Board Member	7
12	January 30 2003	Notes based on discussion between researcher and a board member about the site becoming involved in Wedge. A history.	Total: 2 Researcher Board member	7
TOTAL			71 PARTICIPANTS	248 PAGES

These transcripts provided a rich and comprehensive data source for this thesis. These focus groups and interviews asked a wide variety of organizational members to reflect on the provisioning work of the organization – what the organization does to provide for those it feels responsible. In order to answer that question, participants talked about the work of the organization, its values, its members, and its relationships with other organizations, institutions, and the government. Apparent in these discussions were the varieties of discourses that individual members took up to give value and meaning to the organization and its work. As participants talked about various people and institutions with whom the organization has relationships of responsibility (for example, the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, other organizations, students, alumnae, etc.), they also brought up other discourses that have influenced Place Possibilities. Participants in these focus groups and interviews used discourses to contest and resist other discourses when describing the organization. These transcripts provided an excellent opportunity to observe the dynamics of discourse in action.

In total, this first data set involved 71 participants and there were 248 pages of transcription in total. Of these 248 pages, I identified a subset of 66 pages of data by choosing all of the passages that made direct or indirect references to women and gender. This subset covered all of the discussion about gender in the focus groups and interviews. The criteria for including a passage was very broad since gender and women were referenced in a wide variety of ways in the transcripts. In general, any reference made to women was included. For example, these passages include reference to: the selection criteria for women admitted into the program, the way women are described in recovery, the way abuse of women is talked about, or the question of women only spaces. I attempted to be as broad as possible in capturing a wide range of references from the

larger data set. However, this selection of data was inevitably influenced by my own theoretical, conceptual, and empirical interests. I consider this to be one of the ways in which my own perceptions and experiences have influenced the direction and outcomes of this research project. Consequently, I have attempted to be transparent and reflexive about this in my analysis.

### *New Interview Data*

To collect a data set that specifically focused on gender in the organization, I conducted four semi-structured interviews with various members at Place Possibilities. These interviews gave me the opportunity to ask specific questions about the way in which gender is taken up at Place Possibilities and how organizational members perceive the forces that construct this understanding. The recruitment, interview, confidentiality, and data sharing processes associated with this new interview data will be discussed in the following sections.

### *Recruitment*

I completed four new interviews with staff, board members, volunteers, and past participants. These four interviews were conducted to supplement the significant amount of already existing data. Due to this wealth of existing data, four interview participants make a salient sample to ascertain in-depth data related specifically to gender. These four interview participants also have multiple roles in the organization; for example, a current board member may have been a staff member in the past, or a volunteer in other capacities. Due to their multiple roles, these four interview participants provided an in depth sample and cross-section of organizational members at Place Possibilities.

To recruit staff, board members, and volunteers, I asked members of the Wedge Research Circle to recommend a list of organizational members who had at least two

years of involvement with the organization and who might have an interest in the topic at hand. In order to respect the confidentiality of personal information (for example, email addresses and telephone numbers), I asked a member of the Circle to forward an email invitation (see Appendix 1 on page 126) to the first three individuals on the list (1 staff, 1 board, and 1 volunteer). After receiving no responses from this first set of emails, I asked this same member to contact the next three individuals on the list (1 staff, 1 board, and 1 volunteer), and repeated this process again. Three participants contacted me directly after receiving the email invitation. The fourth interview was conducted as a pilot interview prior to the start of the formal interviews.

### *Interviews*

The first interview was with a former board member. This person has been involved with Place Possibilities for many years. She has served as staff and a board member in the past, and now participates as a volunteer. As a past participant and a current board member, the second participant graduated from Place Possibilities several years ago. The third interview participant currently works as a staff member at Place Possibilities. The fourth participant is a past student, volunteer, and board member of the organization. These participants are represented by pseudonyms (not in corresponding order): Tabitha, Rebecca, Holly and Misha.

These interviews followed a semi-structured interview style in which I had prepared some pre-determined questions, but allowed the conversation to flow and take different directions, depending upon the responses of the participant (see interview guide in Appendix 3). Each interview lasted approximately one to one and a half hours, and took place at a time and place determined by the participant. Three participants chose to meet at a local restaurant or coffee shop and one interview took place in my home at the

request of the participant. The participants chose the coffee shop, and so though it was a public space, they were able to choose a space where they felt comfortable and anonymous. Interviews took place between January 28 and March 21, 2007. During the interviews, I asked questions about how the organization has taken up gender, and the impact of individual members', government, and social ideas about gender have had on the organization (see Appendix 3 on page 131). At the end of each interview, I asked the participant if she would like to review the transcript to ensure that it accurately reflected what she intended to convey in the interview. Each participant agreed to do this. I provided each participant with her transcript, and if there was anything that she wanted to clarify or alter in the transcript, she did so.

### *Confidentiality*

At each step of recruitment, interview, analysis, and dissemination, I took precautions to ensure the confidentiality of participant identity, as well as the confidentiality of the organization's identity. Extensive measures were taken to ensure that no identifying information was retained from the interview data. This means that participant names were replaced with pseudonyms, and any information associated with participant's position within the organization, or any other possible identifying information not essential to the data, were removed. Despite these precautions, due to the size of the organization and the community in which the organization operates, there are possible limits to confidentiality. For instance, the organization may be identifiable due to the limited number of similar organizations in the geographical area. The geographic community in which the organization resides is referred to as a "mid-sized Western Canadian city". Any possible organizational identifying information not crucial to the research was removed from the transcripts prior to analysis, such as the names of other

affiliated organizations or neighborhoods. In order to provide readers with important context about the organization's discourses on gender, abuse, neo-liberalism and feminism at the site, I have provided descriptions of the organization and its work. It is possible that those familiar with the organization in its' geographical area may be able to identify it from this information. As previously mentioned, the pseudonym Place Possibilities was used in place of the organization's name. Additionally, the confidentiality of participants may be limited by the small population of staff, board, and volunteers within the organization from which I drew the sample of four participants. Although names and identifying information were removed from the transcripts, it may be possible for others to identify participants through the experiences they revealed or the positions from which they spoke.

I emailed each participant a copy of the consent form before the day of the interview, and asked them to review it again at the beginning of the interview before signing it. I offered the opportunity to answer any questions about consent and confidentiality at the beginning of each interview. In the consent form, participants were informed that participation in this research was completely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. They were also informed that they could turn the tape recorder off at any time during the interview (see consent form in Appendix 2).

Email correspondence during the recruitment process was kept confidential; emails were deleted as soon as the correspondences was completed. If it was necessary to keep an email, I copied the email into a word processor file that was password protected and deleted the email. All transcripts were cleaned of identifying information and kept in a separate location from the consent forms and kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's

home. Audio tapes from the interviews were kept separate from consent forms as well and placed in another locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Electronic copies of transcriptions (cleaned of identifying information) were kept in a separate file on the researcher's home computer in a password protected file. Audio tapes and consent forms will be destroyed within six months of the completion of the thesis project. The principal researcher will keep paper and electronic copies of the transcripts for up to five years after the date of the interviews. Electronic copies of the transcripts will be kept in a database by the Wedge Research Project for up to seven years after the project ends in 2008. Audio tapes will be erased so they are no longer readable and then thrown in the garbage. Consent forms and interview transcripts will be professionally shredded.

#### *Data Sharing*

Since I have benefited enormously from data already collected by the Wedge Project, I wish to contribute the data from these interviews to the data bank of the Wedge Provisioning Project. Electronic copies of the interview transcripts, with all identifying information removed, will be kept by Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, Principal Investigator of the Wedge Research Project. As part of the Wedge Research Project, this data will be used for the objectives of the Wedge project, which are to examine questions of women's work in the new economy and use the concept of provisioning to explore the many activities and relationships for which women and organizations feel responsible. The Wedge Provisioning Project is a multi-site research project with other researchers in British Columbia and Ontario exploring these questions in a total of six community organizations. This project received ethics approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (Protocol Number 06-105 21-April-06-End 20-April-09). The Wedge Project has also undergone ethics approval at other sites – the University of



Toronto, York University, and Laurentian University. Access to the data in the Wedge Project is limited to authorized investigators who are a part of the Wedge Provisioning Research Project.

### *Compiled Data: Collected Over Time*

The compiled existing and new data form a comprehensive data set documenting discourses and contestation about gender in the organization between 2003 and 2007. Depth of the data is enhanced by the fact that data was collected over a 5-year period when there were significant and ongoing changes occurring in the organization as a result of funding cuts. These changes over time have produced the contestation of discourses in the data. In my analysis of the data, I make every attempt to demonstrate how time and change have affected the particular discourses and the contestation among them, and how these discursive changes happened over time and corresponded with the ongoing changes in the environment.

### *Discourse Analysis*

To analyze the compiled data for constructions of gender, I conducted a critical discourse analysis of all 66 pages of existing data and 34 pages of new interview data. I identified inter and intra- discursive contestations in the data, and analyzed how discourses of independence, individualism, self-responsibility, and collectivity intersected at points of contestation. The struggle amongst these discourses produced new concepts of gendered independence, which proposed new forms of women's subjectivity within the organization. Multiple discourses in the data struggled and contested to produce notions of independence and agency which affected perceptions of women's subjectivity in the organization. Chapter 4, a discussion of the findings, describes the discourses and the points of contestation among the discourses which produced nuanced concepts of

gendered independence. Chapter 5 extends this analysis by exploring how the discursive and conceptual struggles created changing understandings of women's subjectivities in the organization.

The following discourse analysis is loosely drawn from Sara Mill's delineation of critical discourse analysis (2004). Using Fairclough's approach (1992) that integrated a linguistic analysis with an analysis of power relations, Mills (1997/2004) described how Fairclough is concerned with the way in which interactions "display the complexity of the workings of power relations within the society as a whole" (Mills, 1997/2004, p. 134). Critical discourse analysis takes apart discursive constructions by identifying inter-, intra-, and extra-discursive contestations among discourses which produce social relations of power. In this analysis, I have used subjectivity as a point of contestation to demonstrate how inter- and intra-discursive contestations occur to produce a nuanced and complex understanding of the female subject.

