THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

OLDER WOMEN: STEREOTYPES AND POTENTIALS

WOMEN TODAY: A MUTUAL SUPPORT GROUP

BY

GAIL THAU

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A. Stereotyping - A Woman's Issue

As a personal experience, old age is as much a woman's concern as a man's . . . even more so, indeed, since women live longer. But when there is speculation upon the subject, it is considered primarily in terms of men. In the first place because it is they who express themselves in laws, books and legends, but even more so because the struggle for power concerns the stronger sex. (Simone de Beauvoir, 1970, p. 46)

To be a woman. To be old. In the mind of the average person there is no obvious connection between gender and old age. Many women have responded to my interest in exploring the lives of older women with, "Why just women? It's hard for men to grow old too!" Men inevitably age as women do and both men and women must face some losses in old age. Men, like women, experience loss of a spouse, loss of social contacts, physical capacities and financial security. However, I have deliberately decided to focus on the experience of the older woman. It has become clear to me from interviewing older women about their life experiences and current situation that there are unique features of aging that pertain to women alone.

Women are sensitive to the plight of the older man. This is certainly in tune with their nurturing protective role. Yet, the time has come for women to nurture

themselves and each other. The indisputable facts and figures documenting the increase in older women in our population combined with the deficit in research concerning their needs has sparked my interest in pursuing this exploration. Since 1971 females became the predominant sex in Manitoba. In 1985, in Canada there were 126 females to 100 males in the 65-79 age group, while in Manitoba, there were 123 females to 100 males in the 65-79 age group. Females in the 65+ age group compose 14 percent of the total female population and 50.6 percent of the total male and female population over 65 in Manitoba. In Canada females in 65+ age group compose 11.92 percent of total female population and 58 percent of the total male and female population over 65. In both Canada and Manitoba there were approximately two and a half times as many females as males in 1985 in the 90+ age group. It is projected that there will be 138 females for every hundred males in the 80+ age group by the year 2001. (Postcensal Annual Estimates of Population by Marital Status, Age, Sex and Components of Growth for Canada, Provinces and Territories, June 1, 1985, vol. 3, 3rd issue.)

Insert Table 1 about here

The lack of differences between the sexes in most

TABLE 1

ESTIMATES OF POPULATION BY SEX, AGE, FOR MANITOBA AND FOR CANADA, JUNE 1, 1985

(In thousands)

Age	Canada		Manitoba	
	Females	Males	Females	Males
65-69	476.2	401.5	22.4	19.3
70-74	408.4	321.9	20.3	16.5
75-79	295.4	207.0	14.9	10.8
80-84	190.6	114.9	9.8	6.5
85-89	101.7	47.8	5.4	2.8
90+	55.2	20.5	3.2	1.3
Total	1,527.5	1,113.6	76.0	57.2

Combined male and female 65-90+ for Canada = 2,641.1

Combined male and female 65-90+ for Manitoba = 133.2

Total female population in Canada	12,818.2	combined
Total male population in Canada	12,540.4	25,358.5
Total female population in Manitoba	541.8	combined
Total male population in Manitoba	527.9	1,069.6

SOURCE: POST CENSAL ANNUAL ESTIMATES OF POPULATION BY MARITAL STATUS, AGE, SEX AND COMPONENTS OF GROWTH FOR CANADA, PROVINCES AND TERRITORIES. VOL. 3, 3RD ISSUE STATISTICS CANADA

studies on aging can lead to the erroneous assumption that the experience of aging is the same for both sexes. Activist Tish Sommers (1976) protests against this unfairness, "Most statistics lump us together male and female. . . . masking tremendous differences between the sexes, and above all obscuring how much aging is a woman's issue" (p. 36). Gender plays a significant role in all stages of life, and old age is no exception. For throughout the lifespan of a woman, from childhood through adolescence, to adulthood we are socialized to be dependent second class citizens.

Our upbringing as women stresses that taking responsibility for oneself should come second to our relationships and responsibilities to other people. Women develop skills as caregivers to men and children. This role circumscribes women's intellectual development and traps them into passive silence. As women moved away from self-development so the doors to economic security were shut off. This debilitating focus on others rather than self created ignorance, vulnerability and powerlessness. The world of power, of financial independence achieved through higher education and employment is monopolized by men. Women's contributions of nurturance and service are unrewarded by resources translatable into power. The sad inevitable result of this structural arrangement of gender roles is that old women are victimized. In old age, women find themselves in economically and psychologically

deprived states.

In a 1984 study Dolores Gold tried to determine the existence of widespread differences in psychological functioning between elderly Canadian women and men. She concluded that "the factors that predict good psychological functioning for elderly women and men are the same--higher levels of education, being married good physical health, a level of income that is seen as sufficient for daily needs, leading active lives that offer a variety of social rewards that are perceived by the individual as being obtainable through his/her efforts." She maintains that in this sense then elderly men and women are clearly very much the same psychologically. "However, the Canadian historical and cultural contexts provide the two sexes unequally with these resources and so lead to different outcomes in the experience of aging for women and men (Gold, 1984, p. 34). Herein lies the clue to begin unravelling the specific contextual concerns of older women. It is this basic inequality so deeply enmeshed in Canadian society transmitted to all generations that perpetuates the lower socio-economic status of elderly women.

In a recent article on "Social Work Services for Older People," Sheila Neysmith (1985) presents an enlightening framework for the conditions under which services to older people are provided. She distinguishes between the causes and consequences of personal dependency and socially created dependency: "We already know that class and gender

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disparities operating earlier in the life cycle are
important determinants of the quality of life one
experiences in later years" (p. 213). An awareness of
these differences is critical in planning to meet the needs
of older women by designing policies and pension schemes
that do not blame the victim. The need to re-assess the
pension benefits of widows and divorced women is a step
towards acknowledging the existence of gender disparities
in education and employment opportunities. Neysmith's
outlook is both revolutionary and realistic because it
points to the need to examine the social forces that have
created the world of older women in Canada today.

In The Book of Eve, C.B. Howe (1984) depicts the
courage and determination of a 65 year old woman Eva, who
decides to walk out of her soul-destroying marriage and
make it on her own. Eva's lot in life is typical of the
traditional wife in the 1950's. When she decided to leave
her husband and her comfortable home, she assesses her
situation realistically. "I've waited on the man hand and
foot and got nothing much more for it than my room and
board" (p. 22). As Eva decides to escape her life "under
bars" she walks out on the day after the arrival of her
first old age pension cheque. This meagre ticket to a
scant economic freedom is her reward for looking after her
husband and son all her life. Despite the hardships that
lay ahead Eva discovers that, "Being alone like this, holed
up in a dusty basement is something of value, and I'll

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never go back" (p.26). Eva discovers how her socialization has imprisoned her, cheated her economically and stifled her spontaneity and independence. In a soul-searching letter to God, she sums up with keen perception the predicament of old women, "The chief duty of females, we were taught, was to practise the restraints of civilization, not explore its possibilities" (p. 16). Eva presents a rare example of an older woman who chooses to embark upon challenges and courageously explores her independence and creativity in old age. My objective in exploring the world of older women is to expose the socially created barriers which foster crippling roles, and to consider how older women can develop their potential as people. The fictional character of Eva depicts one option--that of leaving a marriage to embark on the exploration of female potential.

Virginia Woolf referred to the realm of relationships between women, "as that vast chamber where nobody has been" (Rich, 1977, p. 31). This metaphor can also characterize the lives of older women. As I spoke to older women and discovered how low their self-esteem generally was and how disconnected they often felt from each other, I sensed an unexplored domain. Most older women have been taught not to trouble others with their "trivial" worries. It is they who always must be available to help others. Women in the 1950's led very private lives, isolated from each other by loyalties of marriage. Women have not been taught to fight

for change, but rather to accept and to believe that they are ultimately responsible for their poor health or inadequate income. Time after time when prodded to share the herstory of their opportunities in life these women reiterate, "If I wasn't so dumb I might have prepared for the future more adequately." As I spoke to older women about their work I was able to uncover wisdom and strengths that have not been acknowledged. The process of exploring the vast achievements, skills and strengths of older women beneath their silence and passivity indeed gives one the feeling of probing into "that vast chamber where nobody has been."

B. Breaking Down Stereotypes

In the 1980's many people believe that we are living in liberated times. Yet, old attitudes die hard. Despite the current movement to liberate women from the confining roles of child care worker and domestic laborer, society is very far from achieving equal recognition for men and women, for old and young. Older women face a dual battle, against ageism and sexism. Therefore:

Any consideration of older women must include two kinds of stereotypes, those dealing with sex and those dealing with age--both powerful as well as intertwined. Our rating of ourselves as good or bad depends on whether we believe we are on time in our developmental behavior and these age norms are different despite sexual revolution, despite the

women's movement, despite everything, for men and for women. (Troll, L., 1984, p.22)

The study of stereotyping is very intriguing. We all harbor stereotypic notions about types of people. They are so deeply ingrained in our thinking that even those of us who wish to avoid stereotyping catch ourselves doing it. The victims also unconsciously become party to their own oppression. After generations of being told by society that old women are of little value, women internalize this stereotype. On one hand we are living in a time of awakening consciousness. On the other hand, in recent years the women's movement has challenged the inequities created by a male dominated society and has awakened both sexes to the oppressive economic, political and social repercussions of a patriarchal society.

Feminists have begun a process of unearthing the valuable unacknowledged work of women in art, politics and science. Yet, despite the growing movement towards a collective feminist consciousness, we remain trapped by stereotypes and myths that manifest in behaviors reflecting old assumptions about gender roles. In daily life the physical and emotional well-being of the older women is placed under duress by behaviors and attitudes associated with sexist and ageist stereotypes. In an attempt to understand the persistence of the gender power struggle Lipman-Blumen raises the phenomenon of "cultural lag." She explains that gender role socialization managed by adults

raised under different social conditions is inevitably geared to roles of a previous era. "Cultural lag, is a disparity between the expectations created by outdated socialization processes and the realities of an everchanging society" (Lipman-Bluman, 1984, p. 53). This gap between the socialization and actual reality induces tension. Therefore, although it is exhilarating to be living in a time of awakening consciousness, it can also be confusing and painful.

In an article entitled the "Distinctive Attributes of Feminist Groups," Naomi Gottlieb (1983) reiterates the importance of exposing stereotypes for group development. She asks, "Can a group experience for women be effective which does not actively attempt to surmount harmful stereotypes or does not purposely increase the control women can assume over their lives?" (p. 93). While planning a mutual support group for older women I realized that an essential beginning point was to expose the negative stereotypes they experience. Older women should explore the cultural, historical roots of stereotypes and the social institutions and media that maintain them. This exploration is a necessary step in the process of consciousness raising. Efforts to surmount the barriers created by stereotypes can free and empower women to move beyond the subordinate status stereotypes impose on them. "For until we can understand the assumptions in which we are entrenched we cannot know ourselves" (Adrienne Rich,

1979, p. 35).

C. Sexism

In Small Expectations, a recent Canadian book that explores society's betrayal of older women, Leah Cohen asserts that women must begin to use their political strength to change society's appalling attitudes towards and treatment of older women. "It is incumbent on all women to work towards ridding society of these negative and damaging stereotypes, which have the power to destroy our self-esteem and our sense of worth" (Cohen, 1984, p. 17). With this goal in mind I would like to consider sexist stereotypes. In the next section I will move on to consider stereotypes of old women.

What are the stereotypes of females? What are big girls made of?

> Dependence, passivity, fragility, low pain tolerance,
> nonaggression, noncompetitiveness, inner orientation,
> empathy, sensitivity, nurturance, subjectivity,
> intuitiveness, yieldingness, receptivity, inability to
> risk emotional liability, supportiveness (Bardwick and
> Douvan, 1983, p. 225)

These adjectives sum up society's idealized stereotypes of femininity. From childhood little girls are encouraged to be passive, cute and quiet. Little boys on the other hand are expected to be more aggressive rascals and are put down for sissy behavior. From the early years of childhood parents encourage and reinforce certain behaviors in their

children who in turn model the roles of their parents. Most parents do not think twice when they buy dolls and dishes for girls and cars and tools for boys. Unknowingly the subtle message is transmitted; litte girls are taught to care for others and boys are encouraged to master skills furthering independence.

All very young children are dependent on adults for their physical well being and for the knowledge that they exist and have value. Yet, as children grow up boys and girls are encouraged to develop in opposite spheres. In the gentle pink world girls are taught to become dependent, symbols of "sugar and spice and everything nice." Girls are treated as more delicate and fragile, and so learn to see themselves as weak and dependent. In school years both sexes are rewarded for achievements and girls are able to hold their own. In fact they are often the better students. Yet, with the onset of puberty new and different behaviors are suddenly rewarded. The physical changes that girls experience throw their emotional and social lives into upheaval. Before too long girls are encouraged to strive for heterosexual success and are punished for conspicuous competitive achievements. It becomes more important for a high school girl to have a boyfriend than to be a good student. In adolescence, the establishment of successful interpersonal relationships becomes the self defining, most rewarded achievement task. In an article entitled"Psycho-Social Problems of Older Women," Troll

(1984) echoes this basic sex difference in status so entrenched in our society. "A young woman has much greater status if she dates the high school senior class president than if she herself is elected president" (p. 21).

The majority of women internalize norms that direct them to assess their self-worth from others. If women choose to pursue a career, those open to them are in large part of a nurturant nature: teacher, social worker, nurse, secretary. The educational segregation of women in traditional feminine fields is gradually changing. Women have made serious inroads in medical, law and business schools. Nevertheless, they still remain far below their potential level in terms of their numbers in the population (Lipman-Blumen, 1984, p. 114). Before entering university most women have been denied the resources they need to become self-defined. They are socialized primarily to develop their nurturant capacities to be good mothers and wives.

In the "Double Bind, Healing the Split," Jessica Heriot (1983) draws attention to the crippling effect of this stereotypical prescription which creates a double bind for women. Women receive a strong message that they should find their greatest happiness and fulfillment in living for and through others, specifically husbands and children. She points out that anxiety is a natural byproduct of other-directed people whose sense of self-worth depends on pleasing others. As a feminist she recognizes the

complications created for women by the notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice. "To be a healthy woman by society's standards is to be a sick adult easily influenced, submissive, passive, illogical, dependent, not adventurous and unable to separate feelings from ideas" (Heriot, 1983, p. 12). The discrepancy between womanhood and adulthood is nowhere more evident than in studies on sex role stereotypes by Broverman, Vogel, Broverman Clarkson and Rosenkrantz (1972). The findings of these studies indicate that all the qualities necessary for adulthood are associated with masculinity, and considered undesirable as attributes of the female (Gilligan, 1982, p. 17). Looked at from a feminist perspective these stereotypes reflect a conception of adulthood that is itself out of balance. If "one favors separateness of the individual self over connection to others, and autonomy over the interdependence of love and care," just what kind of adult emerges? Are the qualities of intimacy and caring not necessary for a well balanced adult? The narrowness of adhering to stereotyped gender roles sets into motion a process of devaluing women.

It is not surprising that as a result of these stereotypes females have no solid foundation on which to build a sense of self-worth. The forms of repression imposed on women vary and the outrage against the paralyzing effects of socially created passivity are voiced by feminists. Adrienne Rich (1979), a feminist literary

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artist expresses her experience of traditional maternal and marital roles as requiring a "holding back, a putting aside of that imaginative activity. . . ." The passivity created by constantly caring for others is in direct conflict with "an imaginative transformation of reality," (p. 43) necessary to develop as a person. Helen Levine comments on the overwhelming and self-destructive stresses created by the traditional role expectations of women. To be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional functions in a traditional way is in direct conflict with self achievement for women.

D. Power

A discussion of the effects of sexist stereotypes on women would be incomplete without considering the dimension of power. What does power mean to women? Until recently it did not mean too much to most women. Most women associated power with politics and dismissed its relevance to their lives. In the Book of Eve, Eva voices the common response, "I've never had a political conviction in my life, unless, you count being bored by politics" (Beresford-Howe, 1984, p. 8). Yet, as Eva leaves her old life and sheds her burdens in a struggle to regain self-respect and a meaningful independent existence, experience teaches her that the personal is political.

In a society that socializes women to become dependent on others the message to women is that power and control are male attributes. In Women, Men and the Psychology of

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Power (1981), Hilary Lips cites Johnson's studies to underline the detrimental results of stereotyping surrounding male and female use of power. Women are expected to be weak and helpless and consequently the exercise of power by women has been seen and in large measure continues to be seen in virtually all cultures as disruptive and illegitimate. Those who achieve overt power are suspect and often considered unfeminine. There is a strong cultural prescription that women's primary role is to be wife and mother and that when women strive to achieve power in the male domain they are interfering with their expected unassertive feminine behavior.

Johnson (1976) states that women's use of power is more often indirect, helpless and personal, while men's use of power is direct, competent and concrete. This derives from the fact that women have less access to concrete resources and competence, as well as to positions of authority (Lipps, 1984, p. 55). Women are expected to be weak and helpless and consequently no one will place the kind of demands on them to develop strength and competence. Or, women's strength is limited to requirements that are functional to a male dominated society. Thus women's true strength becomes masked beneath a learned presentation of women's secondary status. The internalization of the expectations to use power differently is born out in Johnson's studies. The results indicate that the use of power methods tend to raise the self-esteem of the user and

the use of helplessness is linked with a reduction in self-esteem. The cultural prescription against women representing power is so strong that "it is entirely possible for women to maintain a self-image of weakness and powerlessness even when their behavior appears to others to be a demonstration of power and strength" (Lips, 1984, p. 78).

The most important form of power denied to women as a result of the sexist gender power structure is "the capacity to develop one's abilities" (Miller, 1977, p. 81). Women's learned preoccupation with the needs of others prevents them from attending to their own needs. The natural result of deriving one's self-worth from others rather than from independent achievement is a shaky foundation for self-esteem.

Women are taught to regard their feelings of weakness as defeats. Too often women suffer from depressions and become labelled as mentally ill as they blame themselves entirely for the multitude of stresses in their lives. The aim of feminist therapy is to connect the personal with the political. Rather than looking within women's depleted resources to discover the solutions to their life situations, feminists direct women to look to the structures of society to understand their circumstances. Women should be directed to redefine the sources of their stresses and discover that social changes are directly connected to personal changes. In this light economic and

political power take on new meaning and challenge for women. "Limited economic and political power is directly connected to the lessening of personal power" (Graveline, 1985, p. 17). To effect changes in women's personal lives, women must challenge the systems that oppress them.

If one looks at the lives of women in the 1980's it is clear that we are living in a time of changing roles for the sexes. Women's participation in the labor force has increased dramatically in the last decade. Women account for 54 percent of the Manitoba labor force (Pension Commission of Manitoba, 1985). The increased labor force participation of women is a positive indication of women's decreasing economic dependence on men. Yet, one should be cautioned before becoming too optimistic, as the majority of women still work at secondary, low paying service type jobs. Many of these women are motivated to work not so much for personal development as due to financial necessity. At the same time these women are more burdened than liberated by their paid employment. They often must work at two full time jobs, one in the paid labor force and the other as principal child care worker and household manager. Ultimately women are victimized by assuming the traditional role in the home and allowing men to dominate the economic and political spheres.

In our society success is measured with a male yardstick. Women have become very accustomed to the standard putdown implicit in the phrase, "just a

housewife." Our society rewards males who succeed by acquiring money, power and occupational status at the same time overlooking ways in which women who are not employed in the paid labor force contribute to the economy. Feminists emphasize that the nonwage-earning women contribute to the economy in two unnoticed ways. First, they bear the children who produce the next generation of laborers. Secondly, by tending to the emotional and physical needs of their families, they restore the vitality of the labor force (Lipman-Blumen, 1984). Not only are the contributions of such women unacknowledged, they are further hampered by their dependency on men. When men do not materialize to provide the financial security women are raised to depend on in exchange for their services in the home, such women become victims. They are victims of a system based on unequal access to education, to job training and advancement opportunities.

The need for the new generations of young women to comprehend the limitations imposed on women by traditional gender roles is critical. Young women should work to escape their subordinate position in all spheres of society by joining forces and demanding equality. They need to understand the importance of self-nurturance and self-definition in all areas of their lives. The awareness that the structures of society allow unequal opportunities to the sexes, will drive women to comprehend the "political" dimension of their repression. The inability

of women to give themselves and each other credit is a natural byproduct of low self-esteem inflicted on those who are taught to derive their self-worth from others.

Today's university students are more aware than the previous generation of the consequences of role choice. In "Taking Women Students Seriously," a lecture given by Adrienne Rich to women students in a women's college, Rich stresses the radicalizing force of education. For higher education provides the tools for men and women alike to examine political and social realities. She urges women to explore outside the patriarchal descriptions of reality. They must seek out the silence of women and break through this silence by naming themselves, by assuming control over their own lives.

> To think like a woman in a man's world means thinking critically, refusing to accept the givens, making connections between facts and ideas which men have left unconnected. And it means that the most difficult thing of all listening and watching in art and literature in the social sciences, in all the descriptions we are given of the world, for the silences, the absences, the nameless, the unspoken, the encoded for there we will find the true knowledge of women. And in breaking those silences, naming our selves, uncovering the hidden . . . we begin to define a reality which resonates to us . . . which allows us to begin taking charge of our lives (Rich, 1979, p. 245).

Today both men and women are rejecting traditional
role allocations which are exaggerated and costly, as they
push men and women into limited slots, solely on the basis
of sex. Unlike the generation of women who are seniors
today, young women now have expanded opportunities for
self-development. Some young men are breaking away from
the rigid male role set and becoming more actively involved
in child rearing. This in turn frees the women to
participate professionally with less stress. As more women
combine work and family roles the image of the aging
housewife dreading the empty nest and her husband's
retirement characterizes a decreasing proportion of the
female population (Lopata & Norr, 1980, p. 95).

Yet, for the older women of today the role choices
were not available. "The old elderly have less formal
education than the young elderly and the earlier cohorts
have less education than the recent cohorts" (Chappell,
1984, p. 10). Today's older women, now in their sixties
and seventies, are the hardest hit. Many seem trapped, the
victims of a system that socialized them into roles of
learned helplessness and failed to provide alternatives for
the financial and psychological support they were expected
to receive from their spouses. After spending their lives
as caregivers, women are generally ill equipped to move on
and make it on their own after loss of their spouse. One
reason that women have difficulty in making decisions is

that throughout their lives they have been told not to "worry their (pretty) little heads" or make decisions of any significance.

These women are repaid for their years of serving as homemakers by economic and social deprivation. "They remain in frightening and dangerous situations because their confidence in their ability to live on their own has been badly damaged through a lifetime of dependence" (Cohen, 1984, p. 12). Cohen condemns our society that promotes stereotyped roles for women to live financially, emotionally and intellectually impoverished lives and then expects them to be grateful. In contrasting older and younger women's relations to power, a brighter future emerges for younger women. Yet, the subject of my interest is to explore the lives of women who are old today. By understanding the historical, social, economic and political roots of their limited powers one can move with sensitivity to "enter the world of older women" and get in touch with their reality.

E. Media and Stereotypes

Given an awareness of the negative consequences of sexist stereotyping of women, coupled with the awareness of the changing roles of women, one cannot help but wonder what keeps stereotypes alive? Given the increase in education levels, the lower fertility rates and increase in working women, the socialization model is no longer applicable in its rigid form. In "Ambivalence: The

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Socialization of Women," Bardwick and Douvan (1971) point out that "In this tradition bound, sex stereotyped culture, even though millions of women are employed, old values are internalized and serve as a criteria for self-evaluation" (p. 237). The awareness of how simplistic and inaccurate, unidimensional sex stereotypes are is a step towards eradicating old stereotypes. Although this is an era of changing norms, stereotypes are not easily shelved.

What keeps stereotypes alive? The media and our institutions have a tremendous impact on society. Popular advertising does much to sustain the stereotype of woman doing "woman's work," and loving it. Do you ever see a man singing as he polishes his kitchen floor and beam with delight as he cleans his toilet? No! It is inevitably women who are presented, "cheerfully scouring a skillet or two, or she's polishing pots till they gleam like new or she's scrubbing the tub or she's mopping the floor or she's wiping the stains from the walls and floors, she's washing the dishes the walls or the clothes or waxing the furniture till it just glows, with a light hearted smile and a friendly wink" (Marlo Thomas, Free To Be, You and Me, Arista Records, 1972).

Advertising exploits and reinforces the myths of women's place with messages of infinite variety. "It spews out images of women as sex mates, housekeepers, mothers and menial workers--images that perhaps reflect the true status of most women in society, but which also make it

increasingly difficult to break out of the sexist stereotypes that imprison them" (Komisar, 1971, p. 304). It is unheard of to view a man serving his children a meal while the wife comes down dressed for work and casually informs him that she is too late to eat the breakfast he prepared for her. In the endless ads we see women serving children and men. The only power women are honored with in advertising is the indirect power that is implicit in sex appeal. We seldom see women as the buyers of cars, because big purchases are left for men who are more knowledgeable and better equipped to make major decisions.

