

The Fluidity of Power: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges of Visible
Minority Women Working in Women's Shelters

By

Marilyn Rochelle Jones Hon. B.A., B.S.W.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Social Work

McMaster University

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

McMASTER UNIVERSITY (2012)
HAMILTON, ONTARIO

TITLE: The Fluidity of Power: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges of Visible
Minority Women Working in Women's Shelters

AUTHOR: Marilyn Rochelle Jones, Hon. B.A., B.S.W.

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Y.R. Zhou

NUMBER OF PAGES: v, 73

Abstract

Interrogating the concept of power is ethical social work practice. This research aims to investigate the manner in which visible minority women social service providers perceive the concept of power as non-managerial employees in the women's shelter system. Therefore, the necessity to delineate the ongoing challenges and contradictions that shape the work experiences of visible minority women social service providers contributes and furthers our understanding of social justice, critical social work practice, and strategies to enhance workplace equity. In addressing the phenomenon of power from the viewpoint of those affected, this ultimately helps to broaden the understanding how as social workers it remains pivotal to raise awareness about the ongoing power imbalances in social services settings. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with visible minority women employed in the women's shelter system in southern, Ontario were conducted and complement the author's own personal reflections as a visible minority woman previously employed in the Violence Against Women's shelter system. This research suggests that due to ongoing power differentials, neoliberal restructuring and discriminatory incidents, continued attention is required in order to address social inequality and enhance workplace equity.

Key words: Visible minority women; power; social service providers; women's shelter system; social work practice

Acknowledgements

First I would like to express my sincerest gratitude for the help and support given to me by the people at the School of Social Work, McMaster University.

To Dr. Y.R. Zhou, your sense of humour, patience and guidance have been fundamental toward the completion of this project; I honestly would not have been able to finish this thesis without all your help and encouragement. Thank you.

To Dr. C. Sinding – your flexibility and last minute help was most appreciated.

To my family and friends for their understanding, support, and encouragement – your belief in me has carried me through many difficult times.

To the research participants, thank you for your time, reflections and courage to participate in this project.

Mom, thanks for being there when I needed you and supporting me throughout this arduous, and very long academic journey.

Marilyn, thanks for always listening and believing in me. You've always been my personal cheerleader!

André, avec votre amour, avec votre soutien, avec le fait de vous avoir dans mon coin, j'avais la conviction et confiance en moi que je pourrais accomplir ce but. Merci de tout mon cœur.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Power shapes the lives of visible minority women in many dynamic ways. Because our social locations continue to influence and shape professional relationships (see Baines, 2002; see Harrison, 2009; Schmid, 2010; see Spencer, 2008; see Watkins-Hayes, 2010), interrogating the concept of power addresses the fluidity and complexities of this concept (Dominelli, 2004¹; see Foucault, 2000; see Lukes, 2005; Pinderhughes, 2004; see Smith, 2008; Spencer, 2008). Society continues to be divided along such divisions as race and gender, for example, wherein discrimination and inequality ensue (Burke & Harrison, 2009). Thus, the necessity to delineate the ongoing challenges and contradictions that shape the work experiences of visible minority women social service providers contributes and furthers our understanding of social justice, critical social work practice, and strategies to enhance workplace equity. Furthermore, as I identify as a visible minority woman previously employed in a Violence Against Women (VAW) shelter, this research is linked to my social work practice wherein I provide my professional and personal reflections about this experience in relation to the topic of this research. Reflexivity in critical social work recognizes the many dimensions of one's social location as a worker that create unique power dynamics (Schmid, 2010). In particular, Rossiter (2007) makes clear that:

As professionals, continuous questioning about how power works through our subjectivities is critical reflexive practice as *ethics*, and I assert that this ethics is the first concern of practice – not theory, not technique, not knowledge (p. 32, emphasis added).

¹In reference to:

Clegg, S.R. (1989). *Frameworks of Power*. London: SAGE.

Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity.

Investigating power is not only ethical practice in critical social work, but also helps to explicate the manner in which my practice, as well as the practice of others, has been implicated in reproducing as well as challenging unequal power structures in the workplace. Therefore, the purpose of my research is to understand how women from visible minority groups perceive, negotiate, and comprehend the complexities of power in social services organizations.

Specifically, the following **research questions** will be explored:

- 1) *How do visible minority women employed in human service organizations understand power?*
- 2) *How do women service providers from visible minority groups navigate and resist the structural marginalization and oppression in their work as well as their work settings?*
- 3) *How do women services providers from visible minority groups understand their work and the institutions that employ them in the context of changing power dynamics?*

Schmid (2010) reminds us that:

The obstacles that are needed to overcome dominant discourses and pre-determined sets of interactions are enormous, and it might be concluded that to believe one can break through these barriers is unrealistically optimistic and idealistic – an attempt to find innocence. However, the dynamic that occurs between persons along a range of dimensions of privilege is more multifaceted than a depiction of relationship that becomes limited by external representations of power (p. 179).

For that reason, it remains important to investigate processes which understand relational power differentials. Also, in addressing this phenomenon from the viewpoint of those affected, this ultimately helps broaden the understanding how as social workers it remains pivotal to raise awareness about ongoing power imbalances in social services settings.

In order to clarify concepts utilized, and the rationale for limiting this research to visible minority women employed in the women's shelter system, it is pivotal to explain key features. Firstly, while biological connotations to demarcate racial categories have lost favour in the social

sciences (Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner & Schmitz, 2008), the significance of racial classification remains a fundamental part of the ideological framework of the Canadian state. For instance, Statistics Canada (2009) categorizes persons belonging to a visible minority to include individuals that are “[...] non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour who do not report being Aboriginal”. While I also adopt this construction for the purposes of this research, my affinity and understanding of the concept ‘visible minority woman’ is not merely because of essentialist notions confined to gender and race. Rather my affinity involves an identified connection through “[...] the divergent histories and social locations, (whereby we) are woven together by the political threads of opposition to forms of domination that are not only pervasive but also systemic” (Mohanty, 1991, p.4). Furthermore, Mohanty (1991) stresses that the commonality espoused suggests the creation of an imagined community in which the presence of hierarchies does not discount the ‘horizontal comradeship’² (p.4) and sense of community women have across divisive boundaries. As a result, there are no ‘firm’ boundaries which make this ‘community’ a ‘community’ as the construct consisting of visible minority women primarily encompasses a socio-historical and political reality that intertwines the lives and legacies of many differently located women. From a social justice standpoint, Razack (1998) instructs one to remember that as opposed to essentialising difference, to consider it as a process requiring deconstruction. Consequently, Canada continues to rely on racially geared reporting methods to determine the fabric of the nation. Additionally, gender continues to be a significant marker of one’s social location. This is particularly apparent in the labour force whereby disparities persist. Indeed although visible minority women have gained access to some of the higher paying jobs in social services (Baines, 2008), income distribution levels and attainment to secure types of

² In reference to: Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso Books.

employment continue to be uneven for this specific group overall (Canadian Labour Congress, n.d.; Cranford, Vosko & Zukewich, 2003; see Phythian, Walters & Anisef, 2011)³. Although in recent decades socio-political debates have centred on the promotion of diversity and multiculturalism (Bannerji, 2000; see Sundar, 2009; see Sisneros et al., 2008), race and gender, as underlying constructs, matter very much in Canadian society. In turn, this demonstrates the ongoing impact these structural contexts have in shaping the conceptualization of society and social relations as a result.

Moreover, women's shelters have had a precarious relationship with the Canadian state since the first shelter⁴ opened in 1973 (see Sev'er, 2002). Lack of financial support and continued efforts towards justifying the need for services (Sev'er, 2002) contribute to this impasse. In so far that the relationship between the women's shelter system and the Canadian state remains wrought with various difficulties, the women's movement, which initially spearheaded the shelter movement, also experiences many ideological tensions (Janovicek, 2007). For example, Janovicek, (2007) explains that:

Incorporating the diverse experiences of women has been one of the most difficult issues in the women's movement. This has been especially challenging in the battered women's shelter movement because it has so much invested in the violence-against women framework that focuses on individual change and posits patriarchy as the primary reason for violence against women. Using this framework, the movement has promoted solutions that centre the experience of white, heterosexual women. The emphasis on the criminalization of domestic violence has been far less

³ This information was taken in part from an essay I submitted to SW 721 in the School of Social Work, McMaster University on April 3, 2012 entitled "Women of Colour: A Community of Interest" during my Master of Social Work requirements.

⁴ I do not in this research make a distinction between the different types of women's shelter. For example, while there are differences in whether a shelter is for homeless women, or a Violence Against Women's shelter for women leaving abusive situations (with or without children), from my experiences, irrespective of the type of shelter, these agencies supported all women with their various concerns.

effective for Aboriginal women, immigrant women, and women of colour, who rely on strong connections to their communities to counter racism and exclusion from Canadian society (p.14).

While the aforementioned example focuses specifically on the VAW shelter movement in relation to the clients served, it nonetheless offers a perspective about the initial conflicts that framed these agencies. It also points to the ongoing challenges that the women's movement has encountered in ensuring the inclusion of all women. Therefore, women's shelters and visible minority employees are uniquely placed within longstanding debates that confront the ideological and organizational structure of human services agencies, race, women's issues, and ultimately power.

Accordingly, this research is organized to begin with an introduction to the theoretical frameworks that inform, as well as guide this research project. These include feminist poststructuralism, critical race theory and critical theory. The aforementioned theories were selected given that from an epistemological standpoint they offer insights into the ways in which I have come to conceptualize my research. Subsequently, I present a socio-historical synopsis of the legacy of visible minority women and their relation to the Canadian state in order to provide a contextual background that frames the historical processes which contribute to present day circumstances. An analysis into the concept of power ensues thereby acquainting the reader with a brief introduction into the various understandings that frame this phenomenon. Thereafter, I review research that focuses on race, gender and human services organizations which allows for greater depth surrounding current debates. The methodological basis for this research is informed by ethnomethodology, and the empirical data are collected through semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews to complement the overall discussion. In turn, I present findings from the interviews with research participants as well as my own professional

and personal reflections. Lastly, a discussion and analysis of the research findings is presented whereby a conclusion with recommendations for social work practice and strategies to promote workplace equity follows. Albeit this research is limited to a few key informants in southern Ontario, it nonetheless helps to foster a discussion that is significant to the practice of critical social work, and social justice in general. Power affects the structural and social processes that shape the work of visible minority women employed in women's shelters as social service providers in human services agencies. Therefore, the more in which we understand power as a phenomenon in the lives of visible minority women social service providers, the more equipped we become at understanding the complexities that shape our professional realities and the ethical importance required in bringing ongoing attention to this issue.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical Frameworks

An eclectic approach that utilizes components of various theoretical frameworks informs this research project. These approaches are feminist poststructuralism, critical theory, and critical race theory. My rationale for incorporating more than one theoretical lens in which to analyse this research is due to the multidimensional ways in which power is conceptualized. This in turn allows for an interpretation that highlights the complexities of this phenomenon in the lives of visible minority women social service providers and the politicized responses necessary to mitigate structural inequalities in their workplaces. Furthermore, each aforementioned theory addresses the concept of power in different ways, in which an emphasis on the relational and contextual aspects of this dynamic are analyzed. As this research is also specific to visible minority women who are social service providers feminist poststructuralism, critical theory and critical race theory delve into the complexities that arise from the different social spaces in which we occupy in society thereby providing an analysis that interrogates the concepts of gender and race, and the and socio-historical as well as structural dimensions that help to produce inequality. Lastly, reflection, and more importantly critical self-reflection is a fundamental part of this entire project.