In my analysis, I have used two strategies founded in a Foucauldian approach to discourse in order to analyze the discursive process at work. These strategies are inter- and intra-discursive contestation (Foucault, 1972). Thomas and Davies (2005) helped me to interpret the Foucauldian literature on inter- and intra-discourse contestation by naming intra-discursive as "arising between the objects, operations and concepts of a single discursive formation. Here, the polyvalence of discourse gives rise to spaces between the subject position offered within the discourse, and the self as reflexively constructed." (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p. 719). Within a particular discourse, an organization may make small and reactive changes in its systems of knowledge while still remaining within the parameters of that particular discourse. Thomas and Davies (2005) also explained inter-discursivity as "arising as tensions between different discursive

formations” (p. 719). In this instance, the subject challenges the prescribed ideas within a discourse by articulating an alternative to the dominant discourse. By adapting one’s subjectivity within the confines of a discourse and by choosing to take up alternative discourses, the participants in the data adapted, changed, and challenged these available discourses through the way they saw, understood, and enacted these discourses.

Examining these inter- and intra-discursive contestations allowed me to analyze the data by taking apart the discursive process, and provided a system for interrogating how these contestations produce women’s subjectivities within the organization.

I will explain how I came to the point of identifying gendered independence as the major conceptual focus. To begin my analysis, I read through all 66 pages of the existing data. Staying close to the data, I recorded my observations and thoughts while keeping two questions in my mind: (1) What are the discourses around gender appearing in the data?; and (2) How do these discourses intersect? The three major sets of discourses I looked for were social, political, and feminist. I then repeated this process a second time, this time moving back and forth between the raw data and my first set of observations. In this second round of observations, I included anything that I had missed the first time and built on some of my observations by noting some of the themes that appeared in regards to the two questions. The concepts of choice, independence, and individual and structural change began to appear at this time. I then followed the same process for the 34 pages of new data, recording two rounds of observations of the new data.

Once I had two sets of observation notes for each of the data sets (existing and new data), I compiled these notes and began to cut them apart literally using paper and scissors. I cut out each point, observation, thought, and pasted them together into several different categories that I identified as themes or patterns in the data. These overarching

themes and patterns are as follows: *abuse, choice, independence, collectivity/support, governmentality and regulation, feminist, dynamic, and barriers.*

As I read through the parts of the data that I associated with each of these themes or patterns, I identified particular discourses that threaded through these patterns. I began to understand that some of the themes I identified were actually discourses and others were broader concepts comprised of discourses that had to be further taken apart. I continued to rearrange the data until I had identified a set of discourses that were most prevalent in the data. As I cut and pasted, I also observed how these discourses interacted, intra- and inter-discursively. I began to write about each discourse and observed how they interacted to produce conceptual struggles over gender and independence.

The first level of analysis consisted of observing the discourses and how they interacted. The second level of analysis explained how the process of conceptual and discursive struggle interacted with the production of subjectivities, and how understanding the conceptual struggles within the organization around independence can extend to an analysis of how the organization perceives women's subjectivities. I will take up this analysis in more detail in chapter 5, but will explain here why concepts of gendered independence are crucial to constitutions of women's subjectivity. As a woman, I have developed beliefs about my opportunities for choice and decision-making, and have taken actions in the world that are based on these beliefs. For example, if I am socialized to believe that I am solely responsible for my success or failure, I may not develop relationships of interdependence with other people and my sense of self may highly depend on my own personal success or failure. These beliefs about the self-defined by personal success-may result in a disconnect with social movement work. For instance, I would believe that my capacity to initiate change to be exclusively determined

by my personal actions and not through relationships with others. Interest and participation in feminist movements may also decrease as a result of these individualizing beliefs.

My beliefs have developed out of socially sanctioned discourses about capacity for autonomous individuality, as well as social enforcement, regulation, and oppression. In my feminist practice working with women and within the feminist movement, I have brought a particular understanding of women's ability to be autonomous, my own and others' desire for autonomy, belonging and collectiveness, as well as the structural oppression that restricts autonomy and decision-making in women's lives. All of these ideas about autonomous individuals, collectivity, and structural oppressions are socially constructed, and are an important part of understanding women's roles, identities, and behaviours in the world. These beliefs about autonomy, independence, individualism, and collectivity shape perceptions of women's subjectivity in the feminist movement, and they are an important framework for understanding gender relations.

#### *Assessment and Evaluation*

As this research takes up feminist, anti-oppressive, community-based, and post-structural values, it does not adhere to the scientific rules of validity and reliability. I would like to suggest that my research be assessed and evaluated based on three criteria that speak to the feminist, anti-oppressive, community, and post-structural values reflected in my research methodologies. These three criteria are as follows: *use and relevance of the research to the organization under study, respecting multiple truths, and maintaining critical integrity in analysis.*

As I am committed to research with the potential to effect social change, I believe that in order to produce sound and successful research, the results I derive from the study

must be relevant, understandable and useful to those whom I am writing about. If this particular organization finds the outcomes of the research valuable to their thinking, reflexivity, decision-making, and taking action, this research will have been successful. I will be successful in this endeavour if I can “make strange that which appears familiar, and make familiar that which appears strange” (Hekman, 1999, p.138).

My second evaluative criteria is called *a/version of construct validity*. This phrase appropriates a positivist term to explain my desire to maintain a consistently accurate representation of the multiple and complex truths that participants, and myself as a researcher, bring to the data. This does not mean that I have refrained from analyzing and interpreting what and how participants understand and explain their discourses and subjectivity. I do, however, recognize, acknowledge, and present participants’ analyses of their own perceptions and experiences as equally valid truths to my own as the researcher. I have also worked to ensure that I accurately represented the words and intentions of the participants throughout the research, by asking participants to review their transcripts. I have ensured that the analysis remained thorough, rich, comprehensive, close to the data, and an authentic representation of individual’s words and perceptions. This commitment to the integrity of multiple truths has been a part of the community-based research approach of the Wedge Project, and so the focus groups and interviews that form the existing data set are also in harmony with this commitment.

In this research, I have endeavored to maintain a feminist critical analysis. My work can be evaluated by other feminists for its critical capacity to resist the dominant discourses embedded both in the research process and in the content of my research question, data, and analysis (Strega, 2005). I believe that maintaining critical integrity in a feminist post-structural methodology such as mine requires that I acknowledge, explore,

and interrogate both the capacity for contestation, challenge, and resistance, as well as compliance that occurs in the process of discursive constructions.

## Chapter 4. The Findings

### *Overview of Chapter: Concepts, Discourses, and Points of Contestation*

The findings of this research project are divided into three parts. I first discuss the concept of independence, an important element of gender that I chose to focus on as the primary contested concept which emerged in the data. I then identify in detail the individual discourses I identified in the data which constituted this concept of independence. I have included a table briefly outlining and describing each respective discourse. Finally, I will demonstrate how the discourses intersected at points of contestation to produce concepts of women's independence at Place Possibilities. These points of contestation were instances where multiple discourses contested – individuals in the organization accepted, rejected, resisted, subverted, altered, and negotiated different discourses to produce a new conceptual understanding of independence.

### *The Concept: Gendered Independence*

I began this research exploring the general concept of gender. At the outset, this research question interested me because I wanted to understand how feminists re-conceptualize the category of *woman*. As I developed the project, I realized that this category was too broad to be analytically useful. As I read through the interview and focus group texts, I became intrigued by how participants presented, debated, contested, and built new concepts of women's independence. I was then able to specifically focus in on the way that we conceive the actions, agency, and choice-making of women. I would argue that conceptualizing women's independence is particularly important to theorizing about women's oppression and empowerment. My interest in focusing on the concept of independence was further compelled by the way in which it was strongly debated and contested in the data.



I use the concept of independence to describe the ability and capacity to make decisions, enact behaviours, and have agency and choice. I acknowledge that this term is problematic. In the findings, you will not find an analysis of how participants reproduced the traditional definition of independence, “a state of being free from the control of others, [which] is highly prized and equates with strength and agency” (Hare-Mustin & Merecek, 1986, p. 205). Instead, you will find a more complex analysis of how this definition of independence is taken up, resisted, rebuilt, and outright rejected. Holly, an interview participant, argued that Place Possibilities has moved from a primary focus on gender to a primary focus on independence, leaving gender as a secondary focus. She suggested this change has been necessitated by the increasing effects of neo-liberal discourse and is a way to “combat the other emphasis [from the government] on getting a job” (Holly, Interview, January 28, 2007). A focus on independence in the data may be reflective of this shift and so the existence of the concept itself in the data may be a production of discourse. Regardless, the notion of independence currently remains a critical concept used and debated within and outside of feminism, and therefore, is important to explore in women’s organizations.

Some of the discourses I present take up this notion of independence; some problematize it whereas some reject it altogether. For example, a discourse of collectivity challenges the idea that individuals can or should be independent of collectives of people and resources. Other discourses, such as emancipatory subjectivity, argue that independence is important, but should be evaluated based upon internal standards of truth and self, and not conform to social norms of what it means to be an individual agent. A structural analysis connects people’s ability to act and choose the systems and institutions which support and constrain actions and choices. All of these discourses present nuances

and challenges to the traditional definition of independence. As we move forward into the findings, I explore independence as a conceptual site of struggle over ideas of choice, agency, relationships, individuals, groups, and systems.

### *Description of the Discourses*

I will now describe the six major discourses I identified in the data which constituted the concept of women's independence in the organization. In the data, some of the discourses (*emancipatory subjectivity, individualism, structural analysis, personal independence, and collectivity*) were used by participants themselves, and I have identified the discourses by examining the language with which they describe program values, goals, participants, and relationships with the government and other organizations. Other discourses (*individualism and economic independence*) were primarily named and critiqued by research participants; these discourses have been enacted by government funders or dominant society, and participants described how members of the organization resisted, rejected, or conformed to these discourses. Although I describe the discourses separately for clarity, I must note that in reality, none of these discourses appeared in isolation in the data and this isolated representation therefore does not attend to the complexities of these intertwining discourses. After outlining the six discourses in detail, I then describe the points of contestations where these sets of discourses interacted in the data to produce nuanced conceptualizations of women's independence.