Women are generally portrayed as less intelligent than men, dependent on their men and grovelling to please men. They must always look good and maintain a cheerful disposition. Advertising steers young women, in fact, women of all ages, to be preoccupied with clothes and appearance. This focus reflects the cultural expectation that women be beautiful and with their good looks they will succeed in luring a man. The only work that women are portrayed doing is the kind that allows them to assist men. It is their role to make life more pleasant for men. Female incompetence is reinforced in numerous advertisements that echo the message implicit in Parker Bros.: "You might as well give her a gorgeous pen to keep her checkbook unbalanced with."

The psychological effects of advertising in all forms of the media are devastating for women. Women are

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bombarded by a billion dollar beauty industry which "preys upon women's vulnerability and poor self-image" (Cohen, 1984, p. 17). The industry defines woman's worth in terms of youth and attractiveness. The beauty industry inundates us with the message that we must wage war against what are described as the "ravages of age" (Cohen, 1984, p. 17). As Wendy Sanford remarks in "Body Image," "Never before have there been hundreds of profitable businesses set up to convince us that we don't look good enough" (Sanford, 1984). It is not at all surprising that women so often feel negative about their physical appearance.

> Women who don't fit the image of the shapely white, able bodied, smooth skinned, young and glamorous, experience painfully the negative judgments, fears and hatreds which in subtle or unsubtle ways make it hard for nearly every women in our society to love and accept herself as she is (Cohen, 1984, p. 23).

In reality it is the rare woman who for a few years of her life actually meets the image of beauty presented by the media. Yet, the negative self-image generated in relation to physical beauty impairs many women's mental and physical health.

What can women do to change the sexist and ageist portrayal of women so pervasive in the advertising industry? Women's increasing self-determination must fuel a battle against such obvious sources of promoting unhealthy stereotypes. In "The Image of Woman in

Advertising," Komisar (1981) points out the need for female advertising professionals to lead a protest of all women against sexist, degrading portrayal of women. Women must band together to take action against the companies who refuse to eliminate objectionable advertisements. Feminist organizations have focused on sexist advertising and urge others to boycott products where commercials demean or exploit. Komisar points out the real power that women do have to effect companies to change. "Women are 85 percent of the retail market; they could end degrading advertising tomorrow if they refused to buy the products that use such methods" (p. 316). There are currently a few companies that already see women outside the stereotyped roles. Yet the battle to eliminate sexist portrayals of women is only beginning and has a long road ahead before nearing its objective.

Sexist stereotypes are promoted in our education system as well as in the media. In schools the textbooks used to educate our children have only recently been changed to reflect less rigid sex role stereotypes. In their textbooks first graders now see dads washing dishes. On the other hand children's stories and fairy tales are replete with portrayals of "old hags, evil crones, scary old witches and mean old stepmothers" (Lesnoff-Cararaglia, 184, p. 14). Such images foster both ageist and sexist attitudes. Despite the spirit of protest created by the feminist movement, it is apparent that changes evolve very

slowly. An awareness of the negative impact of the media
and of all social institutions that continue to allow
unequal portrayal of the sexes must generate anger and
protest, to keep the struggle moving forward.

Chapter Two

Stereotypes of Old Women

Just as it is a sociological commonplace that in Canadian society women have been considered less valuable than men, so the aged are believed to be less worthy than the young. "Consequently the older woman, burdened with more negative stereotypes than any other age sex group is often viewed as one of society's least socially important members" (Payne and Whittington, 1980, p. 9). We have an entire set of negative attitudes towards old people which makes those who are older feel declassed and those who are younger feel uneasy about associating with such inconsequential individuals or about getting old themselves (Troll, 1984). In 1968, Butler coined the word "ageism" to describe this prejudice against the elderly which is found in some degree in all of us. "Ageism can be seen as a process of systematic discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism can accomplish this with skin color and gender" (Butler, 1982, p. 24). Ageism means that old persons are frequently resented, devalued, forgotten, ignored and even openly disliked (Butler, 1982). The stereotypes of old age range from being categorized as senile, rigid in thought and manner, to old fashioned in morality and skills. Stereotypes of older women include these notions and are rampant in references to old hags, mean old witches, evil stepmothers, and sweet little old ladies.

Although both men and women are victims of ageism, the older woman is particularly devalued. Long before most women are physiologically dead, they experience multiple losses which cause them to shrink away as persons (Curtin, 1972 quoted in Lesnoff-Caravaglia, 1984). Women are not valued equally with men in terms of productivity and worth to society. Similarly the aging woman is not the equal of a younger woman, "neither in power, nor in beauty nor in any of the other female attributes" (Lesnoff-Caravaglia, 1984, p. 15). Women must cope with double stigmata; female and old. Women cannot change their sex--nor can the aged hide their wrinkles. This combination exacerbates the experiences of subordination and frustration that old women face. Aging involves adapting to a series of physical, economic and social losses.

In a recent play by Carol Shields (unpublished, working script for Black Hole Theatre Company, 1984), "Arrivals and Departures," the playwright does a brilliant job of explaining the classic stereotype of LOL's, or little old ladies. In this scene the airline official attempts to bump an older lady, Mrs. Kitchell off her flight to England. She had her reservation close to a year in advance but was being displaced to accommodate a team of Canadian basketball players. Another older female traveller protests against the unfairness and blatant sexist discrimination in choosing to bump an old lady.

Don't let them do this to you. You know why they

chose you to bump? They said to themselves, "Let's

check the passenger list and find a little old lady.

It's called a LOL, little old lady. LOL's are

pushovers. They cave in without a fight. Because

LOL's have spent their lives giving in. Always

accommodating, always making sure they don't intrude.

Giving in to fathers, giving in to husbands, giving in

to children. Now is that true or is it not true? (p.

46)

The differential treatment of older women in our society

must be understood in the context of the general

subordinate status allotted to women in all stages of life.

This sexism coupled with attitudinal bias stemming from

ageism places older women in the powerless position of

LOL's The need to recognize that it is our society that

has created the status of LOL's and not some punishment

they should personally feel responsible for is crucial.

The process of silencing women, of shaping them into

subordinate beings is explained by the character "Jeans" in

Arrivals and Departures:

And when exactly did the little old ladies get little?

They weren't little young ladies. In the beginning

they were full sized human beings. But what happened?

I'll tell you . . . They were told to keep their

voices down. They were told to keep their feet

together, to keep their hands on their lap, to hold

their elbows in, to keep their eyes lowered, to keep

their chins tucked in, to keep their heads modestly

bowed.   That's how they got little. (p. 47)

Older women have so many strikes against them that it

becomes an arduous and depressing task to touch upon each

component of the stereotypes associated with them.   One

widespread bias against older women stems from our cultural

preoccupation with youth and beauty.   Women are told that

their worth is defined in terms of youth and

attractiveness.   Therefore they are advised to "Wage war

against the signs of aging."   "Hate that gray, wash it

away!"   Skin creams like Second Debut, must be used to

erase wrinkles.   Of course Geritol will surely help to

restore some of that youthful energy or zest for life.   Our

society's preoccupation with physical appearance is

"replete with negative images and depressing jargon such as

"Crow's feet, belly bulge, spare tire, sagging breasts,

jowls, baggy eyes and crepy skin" (Cohen, 1984, p. 16).

This endless harping on the decline of our bodies cannot

help but affect women's feelings about their value as human

beings.

A woman's face is prized in so far as it remains

unchanged.   Yet, a double standard of aging is embedded in

our society.   This leads us to accept the view that men

become distinguished and sophisticated as they age, while

women inevitably decline.   The double standard of aging is

a phrase first coined by Susan Sontag in 1972.   She writes,

"In a man's face lines are taken to be signs of character.

They indicate emotional strength, maturity - qualities far more esteemed in men than in women" (Posner, 1984, p.70). On the other hand lines of aging, any scar even a birthmark on a woman's face are always regarded as unfortunate defects. In sum, "While older men are craggy, women are wrinkled; gray hair distinguished on a man shows that a woman is over the hill, maturity makes a man sexually attractive, a woman grandmotherly" (Cohen, 1984, p. 28).

One way for older women to deal with the negative associations of physical aging is to internalize the message and try to pass for looking younger than their years. Older women feel complimented as the years creep up on them to be told that they are young in spirit or do not look their age. Many women fall victim to their oppressors. The pervasive idea that old women are second class citizens, not worth knowing, is summed up by this woman's explanation for dying her hair:

> I'm never going to be a gray haired old lady, never!
> People don't listen to what you say anyway because you
> are a woman, but if you are an old woman, forget it.
> I'm going to dye my hair until I die. (Matthews,
> 1979, p. 79)

In The Social World of Old Women, Matthews (1979) illuminates the enormous life energy that older women expend in trying to deal with the stigma of age. An important strategy for preserving their personhood becomes what Matthews calls, "information management," or in

blunter terms, passing. Dying one's hair is just one part of an elaborate scheme to conceal one's age. The satisfaction of successfully passing for younger is often expressed in this way: "I don't think that they know my age . . . People don't think I'm as old as I am, so I don't go around blabbin it" (p. 74). Passing is the attempt "to avoid the oppressor's hateful distortion of our identity and the real menace to our survival of this hatred" (Macdonald, 1984, p. 55). Given the hazards of passing and the fact that so many older people themselves have lived a lifetime of fear, contempt and patronizing of the old, it is easy to see why most older people "share with the other members of our society the stereotypical view of old people and refuse to define themselves as old" (p. 55). This stereotype of devaluing old people is indeed culture bound. In Japan, China and among American Indians elders are treated with reverence and have no need to disguise themselves. Our society might benefit from exploring this alternative way of regarding elders and thereby enhancing the lives of all generations.

This double standard of beauty not only attacks a woman's physical being by setting up artificial standards of perfection, it also conveys a destructive message regarding mental status. The view that women have nothing to offer but their bodies and that no amount of intelligence, learning or wisdom can make up for the lost bloom of youth is implicit. "A woman's character is

thought to be innate, static not the product of her experience, her years, her actions" (Posner, 1984, p. 70). The prejudice directed towards old women in just about every aspect of their lives stems from the culturally accepted notion that women are their bodies and men are their accomplishments. It is not uncommon to find even eminent male intellectuals who define a female's social contribution in terms of her ability to bear children (Faulkner, 1980).

What gives women even further cause for anger is the association between changing physical appearance and declining mental competence or work performance. It is not uncommon for employers to unfairly dismiss women as incompetent and useless if they fail to present a youthful sexual image. Leah Cohen provides a token example of a successful woman, Christine Craft, who was demoted from her job as a TV newswoman in Kansas City. She was told, "When the people of Kansas City see your face, they turn the dial" (Cohen, 1984, p. 17). Such blatant sexism surely has the power to destroy a woman's life.

If an older woman is not totally dismissed from her work for looking her age, she nevertheless starts to receive some negative messages. Often female employees who know that they are competent at their work become defensive as they get older and sense that others look down upon them. This experience was shared by a member of a mutual support group for older women at Creative Retirement Man.

She voices this uncomfortable feeling that shakes one's self-confidence.

>All of a sudden you begin to feel that you are not
>part of the mainstream. You feel a kind of
>undercurrent because you reach a certain age. I may
>not be able to run around the block but I really feel
>my output at work is just as good as ever, maybe it
>can't be . . . I get the distinct impression that
>because I am nearing sixty-five certain people look at
>me and think "I hope she retires soon." It makes me
>mad! ("Women Today Group, Creative Retirement
>Manitoba, February 1986)

After thirty-four years at the same job it is sad that the older woman receives the message that her value is diminished by her age. Yet the self-doubt engendered by the sexist system prompted this same woman to remark to her boss. "I told my boss that when I retire he must be looking forward to replacing me with a shapely young blond." The idea that work performance suddenly declines when a person turns sixty-five is preposterous. The facts point out that the opposite is often true for people with many years of experience are usually very valuable employees, not easily replaced.

It is not surprising that older women often become trapped in the stereotype and so feel the defeat of age more keenly. The pressures to disguise one's age are so strong that many women do so without first assessing the

potential damage. Pretending must inevitably come to an end and for the most successful actors the cost to self-esteem is compounded. "The energy spent in the cover-up detracts from the joy of existence and has an eroding affect upon human existence" (Lesnoff-Caravaglia, 1984, p. 15). It is important for older women to reject this punishment and to wage a battle against advertising and social pressures that devalue their sense of worth.

In a recent article, "Challenging the Myths About Aging," Sybil Shack speaks out against the strength of myths concerning aging. She epitomizes the position of rebelling and refusing to succumb to stereotypes. Shack states:

> I'm afraid that I startle well meaning acquaintances when I respond to their compliments with "what's wrong with being old in spirit? What's wrong with enjoying the earned the right to be old. We've lived, we've accumulated experience, skills, knowledge even wisdom. Why should we have to apologize for, make light of our assets?" (Shack, 1984, p. 5)

Shack represents the minority of older women for the majority have been well trained to devalue themselves. Yet, the powerful message that she voices should serve as an inspiration for all older women. "Surely part of our maturity is the ability to accept ourselves as we are senior members of the human race, valuable and contributing people, without pretending to be what we are not - young."

She asserts that "in accepting ourselves we gain the respect of others" (p. 5). For if women begin to enjoy the earned right to be old they will acknowledge their accumulated experience, skills, knowledge and wisdom. This self-appreciation and acceptance is indeed a crucial step in gaining the respect of others.

The cry for older women to rebel rather than to succumb is echoed in Barbara Macdonald's (1984) powerful reflections:

> To be surprised time after time by my own gray hair on the hairdresser's floor is to be cut off from direct knowledge of my identity, from the adventure of my growth, from nature and her day to day processes at work in my own being. That surprise reflects my own rejection, not simply of the stigma of age, but of the reality of age. It links me with my oppressor and divides me from myself (p. 56).

Older women must be assisted in their quest for equality and positive self-regard. There is a need for a major reformation of our culture's sensibility toward old people through the use of the media. The media can aid in transforming our views of what older women are really like and can provide information about how to help old women enhance their sense of themselves. Recently the creation of a few new television series like "The Golden Girls" have set a precedent in portraying older women outside of the stereotypical roles. In "The Golden Girls," three older

women living together are portrayed as real people with real sexual, emotional and material needs. These women's unexpected behavior and refreshing sense of humor creates a mockery of classic stereotypes. Yet, this is a small step towards changing society's attitudes towards older women. Women, old and young should strive to eradicate stereotyping from every sphere of their lives.

A. Poverty, Pensions and The Older Woman

There is no denying the statistics indicating that the two poorest groups of people in Canada are women and the old; the poorest of the poor are the old women (National Council of Welfare, 1979). "Three out of five persons with incomes below the poverty line are women. Two out of three older persons living in poverty are women" (Neysmith, 1984, p. 17). How could this have happened? What made this large group of highly deserving, hard working and dedicated wives and mothers become one of the most destitute classes of citizens in Canada? One answer to this question stems from a look at demographics which indicates that the life expectancy of women is seven years greater than that of men. Women traditionally marry men who are three or more years older than themselves; subsequently they often find themselves alone for a good number of years.

One often hears older women being reprimanded for their dire circumstances. Why could they not think ahead and plan for these years of single living in advance? This way of thinking is demonstrative of the "blaming the

victim" approach. One cannot comment on the current figures on women and poverty without reflecting on the historical and cultural context of women's lives. The term "feminization of poverty," was coined in the late 1970's in reference to the societal processes through which poverty increasingly is concentrated among women and children in our society (Pearce cited in Minkler and Stone, 1985, p. 351).

The differences in poverty according to gender are documented in the 1984 National Council of Welfare Report, "Sixty-five and Older." "The poverty rate for families led by aged men was an estimated 10.2 percent in 1982 - one in ten, but 24.6 percent of families headed by elderly women - one in four - were below the low income line" (p. 35). Statistics further reveal the rapidly expanding population of elderly women:

> In 1901, women accounted for 48.8 percent of persons
> 65 and older. Their proportion increased to 49.2
> percent in 1951, 51.5 percent in 1961, 55.2 percent in
> 1971 and 57.2 percent in 1981. By 2001, six in every
> ten aged Canadians will be women (National Council of
> Welfare, Feb., 1984, p. 8).

The roots of poverty that most older women must succumb to are laid down in youth, "their poverty merely comes into full flower in later life" (Neysmith, 1984, p. 17). Matthews comments on the process of economic decline. "In our society at every age and at every stage women are

more vulnerable to poverty than men" (p. 46). Why is it
that the majority of women become so defenseless in the
face of poverty? They have lived in a society where the
principal role of women is to get married, and to pursue
child care and domestic labor. This is considered "women's
work," not real work that is worthy of wages.

There is and has been throughout history a systematic
devaluing of women's labor and a consequent lack of
confidence and low self-esteem transmitted to women. The
traditional division of tasks which delegates the role of
the housewife to women and that of wage earner to men
breeds financial vulnerability of women. Marriage
according to these role prescriptions is not a relationship
of economic equals. There is no pay or fringe benefits for
motherwork. "There are no fixed hours, sick leave,
vacation, pension, job security, collective bargaining or
unionization" (Levine, 1984).

For those women who venture out of the home to join
the paid labor market, they often are paid as secondary
workers. Increasing family incomes are the product of both
spouses yet, a clear division of labor exists in the
Canadian economy, a division based on sex. Women are
segregated into particular sectors of the industrial
structure and within these sectors they perform a limited
number of low skilled, low paid jobs (Report on poverty,
1979). Women are employed primarily in low paying jobs
such as secretaries, housekeepers, waitresses, jobs

without promotional lines, and without employment benefits such as pensions, and insurance (Levine, 1984).

The segregation in the occupational structure and wage discrimination against women results in decreased lifetime earnings. Furthermore women who have a history of part time or temporary employment are punished because of years taken out for childbearing. This punishment is implicit in policies determining pension benefits. "Earlier income patterns are recognized as crucial in determining pension entitlement for men but this relationship tends to be ignored when the welfare of old women is being debated" (Neysmith, 1984, p. 18).

When middle-aged women try to re-enter the labor force they are discriminated against by age and sex. If they are lucky enough to gain employment the insufficient number of years in the labor force or the low paying job usually leaves them without a private pension. The pension of their husbands, if they had one, was probably terminated when the husband died (Dulude, 1978; Collins, 1978; Chappell, 1981, p. 10). Thus the saying that "every woman is only one man away from welfare" is actualized.

As women age, "their major societal task of childbearing has been completed, but without provision for future years and their youth has disappeared without credit for wisdom and experience" (Chappell, 1981, p. 9). Elderly women, especially the widowed elderly are left largely without economic security. Women who are widowed before

becoming eligible for Old Age Security (O.A.S.) are hit even harder. Such women face two choices. One alternative for widowed, separated, or divorced women in their mid years is to remarry quickly. However, the chances of that are very slim. "The hard truth is that there are three unmarried women for each unmarried man between 45-65, and in the unlikely event that all these men decided to marry at once, we already know that many would probably do so with women of younger age groups than their own" (Dulude, 1978, p. 22). The second alternative is to go out and look for a job. A middle aged woman, who has spent many years out of the paid work force while raising her family, will surely encounter tough competition from younger women who seem to be more appealing to employers. If she manages to beat the discriminatory hiring policies, she will likely land a low paying service job that will barely improve her state of poverty. The ultimate result is that "after a lifetime spent taking care of their spouses and children, these women who had no opportunity to become financially self-sufficient--must succumb to poverty" (Chappell, 1981, p. 48).

An examination of the financial plight of today's older women would be inadequate without a brief look at the Canadian pension system. This is the system that ideally is supposed to provide for older people in their retirement or "golden years." The reality that is indicated by the numbers of poor older women is that the system is

inadequate.   Rather than providing a decent quality of life

it condemns older women to an impoverished and demeaning

old age.   The 1984 report "Sixty-five and Older" by the

National Council on Welfare of the incomes of the aged,

confirms the income inequality which is so deeply

entrenched in the retirement income system.   The current

pension system is regressive in design and grossly

inadequate in attaining its purpose.   "The retirement

income system not only reflects, but appears to reinforce

the income inequalities that hold through out the working

years" (p. 43).

In Small Expectations, Leah Cohen (1984) explains that

the Canadian pension structure is based on premises that

reflect "preconceived notions about women, most of which

bear little relation to reality" (p. 156).   She declares

that it is "a national disgrace that a relatively rich

country like Canada is as yet unwilling to consider old

women's quality of life a priority" (p. 156).

The principal source of income for most older women is

Old Age Security.   The Old Age Security (OAS) Act which

replaced the Old Age Pension Act of 1927 dropped the means

test and reflected the concept of a "universal

non-contributory plan."   This pension plan was to reflect

the recognition that everyone, "Man, woman and homemakers

and wage earners - is entitled to his or her own pension as

a reward for a lifetime of contributing to Canadian

Society" (Cohen, 1984).   Although the OAS recognizes in

theory the collective responsibility to retired people, in reality it does not come close to providing an adequate retirement income. One might argue that it was not originally designed to be a sole retirement income but to augment savings. Policymakers never anticipated that most retired women would depend on OAS. This dependence is what keeps older women well below the poverty line. These women were socialized to believe that they would be cared for in their old age by their husbands, children or male relatives. But, as women continue to outlive men they become "victims" of "a contradictory and confusing societal message that initially encourages [them] to be passive and dependent and then punishes [them] for these same qualities when [they] are old and alone" (Cohen, 1984, p. 155).

The Guaranteed Income Supplement (GIS) was designed as a second tier to the pension system. It was created by the federal government in 1967 as a supplement to the OAS. The GIS is an income tested subsidy and most older women rely upon it to keep themselves out of abject poverty. As Neysmith (1984) remarks, "As a stop-gap emergency measure it is a welcome relief" (p. 18). Yet, the fact that fifty percent of single older women qualify for GIS indicates how dire their straits are. In recommendations designed to meet the needs of older women put forward in the Report of the Parliamentary Task Force on Pension Reform, December 1983, one recommendation is to immediately increase the GIS. Yet, in response to this progressive recommendation

Neysmith (1984) points out that the proposed increase would bring single individuals roughly up to the Statistics Canada poverty line. Secondly, the implications of increasing the GIS which is means tested rather than increasing the universal OAS continues to promote gender inequalities.

A third component of the retirement income system is the Canadian Pension Plan (CPP) introduced in 1966. This plan was set up to cover full-time wage earners, especially those lacking a private pension plan. It is set up like private pension plans in that one's benefits are linked to contributions. The basic premise of the Canadian Pension Plan discriminates against women. As long as benefits depend on prior contribution and contributions are linked to earnings women will suffer disproportionately until such a time as there is equality of participation by men and women in the work force (Cohen, 1984, p. 159). Housewives are specifically excluded from the plan as there is no payment for their services. Furthermore, since the CPP is based on percentage of earnings, women, who form a disproportionately large percentage of low wage earners, will receive less than men. A necessary amendment to the CPP plan would be the "Pension for Homemakers" recommendation. Neysmith (1984) emphasizes the symbolic importance of this step for women: "That is by attaching pension credits to homemaking, the latter's value as work is recognized" (p. 18). Yet complexities arise as the

policymakers attempt to attach a dollar value to homemaking. Their decisions will likely reflect the wage discrimination that is pervasive in overall employment for women.

The whole income security debate in terms of pensions has been discussed in relation to the individual's track record in the labor force. As long as women continue to be employed in low paying secondary status occupations and as long as they take time out for child rearing they cannot attain an equitable pension.

The principal of equal pay for work of equal value must be achieved before women can hope to equalize pension benefits through CPP or private pension plans. A final factor that contributes to the socially created dependency and resulting poverty of older women is that when a spouse dies a surviving spouse receives 60% of the contributor's benefits. In a discussion of pensions among a support group of older women the injustice implicit in this policy was vehemently expressed: "If I wasn't doing all the work in the house with the children, and caring for the animals on the farm and doing the bookkeeping and managing, he would never have been able to put in the hours that he did at his work" (Creative Retirement, 1986). This injustice was duplicated by most private pension plans. "When a spouse dies one half of the pension plans give no continuing benefits to surviving spouses. Less than one in four widows can expect to get any regular benefits from the

deceased husband's employers. A widow will receive only about fifty percent of her husband's C/QPP retirement pension entitlement (National Council of Welfare: 65 and Older, 1984, p. 51). Correcting this injustice is the objective of the third recommendation Neysmith presents--splitting of the CPP at retirement and or upon dissolution of a marriage. This would be a progressive step aimed to diminish the socially created poverty of older women.