Feminist Poststructuralism

To begin, a key principle of poststructuralism is the assumption that we derive meaning through language (Weedon, 1997). This is significant as it renders language as a site of political struggle (Weedon, 1997). Furthermore, language is connected to “historically specific discourses” (Weedon, 1997, p. 23) thereby helping to illuminate many of the constructs that shape our lives. Poststructuralism argues for the absence of a fixed ‘reality’ wherein it is only through and in language that “[...] the sign(s) of reality are produced, contested, and struggled

over” (Rosenberg, 2005, p.42). As such, feminist poststructuralism inquires into how language, and in particular discourse, shapes our lives (Rosenberg, 2005). Moreover, feminist poststructuralism adopts the notion that at the same time that power restricts, it also opens up possibilities through relationships (Rosenberg, 2005). For that reason, Weedon (1997) explains the following principles about this theory:

Feminist poststructuralism, then, is a mode of knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change. Through the concept of discourse, which is seen as (a) structuring principle of society, in social institutions, modes of thought and individual subjectivity, feminist poststructuralism is able, in detailed, historically specific analysis, to explain the workings of power on behalf of specific interests and analyse opportunities for resistance to it (p.40).

Therefore, feminist poststructuralism, as it adopts many tenets of poststructuralism, allows for a more in-depth analysis into the machinations of power. As a theory, it also delves into the historical components that help to explain in greater detail the reasons behind power differentials and the ways in which to determine and analyze resistance strategies. In such a theoretical framework power exists in specific social relations that are both consciously and unintentionally expressed (Rosenberg, 2005). Therefore, gender relations, employee relations, and race relations are all various forms of social relations that constitute power relations (see Rosenberg, 2005). While we are unable to actually see power relations, we nevertheless enter into them, produce them, and reproduce them (Rosenberg, 2005). Thus, resistance depends on the type of social relations entered as these help to negotiate power (Rosenberg, 2005).

Moreover, discourses are the main avenues through which notions about power are critically analyzed. Through feminist poststructuralism, discourses, language and subjectivity are concepts that help to elucidate how power operates in our lives. For instance, subjectivity is “[...] constructed through language and discourse” (Gavey, 1989, p.465). Consequently, subjects

are inconsistent and contradictory whereby the strength of dominant discourses and their ability to perpetuate longstanding power relations have the tendency to comprise people's subjectivities (Gavey, 1989). As this research looks to explore power in the lives of visible minority women social service providers, the relations of power that visible minority women enter require a historical analysis, as well as an appreciation of the fluidity of power, resistance, and a theory of thought that helps to frame the relationships that encompass these experiences.

Critical Theory and Critical Race Theory

Authors assert that there is no single unifying theory of what fully constitutes critical theory (see Held, 1980; see Mullaly, 2010; see Pease, Allan & Briskman, 2003). Therefore, as Held (1980) asserts critical theory is interpreted differently by all its adherents. Nonetheless, the main principles of critical theory encompass politicized actions toward emancipation from oppressive structural institutions (see Geuss, 1981; see Mullaly, 2010; see Pease, Allan & Briskman, 2003). As such, critical theory reflects on the manner in which dominant ideologies impact people's lives (Pease, Allan & Briskman, 2003). Furthermore, critical theory emphasizes how societal institutions and our modes of thought influence our lives (Pease, Allan & Briskman, 2003). Mullaly (2010) makes clear that:

Critical social theory is a macro theory that examines social structures, institutions, policies, practices, and processes with respect to how they treat all groups in society; it contains an explanation for social problems and a political practice to deal with them (p.16).

Critical theory then adopts a framework in which political practices are investigated in order to help mitigate structural inequalities. An examination into policies and practices thus helps to explicate the manner in which domination and control are perpetuated in people's everyday lives. Similarly, as a macro theory, it allows for a structural analysis to be extrapolated from the

everyday nuances that shape the lives of visible minority women employed in the women's shelter system. A questioning of existing social institutions with an aim of making a more just society (Pease, Allan & Briskman, 2003) thus ensues from a critical theoretical framework. Ultimately, critical theory is reflective whereby the production of knowledge is committed to understanding the world as it is and changing it in order to promote more egalitarian standards (Geuss, 1981; Mullaly, 2010).

Critical race theory, originally developed as a legal theory (Lynn, 2005; see Mutua, 2010), offers a framework into how this research project is also informed. While there are various tenets that contribute to this theory, the ones that I adopt to help frame this research include a rejection of ahistoricism, neutrality, meritocracy, and objectivity; an insistence for the incorporation of experiential knowledge and critical consciousness; and a commitment towards anti-subordination (Lynn, 2005; Mutua, 2010). Furthermore, critical race theory attempts to explicate and transform the relationship between race, racism and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). A key assertion of critical race theorists is that the concept of race is imbedded in society and everyday interactions (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; see Lynn, 2005; see Mutua, 2010). Thus, our responses to one another have racialized undertones that are marred in specific treatment towards particular groups. Similarly, as an interdisciplinary way of theorizing about social relations, a key concept that came out of critical race theorizing is that of intersectionality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; see Lynn, 2005). Thus, as Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain, intersectionality affirms that “no person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity” (p.9) thereby acknowledging the many dimensions that comprise one's personhood. Also, a stance of anti-essentialism is a significant principle of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Albeit there remains an unsolvable tension in adopting a framework for this research project wherein

visible minority women as a distinct group is presented, the aim is not to essentialize their experiences and identities, but rather link these strategically (see Razack, 1998) to larger structural forces at play. Feminist poststructuralism, critical theory and critical race theory all permit for a discussion of this tension, while simultaneously interrogating the concept of power in their lives as social service providers in the women's shelter system.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

The literature review is organized to begin with a socio-historical synopsis of the relationship visible minority women have had with the Canadian State. I provide a socio-historical account because it offers a contextualized framework that emphasizes the enduring ideological structures that have contributed to shaping social inequality. Afterwards, I introduce the concept of power, and the power inherent in social service relationships in order to demonstrate the manner in which this concept has been theorized. A discussion about race, gender and human services agencies follows thereby providing for a more current understanding of the circumstances affecting visible minority women social service providers in the women's shelter system.

Visible Minority Women and the Canadian State⁵

Visible minority women have a long and complex history with the ideological construct of the Canadian state. In particular, from its beginnings as a nation, racial and gender stratification have been cornerstones of Canadian society (Abu-Laban, 1998; Bannerji, 2000; Carty 1994; Dua 2004). Canada was constructed through immigration in which a settler-colony dominated by colonialist pursuits was originally established (Abu-Laban, 1998; Bannerji, 2000). Persons of African descent began to settle during the 17th century and persons of Asian descent during the 19th century (Dumbrill & Maiter, 1996), yet the dominant racial and/or ethnic political discourse was initially structured along the lines of promoting entry into the country from

⁵ The information presented in this section is taken in part from two essays I submitted to the School of Social Work, McMaster University during my Bachelor of Social Work, and Master of Social Work coursework requirements. The first essay was submitted to SW 4003 on February 10, 2009, entitled "Social Work with Communities: *My Community*" and examined community organizing efforts of Black women in Canada. The second essay was submitted to SW 721 on April 3, 2012, entitled "Women of Colour: A Community of Interest" and analysed the boundaries and formation of women of colour as a distinct community.

persons of European descent (Abu-Laban, 1998). In particular, the policies, norms and laws of Canada were dominated and in the image of white Anglo-French and Western ideology (Dumbrill & Maiter, 1996). These in turn signified precepts that emphasized the individual and self-actualization (Dumbrill & Maiter, 1996), as well as represented notions about the superiority of scientific, cultural, and moral ways of life in opposition to persons from the conceptualized Third World and the East (Razack, 1998). In addition, ‘whiteness’ as a construct involves three dimensions, namely a location of structural advantage, a particular standpoint of viewing others and oneself, and cultural practices that are often not apparent (Yee & Dumbrill, 2003)⁶. Mullaly (2010) explicates the manner in which dominant discourses are a reflection of dominant-subordinate relationships characterised through such divisions as class, race and gender. As such, the construct that envisioned Canada as a white, westernized nation entails the development of an ideology, as well as a discursive project, that was initially antagonistic towards persons from backgrounds that were in contrast to this formation. In order to maintain and protect the white settler makeup and ideology of the nation at the turn of the 20th century, the most effective way to achieve this was to restrict the entry of women from non-European backgrounds (Dua, 2004). For instance, while unofficial, a ban upon the entry of Asian women was seen as a way to prevent Asian men from permanently settling in the country (Dua, 2004). However, and quite ironically, the opposite was also encouraged whereby women from non-European backgrounds were seen to mitigate the integration of visible minority men into white Canadian society (Dua, 2004). Mullaly (2010) asserts that discourses are “[...] contested sites of power and conflict” (p.118) in which they enable us to make sense of the covertness of present day ideology. Hence, through processes which attempted to define nationalistic as well as

⁶ In reference to Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. London: Routledge.

citizenship ideals, discursive constructs contributed to both embrace and disparage visible minority women from the nation state project. This is not to say, however, that visible minority women are innocent bystanders to this process wherein a simplistic dichotomy between dominant ideologies mastering over subordinate groups is the only conception that occurs. While I do not support the argument that groups are complicit in their own oppression⁷, I do acknowledge that societal interactions help to forge group consciousness. For instance, Dua (2004) explains that:

Through the social construction of racial categories Canadians began to identify female migrants from Asia as different from themselves. The politics of white settler nationalism was accompanied by a discursive construction of the racial category of the 'Asiatic', in which migrants from China, Japan, and India came to be defined as sharing membership in a common race. In order to render first Chinese, and later Japanese and Indian residents as alien, Canadians argued that Asians were racially different from those seen as 'white' (p. 74).

The categorisation and creation of visible minority women as a distinct group of women has historically extended roots found intricately tied to the formation of the Canadian state as well as the interactions that accompanied it. Nevertheless, identity formation also incorporates agency (Mullaly, 2010) insofar that visible minority women contributed to the adoption of the notion of 'visible minority woman' as a socio-political construction which in recent decades perceived us as a definite group and subsequently has become a highly popularized term of reference (see Bannerji, 2000).

⁷ For an explanation about the concept of internalized oppression see Mullaly, B. (2010). *Challenging Oppression and Confronting Privilege, 2nd Ed.* Toronto: Oxford University Press. Also see Kuwee Kumsa, M. (2007). A Resettlement Story of Unsettling: Transformative Practices of Taking It Personally. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Building Transformative, Politicized Social Work* (pp.111-127). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing. In Kuwee Kumsa on p.122 an explanation of internalized and lateral oppression is provided.

Successive government policies have helped determine the manner in which women from non-European backgrounds have either gained entry into the country or have been construed as part of the Canadian populace (Abu-Laban, 1998; Bannerji, 2000; Carty, 1994; Dua, 2004; Hodge, 2006). For instance, guidelines designed to meet the labour needs of the nation, and family reunification schemes, have historically been some of the main avenues by which visible minority women have migrated (Abu-Laban, 1998; Carty, 1994; Hodge, 2006; Thobani, 1999). Programs vested in securing labour that fulfilled a service sector role (i.e. domestic worker, nurses, teachers) were dominant from the turn of 20th century (Hodge, 2006; see Brand, 1994; Carty, 1994). Furthermore, visible minority women often entered to fulfill the role of wife and/or mother under family unification schemes that promoted the sponsorship of relatives thereby reinforcing notions of dependency (see Abu-Laban, 1998; Dua, 2004; see Thobani, 1999). While immigration based upon labour and family unification may have been at the forefront of migration processes, there are also different motivations (i.e. refugee claims, educational pursuits) which have also influenced migratory trends. Similarly, this is not to discount that there are also many visible minority women, like myself, who were born in the country. Even though I adopt the standpoint in referring to myself as a visible minority woman, I also problematize this reference as I am aware that it places me outside of the construct of ‘Canadianess’. Hence, although I affirm and embrace an identity that comprises a historical legacy that is linked to my African, my Caribbean and my Canadian heritage, the varied responses I have had when asserting my Canadian identity highlights the manner in which I fail to be automatically considered as part of the ideological construct of the nation. My experiences are echoed by other visible minorities in general who recount similar situations that confront the nuances of being a visible minority and also Canadian (see James, 2001; see Shadd, 2001). Epp,

Iacovetta and Swyripa (2004) explain in reference to the role immigrant and visible minority women played in the construction of the Canadian state that: “Women barred from genuine power and resources by virtue of racial or ethnic identity are indeed ‘strangers’ in a country where privilege and opportunity fall according to racist and sexist criteria” (p.7). Thus, the framework of the ‘outsider-within’⁸ has been imposed on visible minority women by virtue of the strength of such concepts as race, gender, and sex. The aforementioned socio-historical and contextual processes have helped to shape the positioning of visible minority women in Canada. This strongly demonstrates that in the case of visible minority women, “[...] being a minority does not mean belonging to a group having only a few members, *it means belonging to a group that does not have control of what is mainstream, that does not have the power to broadly define and express culture, education and lifestyle issues*” (Sadlier, 1994, p.34, emphasis added). Even though the socio-political discourse changes, and continues to change over time, the manner in which power operates remains a social justice, relational, and highly politicized issue in the lives of visible minority women.