Table 2. Discourses that Constitute Women's Independence

<b>Discourse</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Emancipatory Subjectivity	Ability to make own decisions according to internal sense of truth and self.	"getting in touch with ourselves . . . creating our own lives . . . and having a sense of what we want rather than accepting that external locus of control all

		the time” (Existing data, 2003,p.8-9)
Individualism and Self-Responsibility	Responsibility and freedom to make own choices and decisions for personal benefit.	“Place Possibilities has been criticized for making things too safe, right. Because there is this whole emphasis on ‘just do it’ kind of thing. You know, that you don’t need to . . . that you just need to push them, they just need incentive” (Existing Data, 2003, p.2)
Collectivity	Being in relationships of mutual responsibility and support with others in a community.	“You can’t be human without being in community. Sure enough, what’s happened is we’re becoming less human as we become less community” (Existing Data, 2004, p. 48)
Personal Independence	A holistic understanding of independence that invokes social, political, physical, emotional, and spiritual well being within an individual.	“Everyone has a different passion for life [and Place Possibilities helps them] to find that and help them get there” (Tabitha, Interview, March 14, 2007).
Economic Independence	Independence that focuses on being financially autonomous.	“We used to really nurture women in following whatever dream they wanted. For example, their career expectations. And we talked about, are we going to have to shift that? . . . would we shift from helping someone . . . look at a career that might not be attainable to supporting them in a job placement that might not have been their first choice but will help them get back to work quicker or become financially independent from the ministry?” (Existing Data, 2003, p. 28)
Structural Analyses	Examining constraints and supports in the environment that affect personal circumstances.	Women cannot have choices until they’re not being “dominated and oppressed and violated on a daily basis” (Rebecca, Interview, March 30, 2007).

### *Emancipatory Subjectivity*

*A discourse of emancipatory subjectivity* often appeared in the data. This discourse suggests that women need to focus on their own inner sense of truth and self, as well as their own hopes and desires. It also suggests that women’s independence requires opportunity and a capability to make decisions and choices according to these inner

guideposts. Elements of this discourse include a focus on the individual and empowerment. Many organizational members used versions of this discourse. For example, one participant described it as “getting in touch with ourselves . . . creating our own lives . . . and having a sense of what we want rather than accepting that external locus of control all the time” (Existing data, 2003, p.8-9). At Place Possibilities, this discourse is used in its’ everyday work as members support women to make their own choices and decisions about who they want to be and how they want to live their lives. The participants emphasized that Place Possibilities does not prescribe a certain way that women should be; rather, they help women to explore what they want, and then encourage them to make choices and decisions in light of those goals.

#### *Individualism and Self-Responsibility*

*A discourse of individualism and self-responsibility* was circulated by some participants and critiqued by others. This discourse refers to the idea that every individual is responsible for taking care of themselves and should be able to capably make their own decisions as individuals. Individualism and self-responsibility emphasizes that independence is created and maintained by taking responsibility for one’s own choices, decisions, and actions. The primary element of this discourse is a focus on the individual as separate and in isolation from the environment and circumstances she exists in. This discourse has also been primarily present in the neo-liberal environment of government policies and practices, and most often, it was criticized by participants. For example, one participant commented that

there are some people who say, ‘I did it on my own’ without seeing all the work. But they don’t acknowledge all the support that they got, and all the training that they got, and all the safety that they had. And they also mostly had the great luxury of never going to bed hungry. (Existing Data, 2003, p.11)

However, members of Place Possibilities also support the idea that women can and should claim responsibility for themselves. This appeared in the data when participants spoke about the organization's approach to its work with women. One focus group participant described how Place Possibilities teaches that "instead of being taken care of or taking care of someone else in an abusive relationship, it's now your responsibility for yourself" (Existing Data, 2003, p. 9). Another program participant at Place Possibilities described it in the following terms: "a place that has offered me a real place, not a tough love approach, where I can claim responsibility and be supported" (Existing Data, 2003, p. 43).

### *Collectivity*

*A discourse of collectivity* commonly appeared throughout the data. Over the years, it has increasingly been used to refer to the existence of mutually supporting collectives of people and resources. This discourse argues that women's individual independence can only be achieved when women exist in supportive community with others. Community and the collective do not refer only to geographically located groups of people, but to family, friends, agencies, neighbours, members of identity groups, etc. Participants argued that although not all women may be part of communities and collectivities, communities and collectivities are crucial in developing independence, choice, and individual well-being. The crucial element of this discourse is the relationships among individuals and within communities. The discourse of collectivity suggests that support and community are necessary to create space and cultivate an individual's opportunity to make choices.

Place Possibilities attempts to cultivate collectivity among its participants, as well as build supportive relationships with other organizations in its communities. Many

times, participants referred to a cycle of strength-building for women who have experienced abuse, which requires individuals recovering from violence to exist in supportive relationships in order to heal. One participant suggested that

people who are marginalized [need] supports to gain strength and then [can] give back that strength. There's this real cycle of strength. If we gut out the social welfare system, we put people into positions where they only have welfare . . . so they're in the cycle of poverty (Existing data, 2004, p. 13).

In this respect, strength can only be gained through an exchange of support and resources. This participant also argued that the social welfare system (among other spaces) is an important site to develop a supportive collectivity. Another focus group participant theorized about the inevitability of participating in community. Based upon an author she was reading, she argued the following: “you can't be a human without being in community. Sure enough, what's happened is we're becoming less human as we become less community” (Existing data, 2004, p. 48). This participant suggested that people conduct their lives in relation to other people, and therefore, one cannot exist without communities – these communities are not necessarily geographic, but familial, issue-based, and identity-based. In the focus groups and interviews, participants reflected on the decreased opportunities for developing community because of increased poverty and government cuts to agencies and organizations which provide space and resources for collectives to use and gather.

### *Economic Independence*

*A discourse of economic independence* has been prominent in government policies and procedures guiding funding aspects of the organization. On the whole, focus group participants described and critiqued this discourse in the data. In this discourse,

independence is linked solely with economic and financial autonomy. This discourse therefore puts forth the idea that an individual achieves independence only when she is financially self-sufficient. For instance, focus group participants described how women on income assistance are contracted out to employment agencies which help women secure jobs to obtain financial independence from the state. Although this discourse was actively resisted by organizational members in the data, it has inevitably influenced Place Possibilities since government funders require all women participating in the program to currently be receiving income assistance. The discourse of economic independence also manifests in the organization because government funders evaluate the organization primarily according to how many women move off income assistance after completing the program. It is important to note that this evaluative criteria determines future funding for the organization.

### *Personal Independence*

Focus group and interview participants used a *discourse of personal independence* to argue against a discourse of economic independence. A discourse of personal independence builds individual independence upon social, emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial well-being. Place Possibilities helps women develop many aspects of their lives; along with supporting women to establish financial security, the organization aids its clients to develop in terms of creativity, career, education, family, spirituality, emotional, and physical health. Tabitha commented on how Place Possibilities recognizes that “everyone has a different passion for life [and Place Possibilities helps them] to find that and help them get there” (Tabitha, Interview, March 14, 2007). In the data, members of Place Possibilities conceptualized women’s independence to be rooted in a holistic understanding of well-being and not solely defined as financial autonomy.

### *Structural Analysis*

The final discourse in the data that contributed to constituting the concept of women's independence is a *discourse of structural analysis*. This discourse places importance on the systemic factors that support and constrain the circumstances in which individuals live and make choices. Important elements of this discourse include a focus on power dynamics constructed by social institutions such as the state, patriarchy, and racism. Participants in focus groups and interviews talked about the barriers of poverty, violence, and patriarchy which shape and limit women's opportunities and choices. An analysis of the social, political, and economic forces that affect women's lives was prevalent in the data and participants often referred to the systemic forces that shape opportunities for independence. For instance, one participant during a focus group referred to state control as systemic oppression: "amongst all the odds of how many different directions and how much control the state has over these women's lives they're still here" (Existing Data, 2005, p. 21). The ability of the organization to articulate a discourse of structural analysis has been limited by dominant individualizing discourses.

### *Points of Contestation*

These six discourses did not appear in isolation as I have suggested above. In the interviews and focus group transcripts, all of these discourses weaved together to produce complex and contested ideas about women's independence. As these discourses wove, it was then possible to identify points where discourses collided, interchanged, merged, and resisted each other. I call these *points of contestation*, and will describe how emancipatory subjectivity and individualism, economic and personal independence, collectivity, individualism, and structural analysis weaved together to constitute nuanced concepts of women's independence by the research participants.



*Emancipatory Subjectivity and Individualism*

Both emancipatory subjectivity, and individualism and self-responsibility intersected intra- and inter-discursively in the data. In the data, the discourses of individualism and self-responsibility were strong forces acting on the organization and members of the organization critiqued and resisted them, while simultaneously reconstructing elements of the discourse to align with the values of the organization. At the same time, an alternative discourse of emancipatory subjectivity emerged, which aligned with some elements of individualism, but contested others.

The discourse of individualism and self-responsibility, which accords sole responsibility for choices and actions to the individual, was critiqued by members of the organization in focus groups. These same members also focused on working with individual women (as the service is focused on creating change in the lives of individual women) and encouraged them to claim responsibility for themselves in order to break the cycle of violence. Tabitha suggested that at Place Possibilities, each woman receives her own “personalized care” (Tabitha, Interview, March 14, 2007), which illustrates the individual focus of the program.

Members of the organization prioritized individualism and self-responsibility, but rejected what they saw as the oppressive elements of this discourse; this is intra-discursive contestation. In an interview, Rebecca made a very clear distinction between empowering versus oppressive elements of individualism and self-responsibility. In particular, Rebecca distinguished her use of *choice* from the dominant notions of individuality and self-responsibility; she claimed this other definition of choice is intended to “hurt and undermine and blame women for inequality and the violence they experience” (Rebecca, March 30, 2007). Her version of choice explicitly connected

women's capacity for choice with the structural environment. Indeed, women cannot have choices until they are not "dominated and oppressed and violated on a daily basis" (Rebecca, Interview, March 30, 2007).

While elements of individualism and self-responsibility were contested intra-discursively, members of Place Possibilities also constituted independence through the inter-discursive contestation between individualism and emancipatory subjectivity. In the data, emancipatory subjectivity aligned with individualism since it similarly prioritizes the individual; however, it contested the notion of self-responsibility by focusing inward on women's hopes, dreams, and desires. I would suggest that this particular discourse encourages women to be responsible to their inner truth, as opposed to conforming to socially sanctioned norms and values.

One series of comments in a focus group demonstrated how self-responsibility can be reconstituted in the discourse of emancipatory subjectivity. For instance, one participant commented on the importance of "moving in the world from our centre rather than listening to what other people want" (Existing Data, 2003, p.9). Another participant responded and argued that moving in the world from our centre is "living our truths" (Existing Data, 2003, p.9). A third participant followed with: "I was thinking of self-responsibility" (Existing Data, 2003, p.9). It seems to me that in these comments, self-responsibility is explained as being truthful to a personal centre from which truth and integrity exist. For instance, being self-responsible is not intended to convey that women should enact socially acceptable behaviours in order to conform to dominant notions of responsibility; rather, it intends to convey that women can and should be responsible to their personal truths and their internal *locus of control* as it was described elsewhere in the data.