In 1984 new progressive amendments were made to the Pension Benefits Act of Manitoba. These changes take into account the specific issues affecting women's opportunities for financial security and aim to create equitable pensions for women. One new provision is the inclusion of part-time workers in pension plan membership on the same basis as fulltime workers. Secondly, Manitoba legislation requires that an automatic spousal pension called Joint & Survivor Pension be included in every pension plan with Manitoba members. This provision ensures that at least two thirds of the member's original pension is payable to the spouse for the rest of his/her lifetime should the plan member die. A major amendment to the Pension Benefits Act requires an equal splitting of pension credits earned by the plan member upon divorce or separation effective January 1, 1985. These improvements in the Manitoba pension legislation are exlained in clear language in a pamphlet prepared by The Pension Commission of Manitoba,

titled <u>Sister, Will You Have A Dime?</u>

In conclusion, the stereotype of old women as poor can best be addressed by radical efforts to improve the pension system that works largely against them. A look at history and the socialization of older women quickly reveals that they are victims of an inequitable system. "Given their lack of preparation and the little support they find in society, what is more surprising is that so many are managing as well as they are" (Dulude, 1978, p. 28). In <u>Small Expectations</u>, Cohen (1984) advises older women to band together to improve their lot. "Our goal should not be half of the industrial wage or reaching the poverty line. It should be guaranteeing a standard of living that allows older people to retain their dignity" (p. 180). She recommends fighting for the expansion of the OAS pension as the most equitable way to reach this goal. Changes in pension policies will occur as a reflection of changes in sexist and ageist attitudes. It is necessary to scrutinize each component of the negative stereotypes that create unequal social and economic situations for older women.

A common association between poverty and low intelligence or being poor and dumb is unfortunately part of the negative stereotype of older women. To look at the educational levels of women who are in their seventies and eighties today distorts the true picture of the intelligence of older women. One must first consider the context of the opportunities for education and general

textbook learning for women who were trapped in roles of mothering and housekeeping. Most of these women were encouraged or forced to give up their schooling early or leave it to their brothers who were expected to acquire the education. Women were expected to help out in the home which left little or no time for self-improvement. Furthermore, in addition to lack of education opportunities, the idea that old women are dumb reflects a patriarchal viewpoint. This system fails to attach value to skills displayed in homemaking, sewing, child rearing, household management. To equate knowledge solely in terms of formal education is to neglect a vast reservoir of knowledge that is acquired through life experience. Thus, the stereotype of old women as "poor, dumb and ugly" is indicative of a prejudicial mode of thinking that fails to consider the historical, social and political context of their lives. Numerous additional stereotypes of older women persist in our Canadian culture. These stereotypes cover just about every possible aspect of the older women's life. I will briefly review some of the more popular stereotypical notions which are often referred to as myths in the literature. My intent in discussing stereotypes covering a vast range of issues is to expose the limitations created by adopting narrow generalizations and applying them to an extremely heterogeneous group of people. Only by exposing the harm connected with stereotyping can we strive to attain a more accurate,

balanced view of the older woman.

B Health and Illness

Another popular negative stereotype of older women is that they have more health problems, both real and imaginary, than old men. So often we hear people dismissing the worth of an older woman with statements like, "What can you expect from her, she's a sick old lady." We rarely think of older women as healthy or physically fit. Yet, in reality statistics confirm that the assumption that most older people are sick and in nursing homes is invalid. In Canada, about 6 percent of older people live in nursing homes. The Canada Health Survey reports that 62 percent of people over 65 experience no limitation of their major activities from poor health (Novak, 1985, p. 19). The notion that women are sicker than older men is also proved invalid in research. In "Older Women: An Examination of Popular Stereotypes and Research Evidence," Payne and Whittington cite several studies e.g. Maddo and Douglas (1973) and Duke to confirm that neither objective nor subjective physical health differences exist between the sexes.

Given these figures, one cannot help but wonder why it is that our thinking is dominated by stereotypes of frailty, psychopathology, senility and confusion. The association of illness and old age reflects our cultural discomfort with the notion of old age and the imminence of death. Old age is viewed as a time of failing strength and

self-worth. Butler points out that as westerners fear
death, avoiding and denying the thoughts of one's decline
is met by forming self-protective prejudices against older
people. The stereotyped image of old age as a time of
inevitable illness is especially difficult to overcome in a
culture where people are not socialized to think of old age
as a time of potential growth. The literature on the aged
is partly responsible for re-enforcing this negative
stereotype for until 1960 most of the literature was based
on the experience of the sick and institutionalized
(Butler, originally published in 1974, reprinted in 1982).
The recent trend in gerontological literature reflects a
growing awareness of the increase in life expectancy and
improved health which necessitates exploring positive
potentials in retirement years. Books such as Alex
Comfort's A Good Age and Mark Novak's Successful Aging
strive to create an ideal of good aging that we can aspire
to attain.

The general premise that old age is a time of illness
is not only an unsubstantiated stereotype but also a very
damaging one. This damage is manifested in treatment of
the elderly by health care professionals. Older people are
often the victims of physicians who do not take the time to
diagnose and treat their illnesses but rather write off the
symptoms as old age. This unconscious but blatant
stereotyping prevents older people from receiving the same
quality of care that younger people receive. Medical

professionals often avoid dealing with the causes of female depression. "They have two extreme and unacceptable views; that this aging process must be retarded with ingestion of the female hormone, estrogen; or that menopausal women are neurotic and should be tranquilized or ignored" (Cohen, 1984, p. 66). Medical treatment that fails to consider the medical problems of older people apart from the stigma of old age constitutes gross neglect. A lack of preventative services for most of the major illnesses of the elderly further illustrates the power of the negative stereotype. To dispel the habit of equating aging and illness one must recognize that "there are great differences in the rates of physiologic, chronologic, psychologic and physical aging from person to person and also within each individual" (Butler, 1982, p. 23).

Hand in hand with the notion of older women as hypochondriacs or generally ill, comes the ultimate insult, "you senile old witch . . . ." The notion that old people inevitably become senile, showing forgetfulness, confusional episodes and reduced attention, is widely accepted. As Butler (1982) points out, senility is a layperson's term "unfortunately used by doctors to categorize the behavior of the old" (p. 22). Anxiety and depression are frequently lumped in the category of senility even though they are treatable and reversible conditions. The list of possible causes of "so called senility" is both shocking and enlightening. Drug

tranquilization, malnutrition or unrecognized congestive
heart failure or pneumonia and alcoholism can all manifest
in symptoms mistaken for senility (Butler, 1982).
Therefore Benjamin Rush emphasizes the importance of
recognizing senility as a distinct illness separate from
the process of aging. Bromley echoes this opinion, "the
senile condition is not so much an exaggeration of normal
old age as a disturbance of it" (as cited in Novak, 1985,
p. 20). Practitioners must do older people the justice of
carefully diagnosing depression and anxiety. Too often
depression due to the loss of a spouse or close friends
which leads to forgetfulness and apathy, rather than
senility, is the cause for absentmindedness. Clearly
senile brain disease exists and is a serious disorder
brought on by hardening of the arteries of the brain. The
need to sift out the real disease from other medical
problems that manifest similar symptoms is of utmost
importance to maximize the quality of health care for older
people.

In Small Expectations, Leah Cohen (1984) underlines
this point with an example given by a nursing practitioner
who worked with older women for twelve years—both in
nursing homes and in private practice:

Most of the doctors I have come in contact with view
older women as neurotic and troublesome. I have seen
many older women diagnosed as senile and locked up in
nursing homes when in fact they are suffering from

some form of physical degeneration such as a brain
tumor (p. 81).

The fear of being labelled senile is quite rampant among
older women. If a young person forgets a message or is
late, he says, "I don't know what's wrong with me today, I
must be getting old." This automatic connection between
old age and forgetfulness is indicative of how ingrained
the stereotype of senility is in our culture. It is
awkward enough at any age to forget a name or face. But
when one is old, a simple error can consign one to be
written off as senile, not worth knowing. "A social faux
pas becomes a disaster and the definition of the faux pas
broadens" (Matthews, 1979, p. 78). In The Social World of
Old Women, Matthews captures this fear of forgetfulness.
She describes an older woman at a senior citizens' event
who stared at a downpour in dismay. She had brought her
raincoat but then left it in the car because,

> I thought you'd laugh at me if I brought it in, Old
> grandma with her raincoat and boots. To forget your
> raincoat is to be a forgetful old woman, to bring it
> with you is to be a fussy old woman. There is no way
> to be (Matthews, 1979, p. 77).

This woman's experience sums up precisely the no win
situation that a society immersed in sexist and ageist
stereotypes has created.

C. Sexuality

When men get older and display interest in sex they

are teased and taunted as "dirty old men"--a slight put-down couched in a humorous overtone of admiration. As women get older they not only lose their sexuality or sexiness--"But more basic than that [they] lose [their] gender" (Cohen, 1984).

One of the most persistent and pernicious stereotypes of older women is that of asexuality. Research conducted by Kinsey (1948, 1953) and Masters and Johnson (1966) suggest that none of the biological changes experienced by older females prevents or even inhibits a rewarding sex life (Butler, 1982). They report that "The aging female is fully capable of sexual performance at orgasmic response levels." The logic behind the stereotype of older women as sexless is rooted in a society that devalues the appearance of women as they develop the physical signs of aging. As women get grey hair and wrinkles they are said to be sexually unappealing and this leads men to assume that they must consequently be disinterested in sex. This devastating experience of becoming a member of "the third sex" is expressed by Eva, in Book of Eve: "a few stiff grey hairs appeared on my chin, and men looked at, but no longer saw me. Never did get quite used to that - being neutered is pretty dreary" (Beresford-Howe, 1984, p. 98). "If our society defines middle aged women as sexually distasteful, old women who desire sexual relationships are viewed as obscene" (Cohen, 1984, p. 40). Society presents a standard of behavior to older women that designates the desire for a

full sexually satisfying life as improper and unacceptable.
This prescription is indicative of the double standard of
aging discussed earlier.

The sexual problems of older women do not only stem
from their own physical changes but rather concern the
availability of a partner. Ironically when a sexual
problem occurs it is usually determined by her partner's
sexual capacity, not hers (Butler, 1982). The reason that
older men exhibit greater incidence and degree of sex is
that it is acceptable for men to turn to younger women.
Yet, when an older woman links up with a younger man this
is considered inappropriate behavior, even scandalous. She
is too often made to feel guilty and embarrassed. As women
have greater life expectancy than men most women must
expect to spend a major portion of their lives as widows
without access to partners. Studies confirm that the
primary reason for discontinuation of sexual activity is
impotence of old men and not their wives lack of interest
(Pfeiffer, Verwoerdt, and Wang, 1968). There are some real
physiological changes that come with age, for men and
women. Slower arousal time and lack of vaginal lubrication
are common for women and slowness of arousal affects older
men. Yet none of these changes are irreversible. Many of
women's sexual problems stem from their internalization of
double sex standards which causes them to feel responsible
for any problems. An older woman may fear that her body's
diminished attractiveness is the cause of her partner's

loss of interest. It is important for men and women to figure out together what is pleasurable. "The physiological changes of aging invite both men and women to break through old patterns, assumptions, misunderstandings and miscommunications" (The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, 1984, p. 452). Thus, the stereotyping of older women as asexual is grounded in false and destructive premises. An enlightened view of the older female's sexual abilities and needs should direct nursing home officials to develop more humane and considerate living arrangements which will allow for privacy, sexual freedom and basic human dignity.

D. Rocking Chair Grannies

The older woman is often depicted as a pleasantly plump granny who spends her time in a rocking chair knitting or sewing for her family. She lives in a carefree serene, childlike fairyland, where real worries are laid to rest. She is pictured as constantly smiling and baking cookies--happily doing for others. In reality most older women are not generally smiling peacefully. Burdened by a highly stressful life stage, they often experience grief and depression associated with loss of a spouse and/or siblings and/or friends. There is much to be anxious about, with poverty, loneliness and illness heading the list. If older women are strong enough to weather the stresses of their lives, it is one further manifestation of our sexist and ageist society that then assigns them the

role of "rocking chair grannies." The impact of increased
and sometimes forced leisure on the social behavior of old
people and especially women, and the way in which they
structure the "bulk non-work time" are areas of much needed
research (Payne and Whittington, 1980, p. 18). Stereotyped
activities which old grannies are portrayed as enjoying are
those activities that most females have been socialized to
enjoy most, "that is they are normative leisure activities
for the females" (Payne and Whittington, 1980, p. 18).

As more women are employed outside the home and
develop new skills, their use of free time upon retirement
will reflect new forms of leisure activities that deviate
from the stereotype. Women are creating new roles through
participation in the paid labor force as well as in
voluntary associations. The increasing numbers of older
women participating in voluntary associations should help
to dispel outdated sexist stereotypes that continue to
maintain women in weak ineffective positions. Furthermore
as dependent women are widowed or divorced they must
develop new independence to survive. They cannot succumb
to living as rocking chair grannies. "The image of the
rocker bound granny hardly squares with that of a Foster
Grandmother or Gray Panther" (Payne and Whittington, 1980,
p. 18).

Robert Butler points out that:

There is a steady and hopefully growing group of old
women who are undaunted and look to life with

enthusiasm. Old women will not accept their bleak lot forever because they have the brains, money and voting strength to do something about it (as cited in Martin, 1978, p. 38).

A final stereotype that concerns both older men and women and is equally invalid for both is that they are rigid, inflexible conservative thinkers. Sybil Shack (1984) expresses her resentment of this label in a very provocative manner.

> Never has a generation lived through more greater and more rapid change than the old people of the 1980's. We have seen the domination of the internal combustion engine; we watched the first heavier than air flying machines take to the skies; we caught the first sounds of air waves. We survived two world wars and the Depression of the 1930's. We have accommodated ourselves to sweeping changes in manners and morals. Indeed we, this country's old people, have proved the immense adaptability of the human race (Shack, 1984, p. 6).

Butler wisely claims in his comments on the myth of inflexibility; "The ability to change and adapt has little to do with one's age and more to do with one's life long character" (1982, p.23). Therefore, if someone adopts narrow rigid, responses to change in their middle years the chances that they will suddenly loosen up in old age are slim. Yet, if a woman is open to change throughout her

life, there is no evidence to assume that rigidity and conservatism will set in with old age.

E. Conclusion--Aiming for Equality

This review has by no means exhausted the range of negative stereotypes of the older woman. In my discussions with older women several stereotypes stood out as being most pervasive and most disturbing. The popular view of older women as weak, ineffective, asexual old maids or widows is deeply rooted in the North American image of old women. The dual disadvantage of being old and female is more than apparent. Yet it is not difficult to expose with logic and research validation that most of the stereotypes are false and grossly misleading. What becomes difficult is the second step, the leap towards dispelling stereotypes. This is a crucial step to improve the quality of life for the older women of today and for those of us who will be old tomorrow.

In A Good Age, Alex Comfort speaks of sociogenic aging, "the role which society imposes on people as they reach a certain chronologic age" (as cited in Novak, 1985, p. 25). This role can be improved, but it will only change as people begin to drop the negative stereotypes and fears they have about aging (Novak, 1985). Stereotyping that is sexist and ageist can be challenged and eradicated through advertising, media, school textbooks, and television shows. The replacement of old negative stereotypes with more positive accurate conceptions will in time create a new

"Good Age" for old women and old men. Alex Comfort (1976)
stresses the injustice resulting from treating the elderly
as a separate and unequal class:

> So called "old people" are people who have lived a
> certain number of years and that is all. . . . In the
> absence of ill-health, such as untreated blood
> pressure, aging has no adverse effect on intelligence
> or learning power, sexual response is normally life
> long in both sexes, and working capacity, unless it is
> impaired by ill health is retained and performance in
> it is high. (p. 13)

We as a society must work together to abolish the
stereotypes that lead to the idea that after a fixed age
older women become different, impaired, non people. Women,
young and old who are locked into subordination within the
framework of traditional gender roles must revolt against
the stereotypes that demean and imprison them. Women need
to join forces to seek equity in the structures of society
by participating in political, legal and financial policy
decisions of the present and the future.

In the next section the roles of women's groups in
this process will be outlined.

Chapter Three

Women's Groups

A.   Pre-Group Planning

One begins a practicum project with personal and
professional objectives.   In recent years I have developed
an interest in gerontology.   I have had various jobs which
helped to familiarize me with the specific problems of this
stage of life.   My family situation also created interest
as my parents are in their seventies and face many of the
decisions and changes that accompany the aging process.   My
personal objective was to explore the lives of older women,
their problems and potentials.   I believed that by
focussing on issues of common concern to older women, their
life stories and strategies for coping would manifest
themselves.   I considered the experience as one with the
potential for personal and professional growth.   For the
group members I hoped that participating in a mutual
support group would stimulate self-development and growth
through learning from the other women.

I was apprehensive about presenting the group at the
outset as a feminist group.   It was likely that the
terminology and radical associations with feminism might
turn off prospective members.   At the same time, I was
curious to find out if a feminist consciousness existed
among older women.   Do older women of today view their
economic, political and social situations as a product of a
male oriented society that has oppressed them?   Or do older

women accept their lot in silence and blame themselves for their problems?

I recently worked as an interviewer for a research project conducted through the University of Manitoba, Centre for Aging called Living Arrangements and the Well Elderly. Although the interviews followed a standard questionnaire, I often listened to memories that were evoked by questions concerning loneliness and resources one could depend on in times of need. During these interviews I was struck by the losses and stress that older women experienced These ranged from the highly likely loss of a spouse to loss of social contacts, loss of physical capacities, role loss and financial insecurity. Many of these losses are experienced by both sexes. Yet, to date the bulk of research on adjustments to the problems of aging focus on the male population. Cumming and Henry (1961) concluded that "work does not express the whole woman in the way that work no matter how uncongenial tends to express the whole man" (p. 36). In 1986 such conclusions cannot go unchallenged.

During these interviews with older women I was not only struck by the losses in their lives but I was appalled by the consistent manner in which older women put themselves down. Women who had lived through hard times, wars, depressions, poverty, raising several children on minimal resources, working days and nights to make ends meet; such women who triumphed over tremendous obstacles,

gave themselves little credit, no acknowledgement for the strengths that carried them through such arduous times. Suddenly, when they get older and often become widowed and more isolated, their remarks reflect depression, "put downs" such as, "Maybe if I had done things differently back then . . . ." It became clear to me that many older women have internalized the negative stereotypes that bombard them in Canadian society. In addition to this acceptance of negative stereotyping a lack of recognition of the broad social forces that have locked women into self-limiting roles exists. I believe that the quality of life that most older women experience is a product of society's treatment of women throughout their lives combined with increased socially created dependency in old age. "Old age for females accelerates the discriminating imbalance experienced by women during the life span" (Brown, P. 1981, p. 217). Therefore the lifestyle older women are experiencing today must be assessed as a product of environmental and social influences.

It is critical to understand the historical, social underpinnings of older women's dependency in order to avoid confusion between personal dependency and socially created dependency. As Neysmith (1984) so aptly puts it "Poor old women are perennials, their roots are laid down in youth, their poverty merely comes into full flower in later life" (p. 17). Women's role was traditionally that of caregiver, mother and nurturer. This role was not acknowledged as

contributing to society. After spending their lives as caregivers, upon sudden loss of their spouses, women are generally ill equipped to move on and make it alone. One reason why women have difficulty in making decisions is that throughout their lives they often have not been permitted to make decisions of any significance. Women are rewarded for their years of serving as homemakers by economic deprivation. As noted in Ch. 2, when women who have spent their lives working outside the paid labor force reach old age, the financial policies governing pensions promote gender inequalities.

As women age their need for health resources increase and often lack of resources to meet costs forces them to relinquish their independence into nursing homes. "In our society no money means no choice, thus no autonomy" (Neysmith, 1984, p. 208). By the time many women become aware of the real causes of their poverty they are at a stage of life, either divorced or widowed, where job retraining and education become difficult to attain. We need to educate society by pointing out the contradictions that exist in resource allocation for the elderly. Resources should be directed to meet the socially determined needs of older women but usually are not.

A process of consciousness raising is often necessary for older women to acknowledge their strengths, their self-worth and worth to others, as productive, interesting people. Consciousness raising involves a change in women's

awareness of and interpretation of their problems. It
involves the examination of individual experience and
listening to the personal experience of other women so that
our collective experience, rather than what we are told to
be, begins to replace erroneous beliefs (Mander and Rush,
1974). It involves pooling the collective experience of
women in small face to face groups, in order to analyze the
structures of our oppression and the best ways to fight
them (Jeffreys, 1977, p. 21). Thus older women are seen as
having great human potency, based on their unrecognized
strengths, their endurance and their willingness to talk.
The need to be cognizant of contradictions in broader
social forces and to explore them as they affect various
facets of personal and social life is a powerful force for
self-growth and new creativity for today's older women.
This idea as expressed by Myerhoff (1982) could be hailed
as a guiding force for a mutual support group. "The most
successful elders are those who choose to struggle with
contradictions and remain engaged in social relationships
and committed to issues beyond themselves" (p. 234).

I think that part of the educational process for older
women involves the exploration of their gender
socialization and the skills and orientations that were
enhanced or inhibited by this socialization. Yet, at the
outset I was cautious about allowing the group to explore
this outlook in their own time and in their own way. I did
not want to reform their world into my image as a much

younger woman living with the changing role model of women. In "Aging and Old Age: The Last Sexist Rip Off," Audrey Faulkner (1980) presents a point which was well taken and highly relevant for my group. "These women on the cusp--caught between the new wave of feminism and the tested approach to survival that has served them all their lives--need special help and understanding" (p. 80). It is detrimental to an equitable respectful relationship to relate negative value judgments. "They do not need to be told that their consciousness is low; they cannot utilize behavior options that require a style they have never embraced" (p. 80). I was well warned that my feminist convictions should be used carefully and consciously and only in this way could they be valuable in facilitating older women to redefine their self-concept in new more positive ways. Yet I hoped to find a way to integrate practice skills and feminist beliefs in working with older women in a group.

Although I did not originally label the group as a consciousness raising (CR) group, it has since become apparent to me that the features of sharing resources, power and responsibility and the stress on personal experience reflect those of CR groups. In this mutual support group I intended to facilitate a process whereby members would draw attention to the positives in each other, thereby providing mutual support. The techniques used to accomplish this objective of enhancing self-esteem

were derived from the North Vancouver Island, Women's Self-Help Manual (1984). These will be elaborated on in the chapter on group process and content.

It was decided from the outset that the group would not be a therapy group, but rather a discussion group with an educational focus. Given that the setting for this practicum was Creative Retirement Manitoba the educational component was suitable. Creative Retirement Manitoba is a private non-profit organization offering courses and workshops for seniors throughout the province of Manitoba. The majority of the courses offered have a broad educational focus, ranging from Tai Chi to calligraphy. A few problem oriented courses have been offered such as Taking Care of Me and You, a group designed to identify personal health issues. My intention in deciding on the educational focus for this group was not to dismiss or minimize the needs of individuals who were struggling with personal problems. By moving away from problem orientation I attempted to develop a supportive environment for sharing emotional experiences in aging. I thought that by keeping the discussion topics to issues of common relevance to all the woman and utilizing personal life experience as a basis to explore them, I would be providing some space for sharing personal issues. Sharing experiences within a larger context would inhibit members from pouring out lengthy accounts of personal problems. I hypothesized that the support of group members to each other in the context

of these discussions of themes of common interest would assist group members in coping with issues in other facets of their lives. "The group must be flexible enough to allow for individual need but secure enough to be generally responsive to all. Finding a balance is the key" (Graveline, 1984, p. 84).

Strides made in increasing feelings of self-esteem and potential would naturally in time filter into the individual's relationships outside the group. If a particular individual was in need of more time for personal counselling, I acted as a resource person and linked her up to an appropriate counselling service. I did so as I felt that the demands of discussing personal problems within the group would be outside the scope of this project. Yet, as the knowledge for discussions was drawn from the individual older women's life experience as well as from text book knowledge, a beautiful balance resulted between personal and education objectives. As one group member summed it up, "The school of life is education."

I began this project with a background of reading literature in the areas of aging, gerontology and women's issues. The literature specifically focussing on older women was scarce. Most of the studies on aging issues such as retirement tend to focus solely on the male population or on females as dependents of men. As researchers slowly begin to include women in studies their findings have challenged stereotypical assumptions. For example, Streib

and Schneider reported that "women who retire report a sharper increase in feelings of uselessness than do their retired male counterparts" (as cited in Beeson, 1980, p. 37). Beeson further notes that it is clear that assumptions by gerontologists which dismiss problems of women and overestimate the problematic nature of the male experience have existed and still persist around the issues of retirement. "We have numerous judgments of women's experiences as smoother, less demoralizing and easier and little or no empirical basis for these conclusions" (Beeson, 1975, p. 123).