What is Power?

The concept of power has been theorized for a very long time (Smith, 2008). Power often has many negative connotations which imply that it is an oppressive and repressive force (Foucault, 2000; Rosenberg, 2005). However, there are many aspects of power, and perspectives of what it actually entails thereby allowing for different meanings that help inform our

⁸ Nathani Wane (2002) discusses the paradigm of the ‘outsider-within’ in terms of the “[...] multiple locations of Black women in society” (p.40). Thus my interpretation of this phenomenon highlights that all of us occupy many differing spaces simultaneously that help to privilege and also reduce our status; all of which are affected by social, political, economic and historical dynamics.

understanding of this concept (see Lukes, 2005; see Smith, 2008). From a general standpoint, according to Smith (2008) power can be interpreted as, “*the capacity, held individually or collectively, to influence either groups or individuals (including oneself) in a given social context*” (p.23, original emphasis). From my own vantage point, Smith’s (2008) definition captures many of the widely held assumptions about what is meant when we use the term power. I know from my own professional and personal experiences, this is how power has often been applied and implied in various situations that attempt to explain the main characteristics of this dynamic concept. This highlights the ‘taken for granted’ way I presumed that when I inferred that power dynamics were at play in my practice, I assumed a particular conceptualization and thought that it was shared with those I interacted with at the time. Nevertheless, there are many different notions about what is meant by power thereby including it being theorized as a possession, as a product, as potential and as a process (see Smith, 2008). Power viewed as a possession is linked to notions of institutional authority and discipline (Smith, 2008). In this respect power is interpreted as rules and responsibilities that govern relationships between officials and all others (Smith, 2008). As a product, power constitutes change and emphasizes the ideals of empowerment, whereas power viewed as potential denotes it as a currency thereby to be acquired and implemented as control (Smith, 2008). Thus, Lukes (2005) rightly affirms that we speak about power in numerous ways in a variety of contexts and for differing purposes. Likewise, Lukes, (2005) instructs one to “[...] consider the relation between power and *intention*” (p.76, original emphasis). Therefore, this raises the important matter of what is our intent when we use power, and also, how aware are we when we use our power. The framework through which this research is primarily informed involves power being understood as a producing process (see Foucault, 2000). This is not to refute the aforementioned ways in which power is

theorized for all of them contribute to the overall analysis. Crucially though, Smith (2008) in reference to the work of Foucault (1981) outlines specific characteristics that explain the conceptualization of power as a process to include the following:

- It is not an object but is exercised in the ‘interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations’
- It is not external to other types of relationships, but is ‘immanent’ in them
- It comes from below; that is, it is given substance in the direct interactions between people in specific settings, rather than superimposed upon these
- It is ‘both intentional and nonsubjective’; that is, it is exercised according to the aims and objectives of social actors, but, at the same time, these may be inspired by other networks and influences
- It is also characterized by ‘resistance’: it encounters sporadic and unpredictable acts of non-compliance or counteraction (Smith, 2008, p.32)⁹

As such, even though power may not be a specific thing, it is nonetheless an activity encompassing diverse relations. Similarly, a central point that the aforementioned provides is that it highlights the inherent nature of power in all relationships as well as the manner in which power is something that is substantially contextualized. These points in turn demonstrate that when conceptualizing power as a process, the fluidity of it as a construct becomes apparent. To delve further into what power as a process entails, Foucault (2000) explains the manner in which power is a producing entity. For instance, Foucault (2000) asserts that:

What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (p.120).

Consequently, there are no absolutes when discussing the notion of power. As a process that affects every aspect of social life, it is simultaneously intangible whereby we are not always cognizant of its presence, yet, it is never absent. Moreover, power produces opportunities.

Given that power has the capacity to stimulate pleasure, knowledge, and ultimately discourse, it

⁹ In reference to Foucault, M. (1981). *The Will to Knowledge*. Hamondsworth: Penguin.

thus provides occasions in which its function can be liberating as opposed to solely oppressive. A fundamental consideration is that power constitutes actions in which the exercise of power necessitates an understanding of the manner in which actions continuously impact on others (see Foucault, 2000). These actions are carried through by way of the discourses available, and in some instances unavailable to us in our social interactions (see Dominelli, 2004; see Litvin, 2006). Discourse then is constructed through social identity (Litvin, 2009) whereby power is thus a negotiated phenomenon that exists because of our interactions (Dominelli, 2004). Discourses are neither language nor texts (Scott, 2003). Rather, discourses are an arrangement of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs that are historical, social and institutionally structured (Scott, 2003, p.379). Gavey (1989) explains that as a concept discourse is broad and refers to the manner in which meaning is constituted by specific groups and cultures.

Smith (2008) affirms that a core component of social relationships is our identities wherein how we view ourselves influences and helps to determine how we relate to others. Equally, the manner in which our identities are construed helps to shape how we are treated (Smith, 2008). Fundamentally, the construction and sense of identity precludes the creation of boundaries which help to forge unequal relationships (Smith, 2008). As a result, the many situations in which we interact helps to create and recreate power thereby making certain that no one is ever all powerful or completely powerless (Dominelli, 2004, p.41)¹⁰.

The Power of the Social Service Provider

Power in social service relationships and power inherent in the social service provider role are highly contested issues (see Baines, 2002; Dominelli, 2004; see Rossiter, 2007; see

¹⁰ In reference to Dominelli, L. (1986). The Power of the Powerless: Prostitution and the Reinforcement of Submissive Femininity. *Sociological Review, Spring, 65-92*.

Schmid, 2010; see Smith, 2008). There is much research related to social work, and research in general, that addresses the relational aspects of power (Dominelli, 2004, 2002; Fast, Halevy & Galinsky, 2012; Harrison, 2009; Heijes, 2010; Neal & Neal, 2011; see Rossiter, 2007; Schmid, 2010; Ungar, 2004). In order to ensure that social work practice remains justice oriented, it is pivotal that one understands the construction of self and the “inevitable interplay of power relations” with respect to the relations produced with clients (Rossiter, 2007, p. 22). Even though social work practice adopts an empathic stance of seeing the world through clients’ eyes, this is not only problematic but futile as it tends to falsely negate the privilege in social work positions (see Baines, 2002). There are many indicators which render social workers as having power such as their education, their type of employment as well as their skill base (Baines, 2002). For that reason, Baines (2002) asserts the call of “[...] redistributing power and building politicized, affirming identities” (p.192) with respect to the relationships with clients. The consideration that practitioners are all powerful thereby positioning clients with whom we interact as powerless (Dominelli, 2004) is a mistaken assumption. Hence, Dominelli (2004) explains that:

Practitioners are not all-powerful. They are subject to pressures from both above and below and have to create and mediate power relations through their interactions with clients. Whilst they have situational powers conferred upon them through their role, knowledge of resources to hand, and statutory and legislative remits, they do not control dimensions of power that are dialogical, national or international. Dialogical power is created in and through interaction with others in response to what they do, and vice versa (p. 69).

This further affirms the fluidity of power and attests to the different forms of power that are available in one’s role as a social service provider. Hence, while at times power is either institutional, or legislative, there are also instances that speak to the limits in which social service

providers are powerful. Discourse in turn is a fundamental piece that helps to determine the level of power one experiences in their interactions as a social service provider.

Race, Gender and Human Services Agencies

Race and gender remain highly contested and complex social phenomena in society and by extension in the workplace (Andersen, 2010; Baines, 2002; Billing & Sundin, 2006; see Butler, 2004; Knowles, 2010; Prasad, Pringle & Konrad, 2006; Proudford & Nkomo, 2006; Rezai-Rashti, 2005; Sisneros et al., 2008; Watkins-Hayes, 2010). Albeit the differences in labour force participation between visible minority women and non-visible minority women in Canada are small (Wilson, 2005), visible minority women are more likely to be underemployed (Wilson, 2005)¹¹, wherein with respect to social services many are employed in ethno-specific agencies (Baines, 2008). Because various institutions are shaped by “[...] the micro- and macro level imprints of social inequality” (Watkins-Hayes, 2010, p.313), it is not surprising that until recently visible minority women were excluded from mainstream social service positions (Baines, 2008). As such, the legacies of oppressive ideologies contribute to the current experiences of visible minority women social service providers. Furthermore, the rhetoric of multiculturalism and diversity remain contested issues socially and organizationally (see Baines 2002; see Bannerji, 2000; Mullaly, 2010; see Rezai-Rashti, 2004; Sisneros et al., 2008). In particular, the notion of ‘managing diversity’ (Billing & Sundin, 2006; Jones & Stablein, 2006; Mor Barak & Travis, 2010; Prasad, et al., 2006) has been highly popularized in recent decades; however, it remains imperative to interrogate what this actually entails. There is a particular

¹¹ In reference to Gabriel, C. (1999). *Restructuring at the margins: Women of Colour and the Changing Economy*. In E. Dua and A. Robertson (Ed.), *Scratching the Surface*. Toronto: Women’s Press

language that accompanies the precepts of multiculturalism, diversity and ‘managing diversity’ in organizational settings wherein the conceptualizations of inclusion and exclusion require analysis in order to locate the power differentials that shape these frameworks (Bannerji, 2000; Jones & Stablein, 2006; Prasad et al., 2006). Much of this discourse is bolstered through the development of organizational policies and procedures designed to promote human rights and employment equity (Baines, 2002). Consequently, research demonstrates that these policies are either seldom actualized or become dormant (Ahmed, 2008; Baines, 2002; Prasad et al., 2006). The overall context within which these circumstances are unfolding is occurring in an era of fundamental neoliberal changes impacting the structural and relational dynamics of human services agencies (see Baines 2002, 2008; Dominelli, 2004; McDonald, 2006). Ultimately, there are many factors contributing to the experiences of visible minority women that impact the manner in which power is experienced and negotiated as social service providers in the women’s shelter system.