It is possible to examine the intra and inter-discursive contestation of these discourses over time in the organization in order to see how events in the political and social environment have contributed to the constitutive effects. Emancipatory subjectivity and self-responsibility remained very strong discourses consistently over time in the data. In the first four focus groups in 2003, there was much discussion which referred to these discourses. Participants argued for the importance of developing a sense of self as a way of recovering from abuse, and commented on the significance of claiming responsibility for one's choices as a way to break free from the cycle of abuse and oppression.

At the time the focus groups took place in 2003, Place Possibilities was in the middle of negotiating a contract with the Ministry of Human Resources. At that time, they did not yet know whether the organization would ultimately receive funding and stay open, or whether they would have to close its' doors. At this point, the discourse overwhelmingly revolved around a discussion about the skills that Place Possibilities provides in order for women to develop an internal and sense of self: needs, desires, hopes and skills that align with a personal sense of themselves and how they view the world. One participant in 2003 even critiqued the discourse of self-responsibility when she mentioned that critics of Place Possibilities claim that women in the program simply need incentive and motivation, rather than support and resources:

Place Possibilities has been criticized for making things too safe, right. Because there is this whole emphasis on 'just do it' kind of thing. You know, that you don't need to . . . that you just need to push them, they just need incentive (Existing Data, 2003, p.2).

This discourse remained strong in 2005. For example, one participant commented that "the first step is learning to recognize your needs and recognize that you deserve what you need and that you can provide it for yourself" (Existing Data, 2005, p. 17).

Although the idea of self-defining needs has remained important, there is also strong individualizing discourse here; as individuals they can give themselves what they need. In the new interviews I conducted in 2007, I noted that although emancipatory subjectivity remained a prevalent discourse, references to self-responsibility were also very strong. For instance, Rebecca commented that “it’s the structure in life that influences [women in the program] and its their own choice to keep being influenced and keep carrying on the cycle that keeps them involved in what they’re involved in” (Rebecca, Interview, March 30, 2007). This statement suggests the belief that individuals have the capacity and responsibility to exercise individual choice, separate from their structural and circumstantial constraints. This also suggests that self-responsibility is becoming an increasingly influential discourse at Place Possibilities. However, Rebecca was explicit later on in the interview that her use of choice and self-responsibility differed from that presented by neo-liberal discourses. She named the neo-liberal discourse of self-responsibility as one that intends to “hurt and undermine and blame women for inequality and the violence they experience” (Rebecca, Interview, March 30, 2007). In contrast, her own definition of the concept is intended to empower women. In this way, Rebecca was highly cognizant of the influences of dominant discourses on her personal practice within the organization as she both rejected and reconstituted the dominant discourse to align with her values and the values of the organization.

Emancipatory subjectivity and individualism were consistently strong discourses throughout the four-year period of study and throughout the many changes in the organization underwent over these years. It seems that individualizing discourses increased in prevalence as Place Possibilities contended with the injection of new policies, procedures, and values into the organization. However, in 2007, the dominant

discourses were strongly mediated by the beliefs, values, and the alternative discourses of emancipatory subjectivity, which created an integrated approach valuing independent choice, internal truth, and a structural analysis of constraints.

### *Collectivity and Individualism*

In the data, inter-discursive contestation occurred when notions of individualism and collectivity intersected. Although there was a focus on individual women achieving independence through responsibility to an inner sense of truth, it became apparent in the data that this process can only occur under conditions of collectivity. I would argue that this was the precise point of contestation where collectivity and individualism intersected in the data. A discourse of collectivity has been constrained by government cuts which create limited space and opportunity for collectivity. However, participants also reflected that collectivity is inevitable and therefore part of society. Despite the injection of neo-liberal discourses of individualism, this discourse of collectivity has grown stronger over the past five years.

In the data, notions of collectivity resisted the individualizing discourse that people can be individually independent and self-responsible. Although Place Possibilities has remained committed to work with individual women and supporting women's individual choices, the participants simultaneously suggested that women cannot be independent without communities of support. In other words, participants emphasize that in order for women to achieve independence, they required the support of collectivities; these collectivities provided safety and support in order for women to gain strength, which in turn enabled these women the opportunity to give back to the collectivities with the strength they had gained. As one participant noted,

people who are marginalized [need] supports to gain strength and then [can] give back that strength. There's this real cycle of strength. If we gut out the social welfare system, we put people into positions where they only have welfare . . . so they're in the cycle of poverty (Existing Data, 2004, p. 13).

Focusing on an individual's wants and desires disassociates these desires from other aspects of a woman's life – her relationships of responsibility and the external contexts which may limit her opportunities for choice. The way that participants integrated the importance of individual emancipatory subjectivity with relationships of responsibility among communities of women, organizations, families, friends, neighbours, and identity groups demonstrates that elements of individualism merged with collectivity to allow women's individual independence to occur within communities.

Place Possibilities cultivates a space for collectivity as part of its service delivery for women. Misha described how balancing individualism and collectivity is part of how they help women to develop different patterns after leaving abusive relationships. She also commented on how women are seen as a group as they go through the program, teaching them how to be a part of a supportive community while retaining individualism:

They are learning to support each other but the boundaries are sometimes not strong, and some of the learning has to be to set up boundaries or clarify boundaries and do less support, while they are learning to be independent. So there are new combinations of how to be independent and how to support (Misha, Interview, January 31, 2007).

In this way, the discourses of individualism and collectivity merge in the everyday work of the organization.

Although the discourse of collectivity is clearly evident in the past and current work at Place Possibilities, government funding cuts have eroded many opportunities for collectivities to maintain support and resources. Cuts to advocacy and legal organizations, women's organizations, and other community resources have reduced opportunities for

individual women at Place Possibilities to acquire resources (Misha, Interview, January 30, 2007). Furthermore, cuts to income assistance have reduced the space, time, and opportunity for women to gather with others for support (Misha, Interview, January 30, 2007). Place Possibilities has tried to compensate for this problem by providing many material supports for women such as food and money for childcare.

In spite of the government funding cuts which have reduced opportunities to foster collectivity, research participants at Place Possibilities argued that collectivity and community are inevitable to the organization of human society. Based upon an author she was reading at the time, one focus group participant theorized about the inevitability of participating in community: “you can’t be a human without being in community. Sure enough, what’s happened is we’re becoming less human as we become less community” (Existing Data, 2004, p. 48). This participant further argued that since people conduct their lives in relation to other people, one cannot exist without communities of people – these communities are not necessarily geographic, but familial, issue-based and identity-based. They represent a variety of connections which exist among people.

In the focus groups and interview transcripts, the discourse of collectivity developed over time. The first clearly articulated reference to the idea of a collective of support and resources necessary for individuals to exist independently, but still within community, occurred in 2003 when the researcher and organizational member commented about the organization’s participation in the Wedge project. They suggested that by participating in Place Possibilities programs, women become part of a group and a community at Place Possibilities. They commented that boundaries and individual independence are taught to women through creating a supportive community at Place Possibilities. In the data, the idea of community was not raised again until the 2004 focus

group where participants spent a significant amount of time discussing the importance and the inevitability of community to women's lives, and how this community was being eroded by government cuts. Increasingly in 2005, focus group participants talked about the importance of maintaining *women only* spaces that securely allowed women to heal and recovery from abuse. These comments in the 2005 focus group paralleled the ongoing discussions within the organization at that time over the role of men as members. This demonstrates that the discursive interactions within the organization produced new ways of thinking (and talking) about women's independence. These new discourses uphold that independence is cultivated in relationships with others and cannot be separated.

#### *Economic and Personal Independence*

In the data, the third point of contestation related to the concept of independence was the inter-discursive contestation between an economic understanding of independence and emotional and personal independence. When these discourses intersected, Place Possibilities' strong discourse of personal independence was reconstituted due to changing funding criteria, which forced them to place a greater priority on economic factors and to focus solely on transitioning women into paid employment. In the data, economic independence was accorded higher priority by organizational members because women on income assistance have been increasingly oppressed by provincial welfare policies; in order to secure personal independence for women, Place Possibilities now needed to help women become independent of state support. The economic independence discourse also informed a prerequisite of economic dependence on the state for entry into the Place Possibilities program. The contestation between economic and personal independence goals therefore produced an increased



focus on economic independence at Place Possibilities, and forced the organization to negotiate personal independence goals with economic ones.

The government ministry, which funds Place Possibilities, now requires all participants accepted to Place Possibilities to currently be receiving income assistance. They see the job of Place Possibilities to provide training and skills to get women off income assistance and transition into employment. Place Possibilities, however, has taken a more holistic approach by envisioning its goals to empower women to explore their own dreams, desires, goals, and futures. The following quote exemplifies the tension between pursuing meaningful career and personal experiences, and the pursuit of menial employment:

We used to really nurture women in following whatever dream they wanted. For example, their career expectations. And we talked about, are we going to have to shift that? . . . would we shift from helping someone . . . look at a career that might not be attainable to supporting them in a job placement that might not have been their first choice but will help them get back to work quicker or become financially independent from the ministry? (Existing data, 2003, p. 28)

This debate illustrates the contestation between the Ministry's limited definition of independence, based on employment and financial independence from the state, and Place Possibilities' vision of independence that sees women self-define their interests, goals, dreams, and futures. Place Possibilities values this holistic notion of self-determining independence, but must negotiate this with the government's economic independence priorities. In order to continue to do personal growth and exploration work, the organization has had to compromise by altering the curriculum and "getting a little bit harder focused on . . . hard core employability stuff [which is] going to help women to get a job and support themselves and fulfill the Ministry's outcomes" (Existing data, 2003, p.28). In this respect, a discourse of economic independence has been integrated

more heavily and strategically into Place Possibilities' holistic conception of women's independence.

This integration of economic and personal independence goals reconfigures women's relationship of dependence to the state. Since the government does not support personal and holistic independence goals, it has become critical to help women become financially independent from the state—through employment that may not be best suited to a woman's dreams and desires—in order for her to pursue these other aspects of independence. As a result, working for the emancipation of women now involves working for their financial independence from an oppressive state welfare system. It seems that independence from the rigid institutional rules of the government, as a means to achieving women's personal empowerment goals, has become an important priority for the organization. In this way, Place Possibilities' concept of independence has incorporated both economic and personal independence goals, while remaining critical about the need for economic independence.