Recent feminist literature has begun to point out the positive functions of older women. In addition to the role to the caregiver to family members, older women provide moral, emotional, social, practical and economic support to women and men of their own age or generation. (McLaren, 1982, p. 213) I was excited by the prospect of contributing data to an area where an obvious deficit exists, both in research and in services.

My professional objectives in developing a mutual support group for older women was to develop skills as a group facilitator. I wanted to facilitate an exploration in the group of the social world of old women with the objective of developing self-esteem, knowledge and skills to age confidently. The role of the group facilitator is different for a mutual support group than for other types of groups. The facilitator must maintain an awareness of

the goal of shared leadership. In some ways the
facilitator is a participant. "The content of people's
learning is derived form the concerns, issues and
experience of the group, not the facilitator (Women's
Self-Help Network, 1984, p. 12). The facilitator has no
authority over group members in a traditional sense. The
facilitator strives to model trust and equality in
communication. Trust grows quickly in an atmosphere of
nonjudgmental acceptance. The feminist premise is implicit
in the notion of shared leadership. "The feminist premise
is that we are all experts on being women if we can get in
touch with our experiential knowledge" (Graveline, 1984, p.
97).

A second facet of my role as group facilitator was to
function as a resource for books, films and other aids
concerning topics identified by the group for discussion.
Leah Cohen's book, Small Expectations was passed along in
the group and read by all but one group member (who was
unable to read English). As it covered most of the theses
addressed in the group discussions topics it became our
unofficial textbook. I rented a few films, including the
National Film Board's "All Of Our Lives" (Sky, L. and
Klodawsky, H., 1983) and "Something To Celebrate"
(Brittain, D., 1983), to stimulate discussion.

As the facilitator I viewed my job as keeping the
group on track with the objectives they set forth. I was
sensitive to processes that might block the objectives, and

tried to allow equal opportunities for each woman to

contribute. Being organized and upfront about issues

prevented major misunderstandings from happening. I was

cautious not to interfere with the group process too early

but rather waited to see if the group would evolve itself.

To achieve the goal of equalizing power it was often

necessary to listen carefully to what the group members had

to say rather than talking to them. Some guidelines for a

facilitator to achieve joint responsibility are recommended

in the Women's Self-Help Manual. Questions to draw people

out should be open-ended and nonjudgmental. The goal of

the facilitator when providing information should be "to

share information in a way that doesn't mystify or abuse

others" (Women's Self-Help Network, 1984, p. 15). Figuring

out the appropriate professional role in a mutual support

group where one's objectives are to have the women share

leadership and develop their own supportive capacities to

the fullest was a delicate task. It often felt like

walking a tight rope. The skill involved was often very

subtle, like steering a boat slightly to prevent it from

drifting off course.

B. Pre-Group Recruitment Efforts

When I approached Farrell Fleming at Creative

Retirement with my idea for a mutual support group for

older women, we juggled around various ways of working the

advertisement. Farrell shared my hesitation in presenting

the course as a feminist group as this might deter older

women who could be skeptical of any possible radical associations. It was difficult to know if older women are by and large traditional or if this idea reflected my own adherence to a common stereotype of older people as conservative thinkers. It did not seem advisable to take the risk of losing potential members, so I decided to omit feminist associations from the advertisement for the course in the winter schedule. I felt that the group process would eventually resolve this dilemma.

I met with Janet Johnson at the Y.W.C.A. who operates a Widow's Consultation group. We discussed key issues that older women identify in their lives. I realized that given the statistics of widows in our province the likelihood would be that a large portion of the group would share this experience of losing a spouse. I did not want to restrict the group to specific women, such as single women or widowed women and thereby exclude never married and currently married women. I decided to leave the wording of the course description quite open to avoid restricting the potential members to homogeneous traits. I was in fact hoping to attract a heterogenous mix of women, to enhance the group process and create interest. The advertisement in the Creative Retirement Winter Schedule that is mailed out to all members read:

> Women Today; This is a mutual support group that will
> meet to discuss issues of common concern to older
> women who want to explore aging with confidence. We

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will take a positive orientation stressing the
strengths and wisdom that women represent. One will
gain an awareness of why we are the way we are and
ways to utilize our fullest potential. 1-3:30 p.m.
Rm. 201 8 weeks starting Wedns. Jan. 29.

I hoped to attract seven to ten group members through
this advertisement. During the registration week only
three women registered. I quickly decided that some
additional recruitment efforts were in order. Meanwhile I
contacted the three women and arranged appointments for
individual pre-group interviews. I explained to these
women that it was likely that the group would commence one
week later than the original date to allow time to draw
some more members. I encouraged these women to spread the
word to their friends and neighbors.

My efforts to recruit members over a period of two
weeks were quite intense. I began contacting all the
community centres that had programs for elders; the Young
Man's Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A.) Stay Young Group, Young
Women's Christian Association (Y.M.C.A.) Widow's
Consultation Services. I also put up posters at the Fort
Garry Women's Resource Centre and the Women's Health
Centre. I mailed copies of the Creative Retirement winter
schedules to all of these resources as well as to several
large church groups for older women; the Unitarian Church,
the Retired Teachers Association, Age and Opportunity
Senior Centres, the Seven Oaks Hospital and St. Boniface

Hospital geriatric social work departments. I spoke to staff representatives at these resources to explain the course in more depth and to encourage referrals. While speaking to Dorothy Hardy at Age and Opportunity, I was informed of an opportunity to advertise the Women Today group in the Growing Older column, a weekly column in the Winnipeg Free Press, compiled by Age and Opportunity (A&O). Although this lead proved to be useful, an unfortunate error occurred as the group was advertised as an A&O course rather than as a Creative Retirement program. This resulted in some confusion as inquiries were misdirected. Yet, the problem was quickly resolved. In addition to my efforts, I remain grateful to Farrell Fleming and his staff who took special efforts to advertise the course during the first week of Creative Retirement winter classes, by giving a short talk at the beginning of these classes.

All of these efforts proved fruitful for on January 29 the original date for the group to commence three new women came to register. One of the three women was in a state of crisis and the timing for the course was, we decided, not right for her. Her need for assistance in figuring out the health and social service systems that were caring for her sick husband was clear. A follow-up call indicated that she received the help she needed to sort out the issues that were creating stress for her. Farrell Fleming's efforts attracted another three women who showed up for the class on February 5, 1986. Two of these three women

remained with the group as regular attending members and one woman did not return. One woman who came to join the group on February 5 learned about the group from my advisor Joan Turner. She became a committed group member. A last woman who wandered into the first group meeting about half way through, joined the group. However, she did not attend the meetings after the third week as she was the victim of a vicious attack by two dogs. She was not able to regain health in time to resume attendance. I decided to note this member's involvement as her unfortunate experience had a powerful lasting impact on the other group members.

The process of recruiting group members was tiring and stressful, but it proved to be an unanticipated educational experience. Following the first group meeting the group stabilized with a membership of eight women. This number was ideal for the type of support group I hoped to develop. If the numbers were much larger it would have been difficult to allot each member time to participate in each discussion as well as to take on shared responsibilities. I felt that I ultimately benefitted from recruiting members from various resources and from differing walks of life as it ensured a heterogeneous mix of women for the group.

C. Pre-Group Interviews

The pre-group interviews were arranged with the prospective group members for several reasons. Firstly, I felt that these interviews would give me an opportunity to respond to some of the questions concerning the course. In

the interviews I would explain more specifically what a mutual support group is and provide some specific examples to the women of possible group discussion topics. Secondly, the individual interviews would give me a chance to get to know the women a little personally before we met as a group. Learning about the individual woman's personal history and current life situation would assist me in figuring out the issues that the group members held in common, as well as those areas where there was a great deal of difference. The information concerning personal history, education, health, financial situation and hobbies proved to be very valuable for planning early group sessions. I was able to glean a picture of the various strengths that individual women had and the areas where women felt uneasy or apprehensive that might be acknowledged in group participation. As the issue of sharing responsibility was discussed I was able to learn who was uncomfortable taking on tasks such as group facilitation or recording and who felt uncomfortable with such tasks.

These interviews also provided a chance to explain to the women more about my practicum: to explain and receive permission to tape the sessions. Thirdly, the pre-group interviews gave the individual women a chance to assess me as their prospective group leader. This initial meeting served to break the ice and initiate rapport.

I experienced the pre-group interviews as emotionally

draining and extremely interesting. The interview followed a structured set of questions. However, I did not interrupt the flow of the conversation to adhere to a rigid questionnaire. I welcomed additional personal information, history, experiences, and ideas for the group discussions. My objective was not only to satisfy my needs as the group organizer but to meet the needs of the individual women. I was astonished at how quickly trust developed during these interviews and how several women shared personal problems with a complete stranger. I felt that the need for an empathic listener was great and did not think that it was either fair or appropriate to cut off conversations that became more person-problem oriented. I began to feel worried by some of these initial interviews that the group might turn into a therapeutic one as the need to share and receive support for personal problems seemed quite pressing for three of the members. It was important for me to inform the group members that the group would have a larger focus, and not be solely an arena for sharing personal problems. It was my hope that the women's needs for personal support would be met through the group experience. It seemed that a balance between common issues and personal problems would be a suitable goal.

Once the group meetings began my concern over the group becoming therapy oriented was minimized. I quickly learned that the women were much less open to sharing personal problems with a group than with myself. I

discovered that the group structure which allowed women to
"check in" and remain cognizant of each other's feelings
and general state of being was a useful way of integrating
individual needs with broader group tasks. Although the
group members learned that the group was not for therapy in
one specific situation where the group member requested
individual counselling I referred her to an Age &
Opportunity counsellor. This attended to her specific
needs which were supplemented with the support of others in
the group.

In the pre-group interviews the quality of the
interviewer/interviewee interaction was very important to
me. It was important to model an attitude of trust,
sharing and valuing the strengths and potentials of older
women. If I had limited my position to that of a
traditional interviewer, establishing a one way process of
deriving information, I would have defeated my principle
objective of really connecting with these women. By taking
the time to listen to the older woman's personal
disclosures the interviewee received the message that she
is worth listening to and that she is not alone in her
situation. An important prelude to a support group is to
convey the importance of "sharing" as a positive feature of
communication in the group experience. Women learn that
they are not alone, that in sharing their lives, their
burdens are lessened, their joy increased (Levine, 1983;
Jeffreys, 1977; Turner, 1983).

In the pre-group interviews I began a process of
reinterpreting negative put downs of women and reframing
their analyses. As women shared some personal history,
they often described their experiences as personal
inadequacies. I began to point out to them that often
circumstances were the result of different opportunities in
life. I initiated a process of support and encouragement
in my response that put forth the message that women have
the strength to forge changes in their lives, especially
together with other women and "a new vision of the possible
emerges from that solidarity" (Levine, 1982, p. 78).

I was pleased to find support for my approach to
interviewing women in a chapter by Ann Oakley (1981),
"Interviewing Women: a contradiction in terms." Oakley
suggests that the paradigms of traditional interviewing
practice creates problems for feminist interviewers. In
the masculine paradigm of proper interviewing behavior the
interviewer is not to ask questions back. Textbooks on
interviewing skills warn, "Never provide the interviewee
with any formal indication of the interviewers beliefs and
values" (p. 35). Such advice sabotages the goal of
building an equitable relationship with group members.
Oakley points out that the paradigm of the proper interview
appeals to such (masculine) values as objectivity,
detachment, hierarchy and science, which takes priority
over people's more individualized concerns. I concur that
the polarity of proper and improper interviewing is an

almost classic representation of widespread gender stereotyping.

In interviews where women interview women and aim to promote a relationship of equality, the convention of a hierarchical model for a "proper" interview is inappropriate. On the contrary the interviewer must be prepared to invest her personal identity in the relationship. The relationship between the interviewer and interviewee is an important element in achieving the quality of information required. In the pre-group interviews many women expressed an interest in my situation and asked questions such as "how did you become interested in studying aging and older women?" I thought that such questions were legitimate and deserved sincere answers. It would have been contrary to my objectives of equality and mutual support to disallow women to ask questions. By allowing the mutual interaction to occur in the pre-group interviews I aimed to promote "greater visibility to the subjective situation of women" (Oakley, 1981, p. 48). This new awareness conceives of the interviewer "role" as a tool for making possible the articulated and recorded commentary of women on the very personal business of being female in a patriarchal capitalist society" (p. 48).

This important objective for documenting accounts of women's lives prompted me to devote space to record the information gleaned from the pre-group interviews. However, a summary of the chart is presented in Table 2. A

chart of the data collected in these interviews would be
insufficient. Recording the intimate process of sharing
life experience, tales of good times and bad, goes beyond
traditional methodological techniques and captures the
essential flavor of the interview process. To protect the
privacy of the women, I have changed names and identifying
characteristics.

Insert Table 2 about here

Pre-group interview with Daisy. The pre-group interviews
took place in various locations. The women were given the
choice between meeting at their home or at Creative
Retirement Manitoba. Daisy was the first woman to be
interviewed at her home. Daisy was the American
representative in our group. She came to Winnipeg in 1982,
as a founder of a new church community. This is a
nondenominational church group located in Winnipeg's west
end. Daisy grew up in Illinois, married and raised her two
children in the United States. Her husband was a land
developer. She separated from her husband in 1973 and
later moved to several eastern Canadian cities and
eventually to Winnipeg. Her two children and two
grandchildren live in large eastern cities.

Daisy is a very friendly, warm, expressive and

interesting woman to meet. I was initially overwhelmed by the richness of her life experience, social and political awareness and the untraditional lifestyle that she represents. I was at the same time excited by her strengths and realized that she was a good candidate for sharing leadership tasks in the group. Daisy's political convictions were rooted in a stream of involvements. She laughed remembering her mother's warning, "My mother said never get mixed up with religion and politics and I did both." During World War II Daisy worked as a teacher in adult education at the Highlander Folk School. She was active in the labor movement and taught parliamentary law and public speaking to adults. She was very interested in unions and industrial democracy. Her sympathetic concern for the plight of Blacks prompted her to join a church choir group which ventured into the slums.

In later years, while Daisy was raising her children, she became involved in co-operative nurseries. Daisy became a member of the Quakers, and worked at the Quaker literature service in purchasing and distribution of books. She really enjoyed this job and wonders sometimes if she is not a "frustrated librarian." During the time of her involvement with the Quakers, Daisy recalled attending a meeting for feminists. She found these meetings too radical and hostile. This initial exposure to feminism prevented her from getting involved in the women's movement, despite a growing consciousness of male

oppression of women in all walks of life.

In 1974 following her divorce, Daisy moved to Canada. While living in Kitchener, she was involved in the Refugee Recovery of Vietnamese people. During this period she wrote book reviews which were published in a senior citizen's publication, "Recollections." Daisy is currently involved in the Refugee recovery of people from El Salvador. Her humanistic endeavors are strongly rooted in her religious convictions. Daisy moved to Winnipeg to fulfill a long search for religious fulfillment. She shared the story of her religious quest when she facilitated a group discussion on women and religion.

Daisy left the traditional Christian church as she found "none of it nourishing." She first became disheartened with the church when she was antagonized by the church's position on the war in Spain. She redirected her interest to problem solving in politics. Daisy became increasingly upset by the domination of the church by male clergy. She became more interested in acknowledging the wonderful women in religion, "Coretta King, Mother Theresa, and Dorothy Day." She found the answer to her religious quest in becoming a founding member of a new church community. This religious community harbors nontraditional values and incorporates a system of living intergenerationally, with practicing religion.

Daisy is currently interested in creative writing. She harbors a great love for literature and attends poetry

readings at the Winnipeg Art Gallery seniors program (which she chose to stop attending for eight weeks to join Women Today). Daisy is also involved in the Grandparenting Group, waiting to be connected as a grandparent to a child. She currently fulfills the role of a very active grand-godmother to a small girl in the church community. A further area of involvement is her position on the board of the Winnipeg Memorial Society, a group that actively protests against the high cost of dying in the commercialized funeral industry and provides mechanisms for planning inexpensive funerals.

Although Daisy says that she was never really involved in the women's movement, her "feminist awareness" is certainly very much alive. She is currently involved in rewriting the Hymn Songbooks to remove the sexist language. In daily life she recounts experiences which reflect her feminist attitudes. She recalls a situation where she removed a woman from the chore of washing dishes following a church community dinner. She asked that a male dishwasher volunteer come forth as the woman was needed for another job. In such small ways women like Daisy contribute to further the feminist awareness of sexism in all walks of life.

As the interview progressed there was no doubt in my mind that Daisy would be an asset to the group. I was confident that her charismatic manner and captivating voice would energize the group. Sharing the vast range of her

life experience and interests would also benefit the group.
I was concerned about how Daisy would fit in with the other
group members who by and large led more traditional lives.
I later learned that one of the remarkable features of a
heterogenous group is that the different members are able
to enhance each other's awareness and education. What I
originally perceived as a potential problem, turned out to
be an asset.

One standard question in the interview was, "What did
you think when you first heard of this course, what caught
your interest?" Daisy explained her goal as, "Seeking
interaction with women my own age." As the only senior
member of her church community she felt a need to meet
people her own age. She felt excited by the "stimulation
of challenging ideas that might occur. . . ." When asked
to choose discussion topics in order of interest, her
choices were; 1. women and religion, 2. growing old,
feeling young, 3. changing roles of men and women, 4. women
and advertising, 5. women and poverty. Daisy indicated
feeling comfortable with the idea of sharing group tasks.
She put it, "I am not a candidate for sitting." The final
question on the interview guide asked, "What do you see as
the greatest obstacle older women face in today's society?"
Daisy responded, "For the general population, I would say
financial--poverty."

During the interview with Daisy she was very
comfortable with informing me of her hearing problem. She

indicated that she relies on lip reading to a certain extent. She was pleased to learn that the group would be small as this would minimize her difficulty. Learning about this "invisible handicap" before the group assembled provided me with the opportunity to arrange seating and generally be sensitive to the individual's needs. This was one of the many valuable functions fulfilled by the pre-group interviews.

Pre-group interview with May. May is sixty-three years old, born and raised in Winnipeg's west end. She was married but has been divorced for twenty years and has no children. May completed high school and has been employed since she was eighteen years old. She was the only group member who was still employed in full time work as a secretary for thirty-seven years at the same place. The interview took place at her office.

When I first met May, I was drawn in by her friendly manner, sense of humor and talent for expressing her opinions. As May began to talk about herself, she described herself as "not a very social person, a loner." This came as a surprise to me as she relates to people with a very natural ease. May spoke of sincere friendships which developed at her work, which almost became her family over the years. Yet, as retirement approached she recognized that she became socially isolated outside of her employment. She learned about the mutual support group from Joanne Moffatt, an Age and Opportunity retirement

counsellor. She followed through on her need to build up
further resources and connections with people to make life
more appealing upon retirement. May indicated that she is
not currently pursuing any hobbies. She is interested in
painting and hopes to cultivate this in the near future.

Joining the Women Today group was May's first step to
improve her social situation. When asked what caught her
interest when she first learned about the group, May
responded:

> I like the idea of being with a like group of people
> my own age. . . . I might get together with other
> women facing some of the same problems. . . . I think
> it would be a wise thing. . . . I wouldn't be in a
> category by myself. I'll perhaps run across someone
> who feels exactly the same as I do. This may help me.
> . . and I could help her too. . . .

May expressed some apprehensions about joining the group.
"The fact that I don't do these kinds of things and haven't
done anything like this for a long time. . . . I had
reservations about getting out and doing things with other
people but then I realized that this is the very thing that
I am trying to overcome." May's apprehensions seemed to
lessen as the interview progressed. It was clear that her
lengthy work experience and highly developed skills would
enable her to take on any of the group tasks, such as
facilitator and recorder. She indicated that she felt
comfortable with sharing group tasks, which I found very

encouraging.

As the interview continued May's personality really seemed to come to life. She discussed her feelings about women in the work force, a topic which she had obviously given a lot of consideration. She spoke from a wealth of personal experience, sharing the lessons life had taught her. When asked what she saw as the greatest obstacles older women face in today's society May had a lot to say. "I don't think older women are often taken seriously. They've got to take the bull by the horn. You can't sit back and wait for someone to develop your life for you." As a woman working in a male dominated office May learned that more faith is put on men:

> My own views are not always taken in the same fashion as that of a man the same age or of the same profession. I feel that equal pay for equal work is a need but . . . a great many employers don't adhere to it. It is up to the women to express themselves in such a way that they'll bang their heads together. . . and change their situation.

May also expressed awareness and sensitivity to the stereotyping of older women. "If anyone ever calls me that dear sweet little old lady I wouldn't appreciate that." May's attitude towards her own aging is one of acceptance. "I have no compunction about the age part of it, I'm never reticent to admit my age. I have never had that delicate balance of trying to tell people what I've done and not

wanting to tell them how old I am." I interpreted May's
perceptions regarding older women as a very positive step
in a process of consciousness raising that would equip
older women to age with confidence. I felt that with her
strong personal opinions she was very ready to become part
of a woman's group. When asked to number discussion topics
in order of interest, May's choices were: 1. living alone
and money management, 2. creativity and productivity in old
age, 3. women and retirement, 4. women and health care, 5.
women as caregivers. As the interview came to a close I
was grateful for this interview as I felt that I really got
to know May. She expressed her appreciation for the
opportunity to meet me prior to the group meeting. "Now I
can picture you, and I have some idea of what to expect . .
. it helped me out." She was curious to know why someone
of my age was interested in older women and this interview
gave her the opportunity to take up questions of this
nature with me.

Pre-group interview with Kate. Kate was the only group
member who was a former student at Creative Retirement
Manitoba. She was enrolled in yoga and computer classes as
well as attending the Senior Citizen's Open Forum Series
(slide shows and travelogues). She is also a member of an
ethnic social group that meets monthly and of the Manitoba
Society for Seniors. Kate enjoys travelling and has taken
advantage of special senior trips organized through the Age
and Opportunity Centre. Kate indicated her satisfaction

with the various classes.

Kate chose to be interviewed at Creative Retirement Manitoba. She is a single woman who has lived alone in an apartment since her mother died. As Kate began to share her personal history, it was apparent that this was a painful task. Kate worked as a mail-order clerk for many years. She lived with her aging parents and cared for them when they became ill. She recalled the ordeal of meeting their needs, as well as keeping up the seven room house and working full time. Her experience is a classic example of an overworked woman who became overwhelmed by stress. In 1973 Kate quit her job at the department store, originally intended to be a six month leave of absence due to depression. Her health did not permit her to return to the job. Kate received medication for her depression, but unfortunately was not lucky enough to receive the type of treatment that would have helped and supported her to understand and work through the illness.

Kate shared her frightening experience of having her purse snatched. This occurred while returning home from visiting her mother in a nursing home where her mother spent the last five years of her life. Shortly, following her mother's death, Kate lost her only brother. Her sister-in-law and four children live on the west coast. She feels very close to them and feels quite sad about the distance between them and infrequent contact.

Kate's recollection of her personal and family history

was filled with sadness. As she switched gears and began to speak of more recent experiences it was apparent that she had managed to overcome the stresses in her life and create a new fulfilling life for herself. As Kate spoke of her recent trips with senior groups she shared her feelings of insecurity in socializing with other women. Her discomfort in forming relationships with new women was indicative of her apprehensions about joining the mutual support group.

When asked what attracted her to the group Kate's response was, "It would help me--I thought other people would talk about their stress, money, relatives. . . . I want to get help from others--see how they are handling things." Kate went on to express her curiosity about how other older women deal with loneliness. She wanted to discover how and where other women derive support.

The issues Kate identified for discussion topics were: 1. women and retirement, 2. women and health care, 3. living alone and money management. Kate expressed apprehensions about sharing group tasks. She indicated a lack of confidence in her skills. I assured her that she would not be pressured to take on tasks that she was not ready to do. She identified the greatest obstacle that older women face in today's society as poverty. Her personal attitude about money is to spend it while you can still enjoy it.

The pre-group interview with Kate was very long (2 1/2 hours) and emotional. At times the interview resembled

more of a therapeutic encounter than a pre-group

exploration.   Kate's need to share her personal issues was

apparent and my response seemed to encourage the growth of

a trusting and supportive relationship.   I left this

interview feeling angry by the story of Kate's struggles as

she was clearly victimized as a woman by health care

systems and her family role.

Pre-group interview with Carla.   Carla's interview took

place after the first group meeting rather than before, as

she did not pre-register for the group.   I learned a lot

about Carla from the personal introductions that took place

at the first meeting, but I arranged to met with her after

the meeting to equalize the opportunity for a one to one

connection that I had with the other women.   I met with

Carla in her home where we engaged in a lengthy and

informative discussion.   At the first meeting Carla

expressed some hesitancy in joining the group.   She

explained that she really came the first time to check it

out and specifically to check out the group leader.   She

was anxious to discover if I was a radical feminist as this

would have presented an obstacle for her.