The concepts of race and gender are theorized as socially constructed (Andersen, 2010; Butler, 2004; Calasanti, 1998; Proudford & Nkomo, 2006; Sisneros et al., 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1998). However, this does not discount the significance that such dynamics play in the lives of visible minority women, especially in their professional lives. For instance, a social constructionist perspective acknowledges that such concepts as race and gender exist for reasons rooted in social phenomena as opposed to biological precepts (Calasanti, 1998; Proudford & Nkomo, 2006; Sisneros et al., 2008; West & Zimmerman, 1998). Fundamentally a key feature of this dynamic is the dialogical interactions which help to sustain relational processes, which in turn are various relations of power (see Dominelli 2002, 2004; see Foucault, 2000; see Lukes, 2005; see Rossiter, 2007; see Smith, 2008). Of note, it is important to

remember that disadvantage is multidimensional (Wilson, 2005) whereby such concepts as race and gender, are imbedded in social institutions (Andersen, 2010). Consequently race and gender, in addition to other factors that influence one's social location such as class, ability and ethnicity, for example, interlock and are inseparable when analysing systems of inequality, oppression, and domination (Andersen¹², 2010, p. 169; Proudford & Nkomo, 2006; Razack, 1998; Vakalahi & Hardin Starks, 2010). Hence, although race and gender are social constructs, they intimately affect and organize significant aspects of people's lives (Proudford & Nkomo, 2006). For instance, authors explain the manner in which gender is something that we 'do' (Butler, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 1998). West and Zimmerman (1998) also explain how gender is "[...] an achieved property of situated conduct..." (p.168), whereby they proceed to assert that:

[...] doing gender is unavoidable. It is unavoidable because of the social consequences of sex-category membership: the allocation of power and resources not only in the domestic, economic, and political domains but also in the broad arena of interpersonal relations (West & Zimmerman, 1998, p.185)

This demonstrates the power with which such determinants have in helping to construct, and control social reality. Likewise, there are significant consequences for the individual, as opposed to the institutional arrangements, when one does not perform what is perceived as the appropriate construct of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1998). Though the previous example focuses on gender specifically, the same holds true for the construction of race (see Anderson, 2010). The subjective character of race and gender (see Butler, 2004; Knowles, 2010; Proudford & Nkomo, 2006) has implications for all of us. For instance, our social interactions help to either reinforce and /or challenge systems of injustice (see Dominelli, 2002; see Mullaly, 2010). Given that our

¹² In reference to:

Andersen M.L. & Hill Collins, P. (2007). *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology, 6th Ed.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Hill Collins, P. (1990). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* New York: Routledge.

Hill Collins, P. (1998). *Fighting Words.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

constructions of reality are based upon ‘scripts’ which constitute various messages, the possibility for dialogue in order to change these scripts, and as a result, the perceptions of reality, ensues (Sisneros et al., 2008). In turn, this highlights the manner in which race and gender, as significant components that influence the manner in which we interact with one another, are ultimately discussions that pertain to the notions and processes of power. Many socio-historical occurrences shaped the manner in which visible minority women became perceived as a distinct group in comparison to what has been largely understood as the mainstream citizenry of Canadian society. Therefore, the relational processes within human services agencies continue to be impacted by legacies of structural inequality and dominant discourses.

The professional experiences of visible minority women service providers are quite unique in human services agencies. Watkins-Hayes (2010) explains that:

The deployment of institutional power, discretion, and resources in social welfare services takes on added dimensions when the agents who make these choices are themselves members of racial and ethnic minority group (p.315).

When institutional power is granted to historically marginalized groups, the relationships amongst workers, the clients served and one’s professional self are all impacted. For example, visible minority women service providers often have to come with an increased skill set in order to be hired (Baines, 2008). Moreover, research highlights that visible minority women service providers express having to develop a broader range of skills in comparison to their white counterparts subsequent to becoming employees at their respective agencies (Baines, 2008). Often these skills require visible minority women service providers to become cultural interpreters for their agencies irrespective if they are familiar with the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the clients being served (Baines, 2008). Although organizations pronounce the benefits of a merit-based system, and some argue for the non-existence of discrimination,

research demonstrates that differential treatment is experienced in the workplace based upon the indicators of one's social location (see Baines 2008; Billing & Sundin, 2006; see Harrison, 2009; Prasad et al., 2006; see Wilson, 2005). Popularized arguments that pronounce a belief in the lack of qualified applicants from diverse backgrounds reinforce and maintain a notion that employers are aiming to institute more equitable practices and policies (Billing & Sundin, 2006).

Arguments such as these are extremely problematic because they entail the “[...] power to define ‘the other’ [which] is essential to organizational control, as is the power to decide what standard (the qualifications) which we should be equal to” (Billing & Sundin, 2006, p.105). Therefore, it remains important to ensure that organizations are made aware that discrimination does in fact occur (Billing & Sundin, 2006) as this demonstrates the ongoing necessity to redress social and employment inequalities. Responses to the notion of race and gender issues in human services agencies have witnessed the incorporation of discourses around multiculturalism and diversity, as well as adopting the concept of diversity management as an organizational framework.

The rhetoric of multiculturalism has been incorporated as part of a response that attempts to deal with issues that confront diversity (see Bannerji, 2000). Specifically, the framework of diversity management has been instituted as a significant configuration in terms of how to address the difficult issues of race and gender in the workplace. Multiculturalism, as a sanctioned state institutional framework, has been adopted as a means to celebrate the diversity of the nation (see Rezai-Rashti, 2005; see Sundar, 2009). While multiculturalism and diversity as ideological constructs do their best to promote inclusion, these constructs also foster notions of exclusion (see Jones & Stablein, 2006; Prasad et al., 2006). Authors such as Sisneros et al. (2008) assert that a critical multicultural framework acknowledges the manner in which power differentials shape structural processes and interactions, yet these same authors also point to the

limited capacity of the study of diversity to actually capture problems pertaining to power and domination. Multiculturalism as an ideology is problematized given that the paradigm pronounces difference, and as a result of this difference reinforces the lack of adaptation of multicultural ethnicities (Bannerji, 2000). Therefore, multiculturalism obscures the racist and colonial constructs which helped to forge these identities that are simultaneously embraced and rejected (Bannerji, 2000). Additionally, Bannerji (2000) argues multiculturalism to be an organizing principle in which:

Official multiculturalism represents its polity in cultural terms, setting apart the so-called immigrants of colour from francophones and the aboriginal peoples. This organization brings into clearer focus the primary national imaginary of “Canada”... It rests on posing “Canadian culture” against “multicultures”. An element of whiteness quietly enters into cultural definitions, marking the difference between a core cultural group and other groups who are represented as cultural fragments. The larger function of this multiculturalism not only takes care of legitimation of the Canadian state, but helps in managing an emerging crisis in legitimation produced by a complex political conjuncture evolving through the years after the second world war (p.10).

Consequently, multiculturalism as an ideological construct comprises many tensions that problematize the intentions it presumes to possess whereby the creation of dichotomous entities forms a significant part of the critique of this framework. Furthermore, the subtlety of dominant ideology based upon the construction of white ideals in response to other groups is unconsciously reinforced. The legitimation process that is found within multiculturalism thus inadvertently helps to further entrench unequal power structures within Canadian society. Diversity is no less nuanced with challenging assumptions. The discourse of diversity becomes an empirical process in which ascribing differences occurs, wherein connotations of power relations also develop (Bannerji, 2000). Also, Ahmed (2008) succinctly captures the tensions in the manner in which diversity politics are instituted in the workplace whereby she highlights how

diversity has become a way in which to create a better organizational image. Thus, as Ahmed (2008) contends, “Diversity work becomes about *changing the perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations*. Doing well, or a good performance, would then be about being perceived as a diverse organization” (p.605). Multiculturalism and diversity, as popularized frameworks to help resolve difficult notions that surround difference, recreate and often obscure unequal power relations. The model of diversity management has become a common method of integrating these ideals into workplaces. However, as Prasad et al. (2006) confirm, managing diversity incorporates various types of control from persons in managerial positions.

Managing diversity carries with it the legacy of managing: the traditional classic notions of control, leadership, organizing and power. This diversity framework is situated within the hierarchical corporate control systems where organizational authority lies with senior management. Workplace diversity then becomes the object of control and organizing, and senior managers are the legitimate instigators of organization change (Prasad, et al., 2006, p.7).

A cornerstone of diversity management is the model of diversity training in which changing employees’ attitudes are targeted through relationship building (Mor Barak & Travis, 2010). While there are policies and procedures which in theory are drafted to establish guidelines that promote equity, often the impetus towards action falls short (see Ahmed 2008; see Baines, 2002; Prasad et al., 2006). For example, policies that address gender issues tend to remain dormant and lack politicized struggle whereas research also highlights the lack of explicitness in racial policies (Baines, 2002). The precepts of multiculturalism, diversity and ‘managing diversity’ are rather challenging conceptual frameworks that seemingly intend to promote fairer practices, yet still maintain subtle but powerful inequities. The current context of neo-liberal restructuring is the milieu in which these processes are simultaneously occurring.

Neoliberal restructuring continues to significantly alter the dynamics of human services agencies (Baines, 2008; Dominelli, 2004; McDonald, 2006). Watkins-Hayes (2010) explains the key role of human services agencies and states:

Social service institutions represent a critical piece of our societal response to the everyday and emergency needs of citizens and reflect the possibilities of what can be produced when political bargaining, economic investment, and collective will are integrated (p.314).

However, as an ideology and as a practice, neoliberalism represents a shift in the governing of nation states whereby this framework adopts five specific values, namely, “[...] the primacy of the individual, freedom of choice, market security, *laissez faire*, and minimal government” (McDonald, 2006, p.63). With changing contexts brings a realignment of power in the relationships social workers forge whereby neoliberalism pronounces the interests of employers and the state through managers over and above those of professionals and clients (Dominelli, 2004). As a result, a common trend is the increase in the concept of managerialism as a set of practices that contribute in determining the administrative and organizational structure in human services agencies (see Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Managerialism as a product of the interplay of corporatism into human services is an extension of neoliberal market forces dominating various spheres. Some of the tenets of managerialism include an emphasis on viewing the appointment of an effective manager as the main component in the organization; the devaluing of professional knowledge and by contrast the assertion and dominance of managerial knowledge (Tsui & Cheung, 2004). As a result, Tsui and Cheung (2004) explain that: “Staff are not only managerialized, but also marginalized in the era of managerialism” (p.438). Likewise, the autonomy of professionals is devalued in managerialism (Tsui & Cheung, 2004). Thus, managerial skills are seen as the main component that allow for better performance and quality of services (Tsui & Cheung, 2004). While I remember women’s shelters as unique in their

affirmation of creating women centred environments, this is not to say that these agencies are immune from the aforementioned processes of change impacting human services. For example, women's shelters from their inception have had a tumultuous funding arrangement with the Canadian state whereby monies received were always attached to specific stipulations (see Sev'er, 2002). Moreover, the philosophy of the women's shelter movement initially represented non-hierarchical relations within these types of agencies yet, governments are reluctant to fund such organizational structures that do not demonstrate clear bureaucratic processes and a division of responsibilities (Sev'er, 2002). Therefore, Sev'er (2002) demonstrates the difficulties in women's shelters receiving government funds wherein she states:

The catch-22 was (and often is) that funding was scarce, unpredictable, and more often than not, came with governmental strings. In terms of women's issues, the political resolve of governments have been wide ranging from election to election and from province to province. There are tensions between feminist activism and equity principles and the requirement for bureaucratic structures demanding a professional but docile workforce to qualify for funds (p.315).

Thus, it can be seen that aspects of neoliberal rhetoric permeate the sustainability of the women's shelter movement due to the particular funding demands placed on these agencies. This is a longstanding tension that helps to capture some of the difficulties that frame the analyses of this specific type of human service agency.

Overall, underlying the aforementioned enquiry is the concept of power. Thus, it remains imperative to investigate this concept and the ways in which it is actually conceptualized in the lives of visible minority women service providers currently working in women's shelters. Additionally, while power operates as an interactional process on a micro level, it is also crucial to be cognizant of the structural, cultural, and institutional elements in which power also functions (Dominelli, 2002). For that reason, our identities and the interactional processes

thereby contributing to notions of power have been forged as a result of longstanding ideological constructs that ultimately impact the manner in which our experiences are shaped as visible minority women social services providers. This experience is also affected by the manner in which neoliberal rhetoric shapes our workplace realities and the agencies that employ us.