In addition to integrating economic and personal independence goals, new policies and procedures enforced by the new funding contracts have also constituted new understandings of dependence. The government's objective in this program is to transition women off income assistance so as to become economically independent through employment; however, at the same time, they require complete dependence as a prerequisite to their participation in the program. For instance, they require all women in the program to receive government social assistance; no other forms of income (such as private savings or employment insurance) are acceptable. This understanding of independence—limited to economics and seeing only a dichotomy of independence or dependence—does not provide room for understanding the myriad ways that women gain

informal and formal supports and resources from others in their community. By enforcing a single and narrow definition of independence based on masculinized values, it also ignores the many complex ways in which people depend on each other. By identifying the dependence/independence dichotomy solely on economics, this discourse fails to take into account the many experiences of emotional dependence resulting from abuse, and so de-values emotional independence that may be important for women recovering from abuse. These elements of the economic dependence/independence discourse are in opposition to Place Possibilities' long held values and policies to accept any women into the program, regardless of their financial situation. Place Possibilities has had to integrate a rigid discourse of independence and dependence into their program by restricting its admission to women on income assistance and measuring outcomes based on employment.

In the data, debates around economic and personal independence remained consistent over time. In 2003, participants made reference to their fear that they may have to shift their focus from encouraging dreams and desires to encouraging mediocre employment. A participant in 2006 noted the effects of limiting women's participation to those receiving income assistance. Tabitha reflected back on the 2005-2006 debate over men's involvement in the organization and commented that this debate made organization members ask the following question: "Do we model independence better when it is just women running the organization?" (Tabitha, Interview, March 14, 2007). Differing types of independence/dependence based on economic and holistic factors were continually debated. Although economic influences gained in strength around the time of the new contract in 2003 - 2004, critiques and debates concerning neo-liberal discourses remained consistent throughout the data.

*Structural Analysis and Individualism*

In the data, a discourse of structural analysis fought for space within the political context of individualism. This contestation resulted in a structural analysis of oppression, which also focuses on individual capacity for choice and making changes to support personal independence. Structural analyses have become constrained and limited through government regulation and increasing neo-liberal discourses of individualism. Changes in feminism and neo-liberalism have altered the terrain upon which structural analyses are based, requiring shifts in structural arguments. Shifts over time have thus integrated a discourse of structural analysis with collectivity.

The structural arguments posed by research participants argued that significant time, effort, and work are required of women to make decisions and be independent under the systemic constraints of patriarchy, racism, and poverty. Much of the dialogue in the focus groups made reference to the environmental and structural circumstances required in order to be able to make choices and decisions. During a focus group, participants discussed how making choices and decisions when one is in a position of marginalization requires so much work. For example, women who experience poverty often do not have the resources to actively choose what type of employment or training to undertake. Having children in a society where mothers bear the largest responsibility for their children forces women to take into account a complex array of factors when making choices about their own lives and futures. A structural analysis also elucidates the discourse of collectivity; that women do not live in isolation, but in connected structures of relationships with other people and institutions. In this respect, independence cannot be examined without considering the extensive structure of collectivities in women's lives as illustrated and articulated in the discourse of structural analysis.

In the data, this discourse of structural analysis accorded responsibility for violence and abuse to systemic structures rather than to individual women. However, an increasing focus on service delivery to individual women represents contestation between the structural analysis and the discourse which accords individual responsibility. What emerged during the focus groups and interviews seems to represent both of these discourses. In the data, participants described a problem the organization encountered when a homeless shelter moved next door to Place Possibilities:

Place Possibilities took the lead in organizing a meeting with [the landlord, a neighborhood agency] and us [Place Possibilities]. And that led to writing a letter that went to city hall, because we said this is not our problem, this is a community problem (Existing data, 2003, p. 1).

Some women at Place Possibilities had restraining orders against some men who used the shelter. This, in addition to the increase in violence and drug abuse that the shelter brought into the area undermined the physical and emotional safety of women at Place Possibilities, which prompted the organization to advocate for a community solution to the problem. The participants' assertion that "this is not our problem, this is a community problem" demonstrates an analysis that violence against women is a gendered issue – one of relations between men and women healing from violence. The participant argued that fact that men are in a threatening positions towards women is a problem for the community as a whole rather than the sole responsibility of women.

At the same time that Place Possibilities has taken on a structural approach to the autonomy of the organization, their primary focus is on service provision to individual women to help them to adapt emotional and mental behaviours acquired during the experience of abuse. The organization therefore has taken a trademark neo-liberal approach (focusing on the individual instead of the structural system), and reconfigured it

to focus on individual change and emphasize the structural aspects of dependence such as support, resources, and community. Moreover, I would argue that this interplay between contesting notions of the individual and the structural system complicates liberal feminist individualizing discourse. In this respect, feminist structural theories have been effectively used and debated in the organization. Participants spoke to the importance of acknowledging the barriers in women's lives and also emphasized that a sense of choice and independence was crucial to empowerment. In the data, the discourse of structural analysis was integrated with individualism and emancipatory subjectivity to produce a concept of independence. This concept acknowledges the structures that both constrain and empower women to make choices and changes that attend to their own sense of desire for themselves and the future.

Despite government cuts and constraints, arguments for a structural analysis of women's choice and independence have constantly been advocated by organizational members. The neo-liberal political discourse of individualism has increasingly made it difficult to talk about the institutional structures and systems that constrain women's ability to be independent. One participant commented that,

feminism has in some ways been vastly successful in that there aren't as many acceptable avenues for men to express their physical rage. And I think the white men are feeling a little hemmed in and there is a huge backlash (Existing data, 2003, p.9).

The backlash against a structural analysis of patriarchy and male violence is part of the environment in which Place Possibilities conducts its anti-violence work. Another force that has weakened the organization's ability to perform a structural analysis of violence and oppression is the fact that "forming those links to the women's community, I think has been tremendously weakened you know. Women's centres are closing all over the

place. Running on a shoe string and there's not much happening" (Existing data, 2004, p. 15). Links to a community or a movement of other organizations working on women's equality have reduced the capacity for Place Possibilities to maintain a structural analysis of inequality; it focuses on individual women because that is the nature of its work, and has always done this work in solidarity with other organizations committed to the anti-violence movement. However, this solidarity work has been reduced because of government cutbacks in funding to women's programs, legal aid programs, etc. One participant mentioned that younger women do not know about the struggles undertaken by second wave feminism, thus implying that this knowledge is crucial for challenging the de-legitimization of women's inequality as an issue. Place Possibilities must continually fight to legitimize a structural analysis of abuse, as it continually argues that abuse creates long term impacts on women; these impacts are structural barriers that must be dealt with not only by providing women with support and skills, but by working to end violence against women. This second thread is important to Place Possibilities, but has become less of a priority since this type of work has become harder to do, and the survival work of the organization gets more difficult. Negotiating a feminist analysis of power and structural barriers with the language of the government has also diffused a structural analysis. In her interview, Misha commented on this frustration:

[I]t's always been hard to bring up what might be stronger, feminist principles about it [the long term effects of abuse on employment]. You can talk a little about the power differential but you have to make sure to talk about other things as well (Misha, Interview, January 30, 2007).

Changes in feminism and neo-liberalism have altered the terrain upon which structural arguments are based. Place Possibilities has had to reconfigure these arguments based on the new terrain, resulting in an integrated analysis of women's independence

consisting of both structural oppression and capacity for individual change. Amidst all of this debate and dialogue over structural analyses of violence and inequality, influences of government funding strategies and social backlash against feminism, Misha noted that

when things shifted [around women and equality and funding] there weren't connecting points. Things weren't clear. And I don't know if it's really clear now, but I think people have had more time to try and figure out what those might be. (Misha, Interview, January 30, 2007)

Her comment reflects the idea that so many social values about women and equality are changing and have come under threat. Place Possibilities has had to reconnect with people in power, and re-educate and re-convince those in power that their work is important using new (economic) arguments (Misha, Interview, January 30, 2007). Place Possibilities has retained an analysis of the structural underpinnings of violence and abuse, but the terrain has shifted; new arguments such as those based on notions of collectivity must be devised and implemented in order to continue the work. These new arguments have impacted a structural analysis of abuse, and have required an integration of individualism and structural analysis into their concept of women's capacity for independence.

The discourse of structural analysis was strong in the earlier sets of data, but was integrated with a discourse of collectivity later in the data. In the 2003 focus groups, there was much discussion about the idea of barriers to women's employment. Specifically, participants spoke about the government's criteria for women entering the program; in order to be admitted to the program, women must experience persistent multiple barriers such as lack of education, employment history, etc. These barriers were contested by Place Possibilities' belief that abuse is a systemic barrier to employment. However, these discussions of barriers implied that individual women must change in order to overcome



them. One participant described the tenacity of individual participants in the program in 2005: “amongst all the odds of how many different directions and how much control the state has over these women’s lives they’re still here” (Existing data, 2005, p. 21). All along, participants contextualized struggles in women’s lives by lack of access to childcare, the effects of abuse, and the systemic oppression caused by poverty. These undercurrents of structural analysis become less prominent in the data in subsequent years, and I suggest a structural analysis discourse may actually begin to merge with a discourse of collectivity. This means that participants have not lost an analysis of structural oppression to the discourse of individualism; rather, I would argue that an understanding of the structures which organize society has extended to include the informal collective structures that provide resources and support, in addition to those that constrain and oppress. A structural analysis may become part of the discourse of collectivity since both prioritize the existence of structures that individuals exist within.

### *Conclusion*

The findings of this research have illustrated six discourses which intersected at four points of contestation to produce a complex understanding of women’s independence at Place Possibilities. Self-responsibility intertwined with liberal feminist ideas about individual truth and emancipatory subjectivity. Collectivity is necessary for the development of women’s independence; however space, time, and opportunities for collectivity have been eroded by government funding cuts and an increasing focus on individuals. Place Possibilities retains a strong belief in personal independence goals, but these values have been mediated by government funding priorities for economic independence. Finally, a structural analysis of women’s independence is currently under threat and mediated by an increasing focus on individualism. In the next chapter, I will

connect these discourses and points of contestation back to the political and social opportunities of neo-liberalism and feminism, and evaluate the implications of these conceptualizations of independence for constructing women's subjectivities within the feminist movement.