Carla was born in England where she married a doctor

and raised three children.   She became an RN in 1950 after

four years of hospital training.   In 1958 she moved to

Canada, moving frequently following her husband's career

development.   The family finally landed up in Winnipeg and

in their early years in Winnipeg Carla and her husband

divorced after twenty-seven years of marriage. She
remarried seven years ago to her present spouse. Her grown
children live on the west coast.

Carla is a very energetic ambitious woman. Following
her divorce and a period of depression, she decided to
return to university and complete her B.A. She is
interested in pastoral work and was not sure where to
direct her skills. She studied sociology of aging and
sociology of medicine as well as general psychology
courses. The experience of listening to Maggie Kuhn speak
on the Gray Panthers through one of her classes, had a
lasting impact on Carla. This lecture triggered an ongoing
interest in exploring the social and political activist
groups for the elderly. Carla developed her skills as a
counsellor through a training course at a local hospital.
She joined a Protestant church (her husband's church) in
recent years and became involved in their program of
hospital visiting. She harbors a strong commitment to this
volunteer work. The development of Carla's strengths in a
supportive role through volunteer work was to become a
definite asset in the mutual support group. Carla spoke of
her interest in the future roles of older people,
especially in the realm of increased volunteer options.
She believes strongly that older people must educate
themselves into such roles.

When asked what caught her interest in this group
Carla responded, "The idea of peer counselling is what I

associated with mutual support." The idea of people providing support for each other in an informal way appealed to Carla. When asked about apprehensions about joining the group, Carla spoke of her concern over radical feminist leanings. She was not interested in joining a group where "the facilitator had a chip on their shoulder." "I believe that it is not just women struggling--men are struggling as well . . . but having met you I feel quite comfortable with you." The order of discussion topics that Carla identified were; 1. women and retirement, 2. women and health care, 3. growing old, feeling young, 4. living alone and money management, 5. creativity and productivity in old age.

Carla identified her personal goal in joining the Women Today group as "continuing growth." She hopes to actualize Carl Roger's words which were very meaningful to her, "To be older and growing and not growing older" The strength of her convictions was conveyed by sharing her long term goal, as "To start an extension of the Gray Panthers." Carla felt very comfortable with the prospect of sharing group tasks. She had experience in facilitating group discussions in her university classes. She expressed a little difficulty with the job of group recorder as she has a learning disability which slows down the speed of her writing.

Carla impressed me as a very competent and motivated person. She was a good model for the other women of a

woman with a positive orientation to aging and
self-development. I felt that her interests and activities
might connect her with Daisy in the group. They seemed to
have more in common in terms of further education and
varied interests than the more traditional older women in
the group. I was curious to learn how Daisy and Carla
would interact with the women who had more home-bound
traditional life experience and also how these women would
respond to them.

Pre-group interview with Lee. Lee was interviewed at
Creative Retirement on January 29, 1985, the date the group
was originally intended to begin. However, the first group
meeting was postponed for one week but I used the
opportunity to interview two women, Lee and Stella, who had
come to register at this time. Lee heard about the group
from a social worker at a local hospital who counselled Lee
during her husband's lengthy illness. Lee received support
and encouragement from her son to attend the group.

Getting to know Lee was a process that unfolded with
ease. She is a very warm and friendly woman. She
describes herself as the type of person that strangers
befriend. Lee lived most of her life in rural Manitoba.
As an adult she lived on the same farm where she was raised
as a child in a large family. Lee had a hard life on the
farm, working alongside her husband in every possible way.
They were market gardeners and had five children, losing
two of them--one as a baby and the other at age four. Lee

now remains in close contact with her children and
grandchildren (two live in Winnipeg and one in British
Columbia). In 1982 Lee and her husband were forced to
leave their farm due to his illness. They moved into an
apartment in the city where Lee now resides alone. She
went through an emotionally draining period, visiting her
husband daily in the hospital for one and one-half years
until he died. At the same time she was visiting her aging
mother whose health was declining. She cared for her
mother until December 1985 when her own health made it too
difficult a job for her to maintain. She developed a heart
condition and received a pacemaker. Lee's mother left to
live with another daughter in British Columbia. After a
lifetime of caring for others--children, siblings, husband
and mother, at the age of sixty-nine Lee was finally taking
a first step to do something for herself. She joined the
Women Today group at Creative Retirement Manitoba.

In the interview Lee reminisced, recalling pleasant
memories of a few recreational pleasures during her
laborious years on the farm. She enjoyed the odd game of
cards and bowling with neighbors. She recalled her
traditional upbringing, where boy's education was stressed
and the girl's place was to help mother in the home. Lee
maintains traditional values that were instilled in her
over the years, "A woman's place is in the home." Although
Lee was aware of the difficulties of her situation on the
farm, she struggles with guilt and self-blame about her

role as mother and homemaker. "I always think that if I was smarter maybe I could have done something differently." This attitude of self-blame struck me as exemplary of the standard feelings of low self-worth internalized by women in a sexist society. I thought that Lee could benefit from the group in acquiring a consciousness of the social and political forces that limited her opportunities in life. By sharing her personal experiences with other women she could begin to identify her strengths and move away from a posture of self-blame.

Although Lee had very limited education opportunities she expressed a thirst for knowledge. She enjoys thought-provoking shows and identifies television as an important source of information about the outside world. Lee babysits frequently for her grandchildren and enjoys a fulfilling relationship with her children, who often include her in their outings.

When asked to identify what caught her interest in this course Lee responded, "I'd like to get out, sit down and talk . . . I'm by myself too much." Lee was anxious to meet other women in similar circumstances. Her personal goal was expressed in these words, "I'd like to listen to other people talk and if I can say something that will help someone else that would be good." Lee went on to explain her motivation for increasing her contact with people her own age. She feels that younger people often do not understand the hardships of life that she experienced. She

hoped that people of the same age would understand her better. This unique quality of peer support became a highly valued component of the support group throughout its sessions.

Lee expressed interest in the following topics for discussion: 1. women and retirement, 2. women and health care, 3. living alone and money management, 4. women in rural life. When questioned about her willingness to share group tasks Lee indicated that she was concerned that she does not express herself well but was willing to try. Lee saw loneliness as the greatest obstacle women face in today's society. She feels the need to overcome this loneliness in her own life as a widow. Lee's warmth and friendliness were qualities that made others respond to her with similar concern and affection. At the first group meeting Lee immediately connected with Stella and a friendship developed very quickly. They shared similar life experience of rural living and their mutual eagerness to seek out a friend was evident. Both women felt reassured about returning to the group as they had the security of knowing they shared common concerns with at least one other woman in the group. I left the first meeting with Lee thinking that she needed encouragement and direction in thinking of herself in a positive light. I felt that the other group members would benefit from her warm caring manner and the direct honesty with which she shares her thoughts and experiences.

Pre-group interview with Stella. The interview with Stella took place at Creative Retirement Manitoba, on January 29, 1986, the original date for the first group meeting. As the group meeting was postponed till the following week, I took the opportunity to speak with Stella and Lee together and then individually. Stella presents herself as a well groomed woman with a friendly warm disposition. She grew up on a farm in rural Manitoba and recalled with mixed emotions the hardships of that life. She lost her mother when she was very young and was ill-treated by her stepmother. Her stepmother had six other children and as the oldest child, Stella felt she was given the hardest chores on the farm. She did not have the opportunity to further her education past elementary grades. Stella married and worked part time at cleaning and waitress jobs to help make ends meet. In 1972 she was forced to retire due to her arthritis. She is very self-conscious about the deformity that resulted from the illness. Her arthritis has forced her to give up some of her pleasures in life. Her hobbies include gardening, sewing, reading and playing cards. Stella has four adult children, two in Winnipeg and two on the west coast. She regrets not seeing them as often as she would like to.

Stella learned about the Women Today group from the advertisement in the Growing Older column in the Winnipeg Free Press. In response to my question on what caught her interest when she first heard of this course Stella

responded, "I hoped to get help with a personal problem.
She unfolded the details of her personal marital problems
with great pain and emotion. I gave her the support that
she needed while sharing personal problems. I advised her
of the possible resources to pursue if she decided to seek
out personal counselling. I explained to Stella that the
purpose of the mutual support group was not for therapy.
However, I indicated that her attraction to the group for
support in a general sense was realistic. I thought that
she would benefit from the support of other women, and that
she could benefit others with the knowledge gained through
life experience. Stella spoke of her need to try to
improve her life for herself and overcome her loneliness
and suffering from her marital problems. Joining the
mutual support group was certainly a commendable step for
Stella. As her self-confidence was low, I felt that the
group experience would help her to strengthen herself. I
praised her for her efforts in the past and present to help
herself. Stella also enrolled in a second Creative
Retirement course on Growing Things.

After devoting a long time to personal issues I
switched gears and returned to the pre-set interview
questions. Stella identified her general goal in attending
group as meeting other women who share similar life
experiences. The topics for discussion that interested her
were; 1. women and retirement, 2. women and health care, 3.
living alone and money management. Stella was reluctant

about sharing group tasks as she felt that she "was not smart enough." This feeling was indicative of her overall low self-image. Stella identified loneliness as the greatest obstacle older women face in today's society. As the interview with Stella drew to an end, I reassured her about confidentiality and I assured her that I would attempt to help her to find the best possible referral agent, as she already had an unfortunate counselling experience. I attempted to make Stella aware of her personal strengths that have carried her through the rough times in life. I felt that through the group's support she would be directed to build up a more positive self-image.

Pre-group interview with Angela.

Angela added an ethnic component to our group. As an Italian immigrant her culture and background were unique. Angela had a language problem, as her vocabulary was limited and her speech sometimes difficult to follow. Until recently, immigrants were not eligible for English classes. She was aware of and sensitive about this issue, but showed determination to overcome it by staying with the group. When one meets Angela, she radiates a warm smile that attracts people to her. I met with Angela in her home for the interview. She lives alone in her home since she was widowed twenty-two years ago. Angela worked hard throughout her life raising four children on very limited resources. As a very devoted mother and grandmother she spends much of her time babysitting and helping her

children in other ways. All of her four children live in Manitoba, but only one lives in the same neighborhood.

Angela worked at different jobs ranging from dishwasher to housekeeper. While discussing her current situation Angela expressed a great deal of pain. She is sad about the quality of her family relationships. She describes herself as lonely and often fearful of being alone. She worries a great deal about the future and how she will continue to maintain her home. Her current hobbies include walking, sewing, crocheting and watching television. Swimming and jogging cheer her up. She does not belong to any clubs but attends church regularly. Angela learned about the group through her friendship with Joan Turner, my practicum advisor. Her major attraction to the group was to get out and meet other older women. She was originally very apprehensive about joining and needed continued encouragement throughout the group meetings to share her opinions with others. The non-judgmental environment in the group worked in her favor. The discussion topics that Angela expressed interest in were: 1. women and health care, 2. living alone and money management. She was very threatened by the idea of sharing group tasks. I assured her that she would not be pushed to take on any duties that she was uncomfortable with. When asked to identify the greatest obstacle older women face today, her response was "loneliness." Indeed much of the interview time was spent sharing her anxiety over her

loneliness.   I thought that Angela could benefit from the group's emphasis on building self-esteem within an environment of mutual support.

Having described the process of pre-group screening, I will now turn to a general discussion of women's groups and then to the specific process and content of the Women Today group.

Chapter Four

Women Today Group at Creative Retirement

A.   Are Women's Groups Different?

In my original practicum proposal I stated that my
guidelines for intervention with the mutual support group
would follow the stages of group process outlined by
Toseland in An Introduction to Group Work Practice (1984).
Although many of Toseland's points are discussed in
relation to task and treatment groups, I thought that many
of the strategies were pertinent for a mutual support
group. However, after analyzing the group process from the
position of the facilitator, I discovered that adhering to
this framework alone would be far too limited. There are
unique features of women's groups that differentiate them
from both mixed and all male groups.

Two important issues to consider in the development of
a woman's group are the role of leadership and the
developmental pattern. The role of a leader or facilitator
in a mutual support group is primarily that of an enabler.
Bearing in mind the goal of developing the
members' capacities to the fullest it is necessary for the
leader to acknowledge the limitations of the professional
knowledge base. Riessman (1976) attributes the ability of
self-help groups to meet their goal successfully to two
factors--the fact that such groups are empowering and
secondly the aprofessional dimension. Empowerment refers
to the issue of members using their own strengths to have

control over their own lives, individually and collectively. This concept of empowerment is in tune with a major principle in feminist work with women that is rejecting a hierarchical relationship and equalizing the power. Both the "helper therapy" and "consumer intensivity" concepts are important aspects of empowerment. The "helper therapy" principle encompasses the believe that the benefits that are usually attributed to the professional helper such as less dependency, and the ability to view the problem more objectively can be experienced by all the members as potential helpers. Secondly, the concept "consumer intensivity" refers to the group members' ability to help themselves and each other, rather than depending on the expert (Riessman, 1976). Thus the facilitator of a mutual support group is well warned to proceed with caution. A form of non-directive leadership is implicit in the role of an enabler who assists members in revitalizing and mobilizing their own strengths and resources (Compton and Galloway, 1979). The emphasis on peer equality and the elimination of hierarchical relationships closely mirrors that of a consciousness raising (CR) group.

Given this general role prescription for a leader of a mutual support group one must consider the role of gender in leadership of women's groups. Is there a difference in the response of a group of women to a female or male leader? Although women are moving into leadership roles in

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greater numbers, it is a fact of the patriarchal structure
in our society that men traditionally have more power in
society. "Power usually analyzed macrosocially, can also
be analyzed in everyday interaction, as what people do in
specific interaction, expresses and reflects historical and
sociostructural forces beyond the boundaries of their
encounter (Fishman, 1978)." The patterns in relationships
have traditionally been that males dominate and females
assume a subordinate position. The deep internalization of
this unequal pattern can be illustrated by an example
derived from a provocative group discussion. The subject
of the group discussion was the film "All of Our Lives"
(Sky, L. and Klodawsky, H., 1983). In this film the
reasons why many women face economic hardship and emotional
isolation in old age are examined. The film challenges
women to re-evaluate the undervalued "work" world of women.
Despite the general pro-feminist discussion that developed,
several group members voiced their own "sexist" conception
of proper male and female roles. This was apparent in the
following reaction to female broadcasters. "I can't help
feeling that a man's voice comes across better, there is a
different tone of voice, maybe stronger. . . ." Another
woman agreed, "I always turn off the t. v. when a woman
broadcaster comes on. . . ." (Creative Retirement Mutual
Support Group, 1986)

The day to day experience of men controlling women in
economic, political, educational, social and domestic

situations has socialized women not to trust themselves or other women in roles of leadership. Thus an unconscius bias develops as is evident in the remarks above. Women must become cognizant of their own biases towards other women. This issue of socialized responses to female leadership brings to mind an experiential remark of one group member, Daisy (based on her church group meetings). "I always am amazed how if you are in a mixed group if a man walks into the room and wants to make a point everyone stops to listen, if a woman enters and wants to speak, people around her continue their conversations and pay no attention."

It is precisely this point that gives credence to the need for developing female leadership in female groups. Women need an atmosphere which allows them to develop the relationships with other women society ordinarily denies (Gottleib, Burden, McCormick and McCarthy, 1983). While groups with men largely reinforce stereotypical gender behaviors and perceptions, those with women leaders can open up alternative options for both genders (Mayes, 1979; Reed, 1979). Most research on small groups has been derived from leaderless groups or groups with male leaders. It is only recently that researchers and practitioners have begun to examine the leadership behaviors of men compared to women; and group members' reactions to and perceptions of women leaders (Glover-Reed, 1983). There is little doubt that the gender of the leader as well as of members

clearly affects a group. However, the knowledge on the specific ways in which the gender of the leader affects group member relationships, and group development is often either contradictory or based on small samples of different types of groups. The need for further research in this area is pressing.

Many theories suggest that groups with women leaders are likely to be confusing and more stressful for both members and leaders (Lows, 1975; Kanter, 1977; Kanter and Stein, 1980). Group members who have traditional conceptions about male and female behavior might experience a woman leader as role incongruent. The different role expectations associated with the sexes create differing levels of status. Thus a female leader incorporates status incongruence as well. "She simultaneously occupies (at least) two roles: Female which is the lower status of gender, and leader, which is a higher position than member" (Glover-Reed, 1983, p. 37). Group members may discount a woman's leadership abilities to fit their notion of women's lower status. "The often uncomfortable and frustrating early stages of group formation and developing norms and procedures may be greatly prolonged since these reactions to the woman leader can interfere with clarifying leadership and power issues and make norm development more complex" (Glover-Reed, 1983, p. 38).

Women leaders are indeed less familiar to all. The only way to change and overcome the obstacle created by

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conflicting role expectations about gender behavior and status is to allow greater numbers of women to become leaders whose skills and performance defy stereotypical responses.   Increasing numbers of female group leaders must be accompanied by gender education.   The female group leader is well advised to deal with the possible confusion of members by educating them; that is, creating greater awareness of gender behavior and perceptions.   In this way she maximizes opportunity for growth and learning among members.   "Simply understanding this will free many women to explore alternative explanations and strategies for the situations they encounter in groups they lead" (Glover-Reed, 1983).

Considering the flip side of the coin, a male leader of a female group, several authors believe that the presence of a male therapist impedes progress in accepting and working through feelings of generalized anxiety women experience toward men (Walker, 1981).   It is more likely for female leaders of male groups to experience difficulties.   Men, threatened by loss of their familiar power might react in disturbing ways.   They might discount a woman's leadership abilities and credentials, or try to take over leadership themselves, or behave as if the group has no leader.

Although women leaders are less familiar to female groups (as well as to male groups) my experience was not one of encountering confusion or discomfort over my gender

as a female group leader of women. The absence of

leadership problems might be understood as a phenomenon of

the reciprocating leadership style characteristic of mutual

support groups. A reciprocating leadership style seems to

decrease discomfort in groups with women leaders but does

not seem to make much difference in groups with men as

leader (Wright, 1976, p. 39). The need to sort out real

feedback about behaviors from stereotypes and distortions

relating to gender is crucial.

In my discussion group, I learned that being clear and

explicit about my role and bringing an awareness of the

damage of stereotyping of women to the forefront helped to

establish my position in the group with minimal confusion.

In groups with learning goals, having a woman leader can

open up whole new areas of learning and growth for members

with the inclusion of some of the educational content

(Reed, 1976). This statement reflects an accurate

description of our mutual support group. The combined

educational and mutual support focus facilited this

awareness.

The benefits to women of a female leader in therapy

groups are numerous. Kravitz (1976) and Rice (1973) report

that female therapists are more sensitive to the issues

facing women, are better able to empathize with feelings,

provide a positive role identification model and may be

able to facilitate the resolution of role conflicts by

utilizing their own experience. Denmark (1977) affirms

this view stating that "women leaders demonstrate greater
concern for relationships among people than men do."
Henley (1973) discovered in his studies that the nonverbal
behavior of men asserts status and maintains distance;
while that of women minimizes distance and increases
affiliation. Walker cites Erlick's (1977) observations
that there is less competition in a female led group
because female leaders emphasize fairness and cooperation
as compared to the competitive orientation of male leaders
(Walker, 1981, p. 241). A feminist oriented atmosphere can
be set by a female leader who allows women to develop the
meaningful relationships with other women that society
usually denies them.

In considering the development of a women's group
compared to male or mixed groups, it is important to
acknowledge that there is not total agreement among
theorists about the number and names of group stages. My
experience of a female mutual support group confirmed
Beverly Hagens' (1983) observation that "in general, all
women appear to begin working on intimacy and interpersonal
issues earlier than groups that include men, tending to do
this more intensely and directly than in mixed groups"
(p. 97). In mixed groups, women spend more time comparing
themselves with one another and competing for the approval
and attention of the male participants (Walker, 1983). I
concur with Walker's discovery that one of the most
positive outcomes of women's groups is the rediscovery of

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the pleasures and fulfillment of interpersonal relations with other women. This phenomenon of women rediscovering each other, pooling their collective experience in small groups hastens the development of a climate of trust and "connection" among women.

Walker (1981) reviews the observations of researchers on development in women's groups, using Schutz's framework. This model consists of three stages: Inclusion, Control and Affection. In the Inclusion stage women discover commonalities and build trust. Yalom (1980) describes this process of searching for similarities with the cliche, "We're all in the same boat." This stage is usually achieved quickly in female groups. The second stage, Control, is "marked by frustration, disappointment and anger" (Walker, 1981, p. 243). Women share angry feelings and anxiety which is eventually channeled into personal or societal changes. As the women work through conflicts in the Control stage they move into Affection. During this final stage the female group experiences intense feelings of closeness, intimacy and cohesiveness. They strive for the resolution of the issues in their personal lives or work together to change society. They are using their skills to accomplish their goals.

However, certain tendencies have been identified as unique to female groups and there is no doubt that gender affects group process. In the chapter on the process and content of the Women Today mutual support group I identify

features of this group's process that confirm some of the assertions made by Walker (1981), Wolman (1976), and Kirsch (1974). The greater degree of closeness and intimacy achieved, and the tendency of female groups to encourage exploration of the social determinants of personal problems were two basic features that were apparent in this group. However, more data is needed to validate the critical differences between female, mixed and all male groups. The need to systematically document differences and control for variables such as the types of groups being compared, their ideology, goals and structures is very important for the future planning of women's groups.

B. Process and Content

At the outset of this practicum I had designated the goals as set forth in my proposal. The objectives for the client group were: to provide a supportive environment or arena for sharing emotinal experiences in aging, to utilize the support of the group "to identify the strengths of older women and move towards positive self-images, to encourage women to give each other credit for their life experience and utilize their wisdom to age with confidence" (Proposal, Gail Thau, December 19, 1985).

During the pre-group interviews I attempted to check out how closely these goals reflected the older women's personal goals. For the majority of the women, the terminology in the original statement of goals created some initial confusion and discomfort. Yet, when given the

opportunity to identify their personal expectations in their own words, a desire to "get out" and meet other women who share familiar experiences was a general shared expectation. A desire to relieve loneliness and develop friendships with peers were key incentives. It was difficult for the majority to adjust their thinking to a structured educationally focussed group. It was more my need than that of group members to break down the goals and objectives early on. However, as the group began to develop the members understood the need for structure and objectives to guide the process. While preparing for the first group meeting, I felt that I benefitted from the information I received in the pre-group interview.

As I sat working on ideas for structuring the group sessions I stumbled upon the Women's Self-Help Manuals, by the North Vancouver Island Women's Services Society. These manuals were compiled as a three year project funded by Health and Welfare Canada in 1980. Its goal was to find ways of lessening the isolation experienced by women in rural and single resource communities on North Vancouver Islands. The Network initially felt that this goal could be achieved by providing a supportive environment where women could share thoughts and feelings and learn new skills to make changes in their lives. The more I read about the philosophical underpinnings of this group the more I realized that many of the techniques (to achieve increased positive feelings and support) would be

appropriate for the Women Today group.

The Women's Self-Help Network's program is based on the Popular Education Method developed by a Brazilian educator, Paulo Frere. The popular education method starts from people's experience and is based on the belief that people know what they need. "The content of people's learning is derived from the concerns, issues and experience of the group, not the facilitator (Women's Self-Help Network, 1985, p. 7). With this method the facilitor is not an "expert" but an equal group member with a slightly different role. The method utilizes techniques to actively involve group members in defining their concerns or issues, defining alternatives and deciding how they will make changes. This method is based on the belief that people, if empowered, can and will make changes to improve the conditions of their lives. This belief excited me as it mirrored the ideal of a mutual support group where the professional is not the expert but a facilitator striving to share the power equally among group members.

When I decided to develop a mutual support group, my intention was to precipitate an exploration whereby I could learn about the lives of older women from the experts, the older women themselves. Many of the women in the group came with a traditional notion of a class and expected me to be a traditional teacher. It took some readjustment in their thinking to accept the position that I presented to each woman individually in the pre-group interviews. "You

are the experts on aging, you have the wisdom that comes with the life experience of growing older as women."

The Women's Self-Help Network present many techniques in their skill sharing manuals that cover ten areas that women frequently identified as useful for making changes. There are nine modules which cover skills ranging from the personal to those skills needed for social action. A tenth module, Group Building, was designed to provide facilitators with a number of exercises they can use to maintain the group's energy and trust level while it is doing its work. I found that I was able to draw upon different portions from these modules to enhance group building and to generate increased feelings of self-esteem. I integrated exercises from various modules as they fit into the group's agenda. The values and goals inherent in the popular education process were embedded in the exercises. These manuals were a valuable resource, presenting a wealth of techniques for any group of women to draw on.