Chapter 4 - Methodology¹³

The bases of the methodological frameworks that my research adopts are found in the interpretive social sciences, postmodernism and feminist poststructuralism. The interpretive social science approach endeavours to elucidate the inherent meanings in social contexts through a close examination of subjective social reality (Neuman, 2011). Moreover, interpretive social science seeks to determine how individuals define what they do (Neuman, 2011). While Neuman (2011) introduces the many varieties of interpretive social science, my research is informed mainly by ethnomethodology which aims to explicate everyday realities and their connection to extra-local practices (see de Montigny, 2007). For example, since research demonstrates continued differences between racialized women service providers and their white counterparts (see Baines, 2008) my research questions strive to understand the lived experiences of visible minority women employed in the women’s shelter system in southern, Ontario. Overall, it is my intention to foster an interpretive explanation (Neuman, 2011) insofar that this research is able to produce greater understanding about the complexities and challenges of visible minority women employed in women’s shelters. Neuman (2011) highlights that: “Connections among approaches to science, social theories, and research techniques are not strict” (p. 94). As a result, the subjective nature of interpretive social sciences can be seen to subscribe with elements of a postmodern theoretical approach. Some postmodern tenets include notions of relativism, an aesthetic toward research production, and the integral part that values have in shaping research (Neuman, 2011). Likewise, given that one of my main research questions is to explore how women service providers from visible minority groups navigate and

¹³ The information presented in this section is taken in part from an essay I submitted to SW 738 in the School of Social Work, McMaster University on April 4, 2012 entitled “Description and Application of Methodology” during my Master of Social Work coursework requirements.

resist the structural marginalization and oppression in their work as well as their work settings, as previously discussed, poststructural feminist theory also frames my research. Feminism in general looks to empower, “give voice to women” (Neuman, 2011, p. 116), and interact with research participants. Therefore, the incorporation of interviews as well as my own voice makes explicit the relative stance that my research assumes in addition to the importance I place on having research that is value based. The adoption of interpretive social science, as well as postmodernism and poststructural feminism indicates aspects about the ontological and epistemological views I have towards research. Subsequently, this demonstrates the manner in which I have come to conceptualize my research project.

Conceptualization of Research

Research highlights the relational contexts in which power operates (Dominelli, 2002, 2004; Fast, Halevy & Galinsky, 2012; Harrison, 2009; Heijes, 2010; Neal & Neal, 2011; Schmid, 2010; see Smith, 2008; Ungar, 2004). Furthermore, Schmid (2010) advises of the necessity to explore “[...] how parties defined as the ‘other’ participate and take control of renegotiating power” (p. 181). The multifaceted dynamics of power (Schmid, 2010; Spencer, 2008), wherein notions about inter-sectionality and interlocking forms of oppression (Schmid, 2010; Razack, 1998; Vakalahi & Hardin Starks, 2010) significantly contribute to the conceptualization about the topic matter reinforces the ways in which I have come to understand my research. As a result of the manner in which research examines power, I have come to view my research as part of this scholarly endeavour to further explicate this phenomenon in the lives of historically marginalized groups in order to explore the fluidity of this concept. The relational perspective

within which much research about power is based upon prompted my inquiry to examine how visible minority women experience, understand and negotiate this dynamic.

Additionally, as I identify as a visible minority woman in Canada, I was also drawn to this concept due to my own experiences and understandings of the multidimensional aspects of power, oppression and privilege. Thus, the intersections that this topic presents are of great interest and importance to me on a personal level. From an epistemological standpoint, the creation of knowledge necessitates aspects that resound with me on a socio-political standpoint. Therefore, in selecting ethnomethodology I wanted to use a method that includes the study of work and workplace procedures that are also linked to extra-local processes (see Rawls, 2008; see de Montigny 2007).

Methods

Taber (2010) appeals to researchers to challenge the boundaries of traditional research methods. Neuman (2011) highlights the importance of triangulation in research methods and states: “In social research, we build on the principle that we learn more by observing from multiple perspectives than by looking from only a single perspective” (p. 164). Furthermore, Neuman (2011) explains the processes of objectivity and integrity in the research design where he cautions that:

We “walk a fine line” between intimacy and detachment and place personal integrity and honesty at the forefront. Some techniques may help us walk a fine line. One technique is to become highly sensitive to our own views, preconceptions, and prior assumptions and then “bracket” them, or put them aside, so we can see beyond them better (p. 168).

Thus, the manner in which biases are dealt with becomes a significant challenge in the research design. Nevertheless, the topic matter is very important to me both personally and

professionally. While I no longer work in a woman's shelter, which from an ethnomethodological standpoint is problematic (see Rawls, 2008; de Montigny, 2007), the concept of power is never absent from my social reality. Thus, neither do I make any false claims that I will negate myself as a fundamental part of the research inquiry in order to discount the use of self in the name of objectivity and integrity, nor do I assert that I speak for all visible minority women. In effect, as a visible minority woman, my perspective is comparatively strategic when paired with the voices of the other research participants as it helps to foster a symbolic stance that is united in addressing the issue of power in the women's shelter system. Ethnomethodology investigates many of the taken-for-granted ways of operating in our daily lives (de Montigny, 2009). Essentially, ethnomethodology captures the familiar procedures and features in social orders (de Montigny, 2009). Moreover, de Montigny (2007) explains with respect to social work that as a method of inquiry:

Through EM [ethnomethodology], social workers are directed to examine ordinary practices for accomplishing social work in local settings. As a result agencies and organizations rather than being treated as a 'structure' or a mere object are brought into focus as practically accomplished coordination of social relations and social practices (p.100).

As such, ethnomethodology explicates power (see de Montigny, 2007). Since interviews with research participants is my primary method of external data collection, in seeking to establish and render more clearly how power operates in their daily professional lives, ethnomethodology allows for such a nuanced interpretation. In the findings, informed by ethnomethodology, I interpreted and analyzed the local practices and dialogue of the research participants to larger social relations and practices. These were then linked to such phenomenon as how they understood power primarily in their professional lives; the significance of dominant ideologies based on race and gender in their professional lives; the processes of work with respect to

organizational policies; and the penetration of neoliberal tactics in the women's shelter system.

These links were made based on the information collected during the in-depth interviews in which common themes became more perceptible and resonated with me as I collated the data.

Research participants were initially recruited in the form an Email Recruitment Request (Appendix A), Email Recruitment Script Sent on Behalf of the Researcher by the Holder of the Participants' Contact Information (Appendix B) and Information Letter (Appendix C) distributed via email to publicly accessible email addresses to women's shelters throughout southern, Ontario. Additionally, a snowball sample was employed in order to recruit participants known to me through my previous employment at a VAW shelter. This snowball sample also extended to include former colleagues known to me through the Bachelor of Social Work program at McMaster University who are now employed in women's services organizations. Snowball sampling as a method begins with one or a few cases that are then linked to other cases through networking (Neuman, 2011). An Email Recruitment Script regarding Personal and/or Former Colleagues (Appendix D) and Information Letter (Appendix C) were sent to these potential participants. Once I was contacted by research participants expressing their interest, Consent (Appendix E) and the Interview Guide (Appendix F) were sent electronically for their review.

Face to face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were scheduled with research participants at a location of the interviewee's choice. Each participant was instructed about the consent process whereby they were informed that they did not have to answer specific questions. An information package was also given to research participants that included signed copies of the Consent Form, the Information Letter, and the Interview Guide for their records. While it proved to be a challenge to recruit participants for this project in which a total of three ultimately volunteered, the small sample allowed for more of an exploration into the subject matter with

each respondent. Interviews ranged in length from approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. During the in-depth interviews research participants were asked to reflect about power in their respective workplaces; the manner in which they conceptualized having power as a social service provider; and the ways in which they understood their gender and / or race in relation to having power both professionally and personally, for example. Research participants had the opportunity to have the interview audio recorded, or to allow for me to take handwritten notes. I transcribed the interviews that were audio-recorded whereby interviews where handwritten notes were taken were interpreted for dominant themes. Subsequent to the interview sessions, the option was provided to research participants to conduct a review session either over the telephone, or via email in order to ensure the accuracy, anonymity, and interpretation of the information gathered. Research participants were given the opportunity to determine whether they would like a copy of the study's results either electronically through email or via regular mail.

All of the research participants were adult women (18+ years old) who self-identified as belonging to a visible minority group. Furthermore, research participants were currently employed in non-managerial positions at the time this research was conducted in the women's shelter system in southern, Ontario. The positions that research participants had ranged from front-line staff to case management roles. Each of the participants had been employed for more than a year and all had completed some form of post-secondary education.

As this research aims to delve into the concept of power, fundamental ethical considerations were the social risks entailed towards research participants in terms of their involvement with this project. Some of the psychological risks pertained to research participants becoming apprehensive and/or upset about the opinions they shared in relation to the topic matter as the possibility to trigger uncomfortable past or present workplace situations was probable.

Similarly, given that research participants would be currently employed throughout southern Ontario, the loss of privacy was a potential risk. These risks were outlined to research participants, whereby I also took the responsibility to explain that they had the choice to not answer specific questions, and that no identifying information would be used in the findings. Although the intent of this research is to demonstrate the fluidity and complexities of power in the lives of visible minority women social service providers wherein there was also the probability that stories of triumph were shared, it remained crucial that I ensured to pay particular attention to the sensitive material that was provided in order to mitigate any potential risks. However, none of the identified risks were greater than those experienced by the research participants in their everyday professional lives.

The impetus for this research is to explore the manner in which visible minority women understand power in their workplace, as well as the ways in which they resist structural oppression and conceptualize power in relation to the institutions that employ them in ever changing power dynamics. For that reason, certain themes were identified and thereafter synthesized from the responses that occurred during in-depth interviews. All research participants were asked to reflect about their understanding of power whereby discussions on their various conceptualizations ensued. As a result, the differences between one's personal, professional, and managerial power were all prominent themes in their respective responses. Moreover, responses that demonstrated resistance to discrimination were a critical part of the interview process where in turn these are highlighted in the findings. A discussion about the organizational policies meant to address workplace discrimination proceeds thereby underlining how research participants have come to understand the impact these have in shaping power dynamics in their work.

Chapter 5 - Findings

The Meanings of Power: the Personal and the Professional

As this research attempts to explicate the concept of power in the lives of visible minority women social service providers employed in the women's shelter system, an understanding of the manner in which research participants conceptualize power is necessary. Given that the relevant literature highlights the fluidity of this concept, determining how research participants perceive this phenomenon and its impact in their lives elucidates the emergence of common themes. Even though the answers varied, perspectives that reflect an understanding of power as a notion exemplifying control, authority, and overseeing others were apparent. Furthermore, in interviews with research participants about what power means to them, the idea of having power over oneself, and the ability to influence one's work and/or personal surroundings dominated. The interviews also demonstrate that while power was understood to be possessed by all research participants, there were contextual limitations, as well as the social dynamics of race and gender which moderated an individual's exercise of power. For instance, a research participant reports in relation to the meaning of power that:

Ok, so the word power means to me the ability to be able to oversee or control, a certain number of people. So, it could be within an organization, it could be within your circle, it could be within....like different aspects, but it is that ability to control or oversee. In terms of my gender, I would say as a female, we tend to have limited power, because, the power of the dominance is usually a male thing. So then, it's not very often that you do find women in that position of power, and even more rare, a woman who is from my race who's in a position of power. So, usually it would be the male, and very rarely you would see the woman, if they are there, and even more rare would be a minority woman in a position of power. So then, it's not equal, it's not balanced.

Likewise, another research participant expresses:

To me [power] means having [an] ability to influence something or people.
As a black woman, I think I have limited power to influence other people. I can influence myself, and my inner circle, but in larger I think I have limited power.

This research participant later clarified in the interview session the manner in which she understood what her racial and gender identity meant in relation to power, and the contextualized nature in which she conceptualized this phenomenon whereby she states:

I think it depends on where you are, for me, in my experience, I think in [the] workplace, because we're all women, I think it's more of the race [that matters]. In other places it's been the combination. And, yeah, so I think it depends on where you are really, and the situations you encounter.