## Chapter 5. Discussion

### *Overview of Chapter*

The previous chapter provided an analysis of the complex inter and intra-discursive contestations that occurred in the data, and offered a picture of how concepts of gendered independence are constituted at Place Possibilities. This chapter extends this analysis by (1) summarizing the conclusions drawn from the findings, (2) relate these conclusions back to the political and social opportunities described earlier, and (3) discussing the implications of these changing conceptualizations for the development of women's subjectivities at Place Possibilities, and in feminist movements in general.

### *Conclusions in the Findings*

The four major conclusions I have drawn from the findings of this study are as follows:

1. Concepts about independence are fundamental to the struggles that occur in organizations and within feminism.

2. Neo-liberalism has had an influence on increasing the priority of individual conceptualizations of independence. This idea of individual independence is contested and integrated with a focus on emancipatory subjectivity.

3. This organization argues for a vision of independence that does not separate individuals from collectivities of mutual support, resources, and responsibilities.

Independence is valued, but is integrally tied to others; individuals are not isolated from others.

4. Analyses of the systemic barriers which constrain women's independence are important, but these analyses are under threat. It is important to members of the organization to fuse an analysis of structural constraints with women's choice and autonomy.

*Neo-Liberal Influences on Conceptualizing Independence*

Feminist literature attests to the influences of neo-liberalism on the welfare state, women's organizations, and women's lives (Brodie, 2002; McDonald, 2005; Tang & Peters, 2006). The findings of this research lend further support to the impact of neo-liberalism on the work of feminist organizations who work with women. I have demonstrated how discourses of individualism and self-responsibility affect the construction of independence in a women's organization. More specifically, I would argue that the effects of neo-liberalism on this organization are simultaneously resisted and integrated into the organization, which have significant implications for the women's organizations generally. For instance, the neo-liberal discourse of individualism emphasizes individual responsibility for oneself and conceptualizes the individual as isolated from her environment. Government funding policies at Place Possibilities, which reflect values associated with self-responsibility and a work ethic, have required Place Possibilities to have employment related outcomes, increased individual accountability for poverty, and de-emphasized the gendered aspects of marginalization.

At the same time that neo-liberal discourses are at work, a focus on emancipatory subjectivity (which also contains an individualizing focus) surfaces out of a liberal feminist approach and liberal humanist philosophies of a fixed inner self. Here, it is clear that the diverse feminist backgrounds of Place Possibilities members also influence the construction of independence. Liberal feminist approaches similarly focus on individual women, citing that men and women are essentially equal and alike, and that individuals and systems must change in order to create equality. This focus on emancipatory subjectivity—the idea that women have an inner sense of truth to guide their individual

actions and behaviours—may be a discourse rooted in liberal feminism. Neo-liberal discourses and liberal feminism therefore interact to produce an individually focused notion of independence where self-responsibility is connected to personal autonomy and emancipation.

### *Feminist Discourses and Conceptualizing Independence*

Neo-liberal discourses have had a strong effect on conceptions of independence at Place Possibilities. However, equally strong are the negotiations around differing feminist perspectives on individuals and community. These negotiations debate the importance of advocating individual empowerment and unified collective organizing in a discursive environment where an analysis of differences among women complicates possibilities for unity. The data demonstrated that at Place Possibilities, organizational members placed importance and value on women's individual independence; however, these values were mediated with a discourse of collectivity, which argues that women's capacity for independence is only possible by equally valuing the relationships of responsibility with others.

In response to the shifting terrain of neo-liberalism, the state and other political spaces (including advocacy and other types of women's organizations) are under threat: "Familiar political spaces have disappeared but this does not mean, as restructuring discourse would have it, that political space itself has disappeared" (Brodie, 1994, p. 42). In response to the cuts to women's organizations, where systemic political advocacy has been conducted since the 1970s, this organization is re-envisioning formal and informal collective spaces outside of organizations, and increasing an emphasis on the individual as political. Though these political spaces are not new to feminism, they are being used as ways to resist the regulations imposed on women's organizations. Collectivities and

individual women are being re-envisioned as political spaces, and the notion of independence is being reconstituted within this discourse of collectivity in order to respond to the changing and shifting political terrain.

As one participant suggested, perhaps political feminist values of the *personal is political* are shifting to the notion that *community is political*. This site of struggle between valuing the personal lives of individual women, while simultaneously valuing women's existence in groups with other people is currently an important struggle within this organization. The data suggests that instead of struggling between these two ideas, Place Possibilities fuses the individual and the collective together by understanding and reconceptualizing independence as not only personal or individual, but also as collective and achievable through interpersonal relationships. In this respect, Place Possibilities puts forth the idea that women's emancipation is connected to both personal power and collective belonging. I believe that this fusion is a result of contestation of negotiating identity, difference, unity, and solidarity within feminism, and reflects the necessity of engaging with dominant social and political discourses that increasingly support and perpetuate the discourse of individualism. This organization has responded to increased social pressure to conform to this discourse by developing an approach which supports the notion of women's individual independence, while developing new ways of understanding how women can simultaneously attain independence and remain connected to others. The emerging concept of provisioning provides a conceptual feminist framework which breaks down the dichotomy between individual and collective by prioritizing the realm of relationships rather than individuals (Reitsma-Street et al., 2005). Provisioning reflects theoretically what is happening substantively in this organization,

and has the possibility to be an important conceptual framework for understanding women's independence and agency in alternative ways.

### *Implications for Subjectivity*

I would like to propose that these new and nuanced conceptualizations of gendered independence produce new subjectivities for women at Place Possibilities. Subjectivities in this sense, refers to the parameters of self which are socially ascribed to women by members of the organization. It also refers to how the members of Place Possibilities perceive women's sense of self—the subjectivity of women who are participants at Place Possibilities, as well as the general female subject—in relation to the world. I argue that there are three ways in which the new conceptualizations of gendered independence identified in this research constitute new forms of subjectivity for women at Place Possibilities.

As discussed in Chapter 2, subjectivities refer to the perceived sense of self that individuals develop as subjects. Subjectivity is how we understand ourselves in relation to others in the social world, and moreover, is constituted out of discourses (Weedon, 1987/1997). I would argue that the discursive contestations which construct new concepts of gendered independence at Place Possibilities correspondingly construct new subjectivities for women at Place Possibilities. I use subjectivities in this context to refer to the ways that members of Place Possibilities explain how women, as subjects, exist in relation to the social world.

The first implication is that subjectivity itself as a concept becomes increasingly significant in the organization and in the political project of feminism. This is reflected in participants' emphasis on an emancipatory subjectivity, one in which the individual's sense of self—one's sense of inner truth and self-knowledge—is crucial to one's own

existence as a woman. As a result of both neo-liberalism and post-structural feminist influences, the data described the individual self as a central focus of women's lives and experiences. However, this self is identified as static and fixed rather than dynamic and fluid, and in this respect, is more aligned with the liberal humanist philosophy as opposed to post-structuralism (Hekman, 1999). The data demonstrates this when a participant makes reference to the importance of *finding oneself*. The focus on emancipatory subjectivity in the data also reflects a fixed subject: a belief that the inner truth which Place Possibilities students are encouraged to explore is an already existing stable entity.

The second implication for subjectivity is that the independent individual is a political entity, which is connected to the politics of emancipation. I will explain this by making reference to Harry Ferguson (2001) who suggested that because of the processes of individualizing in our modern world, the reflexive development of autonomous, individual selves has become a "life politics" equal to the "emancipatory politics" which challenge structural norms. As suggested by participants in this research, existing as an individual with independence and agency can be perceived as an act of politics, particularly for women who have experienced abuse. Developing one's own autonomous sense of self in the world among the multiple and fluid subjectivities that exist, is inherently political. It may be that an integration of life politics with the emancipation politics that feminism has long invoked, is an important way of integrating the independent individual and the structural analysis discourses apparent in the data.

The third and final implication of new conceptualizations of independence on subjectivity is a reconfiguration of women's agency. According to the discursive process occurring in this organization, women's subjectivities are both individually independent and connected to others through relationships. This new conceptualization of



independence proposes a breakdown in the definitions of independence and dependence. Independence being traditionally related to free will, autonomy, the masculine, and dependence—“representative of need and desire rather than autonomy and the rational pursuit of interests”(Kingfisher, 1996, p. 534) as well as the feminine. By simultaneously resisting and taking up the individualizing discourses within the political and cultural environment, members of Place Possibilities reconfigure their perceptions of women’s subjectivities to invoke both the masculine and feminine, dependence and independence. The fusing of the individual and the collective reconfigures the fundamental notion that independence can only be achieved by the individual rational agent of humanism. Associating women’s independence and agency with their belonging in supportive communities makes it unnecessary to ascribe sole responsibility to individual actions, and removes discursively produced assumptions about what is rational, and therefore desirable, human choice and behaviour (Davies, 1991).

The fourth implication for subjectivity that arose from the findings of this research is that two theoretical visions of the female subject fuse together within the discourses of the organization. We have seen how the discourses of individualism and emancipatory subjectivity have a strong presence in the data. These discourses represent the rational agent of humanism, view the subject as a rational human with a fixed sense of self, and focus on individual identity. At the same time, also present in the data are discourses of collectivity and structural analyses. Collectivity diffuses the focus on the individual. This discourse presents an alternative way of thinking about agency and independence as behaviours and choices that occur, not by pure rational decision making, but through connections among people in relationships of responsibility for one another (Davies, 1991). Structural analyses are used by participants in the data, and represent the

idea that women exist in different discursively produced subjectivities within our social systems. In this way, the structural analyses that are raised are acknowledgements of the fluid and changing subject positions that women experience.

When these discourses fuse together, it becomes apparent that this organization is fusing both the rational fixed subject of humanism with the fluid and discursively produced subject of post-structuralism. This fusion seems to be an uneasy collaboration of these opposing theories. This collaboration allows the organization to work within the complex discursive environment in which it exists; to resist, subvert and adopt the many opposing discursive positions that it encounters as it carries out its work with women.

*Bringing it Back: Considerations for Feminist Organizations*

This analysis of changing subjectivity invokes implications for feminist organization. As those involved in feminist organizations, we need to ask ourselves a number of questions. Answering these questions for ourselves and our organizations will allow us to reconfigure our political work in ways that both align with our multiple and changing values, and render us politically effective.