In addition to utilizing the exercises from the modules, we also followed the group structure based on the agenda set forth by the Women's Self-Help Network(1984). In this agenda three tasks are designated to the group members; facilitator, timekeeper and recorder. The rotation of these assignments provides a mechanism for sharing the responsibilities and the power in the group. This model is designed to rely on the strengths of the

members.   Another tool derived from the Women's Self-Help
group process which proved very useful for the Women Today
group was the use of a "check in."   The check in exercise
gives each individual a chance to express how they are
feeling as they begin a group session.   This is done in a
round giving equal opportunity for each person to share
with the group (p. 15).   The use of the "check in" solved a
dilemma for me as the group facilitator.   I was struggling
with the problem of steering the group members toward an
educational focus without dismissing the need to share
personal issues.   The check in was an excellent tool to put
the group members in touch with each other's feelings,
lives and activities.   It was a useful way of finding the
balance between the need to share personal issues and the
need to put them within a broader context.

Following the check in, we adopted another tool called
"recap."   The woman who was the recorder for the previous
session did a short review of what happened in the previous
meeting.   This was useful to fill in any meber who was
absent, as well as to refresh the memories of all the group
members.   A further technique the group adopted (when time
permitted) was the use of appreciations.   These are
positive statements of their own or others that refer
specifically to aspects of behavior that one has
experienced.   This can be done in a round where each person
gives an appreciation to the person on her right.   This
appreciation helps to build group trust and builds up the

self esteem and confidence of the individual women.

When the group completed the "check in" and "recap" portion of the meeting, the discussion would begin on a topic chosen by the majority. In order to involve the participants equally in the discussion the facilitator adhered to "rounds." This is a structure in which each group member takes a turn to express her thoughts or feelings about the topic. If certain members were monopolizing the discussion, directing the group to return to the rounds helps to eliminate such problems. Rounds build in equal time for each member to speak and to be heard.

With a brief account of the structural features of the group established, I will focus on the process and content of each of the eight meetings. I originally intended to separate the process and content themes for the purposes of this report. However, as I attempted to do so, I discovered that the two were so intertwined that the task became difficult. The content involved the discussion topics the women identified as being of common interest. The discussion of the topics were approached by encouraging the women to share the knowledge they derived from personal life experience as well as from education. Textbook knowledge was not considered necessary to promote discussion. As the group was composed of a heterogenous mix of education levels, it was important to build up the esteem of those who had less opportunities for formal

education and to encourage them to share and to value their personal wisdom. The way in which the topics were discussed reflected adherence to process goals.

It was important to develop a nonjudgmental, trusting atmosphere to promote mutual support. To attain this goal (of mutual support) a system of shared leadership is of central importance. The goal of establishing equality as a prerequisite to mutual support is central to the premise of both feminist and mutual support groups. Feinberg (1980) stresses the activity of turning the group over to the group members as a necessary component of the leader's role in mutual support groups. This is a crucial step yet it alone does not foster support. Support develops through a sharing process, where the channels of communication are opened up and women begin to share feelings and ideas in an atmosphere of faith, respect and trust. The goal of the facilitator is to model for the group members ways to draw people out into the discussion in a nonthreatening way. The aim is to share information in a way that does not mystify or negate others. To create a supportive atmosphere for older women the leader must stress the pro woman line, that women's greatest strength lies in our ability to touch with our feelings (Greenspan, 1983; Miller, 1976) and our understanding of human need for connectedness (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, "a new vision of the possible" emerges from that solidarity (Levine, 1983, p. 23).

Although I did not previously consider a CR component to the group, I discovered it was an essential piece. Without an awareness of the social and political structure of society that oppresses women they are led to blame themselves for missed opportunities in their lives. Bond and Ribstein (1979) describe this essential feature of the CR process. It involves a reinterpretation of what women formerly felt to be personal inadequacies, as being consequences of the social situation. Through sharing their collective experience women are able to recognize the sources of their powerlessness and their power. This knowledge frees them to develop personal growth and self-esteem. Once women are encouraged to view their lives in the context of their socialization and political oppression, the supportive environment often acts as an enabler. It allows for change, growth and for healing. (Caplan, 1974) The changes inspired by the group support in the lives of the group members of Women Today are documented in the post group interviews in Chapter Five on Evaluation. In the next section the themes of each session will be outlined.

Meeting #1. February 5, 1986. The first group meeting of Women Today brings to mind a very uplifting and exciting memory (experience). I came to the meeting expecting five or six women whom I had interviewed earlier to attend. Daisy called to inform me that she would be unable to show up for the first meeting. I was especially surprised to

meet three new faces who arrived to learn more about the group. These women wandered in at different intervals while the group was in progress. Of these three women two became members. One other new member who was present as the meeting commenced did not return. (She was much younger than the other women and did not feel she was currently sharing the same experiences.) Of the nine women present at this meeting seven returned as regular members and one dropped out after the second meeting due to an unfortunate accident.

My main goal for the first meeting was to have the members get to know each other. As I was facing a group with some women whom I did not have the benefit of meeting previously, I decided to provide some information about myself and elaborate on the meaning of a mutual support group. Some clarification of the nebulous term mutual support was provided for the women in the pre-group interviews. In my personal introduction I explained my role in the group. I stressed the message I put across in the pre-group interviews, that "you are the experts and I hope to learn from you." The importance of designing the group to meet the needs of the members, and of accomplishing our objectives through sharing responsibilities was reviewed. I stressed the importance of building confidence and acknowledging the strengths older women embody.

In the pre-group interviews many women questioned my

interest in older women. "Why is someone as young as
yourself interested in us 'oldsters' or seniors?" they
would ask. After having had the time to reflect on this
question I felt that the first meeting would be an
opportune time to share my thoughts on this with the group.
My earlier responses ranged from an explanation of the
group as a project for my practicum to sharing my
sensitivity to aging due to my own parents experiences at
this stage in their lives. Many of the women stated that
often younger people, such as their children just do not
understand them, hence their motivation to seek out peer
support. This concern reflected some distrust or
apprehension about my place in the group. I began to
address the question of why I am interested in older women
by recounting my various job experiences that brought me
into the lives of older women and created an awareness of
the losses they endured and the strengths they possessed.
As a woman I was angered by the sexist treatment of older
women in society, and I became increasingly sensitive to
the ageist treatment they incurred. I found that this
explanation met with a very positive response among the
group members.

I moved on to discuss a few group business issues, or
assumptions that needed to be shared with the entire group.
For the benefit of those I had not interviewed earlier, I
discussed my intention to video tape the meetings. I
assured the members that confidentiality would be upheld

and the information would be shared with my advisor and not with others unless their permission was obtained. The issues of smoking and of the preferred time for coffee break were raised. It was agreed that a closed membership policy would be in order. No new members were allowed to join after the second week. A brief description of the three shared group tasks: recorder, facilitator and timekeeper were reviewed. It was stressed that no one would be coerced into assuming a role until they felt comfortable to do so. The value of check-ins to start the group and appreciations to conclude were agreed upon as useful. The need for a ten minute period to complete a session evaluation form for my purposes was also mentioned.

The group moved on to brainstorm a list of ideas or questions to ask of each other in order to get acquainted. I wrote this list on the blackboard. The group split into pairs to do this getting aquainted exercise. One person answers the questions for a set period of time while the other listens, then the roles are reversed. The group members then return to the large group to introduce their partners. I suggested that the women try to think of one or two positive things about their partner as they got to know them. As the exercise got underway it appeared that the list on the board proved to be a hinderance to the natural flow of getting to know each other. Yet, as people began to introduce their partners we learned not only about the other person but also about the interviewer. As the

women shared their health problems or spoke of loneliness the other women immediately nodded, identifying with the issues and expressing empathy. I was surprised to see how quickly comfort developed to the point that one woman offered sincere advice to her partner while introducing her, "She spends a lot of time doing things for her children and grandchildren and I told her she has to start to look after herself" (Lee, 1986, Creative Retirement, Mutual support group).

The group members were very attentive to each other and interested in the women's herstories. None of the women had difficulties opening up to each other. The information gathered ranged across marital status, children, health status, cultural background, job experience, hobbies--past and present volunteer work, travel, languages spoken, etc. I found that this method of introducing partners was very successful. It set the precedent for a process of sharing, identifying common concerns and establishing rapport.

It was interesting to observe the differences between the type of information women shared in the pre-group interviews and what they were willing to disclose in a group situation. During this exercise there had been some interrupting which got people off on unrelated tangents. I decided to raise this issue in the next meeting.

Sharing the personal introductions in a group brought to the forefront the different levels on which people

connected with each other. Two women who were both cat lovers felt a bond, while two other women shared the experience of living on a farm drew together.

During the break, about halfway through the group, a new member arrived. I was able to quickly interview her and introduce her to the group. I also introduced Daisy who called in advance to indicate her desire to be introduced to the others in her absence. The group members reaction to my introduction of Daisy indicated that they were overwhelmed by the range of her involvements. This response cautioned me to correct the feeling that this woman was superior to the others or as one member put it "above us all." Sharing information about Daisy's hearing problems set a precedent that it was okay to disclose health problems so that others could be supportive of your needs. As we quickly ran out of time, I drew the meeting to an end by offering the discussion topic for the next meeting: women and health care. This topic was determined on the basis of choices indicated in the pre-group interview sheets.

Meeting #2. February 12, 1986. There were seven women present at the second group meeting. The group members chose either colors or numbers to indicate how they were feeling that day for the check-in exercise (Women's Self-Help Network, 1980). Some of the women provided a very short explanation for their color or number. Stella hinted at bigger personal problems but held back from spilling it

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out. The group members were encouraged to share tasks.
Daisy offered to be recorder and take brief notes of the
meeting. Cary offered to be timekeeper and I was the
facilitator. Early progress was made in sharing these
tasks. Following the check-in we did a brief recap of last
week's meeting. A special notebook was set aside for the
weekly recorder.

The group moved on to participate in a short exercise
designed to help remember names. One group member begins,
"Hello. I'm -----." The woman beside her repeats the first
woman's name and adds her own. The third person says the
first two people's names as well as their own. This
exercise was a quick fun way for the group members to learn
each other's names. This led us into another exercise from
the Women's Self-Help Handbook, called "Find Someone Who."
This exercise is designed to help group members get
acquainted and comfortable with each other. The members
were given handout #1 and asked to spend fifteen minutes
circulating and asking questons of each other until they
found someone who responds to a question and write it in
the list. The group members are encouraged by this task to
make contact with as many women as possible.

Insert Handout #1 about here

HANDOUT #1.

Find Someone Who. . .

                                            Person's Name

1. Is an only child   _____

2. Can speak at least two languages   _____

3. Has been out of this province   _____

4. Has lived on a farm   _____

5. Has a driver's license   _____

6. Can swim   _____

7. Has three children   _____

8. Can play a musical instrument   _____

9. Has pierced ears   _____

10. Can ride a bicycle   _____

11. Likes to read books   _____

12. Can bake pies   _____

The next item on our agenda was a short discussion on goals. I felt that there was a need for further clarification of group goals, as differences existed in the various member's perceptions of the goals. For some women their goal was quite basic and immediate, to get out and meet people with common concerns. For others, the goals were perceived with a larger educational orientation and in a broader social context. These differences were partially indicative of different stages of awareness regarding women's issues. I decided to have the group draw up a list of goals on a flip chart to clarify the group's consensual goals. The desire to receive support from each other, in order to develop strengths and confidence was shared by all.

The forum was then opened up to discuss the topic of women and health care. The atmosphere was warm and group members were attentive to each other as well as to the facilitator. As women shared some painful experiences with the health care system, the other group members responded with supportive understanding. The importance of nutrition for good health was discussed and the need for enough money to maintain a nutritious diet was recognized as an issue for many older women. In a round the women were asked to share feelings and thoughts on the discussion topic. They were asked to consider the postive "What are the things you can do to make yourself feel better?" The area of holistic medicine was covered as Eva was very interested in and

knowledgable in this field. She presented a very strong stand in favor of health food and swore by chiropractors. The myths that portray doctors as infallible gods who are worthy of total reverence brought to the surface painful memories for some women. Lee shared a painful experience of being let down by a doctor whom she trusted in a time of dire need. This experience forced her to switch to a new doctor which was something she would not have considered as proper behavior under normal circumstances.

Carla, another group member, is a nurse. She offered an interesting informative comparison of medicine in England and in Canada. She felt that there was less reliance on drugs in England. She spoke of the injustice to women evident in doctors' tendencies to over tranquilize women. She described the proper English bedside manner and all the women shared her opinion that the doctors in Canada need to brush up their manners. The need to question doctors and to receive clear comprehensible information was voiced as well. The group felt that too many women are intimidated by doctors and accept their pronouncements unquestioningly. I referred the women to read Leah Cohen's book Small Expectations which has an excellent section on women and health care. Most of the women were anxious to read this book and a few copies circulated through the group.

An appreciation exercise followed the discussion. Appreciations are an exercise where positive statements

recognizing each member's contribution are given. This exercise was designed to increase the members' self-esteem and to re-inforce the idea that we all deserve appreciations. As it is more difficult to say positive things about oneself, I decided to have each woman offer a statement of appreciation to the woman beside her. Some examples of the statements of appreciation are indicative of the impact of this exercise:

Your tone of voice urges one to think about nutrition. It sounds like you have a lot of knowledge to offer. . . .

I appreciate your friendship.

I like your attitude, you may be down but not out, I appreciated your sharing your painful personal experience with the group.

I appreciate your smile, being at ease and comfortable.

I appreciate your opening comment in the check-in on how you felt closer to the group members after two hours than to people you have worked with for many years.

This exercise worked very well leaving the women in an uplifted positive frame of mind at the end of the meeting. The last statement of appreciation is indicative of how quickly intimacy develops in an all female group.

In this first discussion session women were validating each other for their experiences and it was an exciting process to witness. My concern with achieving a balance

between personal issues and focussing on educational topics was alleviated. Despite the different life experiences these women possessed, their recognition of the common elements in their experiences as women were acknowledged.

Despite the heterogenous mix of women, a common bond was evident. At the same time I became cognizant of my own connection to the older women as a woman. Although I did not share the experience that comes with old age, I was accepted into the group with warmth and trust. I felt an identification with the women in many of the issues they faced as mothers, homemakers, daughters. I left this meeting convinced of both the need for the ability of women to support each other. "Women need to be heard, to be hugged, to be healed. Women can do this for each other" (Graveline, 1985, p. 79).

Thus, by the end of the second group meeting the group had moved toward the elements of Inclusion as illustrated in Schutz's framework. "Inclusion involves trust building which is generally based on sharing information about one's self and discovering commonalities" (Walker, 1981, p. 243). Meeting #3. February 19, 1986. As most of the members felt reluctant to take on the task of group facilitator, I was pleasantly surprised by Carla's offer to facilitate this class. Daisy volunteered to be recorder and May was the timekeeper. By the third group meeting all three group tasks were shared by the group members. Thus, it was clear

that we were progressing toward the goal of shared

leadership. Before turning the group over to Carla, I

raised an issue from the last meeting, the need to refrain

from speaking at the same time.

In the planning portion of meeting #1, the group

expressed interest in viewing a film to stimulate a

discussion on women and retirement. Six women were present

to view "All of Our Lives" (Sky, L. and Klodawsky, H.,

1983) a thirty minute film. This film examines the reasons

why many women face economic hardship and emotional

hardship and emotional isolation in old age. The film

challenges audiences to re-evaluate the undervalued world

of "women's work," of childrearing and work in the home

(National Film Board, Health and Welfare Canada, 1984).

As I viewed the video tape of this discussion I was

particularly sensitive to the non verbal behavior of the

women which appeared to increase their affiliation (Henley,

1973). The women were very moved by this film and eager to

share the memories it conjured up. Carla was an excellent

facilitator. She opened the discussion with some of her

thoughts on issues of pensions and activist groups like

Gray Panthers. Her enthusiasm over the positive efforts to

promote senior citizens' rights set the tone for the group.

As Carla turned the discussion over to the group she was

careful to operate in a round and very skillful in assuring

each member an opportunity to speak. Each woman's opinion

was accepted in a nonjudgmental fashion.

The film explored women's socialization into rigid

traditional roles. The pressure for girls to remain "in

the back" and allow "boys to be boys" was covered. In the

traditional family girls often had to quit school and help

out in the home, while boys were encouraged to develop

themselves. Several women in the group could identify with

this portrayal of women's oppression. As Lee recalled, "In

the old days the boy or the man had the say and the girl or

the woman had to follow. I recall attending a school in

the country where we had eight grades in one room. The

slower ones and the girls never got very far. . . ."

Another group member expressed the result of this

socialization and the difficulties it creates for women.

"It limits your capability to express yourself. The shape

of your life begins in your youth. . . . It takes quite an

effort to break the chains and become your own person."

The group members expressed anger at the lack of

recognition women receive in old age. They are often left

to fend for themselves on a meagre pension. "All of our

lives we worked hard . . . . It was never recognized--we

are left not thinking much of ourselves--that makes me

angry" (All of Our Lives, National Film Board, 1984). Some

women in the group reacted to the injustice by deciding

that the only way to change things is "to fight for what we

want." Canada Pensioners Concerned helped to put out the

film and the need to create and support groups like this

one was expressed. Some women talked about how hard it was

for them to take a stand. Others, like Carla the
facilitator, pointed out the positive impact of sharing in
a discussion of this nature as a pre-requisite to action.
As she put it, "As we talk to one another we generate
energy." There was a range of feelings about the economic
and social situation of older women among the group members
from the more conservative thinkers to those of more
liberated women.

The film and discussion created new awareness, and a
consciousness-raising outlook on their circumstances for
several women. However, it was still difficult for them to
be convinced that their work was of equal value to that of
a man. As Lee shared her memories of life with her husband
on their farm she said, "I worked hard . . . he worked
harder . . . ." This same woman later began to acknowledge
and value her own work . . . "When you stop to think. If I
didn't do all the ironing, cooking, cleaning, caring for
the children, canning, preserving, sewing and help out on
the farm, he would never have been able to do his work."
For another woman, Angela, an Italian immigrant who now
lives alone and worries about her future, the reaction to
the film was sadness. "The more I think the more I feel
down." For May, who is an older woman in the work force,
the film brought forth her experience of feeling shut out
of the mainstream. The group facilitator pointed out the
wealth of skills women acquire in managing a household that
might equip them to run a business.

The group also discussed various solutions to loneliness. Daisy's religious community, where she lives among mixed age groups was one example. Another example from the film was the depiction of two older female friends who move in together and find the satisfaction that replaces their previous marriages. Carla ended the discussion on a positive note, "We can be old, but still growing in spirit, caring and sharing." This was consistent with the group's goal of developing confidence and the strengths of women.

Before the meeting was turned over to evaluation, I shared with the group the reason for Eva's absence. I had spoken to her prior to the meeting and learned that she was the victim of a vicious attack by two watch dogs. The group members responded to this horrendous experience with concern. They offered assistance to Eva in her recovery. (Many women called to offer various forms of help.) Eva was never able to rejoin the group, but her presence during the first two meetings and the impact of her accident certainly left a lasting impact on the group. As the meeting drew to an end, planning further discussion topics for the next two weeks was addressed.

Meeting #4. February 26, 1986. By the fourth group meeting, Daisy, a group member was willing to facilitate the entire meeting. The structure of the group sessions was set. All the members were familiar with the general agenda and the group was making strides in reaching their

goals. A further step in sharing the responsibilities was Kate's offer to be timekeeper. This was a task which she took on as a challenge, trying to overcome her anxiety.

In the check in the numbers ranged from one to ten, the average being seven or eight. One woman shared a very positive step in her life. She initiated actions that she had never done before in her life, arranging two trips by herself. She felt very good about taking this initiative and disclosed to the group that "I wanted to prove to my husband that I can do things without him." I believe that the group support assisted her in taking this positive step, for change is often enabled by support (Caplan, 1974). Another woman expressed positive feelings about getting to the group on her own by bus for the first time. She managed to overcome her anxiety and felt stronger for this victory. Another group member, Lee rated her feelings as a five. While she was away, her apartment was flooded. She was distressed and had to face coming home alone to clean up the mess and pack up her belongings. Her motivation to attend the group despite this obstacle was admirable. These examples of information shared in the check-in, illustrate the range of the trials that older women often have to contend with alone. The inclusion of events "external" to the group recognizes the congruence of external and internal.

Before introducing the discussion topic of women and religion Daisy conducted a group meditation exercise. The

material for this was derived from similar exercises in the Women's Self-Help Manual. The purpose of this exercise was to transmit caring. The women sat in a circle and held hands maintaining silence while Daisy read a meditation designed to create positive energy and caring. Everyone participated in this exercise and a feeling of warmth predominated.

Insert Handout #2 about here

Daisy's talk on women and religion began with her sharing some personal history. Daisy experienced a long soul search for a Christian way of life that would fulfill her special needs. She was antagonized by the domination of the traditional church by an all-male clergy. This, as well as other issues, caused her to leave the Christian church. None of it was nourishing for her as a woman. Daisy went on to discuss some of the wonderful women in religion: Mother Theresa, Coretta King and Dorothy Gay. She then organized the discussion by offering five role play situations. She assigned each to five different women and asked them to respond to the statements, in 1936 and in 1986. The issues were:

    1. If you saw a woman on the bus wearing a skirt and jacket and later learned she was a nun, how would you

_____

Group Meditation Exercise

(designed to transmit energy and caring)

      Group members sit in a circle. Each person closes her eyes and becomes aware of her breathing and energy level in the group. Take long slow breaths. Breathe deeply. Do you feel tense? anxious? excited? calm? tired? Energy travels up and down the spine. Sit up as erect as you can without straining. Take deep breaths. Imagine yourselves in a warm, comfortable place in nature, soaking up the warmth of the sun near a lake or smelling the fresh flowers in an open field. Try to soak in the positive energy from nature. Join hands with each other. Through your right hand, from your place of caring, send energy around the circle. This positive energy comes from our heart, from our ability to be loving and caring.

      As you breathe in, receive the gift of caring energy through your left hand. Feel the energy move around the circle and warm yourself with it. It may seem like a tingling or a low heat or a sensation of cold. Take a deep slow breath and breathe in the energy of the group. Feel it travel down your spine and travel into the earth. Gently bring your hands into your own lap, relax and gradually open your eyes. Look around and connect with the women around you.
_____

NOTE: ADAPTED FROM WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHANGE: WOMEN'S

SELF-HELP HANDBOOK. (VOL.2, P. 105) BY WOMEN'S SELF-HELP

NETWORK, 1984, CAMPBELL RIVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA: PTARMIGAN

PRESS.

react in 1936? in 1986?

2. Your son is to be married in two weeks. You find out that your future daughter-in-law intends to keep her own name. Reaction 1936? 1986?

3. You are a qualified and able man and volunteer to teach pre-school bible school. Reactions 1936? 1986?

4. You are in the women's society and asked to prepare and serve dinner. How would you react 1936? 1986?

5. You are searching for a new minister. The applicant Rev. Merrill Bowan turns out to be a woman. Reactions 1936? 1986?

Daisy's role play situations stimulated a very provocative discussion. The situation urged the women to examine traditional views regarding women's prescribed roles and how they are changing. Some women were sympathetic to more liberal views, for example, supportive of a woman's right to keep her own name after marriage. Daisy pointed out the added advantage of doing so--it enables people to track you down. This is not the case if you change your name to your husband's. Some other group members reflected more traditional views, "I hate Ms. It puts you in a never, never land, you are neither here nor there."

As the women disagreed in their responses to some of these issues, there was conflict in the group for the first time. However, this conflict was not destructive to the

group process. It was handled in a very respectful way.
For example, while discussing the issue of nuns dressed in
street clothes, Angela spoke out with the opposite position
of the other women. She did not feel that this was proper
as in her mind the uniform demands respect. The
facilitator responded to her anxiety with, "We feel
differently about this issue, but that's okay, we respect
each other's opinions here." This response was very
powerful as it did not put down Angela for her views but
accepted them in a respectful (noncritical) way.

The process underway in this meeting reflects the
second stage in Schutz's framework for the development of
women's groups, control. It is marked by frustration,
disappointment and anger. "The insight gained through
sharing and analyzing elicits anger which may be expressed
toward oneself, toward others within and outside of the
group, or towards society." Several authors (Halas, 1973;
Kirsch, 1974; Wolman, 1976) note that anger revealed in
women's groups differs from anger expressed by participants
in mixed groups. I felt that this group meeting was a good
example of how women's groups are more conducive to
expressing and sharing angry feelings. The women were not
threatened by the conflict, when they had the security of
an all female group. Women's groups encourage
nonconformity and the expression of anger and
dissatisfaction towards traditional role stereotyped
behavior (Walker, 1981). One of the positive outcomes of

voicing angry or emotional feelings is the acquisition of insight that may be channeled into personal or societal changes. Hage (1983) contends that conflict and control are likely to be especially difficult areas for all women's groups. Women's socialization and interpersonal orientation often disallow feelings of anger, thus anger becomes a new and frightening experience. In the Women Today group, this contention of Hagen's was not apparent.