Hence, this illustrates that even though visible minority women are aware of possessing power, there is also the understanding that this power is mitigated relative to context and ongoing structural inequality. Likewise, the aforementioned demonstrates the perceived difference between one's personal power, versus their professional power. Thus, a qualitative difference in the manner in which visible minority women service providers comprehend their personal power, and the ability to influence themselves and their inner circle per se, is in contrast to how power is manifest from a professional standpoint. Nonetheless, this divide is not absolute. Likewise, given the dynamics of the women's shelter system, the concept of race was more prominent as opposed to one's gender. Additionally, as a research participant states with respect to what was termed 'individualized power':

There is individualized power, because then the only person who knows you better is yourself. So then you do have that power, and that control over yourself, over your choices, over your decisions, so yes, there is definitely for each individual you have that capacity to have that power, over yourself. And then it just extends...when you talk about not just yourself, but even within your circle, within a job, within...culture, etc.

For that reason, power is viewed as an extension of oneself simultaneously as it is sensed to be limited it is capacity. Nonetheless, as one research participant summarized her thoughts on power:

Power to me, in specific, means somebody who has the authority and the strength to do what they would desire to do. In a sense of good deeds though because power could very much [be] misinterpreted and utilized against others or to hurt them, or in vain. Power to me also means being educated, being well aware of who you are, and how you can help your fellow members, whether it's in a work field, or in school, or even just society in general, so even people who you don't know. Power could be utilized as a great tool and as a painful tool. So yeah, power to me means, the woman that I am.

I noted that during the interview I stated liking this response as it denotes not just simplicity, but also characterizes the complexities in how visible minority women perceive their power as it embodies the varying aspects of their personhood. This research participant links their understandings of power to different aspects of their social location such as their education, as well as claims her womanhood as a source of strength. Similarly, power for this research participant is felt to be an awareness of self, in addition to a sense of doing well towards others. Therefore, the intent behind using power matters for this participant. Other notable aspects that research participants provide to convey their understanding of the meaning of power display thoughts about having knowledge and a skill base. When I reflect on my own understandings of power, I know I echo the various sentiments about feeling that power is something with imposed contextual limitations, but also, given my social location it is not an all or nothing phenomenon. As a visible minority woman, while my race and gender may negate my power in certain instances, I also celebrate my ethnic identity and am quite cognizant that my education, ability, and skills base privilege me in many situations both professionally and personally.

Relational and interactional understandings about the aspects of power were also prominent in the responses of research participants. As one research participant explains:

In my workplace setting I think there is explicit power, and there's implicit power. I think explicit power is maybe for the program managers, they're assigned power. Then the implicit power to me, maybe relates to friends of program managers. People who hang outside work together. Sometimes they can be at the same level as me, but because they have that extra connection to the program manager, I think they can have....it's known by other people they have power.

This research participant went on to further elucidate that because she had not developed a relationship with managers, she perceived her influence in her agency as limited. Similarly this response highlights structural power and the fluidity of power in terms of the connections that are made with people. Consequently, she states that:

So, I have to work harder to see the impact of what I'm trying to achieve. But for me, because I don't have that level of relationship with them, I have to break it down further, justify my request more.

Relationships, and the level of intimacy in these relationships, are thus seen to affect one's perspective on the degree of power possessed. For that reason, the interactions we have with others contribute to our sense of power within an agency. As expressed by the aforementioned research participant, feelings of having to work harder, and break things down further in order to justify their requests are factors that demonstrate the lack of receptivity in their exchanges with managers. This in turn demonstrates the significance that our interactions have in shaping the type of experience in the workplace.

Managerial Power

While some of the previous limitations on one's power were perceived to be the result of one's race, gender, or a combination of both dependent on the contexts, all research participants expressed limitations due to the organizational structure of their agencies. For instance, a research participant states:

In my workplace, power is hierarchical, so then it comes from the top. Then comes down to the program managers, and then, to us as case managers. So for us, we do have power given to us to oversee, the women that we serve. But again, we do have our limitations on what we can do, and what is accepted, which again comes from the director, and the managers. So, we do have some power, but it's again very limited, and everything you do, has to be Ok'd with those who are in charge, so those who do have that deciding power.

Another research participant resonates with these same notions about an organizational hierarchy and narrates:

Hierarchy, yeah, managerial. It's just the nature of the work. And some though, I would say to be fair, some managers who will sit down and will try to...some level to give you some...you know, to negotiate, you know, but the majority, it is hard. And with coworkers and clients I think it's easier to negotiate because I...I like exercising power with other people, that's my personality.

The threads of managerialism are seen in the responses of these research participants. The hierarchical nature of their organizations speaks wholly to the implementation of a bureaucratic framework in the woman's shelter system. Their responses highlight the limited capacity in which employees are given to exercise their authority and autonomy as professionals in the workplace in terms of their decision making capacities. Even though this hierarchy exists, the last research participant indicates the willingness of some managers to negotiate power with front line staff. However, she still acknowledges that this is atypical. Therefore, with respect to negotiating one's power this last research participant makes it clear that it is easier to do this with coworkers and clients, as opposed to with managers. For that reason, a research participant explains the following in terms of negotiating power:

I would say you can't negotiate it. You cannot. I'm thinking in terms of...like those in power, like your program manager, the director, giving us more power. I think that they have their own set policies and rules, as to this is how much power we are going to give you as a case manager. And that's not going to change.

A sense of finality accompanies this response toward the end whereby she states not seeing any change within her organizational structure that gives more power to managers than to employees. Feeling that power cannot be negotiated with one's manager and that it is simply not even an option to be considered creates quite a stark understanding in this research participant about the lack of potential authority she can exercise. Furthermore, she states in her narrative that:

Yeah, even working directly with women in where I work, I...find that there's times where a woman would ask me for something, or ask for a service. And I have to ok it with a manager, so it's not in my capacity to say 'yes' I can do this, or 'yes' this is what I can give you, I have to make sure that it is ok with somebody who is overseeing my work.

The lack of autonomy as a worker is quite palpable. I remember as an employee in the VAW shelter how even though there were guidelines on what procedures were to be implemented when certain high risk incidents occurred, as an employee we nonetheless had to still consult with a manager on-duty before, during, and after taking any necessary actions. The message then to employees is quite clear in that all their decisions require approval irrespective of the knowledge and skill base that as a professional social service provider they indeed possess. The truth of the situation as well is that this is unavoidable, as one research participant expresses in terms of working with managers:

Well, you have to work with them right? It's not like you can avoid your managers, or not collaborate with them on things. They do listen to you; I don't want to make them sound to be like the monster you can never approach. Not everybody is going to have....cause they have to answer to a director, and the director has to answer to a board of directors, so I can understand where their like 'no's' come from.

This research participant explicates the hierarchy that managers also have to manoeuvre within whereby she expresses an acknowledgement of the difficulties managers have to endure. As well, she recounts the inevitability of having to work together with one's managers whereby in contrast to managers being seen as unapproachable, there are opportunities to collaborate.

Therefore, the ‘no’s’ that employees must endure are by extension the result of a larger system in place that dictates the level of power that not just employees can exercise, but also managers, and senior management. This is indicative of the processes of neoliberal restructuring penetrating every aspect of the shelters’ organizational structures. A firm, hierarchical and bureaucratic style of administration is thus present in the women’s shelter system thereby refashioning the longstanding commitments these agencies made originally to avoid such organizing.

Resistance to Discrimination

All research participants discussed situations that involved workplace discrimination. Whether they felt discriminated against by managers, co-workers or clients, at some point in their workplace experience some form of feeling discriminated against occurred. Research participants also spoke of the ways in which these incidents of workplace discrimination became opportunities for personal and professional growth. Moreover, incidents of workplace discrimination were also occasions in which research participants discussed how they approached unfair processes and work practices. Thus, a research participant notes that:

In my workplace, I think the most discrimination I get is that it could be from managers, I don’t know if I’ve ever received it from clients. And it’s only because if I have an idea, or if I have a thought in the program process, or how the mission statement of that program, or that, you know, that group that we’re leading will go, I think a lot of times, and I see that in managers, maybe because I’m too strong, or because I have really really strong ideas or thoughts on how things should be. [...] So I think that sometimes, people have a power struggle and when the idea doesn’t come from them, and because they’re at a higher superior level of work skills and levels, they just feel threatened.

This same research participant continues to narrate that:

I don’t let things get me down, or put me down. There’s always ways where you can still implement things that you would like in a group without it really being that visible. [...] So, sometimes, not backing down, and being strong in your opinion and

believing in what you do, you could accomplish a lot. It doesn't always happen the first time you try, but then that's why we're persistent and we strive for better.

This research participant frames their experience of discrimination in terms of the strength she acknowledges that she has with regards to valuing her ideas. Moreover, this research participant speaks of the necessity to remain persistent in one's determination to implement what they believe they must accomplish. Additionally, another research participant who recounted a difficult workplace experience of having felt generalized because of her race asserted her attempts in trying to open up a dialogue with her coworkers whereby she states:

I've tried to find opportunities where I can have like conversations. Because I think, because I'm comfortable the longer I've been there to have those conversations with them.

Thus, for this research participant resistance takes the form of looking to find ways in which to converse with her coworkers thereby opening up the opportunity to create more understanding. As a result, discursive processes are seen as an occasion for addressing one's concerns. This nevertheless is something that is more comfortably done due to the length of time in the agency. This same research participant reports in terms of her experiences of discrimination that:

I think sometimes with coworkers, someone can make a remark. Then sometimes I've learned it's about picking your battles. So, that's when I say 'Ok, this one I just have to you know...' It doesn't mean I'm being complacent, or I'm allowing it, but sometimes you can't be a noisy [laughter]...speaking up all the time, picking up all the wrong words someone uses.

As such, this research participant notes the need to balance her responses when addressing discriminatory comments. She asserts the simultaneity of not being complacent, along with having to be aware of which battles need to be fought. Thus, as previously mentioned, resistance is not always visible, or even vocal for that matter, but rather can take on the form of knowing within oneself that one is not tolerating something they find discriminatory. This same research

participant, in reflecting on her experience of having felt generalized because of her race by her coworkers narrates that:

My reflection on it is, what I realized that it wasn't intentional for them to say 'black workers wouldn't like it', it wasn't ill-intent, but the impact to me was, they're saying, 'Oh, [a] racialized woman wouldn't like this', you know, it was kind of like generalizing. They never...they just thought they were being helpful. Yeah, so it was eye-opening for me.

Therefore, a greater understanding developed on the part of this research participant whereby she acknowledged that the intent was not necessarily the result of the interactions that transpired amongst coworkers. This speaks wholly to the contested site in which dialogical processes are situated and the importance for ongoing communications amongst agents in order to tackle the difficult issues of race in their workplace. Another research participant who also experienced a very difficult encounter with a client because of her race shared her reflections on the manner in which she grew from the experience. She also recounted the limited way in which the situation had been dealt with. In her reflection she states that:

So um, reflecting back, I felt really down about this situation. Because I felt...the woman did not even know me. The woman did not know...where I was from, or anything like that. [...] So, I did doubt myself a little bit. Doubt even my skills, to some extent. But now that I've grown and become more confident, I know that was not my fault, whatever happened. She had an issue with me, but that was her issue. I can't do anything to change that, I can't do anything to change my race, or where I'm from, or my skin colour. [...] But these are issues that happen, quite often, and this is not the first time. I mean, I've had many more incidents about discrimination. But I don't really feel that they are dealt with appropriately.