In order to remain politically relevant as an organization, do we have to adopt life politics and use the configuration of subjectivities within our membership or our service base, as a means of effective political change alongside emancipatory structural politics? What are ways that we can challenge the dominant dichotomous discourse of masculinized independence and feminine dependence through reconfiguring agency and collectivity in our organization?

As feminists, is fusing the rational humanist subject (acknowledging women's capacity for individual choice-making) with the discursively produced subject (seeing oppression as produced through fluid subject positions and challenged through collective

belonging) a politically effective move? If so, how might we change our organizational policies to incorporate both approaches into our service and advocacy work? Some feminists may view this fusion as simply succumbing to the neo-liberal influences of individualism. If this is the belief, how are we then, as an organization, being affected by neo-liberalism and changes in feminism? What will our responses and reactions be to these influences, knowing the possible effects that I have elucidated in this thesis?

### *Conclusion*

Conceptual struggles in women's organizations produce new configurations of independence and women's agency. As illustrated in my findings, these configurations produce new subjectivities for women in Place Possibilities. This research, more specifically, demonstrates how subjectivity and organization are necessarily and inevitably intertwined, and that deliberate reflection on subjectivity is crucial for the political mobilization of feminism. Feminists who work in organizations with others need to consider the new designs on subjectivity resulting from individualizing discourses, economic independence, as well as contestations over identity, difference, and collectivity in feminism. Understanding these new configurations of subjectivity will introduce opportunities for resistance by interrogating and reshaping our sense of ourselves as women in relation to the world.

## Chapter 6. Closing Thoughts

### *Overview of Thesis*

As this research progressed, it became evident that independence is an important, yet contested concept within the organization under study. The organization has integrated neo-liberal and feminist discourses to produce complex and contradictory concepts of women's independence. Individualism, emancipatory subjectivity, collectivity, personal and economic independence, and structural analyses are intertwining threads of discourses that have emerged within the organization. The discursive contestation uncovered in this research suggests that changing or dynamic conceptualizations of independence may be developing within feminist organizations and movements, which have significant implications for women's subjectivities and lives.

The intra- and inter-discursive points of contestation that arose in the analysis demonstrate that Place Possibilities is invested in the notion of women's individual personal power, but believes that this personal power can be only cultivated through collectivities. Although neo-liberal economic visions of independence have been imposed, the organization has resisted this by retaining a more holistic conception of personal independence. As structural analyses are threatened by government funding policy language and as systemic oppression becomes a de-legitimized discourse, women's organizations have had to adopt different language to articulate oppression.

Beliefs about women's independence are fundamental to feminist debates. For example, issues such as women's right to state support for raising children, violence, abuse, and women's only spaces require an understanding of women's agency, independence and responsibilities. If feminist conceptualizations of independence promote women's economic and individual independence, then support for women

raising children from social and welfare services would not be considered an important right, because this support cultivates “dependence”. Debates over violence against women demand an acknowledgement of women’s rights to individual independence and emancipatory subjectivity, while still insisting that support and resources are necessary. New visions of collectivity thus re-conceptualize the importance and opportunity for women only spaces.

As the examples above suggest, these new conceptualizations of independence may be altering the arguments about social issues that feminist movements articulate. Changing visions of women’s subjectivity based upon new configurations of independence and agency, or individuals and collectivity, affect the arguments that we make as feminists. Feminists in organizations must integrate new and changing discourses into their conceptualizations of women’s independence in order to continue to move forward feminist agendas within these debates. Since there is always the possibility of being co-opted by these dominant discourses, it is necessary for feminists to strike a careful balance between individual and collective notions of independence. The strategic negotiation of new cultural meanings fighting oppression can be achieved through critically reflecting upon cultural concepts and meaning-making at the level of women’s organizations.

#### *Relevance to Movements and Organizations*

Conceptualizations of independence constituted in women’s organizations contribute to an analysis of power and gender relations within the feminist movements. As women’s organizations construct meanings which contribute to feminist movements, they also influence the current political and social climate. Thus, it is essential to understand how women’s organizations bring meaning to gendered concepts of

independence which in turn, affects the social change work of feminism in general. As I have argued throughout this thesis, notions of women's independence form the framework of beliefs about how power operates in society and affects the social construction of women as a category. If we understand women to be individuals imbued with personal power, we correspondingly construct beliefs about women's individual capacity for choice and autonomy. If we value both women's independence and dependence through collective relationships of responsibility, our beliefs about women will incorporate an appreciation for the work that occurs through many relationships of responsibility in women's lives. The concepts of independence presented in this study incorporate a complex intersection of contesting notions of individualism, collectivity, structures, and personal power.

These conceptualizations form the basis for feminist arguments in debates over welfare, anti-violence, poverty, and many other social issues. More specifically, these conceptualizations become part of the social and political discursive environment, and are mobilized to advocate for policy changes, service provision, and legislation. The contested and contradictory concepts produced in this organization and documented in this research contribute to public debate, manipulate and disrupt powerful neo-liberal discourses, and elaborate on the social and political meanings about women in society.

### *Concerns and Challenges*

Although I believe that exploring the concepts that women's organizations constitute is important to the work of organizations and movements, I acknowledge two flaws in this study. The first is that the concept of independence is an inherently western notion, and I do not attend to the nuances of culture or race associated with this concept. Second, this research is also limited in scope since it focuses on one organization.

The very idea that independence is desirable and attainable is situated within a western context. Western societies place much value on attaining individual autonomy. I would even argue that dependence and independence is a dichotomy imposed by western epistemologies; other nations and cultures have diverse ways of thinking about and organizing social relations, and I have not taken into account the cultural influences on the conceptualization of independence at Place Possibilities (e.g. Collins, 1990). In the data, some participants questioned the value that is placed on individual and economic independence, and I present their questioning as a point of discursive contestation. I do not, however, connect this contestation to cultural nuances that may exist among participants and within the organization. This is consequently a significant drawback to the study. It may well be that this research continues or perpetuates the process of colonization by failing to problematize the cultural influences and biases on the concept of independence.

This research was designed to focus on one particular women's organization. I do not suggest that the discourses that appeared in this organization exist in all other women's organizations; I do, however, suggest that the discursive construction in this organization contributes to conceptualizations and meaning-making in the larger movement. Although I do not wish to suggest that what occurs in one organization establishes the conceptual framework for all feminist organizations, there is nevertheless a growing body of literature attesting to the impact of neo-liberalism on a growing number of women's organizations (McDonald, 2005; Tang & Peters, 2006). In this respect, my research thesis contributes to this growing body of literature and showcases the ways in which feminisms resist and adapt to the powerful discourse of neo-liberalism. Indeed, this conceptual struggle over differing notions of independence is an important

tool when evaluating the affects of neo-liberalism on women's organizations and the feminist movement in general.

*Where To Go From Here*

I would like to see further research which demonstrates the link between conceptual meaning-making and political mobilization. Although I am committed to my belief that discursive meaning-making is crucial to the tangible political work that feminists do, I would like to see more research that documents this relationship. I would also like to see research that specifically explores how a contestation over contradictory concepts of independence can be used in the political work of social change in order to advocate, lobby, and influence social policy. More specifically, I would like to ask how these integrative conceptualizations of independence play out in issues such as violence against women and welfare reform.

Most importantly, I hope that this work encourages others who are involved with women's organizations to think critically about the conceptual foundations upon which their work is based. It is absolutely essential for feminists working in women's organizations to carefully reflect on how these foundations can be shifted by both neo-liberal policies and changes within feminism. This reflection will allow women's organizations to deliberate on how they want to negotiate, manipulate, and resist these shifts. Being conscious and reflective about how women's independence is configured in feminist organizations will allow organizations to design policies and services to best serve the emancipatory goals to which they are committed.



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## Appendix 1. Email To Participants

### **Information to Participate in Research**

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study entitled: *Contesting Discourses of Gendering in a Women's Community Organization*. This study is being conducted by Crystal Gartside, a graduate student at the University of Victoria.

Crystal has been working as a research assistant for the past year with the Wedge Provisioning Research Project in its research with the Bridges for Women Society.

The purpose of this research project is to further our understanding about women's community organizations in our changing political and social world. This project explores the question: how do members of a women's community organization contest and reconstruct discourses of gendering in the everyday practices and culture of the organization? By this I mean, how does this organization understand gender, and how does this understanding affect the everyday work and culture of the organization? How does this understanding of gender influence the organization's work for social change?

Research of this type is important because it is valuable to know how women's community organizations are creating their own ideas about gender in relation to those in the larger social and political world. To continue the work of social change, it is crucial to critically reflect on the way that grassroots women's community organizations are understanding gender in their everyday practices and political work.

I will be conducting this research in the context of a larger cross-site research project. The Wedge Provisioning Research Project is a multi-site Canadian study, entitled "Women, Provisioning and Communities". It is examining questions of women's work in the new economy, using the concept of provisioning to explore the many activities and relationships for which women and organizations feel responsible. The Wedge Provisioning Project is a multi-site research project, with other researchers in British Columbia and Ontario exploring these questions in a total of six community organizations.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include one interview with the researcher, Crystal Gartside, which will last approximately one to one and a half hours and can take place at a time and location convenient for you. This interview will consist of a series of open ended questions which are designed to facilitate conversation and discussion between us. With your consent, the interview will be tape-recorded.

If you are interested in participating, please contact me by email or telephone and I can answer any questions you may have and provide you with a copy with the consent form for you to review. Once you have read the consent form and agree to the terms of the study, we can arrange a time, day and location for the interview to take place. Thank you for your interest in this research!

## Appendix 2. Consent Form

**CONSENT FORM****Contesting Discourses of Gendering in a Women's Community Organization**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled *Contesting Discourses of Gendering in a Women's Community Organization* that is being conducted by Crystal Gartside, under the supervision of Marge Reitsma-Street, Ph.D.

I am a graduate student in the department of Studies in Policy and Practice at the University of Victoria and you may contact me if you have further questions by email at [crystalg@uvic.ca](mailto:crystalg@uvic.ca) or by phone at 483-5845. As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Master's of Arts in Human and Social Development. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, PhD. You may contact my supervisor at [mreitsma@uvic.ca](mailto:mreitsma@uvic.ca) or 721-6468.