In this fourth group meeting in addition to the conflict among group members, there was also conflict with my opinions. The group members were comfortable and confident enough to disagree with my opinions on the issue of women changing their names. This response was an indication that the group accepted me as an equal rather than as one up on the hierarchical structure.

The group members agreed that this meeting was an "enlightening experience." Daisy had a wealth of personal knowledge and experience to share with the group. She was a very competent facilitator and kept the group on track during the discussion. She concluded the discussion with a brief description of the resolution of her religious quest, in becoming a member of a new church community. The group meeting ended with a spontaneous appreciation exercise. Daisy received a lot of appreciation for her presentation. Kate's efforts at timekeeping were also acknowledged. One group member who was unusually quiet during this meeting was noticed with the supportive remark, "Glad you were here

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despite your quiet mood." The group members discussed
Eva's situation following the attack by dogs and decided to
send her a card by the entire group. I was moved by the
level of concern in the group for someone they knew so
briefly. This was a clear demonstration of women's
capacity to develop intimacy quickly.

Meeting #5. March 5, 1986. The first half of this group
meeting involved a discussion on stereotyping of women.
There were seven group members present. Our standard
structure was altered to accommodate our speaker for the
second portion of the group. The group commenced with a
short check in exercise. May was feeling particularly low
due to threat of eviction. By sharing her feelings of
anger and hurt the group members were able to express
support and follow the progress of her action on this
issue. Another group member, Lee arrived wearing a monitor
attached to her pacemaker for testing purposes. She had
inquired in advance about attending in that condition, and
the fact that she was encouraged to come was indicative of
the trust and support in the group. Following the check in
the women discussed an article concerning Eva's accident
that appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press.

I facilitated the discussion of stereotyping of women.
I believe that understanding of stereotyping and learning
ways to minimize or change it was of central importance for
any group of women. I introduced the discussion with a
question posed by Gottlieb (1984) "Can a group experience

for women be effective which does not actively attempt to surmount harmful stereotypes or does not purposely increase the control women can assume over their lives?" The group began to discuss the multitude of negative stereotypes of older women that depict them as ugly, sick or sexless. They offered their views on wrinkles, gray hair, and the general appearance of the older woman. Most of the women did not feel ashamed of their physical signs of aging. As May commented about her gray hair, "I earned every one of them and I'm proud of them." Daisy's reaction to gray hair was different and more complicated, "When I see it in the comb I get a fleeting feeling--how is it mine? I don't know what to do with that feeling. I guess it's a reminder that the years have gone by." The women agree that our society misleads people to focus on the external while it is "the inside of a person that counts." Therefore the beauty of aging is overlooked.

The women discussed the stereotype of old women as senile and forgetful and generally incompetent. There was a torrent of personal stories documenting situations where women were victims of such stereotyping. One recent experience recounted by Lee reflected the innocent way in which stereotyping is often put across. On a recent visit to the doctor's office the receptionist asked her if she remembered when she had last seen the doctor. When she provided the exact date, the secretary responded with surprise. Lee remarked in the group, "I couldn't help

wondering if she'd have felt the same surprise if I was ten years younger." The discussion of stereotyping included comments on women as hypochondriacs and as sexually inactive. The circumstances that contribute to labelling and the persistence of stereotyping were covered. The discussion was ended abruptly to leave time for the speaker.

At the suggestion of one of the members the group invited Professor Ed Allen from the University of Winnipeg, Department of Psychology to speak on the topic of peer counselling. This seemed like an appropriate and worthwhile topic to explore. The similarity between mutual support groups and peer counselling were considered. Ed Allen worked as a resource person for the James Bay Peer Counselling project in Victoria, British Columbia, during his sabbatical. The rationale behind this project was that there was a reserve of talented seniors who desire to be helpful. These people were recruited and trained to be peer counsellors. "A peer counsellor will use communication skills to facilitate self-exploration, value clarification and decision making while operating within their own social network" (Women's Self-Help Network, 184, p. 141).

The Women Today members were very interested in and excited by the concept of peer counselling. They shared the belief that the seniors generally seek out other seniors for help when they are experiencing frustrations,

concerns and other problems. One group member suggested doing a role play to illustrate the skills necessary for a good counsellor compared to a counsellor that is ineffective. This role play exercise was fun and educational for the group.

Meeting #6. March 12. This meeting opened with a recap of the last session followed by a check in exercise. Angela shared a very frightening experience of being harassed at a bus stop by a man with a knife. The group members reacted with genuine concern and empathy for the traumatic experience. A short discussion on the many dangers older women face when going out alone in the evenings developed. The discussion topic set for this meeting was Stress. We discussed the definition of stress as some confusion was voiced over the difference between stress, sadness and anxiety. Carla came up with a helpful definition, "sadness is an emotion, stress is the physical manifestation of the emotion." The discussion covered the causes of stress in the lives of older women: happy as well as sad events, money, relationships, obligations, accidents, crisis. In a round, women shared personal experiences of stress ranging from marital problems, to hearing loss, employer relations, landlord problems. The group participated in a series of relaxation exercises to minimize the physical reactions to stress. The exercises were distributed on Handout #3 derived from the Women's Self-Help Manual. The response to this brief exercise session was positive. People felt

energized and the mood was lifted.

Insert Handout #3 about here

The group members were guided to explore other
positive ways to reduce stress. One woman expressed her
gratitude for the support of the group as an example of a
positive way she copes with the stress in her life. "Being
here with you ladies has been a great boon for me. I have
discussed things, that I haven't said to my closest
friends. I feel I can say what I think here and not be
criticized for it." Thus a mutual support group was
identified as one positive means to reduce stress. This
emphasis on the positive ways to reduce stress was
consistent with the goal of emphasizing the strengths of
older women. We avoided getting stuck in a negative
discussion of the destructive habits stress can produce.

May was the group facilitator for the second half of
the meeting, leading a discussion on "women and finance."
May's stimulating material on the subject was largely
derived from personal experience. She shared with the
group the knowledge she gained about financial management
through her devastating personal experience. May was the
victim of poor stock investments and credit card abuse.
She now lives on a tight budget and sticks to a rigid,

STRESS REDUCTION: Physical exercises
      (as put together by Sara Joy David, Ph. D)

1. **Shoulder Shrugging:** both shoulders 10 times,
right one-5, left-5.
2. **Shoulder rotating backwards** 5 times.
3. **Elbowing:** elbows are at shoulder height, hands hang
down loosely. Elbows are moved backwards vigorously. Use
sentences like "off my back" 5 times.
4. **Arm flinging:** arms are raised with fingers of each hand
on chest. Fling arms backwards and outwards. Do the right
arm only and then the left arm only. Head and eyes follow
swinging arms.
5. **Pushing arms forward:** Hands are in front of chest, palms
facing out. Push irritating or hurtful situations away. Use
phrases like "Get away". 5 times.
6. **Jumping and Shaking:** jump up and down on the spot, knees
loose, on toes, move shoulders, arms, head. Idea is to
loosen the whole body by shaking it up. Shake tension out
of finger tips, kick it out at toes.
7. **Head shaking:** Shake head back and forth as rapidly as
possible without causing undue pain.
8. **Head rotations:** Drop head forward. Rotate right, back to
centre, to left, repeat 5 times. Do this frontwards only.
9. **Reaching/stretching:** First with one hand and then the
other, reach above your head as high as you can. Imagine
grabbing hold of a rope and pulling it down. Imagine the
rope is something you long for – meaningful work, love,
increased creativity, etc. 5 times for each arm (alternating
right, left).
10. **Stomping with hands and feet:** lie on floor, knees bent,
head on floor, hands and feet on ground. Hit with palms and
stomp feet (looks like a temper tantrum). Let sounds out or
say 'no' 'stop' 'don't'.
11. **Jack-knife stomping:** bring both legs up to chest and
stomp. Pelvis comes up as feet come towards the floor. You
may do all or part of the series. Pick one and do
3 – 4 times a day. The idea is to incorporate these
exercises into your life – to be aware of tensions, and
releasing it without making it 'work'. Self massage is a
good complement.

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realistic plan to rid herself of her debts before retirement. During this personal disclosure the group members were very supportive of May and did not allow her to blame herself. They helped her to consider the unpredictable factors that created much of her trouble. With reference to the stock investment one woman commented, "We are ordinary people, we have to trust professionals." The discussion covered pension planning and the inequality of male and female pension plans, the need to demystify pensions, the impact of consumer credit card advertisements, Registered Retirement Savings Plans, wills and funeral expenses. Some of the information concerning finances was gleaned from Every Woman's Money Book (1985) which later was ready by many of the women. Following the discussion the group members offered their appreciation to May in a very supportive fashion. Such as, "I appreciate your sharing. I don't think you looked stupid at all. . . ." or "It takes a lot of courage to speak as you did. . . ."

May's ease and courage in disclosing her personal, financial history was indicative of the accomplishments of the group thus far. A nonjudgmental atmosphere, trust, and caring were all factors that enabled her to present a discussion of this nature. Facilitating this discussion concerning issues that had caused her a great deal of pain in her life resulted in a therapeutic experience. Through this discussion the women learned how women's experience of the financial world is unique and different from the male

experience due to limited opportunities in employment and the inequities of the pension system.

Meeting #7.   March 19, 1986.   The agenda for this meeting was planned with the awareness that this was the second last meeting.   I thought it necessary to invite the group members to offer their thoughts about the group's impending termination.   The women were asked for suggestions on how they would like to spend the last meeting.   It was important to meet all the members expectations and to attend to any unfinished business prior to the group's ending.   The need to skillfully move toward the ending of the group should not be minimized.   "In the ending phase the workers and members alike form their last impressions of the group" (Toseland, 1984, p. 331).

Throughout the group process I had adopted the role of an enabler, a "worker who helps members to revitalize and mobilize their own strengths and resources to cope with different problems" (Compton and Galloway, 1979, quoted in Toseland, 1984, p. 210).   The benefits of this nondirective, shared leadership served to equalize power among the group members and group facilitator.   As my professional role was coming to an end, I reflected on how the group members would continue to find the support that had been fulfilled by the group.   I thought that the women were well equipped to carry on, and share the role of facilitator among themselves.

A brief period was devoted to discussing issues and
feelings that arise as a group draws to an end. May
offered to type a group list of names, addresses and phone
numbers to help the women to keep in touch in the future.
This idea was accepted positively. Another group member,
Stella indicated that this would be her last meeting as she
was leaving town. The women acknowledged that this was
Stella's last week with caring and good wishes. The group
members indicated the desire to have a reunion, which would
be arranged at the last meeting. The group then took ten
minutes to complete a Creative Retirement evaluation form.

The check in exercise for this week followed a
slightly different format. The women were asked to
consider what makes you feel positive about yourself. The
second portion of the group time was devoted to a
discussion on creativity and productivity in old age. This
discussion was preceded by a film, "Something to
Celebrate." This topic seemed to be timed appropriately in
the group process. It was in tune with the positive
orientation and motivation to build up confidence in older
women. "Something to Celebrate" (Brittain, 1983), sets out
to prove that life doesn't necessarily slow down after the
age of sixty. The film features fourteen people ranging in
years from 71-92. All of these individuals express their
passion for life in different ways ranging from riding in a
hot air balloon, to starting a new business at age fifty to
a fraud artist retiring to become an honest person age

seventy-four. They are all individuals with a fierce sense
of independence and a notion that the best way to keep
alive is to be intensely curious about tomorrow. In this
film the individuals express a variety of positive ideas
about old age. One woman's attitude is that "it is no more
difficult than being young or middle aged, just another
stage." An old shepherd living on his farm expressed his
attitude with the words "The best is yet to be." The women
experienced this film as very uplifting, exciting and
thought provoking. They identified with the memories of
collected precious moments of the past that the people in
the film shared. The older people in the film drew their
strength from a variety of sources including friendships,
the sea, animals and music. . . . The film steered the
group to consider realistically the need to plan for and
enjoy their old age. The film communicated the idea that
old age can last a long time. Nature is no longer the
scourge of the elderly it once was. Many factors such as
the control of infectious diseases, reduction of fatal
strokes and heart attacks, emphasis on fitness and the wide
availability of better medical care have combined to
mitigate the traumas of growing old" (Novak, 1984).

The group members were impressed with the
non-stereotypical portrayal of older people this film
presented. As one woman remarked, "The thing that remains
with me is I didn't feel sorry for them. They were old yet
the way they coped with life . . . you never thought, 'Oh!

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That poor old soul!'" The group's discussion covered the topic of labels such as "seniors" and their connotations. Lee and Stella identified with the portrayal of the shepherd and farmer's lives and the meaning that nature held for them. The message of the film was that the positive attitude these people represented was derived from continuing to pursue their special interests. The film prompted the women to share some painful experiences in life, such as losing a spouse through death and/or divorce. The need to move on and to remain committed to the future was discussed. As in any stage of life during old age the elderly must cope with developmental tasks. "The elderly must teach themselves to conserve their strength and resources when necessary and to adjust in the best sense to those changes and losses that occur as part of the aging experience" (Butler, 1982). Butler speaks of a process of life review for older people which involves allowing time to mourn one's losses through reminiscence and then moving on with a liberated feeling to integrate the past into the present. The need for energy and optimism to grow old cheerfully was depicted in the film. The women in the group who were employed outside the home spoke of their need to replace one type of work with another. "What people miss most when they quit working are the friendships, contacts and relationships to the community more than the income." For May, the one group member who is still employed but now preparing for her retirement, the

message from the film was very timely. The women shared
their ideas of different ways to remain productive and
happy in their senior years. Daisy is involved in teaching
English to illiterates on a volunteer basis, which she
finds very rewarding. ("It is absolutely overpowering how
grateful they are.") This was one of many examples put
forth on this topic. As the discussion drew to a close the
group members were in a cheerful and energized mood. We
participated in a fun exercise called, "I've Always Wanted
To. . . " taken from the Group Building Module of the
Women's Self-Help Manual. In a round, each person stated
something she had always wanted to do or to be in her life.
This exercise capitalized on the women's uplifted mood and
the reminiscences provoked by the film. The responses
ranged from: "to learn to swim, to be a dancer, to play a
musical instrument, to become a mountain climber, to become
an actress." The meeting closed with Carla suggesting a
motto: "Don't mind growing older, but I don't want to get
'old.'"

March 29, 1986 - The last meeting.

The group decided to begin the last meeting with a
period of reviewing segments of the group's video tapes.
There was a mixture of apprehension and excitement among
the women. Unfortunately, the quality of the sound created
difficulties for some of the women. Oddly enough the one
group member who was self-critical as she watched the tape,
expressed how much she enjoyed viewing them. The value in

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sharing the tapes was minimal. If more time was taken to
focus on one tape in greater depth, the women would have
become familiar with the system, and perhaps able to derive
more from viewing the tape.

The group members moved on to have the check in
period. The focus was to share feelings about the group's
ending. This directed the women to evaluate the group
process and to share plans for the future. I praised the
group for their motivation, their commitment to the group,
for sharing their knowledge, life experiences and skills in
ways that benefitted the entire group, as well as myself.
As the women voiced their feelings, a range of emotions
from sadness to gratefulness to others for their support
were expressed. It became clear to me that the group made
definite progress towards achieving their intended goals.
The women perceived a growth in awareness or consciousness
of women's issues. They spoke of the tremendous value they
derived from communicating and discussing issues with
peers, which to them was preferable to turning to family.
May summed up the benefit that the mutual peer support
provided for her: "I care about you people. I care what
happens to you. Eight weeks ago I didn't even know you
people. I'm sad it's over now." Daisy remarked about the
pleasure of sharing with a group of women. "I don't think
a bunch of men getting together could have enjoyed
themselves as much. . . They'd talk about their latest
sexual conquests." The women all commented on the quick

development of rapport. They spoke of a female quality that enhances this process.

Several women in the group expressed feelings of appreciation to me for my interest in older women. "It's nice that a young person like you was interested. . . ." The women recollected their initial surprise that I intended to learn from them rather than to teach them. They now understood what I meant by this. Other women remarked that they did not think of me as a young leader, a 32 year old mother of two girls. "I didn't think of you a a young person. . . you were Gail." The value of rapport between women regardless of age was discovered. I thought that such remarks were indicative of the level of personal growth and appreciation for the strengths of older women.

Following this discussion on the group process, the group engaged in a positive feedback exercise. This exercise had been on the agenda several times but was bypassed due to lack of time. The goal of this exercise was to enhance women's ability to identify their qualities, thereby building self-esteem. We practiced giving appreciations to other group members in an earlier meeting. Saying something positive about yourself required going one step further. This exercise was appropriate for a group at this stage where the members were familiar with one another as it requires a climate of trust and support. The exercise was carried out by each person's neighbor writing down the statement for them on a slip of paper that could

be taken home as a positive reminder. The responses indicating positive feedback included: "I'm a good teacher. I'm a caring person. I'm friendly. I'm proud of my limitless curiosity. I care about people, animals, and the state of the universe. I'm a compassionate person."

The last item on our agenda, prior to completing a course evaluation form was a discussion on plans for a reunion. The group decided to have a reunion at a member's home. The plan was for each person to bring a bag lunch and the hostess offered to provide tea and pastry. The date for the reunion was tentatively set for May 15, 1986. The agenda for the meeting was to be unstructured. The members saw the reunion as an opportunity to catch up and reconnect with each other's lives. They decided not to set a specific topic for discussion. The only item I particularly wanted to explore on this occasion was the interest in the group reconvening in the fall/winter session with the group members facilitating the entire program and how this might be done.

Reunion.

The Women Today reunion took place on May 15, 1986 at Lee's apartment. All the group members were present except for Stella who called to say she was ill. I offered to pick up Angela, Daisy and Cary and meet the other women at Lee's. During the car ride through town to Lee's, I became aware of how limited transportation was for some women. As they lived in restricted parts of town and rarely travelled

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beyond, it was a real treat to venture into suburbia. The car ride there provided unanticipated pleasure for the women. Lee's place was very warm and bright, full of plants and flowers, a perfect setting for the occasion. She was a friendly hostess, and greeted all her guests with a hug.

The women sat around the kitchen table having lunch and catching up on the latest events or experiences in their lives. There was no prearranged discussion topic and the focus became personal. The women were much more inclined to share personal feelings and express strong emotions in this context. Lee talked about her month spent in Vancouver. She shared her concerns over her aging mother wishing to move back to Winnipeg. The women were very understanding of the demands and the guilt that the situation imposes on Lee. Their support for her position was conveyed. Kate for the first time told the group about her personal life. She recalled painful memories of having to quit her job due to a lengthy depression. She spoke of her relationship of caretaker for her parents and how this restricted her opportunities in life. Sharing this information with the other women was indicative of the high level of trust established throughout the meetings. Daisy had her son visiting from out of town but decided to attend the reunion. She spoke of the need for parents and children to live their own lives and not impose binding obligations on each other. A lot of discussion developed

on the issue of coping with the care of aging parents.

Carla mentioned to the group that she spoke to Farrell
Fleming at Creative Retirement about the possibility of the
group reconvening in the fall. She expressed a desire to
facilitate the group if the interest exists. She was
however uncertain about the time commitment. The group
members responded favorably to her proposal. May talked to
the women about her ongoing problem with her landlord. The
women were pleased to learn that a pet agreement was
instated. They praised May for her assertiveness and skill
in handling this problem. May was currently attending a
class in Law at Creative Retirement and enjoying it very
much. She shared some of the valuable material she learned
about wills and pension schemes with the women. May was
unsure about attending the group in the future due to
commitment to her job. Angela was very quiet during the
reunion. Her difficulty in expressing herself in English
presented an obvious barrier to her contributing to the
conversation. The reunion drew to a natural ending after
about two hours. The women expressed appreciation to the
hostess Lee and indicated the desire to meet again soon.

I learned from a conversation with Carla on October
29, 1986 that the group met once recently again at Lee's
home. They reviewed ideas on what they would like to focus
on for a new group. The group was advertised as a class in
"Confidence and Competence" for the Older Woman for the
winter 1987 session at Creative Retirement with Carla as

the group leader. The group met for two sessions and then
decided to disband. To me this was an indication of the
importance of the pre-group interviews.

Chapter Five

Evaluation

In order to facilitate the evaluation process I video taped all of the group sessions. This was very beneficial for my learning and provided me with the opportunity to reflect on nonverbal as well as verbal communication. The tapes provided a record of the group development in a more detailed and accurate fashion than written recording can attain. I kept a journal recording the group content and process, but was able to embellish this record with information from the video tapes. A further benefit of the video taping was to study my skills as a group facilitator and to pick up on actions and behaviors that one does not realize one is doing at the time. I reviewed the tapes of each session prior to the next and was able to implement changes in my role as facilitator. I learned that my communication skills were quite good; I came across in a clear organized fashion. The main weakness that I noticed upon reviewing the first session was that I was talking too much myself. I therefore made efforts to restrain myself from speaking too much and waited first to see if a group member had an opinion to offer on the subject or would raise relevant issues before I did.

I had some difficulty in determining an appropriate system for evaluation of the gains or attainment of objectives by the group members. My first thought was to use either the Generalized Contentment Scale or a Scale of

Self-Esteem to achieve an indication of the group members'
gains from the group process. However, it was brought to my
attention that such measures were biased against women.
Traditional methods of measurement are concerned with
measuring behaviors or traits that are part of the
traditional cultural demands. Measures developed out of
traditional practice have been concerned with identifying or
describing cultural demands and assessing success in terms
of adjustments to stable, shared behavior patterns or
personality traits.

Klein (1976) reviewed traditional measures and
illustrated how many of them have inherently sexist bias.
She included: symptom removal, which may indicate adjustment
rather than growth and self-esteem and role performance
concepts and measures which are biased against women as well
as the quality of interpersonal relationships which are
often enhanced at the expense of women. Thus, measuring
self-esteem with a tool that incorporates values and an
approach that is biased on the exclusion of women would be
contrary to the intent of this practicum project.

Within the value system of feminist therapy it is
necessary for a woman to think about whether her self-esteem
is dependent on other's evaluation and reactions or based on
her own judgements and values (Klein, 1976). Feminists
point out that the culture's value system is patriarchal and
male-dominated (Sturdivant, 1980). Feminist therapy or
feminist groups incorporate a new vision of what women can

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be when the internalized cultural and societal barriers to self-actualization are removed. The goal of the group experience becomes personal growth as defined by women individually and collectively. As the evaluation process was conceived of as reflecting the needs of the members it became evident that a predetermined scale was inappropriate. I viewed the evaluation of the group experience by the members as part of an ongoing process over the life of the group. This is in keeping with the feminist regard for the value of experiential learning (Sturdivant, 1980). As feminist therapy incorporates a revolutionary ideology focussing on the cultural and social oppression of women, so it seems logical that new alternative tools for evaluating this system are in order. The development of feminist evaluation tools must recognize the difficulties women face in attaining these goals. Therefore socially significant variables must be taken into account. It is important that the evaluation of a feminist, mutual support group encompass a shared endeavor by group members and facilitator as, "within an egalitarian model, true treatment effectiveness can only be evaluated in conjunction with the client; it is after all, the client's goal that feminist therapy seeks to serve" (Sturdivant, 1980, p. 172).

I developed and implemented three components to the evaluation of the Women Today group. These three evaluation processes were carried out in addition to the writer's self-recording of the group process and content. The measures

selected were intended to be free of sexist bias and were chosen with consideration for the experiential nature of the group. It was not my aim to be either scientific or entirely objective in this evaluation. I came to understand the subjective component to the evaluation process as legitimate (Roberts, 1981). The importance of taking gender into account in group process and evaluation does not suggest less vigorous methods. It does however indicate the need for further development of methodology and evaluation in feminist research.

The first evaluation measure consisted of a brief session evaluation that the group members were asked to complete at the end of each meeting. It included three open-ended questions: 1. What did you like about the group during this session? 2. What did you dislike about the group? 3. Is there anything that you would like today's group facilitator to do differently? Additional comments, suggestion and ideas for future sessions?

The following is a list of the group members' likes and dislikes compiled from the eight weeks of session evaluation forms.

Likes:

-The frankness with which the women expressed themselves in describing their lives. I found Daisy's dissertation on women and religion very frank and enlightening and it opened up many areas for discussions in which most members enthusiastically participated.

-I liked every topic we discussed today. The group was very caring and sharing of women.

-I liked the group's response to the subject of women and religion. I liked the positive interaction between the participants and the willingness to share good and bad experiences with each other. I liked the size of the group--not too large.

-I liked that we were able to share each other's experiences and get to know the other women better--the openness and development of closeness.

-The opportunity to meet with a group of my peers--who are facing now and will be facing the condition of retirement. I also liked the idea of each of us interviewing one another and the information gleaned from these one to one sessions I think will be invaluable as the group [members] strive to know each other better as we progress with the program.

-Liked talking about money investments.

- . . . that we were able to talk about stress.