Although this research participant affirms having grown due to a difficult situation wherein she doubted herself and her skills, she all the same demonstrates the deleterious effects that discrimination can have, and the process through which one is able to come to appreciate and understand their professional abilities. Her reflection highlights notions of intersectionality whereby she asserts that the client in question '*did not even know me*' and proceeds to indicate

such aspects of her identity as where she was from, or any other attributes that combine to form who she is as a person. This response also captures the complexities whereby our understandings of ourselves confronts the assumptions others have of us. This in turn highlights the structural limitations, and the power differential in social service provider relationships. Thus, it places at the forefront the manner in which relationships between social service providers and clients include biases, and negative stereotypes thereby constituting notions of the ‘other’. Furthermore, this research participant’s response underlines the fact that although in an all woman environment, as previously mentioned the concept of race was once again more significant.

The Limitations of Organizational Policies

A widespread response voiced by all of the research participants expressed dissatisfaction with the implementation of organizational policies and procedures to address discriminatory incidents and workplace inequalities. These testimonies uphold what researchers have documented in terms of the inadequacies that organizational documents have in actually responding in an effective manner to discriminatory occurrences. Consequently, as one research participant determines:

So, our organizational policies, the first thing that jumped in my mind, was about the Anti-Oppressive Anti-Racism framework, that we work with. And it’s a lot of emphasis, a lot within this organization about equality, about no discrimination, about no oppression and all that....but I do feel that it’s always positive, or, I’ve had positive experiences, I wouldn’t say I have...because even though we do say, you cannot discriminate with our clients coming in, and you say you can’t be oppressive, or discriminate and all that, we’re saying to our clients, but yet it still happens. But then do I feel like these policies are implemented when it does happen...not always right?

This same research participant continues to narrate that:

The policy is there, but what are they doing to make [sure] it's actually being followed. Or what are the consequences of not following this policy, because it's huge. If you discriminate someone and all I do is talk to you about it, and they feel like they have the right to say that, is that really fair for the minority who is experiencing the discrimination, right? So, I feel like yes, the policy is there, we are trained in the policy, is it a positive experience, no.

And that:

It feels like it's just a policy there to have it there. But it's not functional; it's there on paper, but then it's not really functional.

There are a number of issues that are brought forth in the aforementioned dialogue. To begin, the frameworks of anti-racism and anti-oppression are somehow falling short of the intended politicized actions these philosophies originally entailed. While the emphasis towards anti-racism and anti-oppression are displayed in terms of the doctrines that are produced, and employees are trained in these policies, there remains a disconnection between the policies and the actions necessary to execute them. The lack of consequences when policies are broken is a definitive point of contention. However, it also brings forth the question on how to develop what an appropriate consequence should be for breaking a policy designed to promote human rights in the workplace. As this participant expresses, breaking such a policy is '*huge*', yet, the lack of functionality renders them ineffectual. Likewise, who is responsible for enacting these policies and ensuring that when broken there are consequences that ensue. The preceding implies that senior management are ultimately accountable for the implementation of these types of policies. Additionally, consistency is another drawback that a research participant describes as problematic with the implementation of organizational policies whereby she expresses:

Like I've said before, they've been trying to change policies, in the workplace. And I've seen positive progression in the direction everybody hopes to go to. However, it's not as quick as we'd all like. The only thing that I think could be done differently, I don't know if, when someone breaks a policy, I don't know if it's addressed consistently across the board. So I think those inconsistencies sometimes

they...trying to find the right word...the policy will have less impact because it's not applied consistently.

This research participant alludes to the benefit of indeed having these policies in place as they do demonstrate a positive step in the right direction. There is also the awareness that this process takes time and does not necessarily happen expeditiously. The inconsistencies, however, point to the futility that these policies have though in ensuring what they are designed to achieve actually becomes possible. Another research participant described the process of change in the workplace as follows:

And so, I think it's gonna be a huge stepping stone, and it's gonna be a lot, and a lot of people breaking like barriers and breaking policies to implement new policies. It's gonna be a long time before the change I kinda foresee happening to happen.

Similarly, she identifies that changing workplace policies is a lengthy process. There is also the importance in acknowledging that breaking rules may be necessary in order to see new policies come into place. Therefore, given that the predominance of policies designed to promote workplace diversity and equity have come to fruition with the last few decades, it could be said that a sort of testing period continues to be underway wherein as we see the failures and limitation of previous policies, the opportunities to learn from these and move forward unfolds. Moreover, a research participant asserts her interpretation of the need for more inclusiveness and states the requirement to have an increased education about difference groups:

An education about different cultures. Different races. The different people, the minority that are working there. And there's probably a handful of us. And the fact that we're just in that organization we bring diversity, we're bringing a lot more to the table right?

As a result, as a visible minority woman, she affirms that simply being in these agencies is beneficial and contributes to a vision of diversity. This research participant's response highlights the need to continue to challenge ignorance and prejudice. The sense that we have something

more to offer the agency that is potentially not being fully utilized highlights that the full involvement and knowledge of visible minority women social service providers could be increased. As a result, her response is also indicative of the process that is necessary in order to reconstruct dominant discourses. The preceding findings demonstrate a number of different tensions and opportunities for further discussion.

Chapter 6 - Discussion and Conclusion

The aim of this research project is to understand how visible minority women social service providers understand the complexities of power in social services agencies, and in particular as employees in the women's shelter system. The responses that research participants provided during the in-depth interviews resonates with the relevant literature and highlights that power impacts visible minority women social service providers in dynamics ways in their professional experiences. For that reason, there are many issues that are raised from this research project. For instance, the findings provide a point of which to critically reflect upon the manner in which power is a highly multidimensional and fluid concept (Dominelli, 2004; see Foucault, 2000; see Lukes, 2005; Pinderhughes, 2004; see Smith, 2008; Spencer, 2008). The responses of research participants demonstrate from a socio-historical perspective the pervasiveness of dominant ideologies but also the manner in which discourses change over time. As such, the responses of research participants reveal how visible minority women have resisted structural marginalization in their work and work settings. Similarly, the construct of managerialism (Tsui & Cheung, 2004), and by extension neoliberalism are seen to have permeated the women's shelter system thereby affecting the institutional framework of these types of human services agencies. Thus, this is seen to influence the manner in which visible minority women social providers have come to understand the institutions that employ them and the ways in which power shapes the work that they do in the shelter system. Importantly, a discussion about the lack of effectiveness of agency policies presents a crucial point in the lives of visible minority women social service providers.

From a fundamental standpoint, many of the research participants' answers adopt the basics from Smith's (2008) definition on the manner in which power can be interpreted.

Nonetheless, the findings also highlight assumptions that adhere to the authoritarian dimensions of power (see Rosenberg, 2005; see Smith, 2008) and the different meanings we attach to power given the contexts within which we are situated (see Lukes, 2005). However, the contextual limitations that visible minority social service providers narrate illuminate the structural inequalities that continue to impact us as a distinct group in Canadian society and point to the manner in which society continues to be shaped by discriminatory divisions (see Burke & Harrison, 2009). As such, for visible minority women social service providers the many social relations that we occupy constitute varying understandings about how we conceptualize power. While from a feminist poststructural framework we both consciously and unconsciously enter into different social relations thereby producing and reproducing power relations (Rosenberg, 2005), in their reflections research participants were conscious of the different environments that affected the degree of power they exercised. The awareness that research participants had in terms of the manner in which their race and/or gender contributed to their conceptualization of how much power they had in their professional and personal environments demonstrates the critical consciousness that has been formed as a result of longstanding ideological structures. Additionally, this critical consciousness points to the notion that especially with respect to their work in the women's shelter system, as highlighted, race was a more prominent feature in the relations they had with coworkers and clients. Thus, from a critical race perspective the connotations that our relations are structured through racialized undertones (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; see Lynn, 2005; see Mutua, 2010) are significant in the experiences of visible minority women social service providers especially as employees in the women's shelter system. As a result, visible minority women social service providers are cognizant of their power as employees in the women's shelter system, as well as the limitations of this power based on being

racialized citizens. Likewise, the fluidity of power is also demonstrated and understood in the testimonies wherein one's social location is a marker that frames the dimensions of power exercised and experienced in the workplace as visible minority social service providers (see Baines, 2002; see Harrison, 2009; Schmid, 2010; see Spencer, 2008; see Watkins-Hayes, 2010).

In light of the discriminatory experiences research participants recount, approaches meant to resist marginalization in their workplaces resonate in the findings. My research implies that similar to the relevant literature which discusses that one's social location contributes to differential treatment in the workplace (see Baines, 2008; Billing & Sundin, 2006; see Harrison, 2009; Prasad et al., 2006; Wilson, 2005) visible minority women social service providers indeed implement strategies that counter these detrimental occurrences as employees in the women's shelter system. Through dialogical processes and personal journeys of growth and perseverance, research participants demonstrate through their responses how power as a productive force not only confines, but also liberates (Foucault, 2000). Likewise, research participants discuss the futility that agencies have made towards promoting diversity and enhancing policies that address the challenges of race and gender in the workplace. This is similar to research that highlights the lack of progress organizational policies have made for the most part to enact strategies that concretely address human rights in the workplace (see Ahmed, 2008; see Baines, 2002; Prasad, et al., 2006). The lack of consistency and enforcement that research participants describe helps to perpetuate unjust processes. Nonetheless, it was voiced that policies such as an anti-oppressive framework are a step in the right direction, albeit this type of change takes time.

Moreover, the precepts of neoliberalism have distinctly impacted the institutional framework of the women's shelter system in terms of the responses from research participants that highlight the hierarchical, bureaucratic, and managerial structure these agencies have

adopted. Managerial power as a distinct theme and way in which visible minority women service providers conceptualize the structuring of their agencies also reinforces a distinct understanding about one's role in the agency. The sentiment that managers held more power whereby the authority of employees was mitigated is in line with the concept of managerialism in which managers as opposed to employees are seen as central to the organizational structure (Tsui & Cheung, 2004).

In conclusion, there are many dynamics ways in which visible minority women social service providers understand power in the women's shelter system. Furthermore, visible minority women social service providers have determined various approaches in order to resist the structural oppression that impacts them in their workplace settings whereby their understanding as employees in the women's shelter system is significantly affected by managerial restructuring. As such, the necessity to continue to interrogate the presence of power in social service relationships remains a pivotal component of ethical social work practice. Given that this research demonstrates the presence of power differentials in the relationships that visible minority women social service providers have as employees in the women's shelter system, the inequalities that persist remains a social justice issue that requires ongoing attention and politicized actions. While this study is limited in terms of a small sample size that only chronicles the experiences of visible minority women in southern Ontario, it nevertheless provides a discussion that demonstrates linkages to longstanding debates researched by various authors. An important factor and avenue for future research is to determine the necessary measures that will strengthen the organizational policies designed to promote workplace equity and human rights. While increased education about other cultures was seen as a viable response from one research participant, it still remains crucial to go beyond a framework that promotes an

awareness of ‘other cultures’ thereby reinforcing notions of subordination and domination.

Therefore, it remains critical that future research determines what actually inhibits the full actualization of these policies and what role can employees take to ensure that they are also part of the process that makes certain action is in fact taken to redress discriminatory and oppressive practices. Additionally, determining the level of commitment on the part of managers, as well as front-line staff toward the implementation of policies designed to promote anti-oppression whereby a framework that investigates how to promote consistency and enforcement when these types of policies are breached is an area for further inquiry. This research highlights that the interactions that are had on a daily basis in the women’s shelter system unfold continuously thereby creating new opportunities to form acts of resistance and modify existing power structures. A key point to remember is that any change takes time to come to full fruition. As I reflect upon the answers that research participants provided, I am struck by how much seems to remain the same in terms of the challenges visible minority women service providers have as employees in these agencies. While I know that at times I am disheartened with the slow pace at which fundamental change occurs, the attempt to open up space in order to have difficult discussions about race and gender are beginning to happen. As an ethical component of critical social work practice, it continues to be part of our duty to ensure that these discussions continue to occur thereby being an integral part in reconstructing dominant discourses, and social relations over time.