The purpose of this research project is to further our understanding about women's community organizations in our changing political and social world. This project explores the question: how do members of a women's community organization contest and reconstruct discourses of gendering in the everyday practices and culture of the organization? By this I mean, how is this organization understanding gender, and how does this understanding affect the everyday work and culture of the organization? How does this understanding of gender influence the organization's work for social change?

Research of this type is important because it is valuable to know how women's community organizations are creating their own ideas about gender in relation to those in the larger social and political world. To continue the work of social change, it is crucial to critically reflect on the way that grassroots women's community organizations are understanding gender in their everyday practices and political work.

The Wedge Research Advisory Circle, an ad hoc committee of Place Possibilities, indicated support for this project in a meeting on September 14, 2006. They have also given me permission to use interview and focus group data that has already been collected by the Wedge Project in the past three years, for the purposes of this thesis project. I have worked with this Research Circle and the Wedge Provisioning Research Project as a research assistant for one and a half years. It is important to note that this research is being conducted outside of my paid work as a research assistant with the Wedge Project.

You are being asked to participate in this study because Place Possibilities has been selected as the most appropriate organization in which to conduct this research. As a staff/board member/volunteer, you have valuable information and insight about the everyday practices of the organization, and I am interested to learn your thoughts about how gender is constructed in the culture and practices of the organization.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include one audio taped interview with the researcher, Crystal Gartside, which will last approximately one to one and a half hours and can take place at a time and location convenient for you. This interview will consist of a series of open ended questions which are designed to facilitate conversation and discussion between us. I will also contact you at two other times after the completion of the research. The first contact will give you the opportunity, if you choose, to review your transcripts

to ensure that they are accurate and reflect the information you wish to convey in your interview. If there is information you wish to clarify, or remove because of inaccuracy, we will make these changes at that time. I will contact you a second time to offer you the opportunity to review parts of the completed thesis paper including any particular quotes from your interview; this will give you the opportunity to review your information in the context that it will appear in the thesis. At both of these times, you are completely free to choose whether or not you would like to review the material.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include an opportunity to reflect on and discuss thoughts and ideas about your organization and its relationship with larger society. This may be interesting and useful for you, and will provide knowledge for the organization about its own approach to constructing gender, and how this approach informs its work. This research contributes important knowledge about the current situation of women's community organizations, and to the state of feminist activism; in this way the research makes an important contribution to society, as it explores the roles of community organizations and feminism in social change.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time required to participate in the interview. As participation in the study is completely voluntary, if you choose to participate, it is my hope that you find our time together useful and productive.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research. As I am asking you questions pertaining to your ideas and perceptions of the organization in which you work, it may be possible for information that you do not wish to be public to be unintentionally associated with your identity. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken. Extensive measures will be taken to ensure that no identifying information is retained in the interview data. This means that your name will be replaced with a pseudonym, and any information associated with your position within the organization, and any other possible identifying information that is not essential to the data will be removed. In order to minimize the risk that Place Possibilities be identified in the data, the organization will be referred to as only a "women's community organization in a Western Canadian city". However, it is possible that inherent in the data will be descriptions of the activities of the organization, which are important to retain for the purposes of the research, but which may make the organization's identity evident to others familiar with Bridges. If there are any particular and long quotes in your transcript that I wish to use in the final thesis, I will contact you and seek explicit permission to include them.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study it will be your decision whether any or all of the data that you provided in the interview may be used in the research. With your permission, this interview will be audio tape-recorded. If, during the course of the interview, you choose to withdraw, you may turn off the tape recorder. At this time, I will ask you if any or all parts of the interview may be retained as part of the research. If you do not want your interview included in the research, I will erase and discard the tape.

In terms of protecting your anonymity, only myself and my supervisor will be aware of your identity; this is necessary because you will be meeting with the researcher for the interview, and the supervisor is responsible for providing guidance throughout the research process, including recruitment and data collection.



Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by ensuring that all data reference to your identity is removed. A pseudonym will replace your name in the transcripts, and any reference to the organization will use a "women's community organization in a Western Canadian city". Email correspondence during the recruitment process will be kept confidential; emails will be deleted as soon as the correspondence is completed. If it is necessary to keep an email, I will copy the email into a word processor file that is password protected, and delete the email itself. All transcripts will be cleaned of identifying information and kept in a separate location from the consent forms, which will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

There are some limits to confidentiality due to the size of the organization and the community in which the organization operates. The organization may be identifiable due to the limited number of similar organizations in the geographical area. All precautions will be taken to refer to the geographic community in which the organization resides as simply a "mid sized Western Canadian city". Whenever possible, description of the organization will be limited to a "women's community organization" without any identifying information. Any possible organizational identifying information not crucial to the research will be removed from the transcripts prior to analysis. Additionally, confidentiality may be limited by the small population of staff/board/volunteers within the organization, from which I draw the sample of five to seven participants. Though names and identifying information will be removed from the transcripts, it may be possible for others to identify participants through the experiences they tell or the position from which they speak. All efforts will be made to ensure the confidentiality of your information and your identity, but there is a small risk that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: this study will be written up in the form of a master's level thesis paper and will be distributed to a supervisory committee, staff and other students. A copy will be kept in the University of Victoria library. Results may also be used for academic and conference publications. A copy of the final paper will be provided to all participants. Additionally, I will present the preliminary findings of this project to the Wedge Research Circle in the spring of 2007, which consists of members of Place Possibilities.

As I am benefiting from data already collected by the Wedge Project, I wish to contribute the data from these interviews to the data bank of the Wedge Provisioning Project. Electronic copies of the interview transcripts – with all identifying information removed – will be kept by Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, Principal Investigator of the Wedge Research Project. As part of the Wedge Research Project, your data may be used for the objectives of the Wedge project, which are: examining questions of women's work in the new economy, using the concept of provisioning to explore the many activities and relationships for which women and organizations feel responsible. The Wedge Provisioning Project is a multi-site research project, with other researchers in British Columbia and Ontario exploring these questions in a total of six community organizations. This project has already received ethics approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (Protocol Number 06-105 21-April-06-End 20-April-09)). The Wedge Project has also undergone ethics approval at the University of Toronto, York University and Laurentian University, where the other five sites are located. Access to the data in the Wedge Project is limited to authorized investigators who are part of the Wedge Provisioning Research Project.

All transcripts in this research will be cleaned of identifying information and kept in a separate location from the consent forms, which will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Audio tapes from the interviews will be kept separate from consent forms as well, in another locked cabinet in the researcher's home.

Electronic copies of transcriptions (which will be cleaned of identifying information) will be kept in a separate file on the researcher's home computer. They will be kept in a password protected folder. Audio tapes and consent forms will be destroyed within six months of the completion of the thesis project. The principal researcher will keep paper and electronic copies of the transcripts for up to five years after the date of the interviews. Electronic copies of the transcripts will be kept in a data base by the Wedge Research Project for up to seven years after the project ends in 2008.

Audio tapes will be erased so they are no longer readable, and then thrown in the garbage. Consent forms and interview transcripts will be professionally shredded.

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include:

Crystal Gartside, Principal Researcher	email: <a href="mailto:crystalg@uvic.ca">crystalg@uvic.ca</a>	Phone: 483-5845
Dr. Marge Reitsma-Street, Supervisor	email: <a href="mailto:mreitsma@uvic.ca">mreitsma@uvic.ca</a>	Phone: 721-6468

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, 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 (250-472-4545) or by email at [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca).

- |  |     |    |
|--|-----|----|
| 1. I Agree to be interviewed by Crystal Gartside   | Yes | No |
| 2. I Agree to be taped during this interview   | Yes | No |
| 3. I Agree that my transcript (with all identifying information removed) can be used by the Wedge Provisioning Research Project for cross site analysis, under supervision of Dr. Marge Reitmsa-Street | Yes | No |

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.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>
_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Witness</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

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

## Appendix 3. Interview Schedule

**Interview Schedule****“Contesting Discourses of Gendering in a Women’s Community Organization”****Introduction**

- Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I appreciate the extensive experience and knowledge about \*\*\*\*\* that you bring and I’m looking forward to our time together.
- Review Consent form, mention key points such as permission to tape record, can stop at any time by letting me know or turning the tape recorder off. Sign consent forms. Give one to participant to keep.
- Set the context for the questions:
  - Review the research question: how does this organization understand gender and how does this understanding affect the everyday work and culture of the organization? How does this understanding of gender influence the organization’s work for social change?
  - We will be talking about the concept of gender during the course of the interview. This is how I am understanding gender: as a process of organizing society according to how we understand masculinity, femininity, and the range outside of these categories. I am asking you to think about the way the organization thinks about, constructs knowledge about, and applies meaning, value and power to these categories of gender. *We may need to talk about this, clarify, ask participant to tell me her definition of gender.*
  - Keep in mind that the overall objective of the research is to understand gender as it relates to the organization’s social change agenda. So through our discussion, I would ask you to think about the organization’s work for social change, and how gender fits into this work.
  - I will also particularly focus on culture, practices and the everyday work of the organization, as opposed to formal policies, mission, etc.

## Interview Questions

1. Please describe your role in the organization, how are you involved, what do you do?
2. Based on your involvement with the organization, tell me how this organization thinks about and talks about gender?  
*Prompt: Can you think of a time in which the organization's ideas about gender came to the fore front, for example, in making a decision or employing a strategy?*
3. Where do you think the organization's ideas or perceptions about gender come from?  
*Prompt: social ideas, government ideas, individuals, participants?*
4. How does the current social environment impact the organization's ideas about gender?
5. How does the organization develop its perspectives of gender?
6. Has there been a moment where ideas and values about gender in the organization have been different from other ideas and values? (i.e. government, social ideas, members beliefs, other organizations?) Please describe.  
*Prompts: make sure to get at this, use other prompts to ensure that question has been answered thoroughly, particularly if participant says no.*
7. Do individual member's ideas about gender affect the organization's understanding of gender? How?
8. Do you think that differing ideas and values about gender impact (or change?) the organizations' understanding of gender? If so, how? If not, why not?  
*Prompts: The struggle between social ideas and values, or your own personal ideas and values.*
9. Do you see the organization's ideas about gender affecting the social change work of the organization? If so, in what way?
10. Are there emerging ideas or new developments about gender within the organization?

## Conclusion

Thank you very much for sharing your time, thoughts and knowledge. Do you have any questions for me? I will be contact you in \_\_\_\_\_ weeks, to ask if you would like to review the transcript. You are free to accept or decline this offer to review the transcript. Here is a small token of my appreciation.