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Appendix A

Email Recruitment Request

M. Rochelle Jones, MSW student

The Fluidity of Power: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges of Visible Minority Women
Working in Women Shelters

E-mail Subject line: Participant Recruitment for a Study about Race, Gender and Power in the Workplace

Dear Administrator,

My name is M. Rochelle Jones, and I am a current Master of Social Work Student at McMaster University. I am requesting your assistance in order to recruit potential research participants for a study about race, gender and power in the workplace. I am seeking participants who self-identify as women belonging to a visible minority group and who are currently employed in non-managerial positions in a woman's shelter in Southern Ontario. I have attached a Recruitment Script and Information Letter for distribution via email to your employees should you agree to it.

This study will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of social justice issues. This study is my MSW thesis project. I have attached a copy of a letter of information about the study that gives you full details. If you have any questions, please contact me at **905-536-1766** or jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca.

If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Thank you for your cooperation,

M. Rochelle Jones, MSW student
School of Social Work, McMaster University
(905) 536-1766 or Email: jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca

Appendix B

Email Recruitment Script Sent on Behalf of the Researcher by the Holder of the Participants' Contact Information

M. Rochelle Jones, MSW student

The Fluidity of Power: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges of Visible Minority Women Working in Women Shelters

E-mail Subject line: Participant Recruitment for a Study about Race, Gender and Power in the Workplace

Dear Employees,

M. Rochelle Jones, a McMaster University student in the School of Social Work, has contacted our organization asking us to tell our employees in non-managerial positions about a study she is doing about race, gender and power in the workplace. This research is part of her Master of Social Work program.

The following is a brief description of her study. If you are interested in getting more information about taking part in Rochelle's study please read the brief description below and/or **contact her directly at jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca or at 905-536-1766.**

M. Rochelle Jones is inviting women employed in non-managerial positions in the Women's Shelter System to take part in a study about how women who identify as a member of a visible minority group understand power. The definition of visible minority "[...] includes persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour who do not report being Aboriginal" (Statistics Canada, 2009)¹⁴. You would be asked to participate in 1 (one) face-to-face interview that would last for approximately 1 (one) hour. In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences working in the Women's Shelter System, and about your understanding of power. A follow-up review (member-check) to the interview will be scheduled to ensure the accuracy of the information provided and the interpretation of the results, as well as the anonymity of participants. The review will be scheduled over the telephone or via email communication. Participants have the option to decline the review process.

M. Rochelle Jones has explained that your participation is voluntary. It is possible that as a research participant you may feel apprehensive and/or upset about any opinions you share in relation to the topic matter as these will be linked to your professional experiences and may trigger uncomfortable past or present workplace situations. Also, loss of privacy is a potential risk to you whereby it may be possible to determine your identity from the information you provide. It is expected that the risks to you in taking part in this study are no greater than the risks experienced in your everyday professional life. Your participation in this study is completely confidential and thus will not be known by your peers or superiors.

¹⁴Statistics Canada. (2009). Classification of visible minority. Retrieved June 5, 2012, from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/minority01-minorite01a-eng.htm>

M. Rochelle Jones has advised that you can withdraw your participation from this study by **August 3, 2012**. She has asked us to attach a copy of her information letter that gives you full details about her study.

This study has been reviewed and cleared by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Thank you.



Appendix C

June 14, 2012

Letter of Information / Consent

The Fluidity of Power: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges of Visible Minority Women
Working in Women Shelters

Researcher

Student Investigator:

M. Rochelle Jones
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 536-1766
E-mail: jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca

Faculty Supervisor:

Dr. Rachel Zhou
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23787
Email: zhoura@mcmaster.ca

About this Study

I am inviting your cooperation and participation in a study about how visible minority women, who are current employees in non-managerial positions in the women's shelter system in southern Ontario, understand power in the workplace. The study will involve interviews with women who identify as members of a visible minority group, which, according to the Statistics Canada, "includes persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour who do not report being Aboriginal" (Statistics Canada, 2009)¹⁵.

The purpose of my research is to understand how women from visible minority groups perceive, negotiate, and comprehend the complexities of power in social service organizations. Research demonstrates that women from racialized groups have had to develop new skills in order to resist marginalization. Because power differences remain, talking to those who are

¹⁵ Statistics Canada. (2009). Classification of visible minority. Retrieved June 5, 2012, from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/minority01-minorite01a-eng.htm>



affected helps to raise awareness and investigate possible solutions to enhance workplace equity and social justice.

About the Investigator

My name is M. Rochelle Jones, and I am a Master of Social Work candidate at McMaster University, School of Social Work. I have a Bachelor of Social Work degree as well as a degree in Sociology. My present research interests include topics that deal with race, gender, class/income, and ethnicity. I have work experiences in a woman's shelter as well as in mental health and addictions. Presently, I am a member of the Anti-Oppression Education Committee at McMaster University in the School of Social Work.

Research Participants:

I am seeking participants ***who self-identify as women belonging to a visible minority group and who are currently employed in non-managerial positions in a woman's shelter in Southern, Ontario.*** Research participants will be invited to attend 1 (one) face-to-face interview that will last approximately 1 (one) hour at an agreed upon location. Research participants have the option to have the interview either audio-recorded or, for handwritten notes to be taken by myself. With their permission, participants will be contacted after the interview to review (member-check) the information provided in their session. This will help to ensure the accuracy of the information provided and the interpretation of results, as well as the anonymity of participants. The review of information will be scheduled over the telephone or via email communication. Participants have the option to decline this review process. All audio-recordings will be transcribed by myself and destroyed once the transcription is complete. I, M. Rochelle Jones will retain a copy of the transcript for 1 year, at which time the transcript will be destroyed. Handwritten notes will be destroyed after 1 year's time.

Potential Harms and Risks

It is possible that research participants may feel apprehensive and/or upset about any opinions they share in relation to the topic matter as these will be linked to their professional experiences and may trigger uncomfortable past or present workplace situations. Also, due to all participants being currently employed in the women's shelter system, loss of privacy is a potential risk. It may be possible that your peers and/or superiors are able to determine your identity from the information you provide in the interview which could result in professional and/or personal consequences. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that you can decide what, and how much information you would like to share with me in the interview. It is expected that the risks to participants in taking part in this study are no greater than the risks experienced



in their everyday professional lives. Your participation in this study is completely confidential and thus will not be known by your peers and/or superiors. **Please see the section about Confidentiality for additional information.**

Potential Benefits

The possible benefits of this research are that it has the potential to impact social service organizations, and in particular women's services, in terms of the policies and procedures that govern workplace equity.

Compensation

There will be no compensation or reimbursement for participation in this study.

Confidentiality

Privacy and security is of the utmost concern. As research participants you are instructed to only provide information that you are comfortable to share. No research participant will be identified by name throughout the duration of the study and in its completion. No names will appear in any notes taken whereby an identification number will be used to refer to research participants. Any information provided that may be specific enough to identify an individual will not be published in the study's results. Upon completion of the study, information will be securely stored for 1 (one) year's time after which point it will be destroyed.

Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and may be withdrawn by **August 3, 2012**. Furthermore, participants may decide not to answer specific questions during the interview session. There are no consequences for withdrawing from this study. In the event that a research participant would like to withdraw their participation please contact M. Rochelle Jones at **(905) 536-1766** or Email: jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca to advise. All information provided will be removed from the study and destroyed. A letter of confirmation will be sent via email to inform you that this process has been completed.

Information about the Study Results

Research participants will have either the option to be provided with a PDF version of the study results electronically, or a hard copy mailed via Canada Post.

Question or Concerns about the Study

If you have any questions about the study, and would like more information, please contact:



M. Rochelle Jones (Student Investigator)
School of Social Work, McMaster University
(905) 536-1766
Email: jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca

Dr. Rachel Zhou (Faculty Supervisor)
School of Social Work, McMaster University
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23787
Email: zhoura@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. **If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:**

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Appendix D

Email Recruitment Script re: Personal and/or Former Colleagues

M. Rochelle Jones, MSW student

The Fluidity of Power: Complexities, Contradictions and Challenges of Visible Minority Women Working in Women Shelters

E-mail Subject line: Participant Recruitment for a Study about Race, Gender and Power in the Workplace

I am inviting you to participate in a study about how women employed in non-managerial positions in the Women's Shelter System who identify as a member of a visible minority group understand power. The definition of visible minority "[...] includes persons who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour who do not report being Aboriginal" (Statistics Canada, 2009)¹⁶.

You would be asked to participate in 1 (one) face-to-face interview that would last for approximately 1 (one) hour. In the interview, you will be asked about your experiences working in the Women's Shelter System, and about your understanding of power. A follow-up review (member-check) to the interview will be scheduled to ensure the accuracy of the information provided and the interpretation of the results, as well as the anonymity of participants. The review will be scheduled over the telephone or via email communication. Participants have the option to decline the review process.

Your participation is voluntary. **Please do not feel pressured to participate in this study because you know me.** It is possible that as a research participant you may feel apprehensive and/or upset about any opinions you share in relation to the topic matter as these will be linked to your professional experiences and may trigger uncomfortable past or present workplace situations. Also, loss of privacy is a potential risk to you whereby it may be possible to determine your identity from the information you may provide. It is expected that the risks to you in taking part in this study are no greater than the risks experienced in your everyday professional life. Your participation in this study is completely confidential and thus will not be known by your peers or superiors. You can withdraw your participation in this study by **August 3, 2012**.

¹⁶Statistics Canada. (2009). Classification of visible minority. Retrieved June 5, 2012, from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/concepts/definitions/minority01-minorite01a-eng.htm>

Participation in this study will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of social justice issues. This study is my MSW thesis project. I have attached a copy of a letter of information about the study that gives you full details. If you would like to participate in this study, please contact me at **905-536-1766** or jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca by **July 3, 2012**.

If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is being conducted you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Office of Research Services

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Thank you for your consideration,

M. Rochelle Jones, MSW student
School of Social Work, McMaster University
(905) 536-1766 or Email: jonesmr2@mcmaster.ca

***This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance
by the McMaster Research Ethics Board***

Appendix E

CONSENT

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by M. Rochelle Jones, School of Social Work, McMaster University.

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study.

1) Yes, I agree to be interviewed by M. Rochelle Jones, MSW student for this study

2) I agree that the interview can be audio recorded

Yes

No

3) Yes I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this **Email** address: _____

Please send them to this **Mailing** address: _____

No, I would not like to receive a summary of the study's results.

4) Yes, I agree to be contacted to review (member-check) the information provided. I understand that I can always decline this request.

Please contact me at:

Phone: _____ -OR- Email: _____

No.

5) I understand that I may withdraw my participation from this study by **August 3, 2012**.

Signature: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

Date:

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix F

Interview Guide

The following questions serve as examples and a potential guide to the interview process with research participants. Therefore, additional questions informed by this framework may be posed, and / or expanded upon during the interview.

- 1) What does the word 'power' mean to you? What does 'power' mean to you in relation to your gender and/or race?
- 2) What does 'power' mean in your workplace setting? Can you give me some examples?
- 3) Have you had an experience of resisting marginalization and/or discrimination in your workplace? If so, can you describe the situation? What was the outcome? Who was involved? What is your reflection on this? How has this affected your self-perception and your perception about your ability to work/help in your workplace?
- 4) Who would you say has 'power' in your workplace? Why?
- 5) Do you think you have 'power' in your workplace? If yes, what does this look like and why? How do you use it? If no, why not? What are the barriers?
- 6) Do you feel that 'power' can be or is negotiated in the work that you do? If so, how? If not, why?
- 7) Are there instances where you give up your 'power' or negotiation of power? If so, what were the circumstances? What were its impacts on you as a social service provider?
- 8) Do the organizational policies that deal with workplace equity positively impact your professional experiences as a visible minority woman? If so, what are they and how? If no, why do you believe they do not? What more needs to be done?