-Liked that attention was paid to everyone.

-Not too large, everything--their responses to the subject.

-Enjoyed the movie--thought it was very enlightening.

Dislikes:

-Not enough time, feeling rushed.

-Occasionally more than one person talking at the same time, however this probably demonstrates good stimulation.

-Hard to be the timekeeper.

-Inability to help Eva and some confusion about this matter.

Comments on group facilitator's effectiveness--things you
would like to do differently:

I think Gail handled the meeting very well. I'm sure she
put everyone at ease and her sincerity and caring I'm sure
will make future get-togethers very rewarding.

Wish more women had the opportunity to describe their own
religious life.

I thought Daisy handled the meeting very well.

I would like to have been more confident in starting the
discussion.

Ideas for future sessions: (These ideas were incorporated
into the agenda whenever possible.)

-More about money matters.

-To talk about tension, stress and loneliness.

-Talk on stress and health.

-To explore the possibility of peer counselling.

-Would like to think about how older people can be givers.

-To be able to show a film on health and nutrition.

-Dealing with psychosomatic medicine.

-Use of leisure (not crafts) or volunteer work.

-Creativity in later life.

-To be able to talk about budgeting.

-Older women still in the workforce as opposed to those
already retired.

   The second measure used by the group members to
evaluate their experience as a whole was an evaluation form
which consisted of two open-ended questions and several

statements that required checking off agree, disagree or neutral. This form was designed bearing in mind not only the needs of the researcher, myself, but with consideration for the composition of the group. It was apparent throughout the course of the group that some of the women had difficulty with written forms and were much more comfortable with the personal interview format. The need for feminist research to attend to the needs of the subjects as well as themselves is stated by Roberts; "It is clearly of particular importance when doing research with relatively powerless groups that research findings should be presented in a way which is as clear as possible for those individuals" (1981, p. 26). I thought that the language was clear and to the point, and checking of a response would be indicative of benefits derived from the group as well as of the feminist consciousness raising component of the experience. I knew that if I found any responses that were surprising and needed clarification, I would have the opportunity to discuss the issues with the particular women at the post-group interview. The following evaluation form is a summary of all the responses, to the evaluation.

Evaluation of Women Today at Creative Retirement.

What did you like best about the group?

Daisy: The frankness with which women expressed themselves in describing their lives.

Lee: Gail is a good communicator and I enjoyed the company of the rest of the group.

Angela: To share problems makes me feel better.

Carla: Gail was an excellent facilitator and I enjoyed the other people in the group.

Stella: The warmth and support of the women sharing each others' feelings and our past experiences.

May: I enjoyed the opportunity to share with and learn from my peers. The closeness and trust among the women meant a lot to me.

What has the group done for you?

Daisy: Offered some interesting afternoon discussions.

Lee: It gave me a fresh incentive to think about starting a group--Grey Panthers.

Angela: Enjoy the company, people.

Stella: It has given me more confidence in myself and I do more things for myself.

Would you like the group to continue meeting after the eight weeks?

Yes: 5. No: 1. Unsure: 1.

The following ten statements indicate possible changes.
Read each statement and then check off agree, disagree or
neutral.

	Agree	Disagree	Neutral
(1) I feel emotional support from the group.	7	0	0
(2) I developed rapport with people my own age.	7	0	0
(3) I gained more awareness of myself.	7	0	0
(4) I feel closer to other women.	6	0	1
(5) I gained knowledge about issues concerning women and aging.	7	0	0
(6) I am angry about the unequal treatment of older women today.	6	0	1
(7) I learned to identify the strengths of older women.	6	0	1
(8) I have increased my feelings of self-esteem.	6	0	1
(9) I want to be involved or am involved in action to change older women's unequal position in society.	5	1	1
(10) I am more aware of the strengths that older women represent.	7	0	0

<u>A.</u>   <u>Post-Group Interviews</u>

The post-group interviews took place in the first two weeks of June 1986. The women had two months to reflect on their group experience at Women Today. In the post-group interviews as in the pre-group interviews my objective was not to conduct a one-way interview. The interviews were more than an academic exercise. They provided an opportunity for the older women to meet their various needs. I was very open to sharing thoughts and ideas on issues that were indirectly related to the group. Although I prepared a set of questions it was not my intention to rigidly adhere to this structure. Some of the questions were more appropriate for some women and other women had different material to offer to the interview. I saw these interviews as providing an opportunity for the older women to discuss their lives and to express what the group experience meant to them. In order to preserve the authentic flavor of the women's contributions I have quoted verbatim from the taped interviews, and arranged this material as the responses to the set questions. Only a few samples of Kate's responses are recorded as the tape of her interview was stolen from my home while I was in the process of transcribing it.

Post-group interviews. June 4-12, 1986.

1. Thinking back to the group experience what thoughts enter your mind? is there anything you want to share with me or with the others?

Daisy: "Being self-centered in the way that I am, what am I personally going to do with this experience? I don't think that I've reached an opinion on that. I liked the way the women got together and talked about their lives. The only reservation that I have I guess that I expected something else. It was pleasure. I liked being with new people, it's very interesting."

Gail: "Can you elaborate a little on what you hoped to gain from the group?"

Daisy: "Well, I guess, one thing is a new friend which I am attempting, so that's something valuable."

Carla: "I think for me that it was a good experience. There was a sufficient mix in the group for it to be enriching, and to get an understanding of what it is like for the others. For example, what it is like for May to be left to struggle as a woman in the business world, Stella's need for therapeutic help. Daisy I found stimulating, isn't she? She's got a wide experience. Kate has a whole new dimension to her."

Stella: "I enjoyed the group, the women. I liked to listen to their experiences. Somehow I don't think that I'm the only one that has problems. There's other problems. I start to think that maybe mine are not so bad."

May: "I'll be honest with you, I wasn't over enthusiastic
to begin with, I don't mean to say that I didn't want to go
to it, because I wouldn't have gone. It didn't dawn on me
at the time that I could learn so much from other people--my
peers. It was nice to talk to other women. I don't get
this chance very often. At the office most of the people I
have any social contacts with at all they are younger than
me. There are no women my age at the office, I'm the
matriarch. It was nice to discuss with the other women,
although I might not have had that much in common with them.
I liked finding out how they react to getting older. There
was a levelling there, there was a ground level of
understanding. Another thing too that I thought that I
maybe wouldn't have the interest in, because most of these
women have been married. We all have our problems and I
don't say that our problems were solved. But, it gave me a
better appreciation of women my own age. I don't know how
many times I thought to myself how nice it was of you to
chose this particular subject to do a thesis on. This is
unusual to me, for a woman of your age (32) to take an
interest in people twice your age, or more. Certainly at no
time did I get the impression that because of my age I was
talking to a person a great deal younger than myself. It
didn't deter us from expressing ourselves and saying what we
wanted to say. You were just there."
Kate: "It's just that at first I didn't think I'd get much
out of it. When I got to know the ladies I liked them. I

wondered why did they come here? After talking to them I
realized that they had problems too."

Angela: "I didn't understand too much, didn't help me very
much, some . . . I enjoyed it then, when people talk I keep
quiet. I can't talk . . . . At the reunion I wanted to
talk, but I'm scared . . . nobody understand me."

Lil: "It was pleasant and very interesting. I liked the
togetherness and meeting the other ladies. Everyone has
different ideas. When I heard other women talk it made me
think how lucky I am, I should appreciate it a little more."

2. <u>What do you think the benefits of an all female group
are, if any?</u>

Daisy: "It would depend on the age of the men. I think
that men of my generation have been very unwilling to share.
If it had been younger men, I think that women have a more
caring attitude that may be the benefit."

Carla: "I think it would have been a different kind of
group because of the fact that a lot of people my generation
or older, they are used to sharing authority kinds of things
because the males, have been the doctors, the lawyers, the
pillars of society. They are not used to sharing as a group
with men. If you had younger people in the group maybe they
are less inhibited, I don't know . . . . In a course I
took in the psychology of values there were two men present
in a group of ten. The kind of discussions that went on
there were very deep . . . I didn't find having men present
altered the character or the depth of the group but I think

it would have changed our group."

Stella: "Oh yes, definitely. I"m more comfortable with just women. Women are more sensitive, more caring, easier to talk to. I think of the way that my husband is, I don't know if other men are that way . . . ."

May: "I know personally I wouldn't have said a lot of things that I said if there were men in the group." Angela: "Okay, I guess so."

Lee: "When you have men in the group you would not be so open. With women you are able to talk personally."

3. Do you feel that the group experience expanded your caring about the situation of older women in general?

Daisy: "Well, as a feminist I care about this completely, I couldn't go any further. It didn't really open new ideas to me."

Carla: "I think that I was very aware of and had a knowledge of aging, I worked at the Health Sciences Centre."

Stella: "Yes, it did definitely."

May: "Yes, it did."

Kate: I was never married, so I handled my money by myself and my mother's money when she got older. I experienced violence three times. I had my purse snatched. Oh! the group definitely got me caring more about other older women."

Angela: "Oh yeh. Maybe sometimes I felt very down, it make me cheer up a little bit."

Lee: "Yes it did. When I am out and when I see an older

person I always try to help them or to listen to them."

4. <u>Do</u> <u>you</u> <u>feel</u> <u>angrier</u> <u>or</u> <u>sadder</u> <u>about</u> <u>the</u> <u>situation</u> <u>of</u> <u>older</u> <u>women</u> <u>or</u> <u>your</u> <u>own</u> <u>situation</u> <u>than</u> <u>you</u> <u>did</u> <u>before</u> <u>the</u> <u>group?</u>

Daisy: "I don't feel either sadness or anger, it's more cool determination. Because of past experience, it didn't get me as far as it could--lashing out. Getting wrapped up in anger hysterical or neurotic can be pretty damaging or alienating . . . you are not as effective as you would like to be."

Carla: "I don't feel any different because I suppose my awareness was there. It was very much in the foreground already."

Stella: "A little angrier yes, because a lot of women are treated unfairly. Like the way my husband treats me sometimes . . . there's no respect. I think a lot of women are treated that way. They make you feel like you are not a person."

May: "I think I feel angrier. I still feel that women as a group are put down in society. I think the fact that you are older just adds to the put down. Women in general are not considered to be as intelligent, as capable as men are at doing certain jobs. I really can't say on a personal basis. I know my boss and the people I work with appreciate me. I don't think that as individuals in their own minds they put me down. But, I've talked to so many women in my own office, there is a lot of unhappiness. . . a lot of

unrest due to the fact that women are not given equal opportunities for advancement. I have to discuss this with my boss when he returns from Europe. A job was given to an outside unqualified man over a woman and I resent this. She wasn't given a chance because she is a woman and this sort of thing makes me angry. I don't feel I have anything to lose. I am certainly going to speak up about it."

Kate: "I don't feel angry or sad, but I know more about them."

Angela: "Yes, to me it was sad, when I see older people I feel more sad. I see younger faces, it makes me feel better."

Lee: "In a way yes, a little angry. After seeing women work so hard and then in their old age, they haven't got a decent living to end their days. It makes me kind of sad for them. But if I were a millionairess—I would go out there, 'Here you are whoever you are and spread it around.' But, you can't worry about the whole world—you can't help everyone."

5. Have you had contact with people from the group?

Daisy: "Yes, two women."

Carla: "Yes, with one."

Stella: "No. I was thinking of getting together with Lee, then I got sick, etc."

May: "Yes, with one. Well, only Lee, she asked me to meet for lunch because we live close. I tried to call Eva and I haven't been able to reach her."

Angela: "No."

Lee: "No. I was out of town for a month and busy babysitting at my son's but I will. At night I say I should have contact with someone from the group at least to say 'Hello.'"

6. Do you feel that you gained greater self-confidence and/or self-knowledge from the group experience?

Daisy: "The presentation that day renewed my self-confidence because I hadn't done that for a long time. I had to review in my mind experiences that helped me to develop as a facilitator."

Carla: "Yes. I think that I did. Had it been the first time I'd been exposed to a group I'm sure it would have been a different experience. I was very involved in groups when . . . . But I think that every time you form a new group you develop a new sort of community. Yes, I think that I gained from being part of the group community."

Stella: "Oh, yes."

May: "It brought it home to me in a stronger fashion. I think that the strengths that I have, I certainly had them before I came to the group. But, it brought them home to me in a stronger fashion. It opened the portals for me. Other people spoke of their problems and just their experiences even if I did it silently I thought to myself I had something like that and I coped with it successfully. I realized that I was coping very well for myself considering my circumstances. Even if I hadn't had these other women who

brought the issues to the fore, I might not have realized this. They brought it to the attention of the group . . . I'd still be thinking, 'What am I going to do?'"

Angela: "Don't know."

Lee: "Yes, I do it all the time. I used to put myself down. I should have done this or that. I think I've done the best I could and if I didn't--well, I'm sorry about it. I've got to keep on living day after day. It's been three years since my husband passed away and I'm just starting to pick up. I didn't care for the plants . . . now I started to care for them again. It takes a long time. It's nice to have someone else, another lady or someone interested in the same things. . . I was thinking of joining the place where Stella plays cards."

7. Do you feel that you experienced a growing sense of identity with other women from the group experience?

Daisy: "Definitely. It kind of surfaced in a new way because I am so involved with people in their thirties and forties, and I guess one needs also to be with people their own age. That's why I entered into this. It really helped that."

Stella: "Yes, I did. I saw that they have their own problems too."

May: "Yes, I certainly did."

Angela: "Yes. Hard job the work that women do in the house, baby cry, want this, want that, to cook, to clean, a tough job. My daughter is at home with children, she's

pretty miserable sometimes you can't talk to her. I did the same job!"

Lee: "I like it with ladies getting together, it was nice . . . I always wondered do men have these kinds of group?"

8. <u>Have you or are you interested in participating in work/community activities to change the options and opportunities for women?</u>

Daisy: "Well, I do volunteer work teaching illiterates to read English as a second language. People from El Salvador who don't speak any English. What Carla and I have been trying to do is get this woman to visit the one in the hospital who is just lost without English and work as a translator. If our Lucia can go in and speak a little Spanish to her--it would make her feel a lot better."

Carla: "Yes, opportunities, very much so. It's women and men working together to change things in the Gray Panthers. They work as much intergenerationally, as for older people. I see that as gradually incorporating the eastern idea; you learn you are a householder and then you go out of the materialistic world, as it were, to sink back into society. By having a great concern for the unborn child of tomorrow, by checking society, what is happening in society, what is happening to today's children and what is going to happen to the children yet to be born. It is the need to preserve the environment, I think that Erikson talks about the older person's concern for the yet unborn. I'm not quite sure where I see myself yet, but I certainly see looking for a

reason, I see that as the gift that older people have to give as their wisdom and their strength. That is a role for society for those who want and are able to, to develop second careers, to educate themselves as to what is happening. We don't have enough watchdogs, we have the government people, we have the vested interests, but we don't have the kind of watch over society that truly aims to do the best for society."

Stella: "Right now, I don't think I can because there is too much happening. I really don't know where I am going to be next week, or next year. In the future, well, no, I don't think I would be qualified for it."

May: "Yes, not too much time now, when I retire in two years it would be of interest to me. I'll need to fill the blanks in my life. I'm not looking forward to it. It's nice to see older women volunteering at A&O."

Angela: "No."

Lee: "Yes I would. Some people have it in them to start something like a group to change things, like pension laws, others will join. I wouldn't know how to start a group, but I would join."

9. Did you gain any concrete information regarding available services for seniors from the group?

Daisy: "Yes I did."

Carla: "I think mostly I knew what was available."

Stella: "Yes, I learned about a few places to go for help."

May: "Well, mind you over and above what they have to offer

here (Creative Retirement Manitoba) which I haven't pursued, I still know about Age and Opportunity and they are there to help me plan out my finances when I retire. When I go to see a social worker it is a nice experience. She's something like yourself, old beyond her years and she's a very caring person. I'm very glad I have her to fall back on."

Angela: "Yes, I think a little."

Lee: "I knew quite a bit from the St. Boniface Hospital social services, which I went to when my husband was sick."

10. Did you experience new understanding concerning sex roles--or do you feel the same as you always did?

Daisy: "No, it probably made me more so . . . because I could see some of the others not having had any determination to assert themselves--I felt that old temptation to go way out on the limb hoping to get to the middle."

Carla: "Maybe, I am beginning to change after talking to a peer counsellor trainer at A&O. At least I'm beginning to think about it. When I really get around to it I don't think that I'm anti feminist at all. But, I'm opposed to certain things that happen. Like my daughter to some extent I admire what she is doing but I see her as an antagonist of men, and I see that it is because of her father being too dominating and her husband being too dominating and I see what she is fighting against but we need a balance. I tend to react by going the other way. But, I am more aware that when I call myself an anti feminist, I don't mean that at

all. That's a really harsh label."

Stella: "There is too much pornography, women degraded and put down. It troubles me to no end."

May: "No. I think I feel the same as I always did. It singled out certain things. It made my own ideas more secure, it reenforced what I already felt. Yes, I knew that before and now I'm sure of it."

Angela: "For me it happened, I was widowed when I was young, for me it is natural for the woman to be at home and to look after the kids. For me it is cruel to leave a baby with a baby-sitter and go to work. Now women are sick in the head. Once the kids don't need the mother it is okay a few hours a day."

Lee: "If men and women are working the same kind of job, I think a woman should have the same pay. There are things that men could do better than women. But, I believe in equal opportunities for education as long as it does not affect the family life."

11. <u>Do you feel that being involved in the group and with me as group facilitator has affected your experience of coping with issues in your life as an older woman?</u>

Daisy: "Not really, I don't have a lot of issues right now."

Carla: "I'm not sure that it has but it's not a big change because of my past involvements."

Stella: "Yes. I have to be strong about doing things myself, convince myself to be confident . . . . I have my

children, relatives, but I've learned to do more for myself."

Lee: "Not sure how to answer that. You know that before I was involved with a social worker, she was a real good person and she helped me and she had some problems of her own and then coming through these classes was a help too. I enjoyed coming because you remind me of that social worker."

12. Did you feel somewhat socially isolated--was social isolation one factor in your attraction to the group?

Daisy: "Social isolation with people my own age--my peers was a factor. I was hoping to make a new friend in my age group. I liked you originally and I liked what you were trying to do with your education. That was a real motivation, I felt that myself multiplied by five or six could give you a head start in what you were trying to do. I am interested in your professional future."

Carla: "No, Gail, the thing that attracted me to the group was that you were writing a Masters thesis. I thought I would really like to encourage you in what you were doing. That is not to say that I didn't gain from the group."

Stella: "Yes, right. This group reached me at the right time in my life, when I needed to build myself up."

May: "Yes, most of my life I have been alone, very rarely socialize with the people I work with. In one respect outside of my office responsibilities I live in a shell. I don't know if it is because of my own lifestyle. Being divorced at thirty-nine, I lived so much of my life

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alone. . . ."

Angela: "Yes, I think so. Alone in the house, look at the walls, sleep by the t.v. Found the beginning hard, I was very scared."

Lee: "Well, it was loneliness, you look forward to getting out. When I have to go somewhere, I'm not going anywhere I laze around and accomplish little."

13. <u>Do you have close women friends with whom you can and do share your concerns?</u>

Daisy: "Well, I'm trying to make new friends more my own age. It's a problem for me that people always want to meet for meals, especially the woman I live with here. Why couldn't we meet and have a conversation without this huge meal preparation? The younger women whom I know have children. There is a motherhood conflict. I'll pick up the friendship in ten years and then we can have a conversation without being interrupted by the children. Maybe, I'm just too narrow in having to define these settings where friendship can emerge."

Carla: "Not too many. I used to be more involved as a dentist's wife. But my life has changed and that was one of my reasons for getting involved in peer counselling. When you have to make a severe lifestyle change like I did, one has to be aware of what people will face. The one person that was left from my previous life, (first marriage,) she was much younger than I was. Now, I am a member of a different church which again is a different culture; they

are not the kind of people I could share with. Joining a

German culture as opposed to an English one was another big

change. I'm not sure, I think that I have a need to try to

reach out to people, one or two people who have similar

backgrounds or interests, or I call it vibrating on the same

wavelengths. There are not too many people like that whom

you can feel comfortable to share with, to talk to or be

silent with."

Stella: "Yes I do. But she is disturbing me a lot,

imposing her religious views on me and making my decisions

about my personal problems more complicated."

May: "No. I don't."

Kate: "Yes, I have one older woman friend."

Angela: "Yes, my neighbor. We swim together sometimes, not

too often."

Lee: "Not since I moved to the city."

B. <u>Conclusion</u>

As I record my conclusions concerning my practicum at
Creative Retirement Manitoba, ten months have passed since
the termination of the group. This was certainly ample time
to analyze the personal and professional benefits of the
experience. The group members' opinions concerning the
experience are documented in the post-group interviews.
Thinking back to my original incentive and excitement about
initiating the Women Today group, the desire to pursue an
exploration into the world of older women was paramount. A
mutual support environment was the vehicle whereby members
were encouraged to discover commonalities, to build upon
their own resources thereby increasing self-esteem and
skills to age confidently. From the existing literature on
aging it was apparent that women were overlooked. This
deficit or disregard of women in aging research fueled my
drive to contribute some data in this area. I believe that
only by learning directly from these women how they view
their circumstances and discussing issues they identified as
important in their lives could I record something of value
for the future.

I began with a respectful attitude for the wisdom and
strength older women represent. My objective was to
facilitate a process where these women would affirm each
other's strengths and emerge with a fresh vision of their
potential. "A recognition of women's unquenchable
creativity--contained so often within domestic limits, yet

astounding in its diversity—has been one of the deep perceptions of the feminism which looks with fresh eyes on all that has been trivialized, devalued, forbidden or silenced in female history" (Rich, 1979, p. 263). Women were often blinded to the commonality of their experience by a socially imposed isolation from each other. It was my belief that by providing a place for women to meet and an environment of trust and caring, their strategies for coping would be shared. This sharing would empower these women to recognize their competence and gain self-worth. The mutual help orientation was especially appropriate to promote the development of personal independence in older women. The women were directed to view each other as valuable resources, rather than placing the group facilitator on a pedestal.

As a feminist I believed that these women's experiences throughout life and in old age are shaped by the discrimination of a sexist and ageist society. I was convinced of the urgent need for organized change efforts to end the social and economic inequities that create hardships for older women. However, it was not my objective to impose a feminist perspective upon the group members. My hope was that such an outlook would evolve from women discussing and reviewing their lives. A setting which legitimizes the experience of women also strengthens them by virtue of acknowledging their capacity for taking responsibility for their own lives.

What actually transpired in the Women Today group? For many of the women their initial goal was to develop friendships, rapport with women their own age. This motivation was the result of leading isolated lives. Existing opportunities for older women to meet others like themselves in a combined educationally focussed and personal growth setting are limited. As the women bonded in the group it was quickly apparent that commonalities existed. A common bond prevailed although the women represented a heterogenous mix of education, social, economic and cultural backgrounds. The women gave and received the message that despite their differences each woman was worth listening to. As Walker (1981) emphasizes, "One of the positive outcomes of women's groups is the rediscovery of the pleasures and fulfillment of interpersonal relations with other women" (p. 242). This is a platform upon which women can proceed to help each other grow in confidence and competence. For competence is not an innate ability but rather a result of the individual's transaction with the environment. In a supportive environment the older women in Women Today discovered positive means to attain competence and thus cope with aging in a more confident manner.

In this mutual support group the women were often surprised to learn that other women shared their circumstances. In the group, the women met other women facing similar problems who also needed to develop the resources within themselves. There was an acknowledged

comfort in sharing and learning with peers that is unique.
The value in building support networks among people of
similar ages came across strongly. In this group the women
went beyond deriving company or personal support. The
educational focus of the discussion topics prompted the
women to consider the stereotyped roles stemming from sexist
and ageist attitudes. Through examining stereotypes of
women and old age the group acquired an understanding of the
restrictive roles society imposed on older women. Exposing
these stereotypes liberated the group members. The women
began to realize how restricted their lives were by socially
prescribed roles. They began to explore alternative methods
of defying stereotypes, for example, creativity and
productivity in old age. They were able to develop new
ideas of their potential as older women.

As I got to know the women individually and within the
group, I learned how artificial these stereotypes were.
Part of my education involved breaking down my own
preconceptions through meeting and working with these women.
The women emerged as individuals, distinct from their labels
as old and female. As a professional social worker I was at
the same time alerted to the need to be aware of the
limitations of the professional label. I discovered that
adopting the role of group facilitator involved subtle
skills, learning to step aside and allow the group members
to share the responsibility for the group. I felt that I
was successful in providing guidance and direction without

impinging upon the group members' acquisition of
responsibility for the discussions.

Although I was a younger woman among a group of older
women I did not feel that my age created a barrier. There
was a bond with the women as a woman. The central issues
that need changing to improve the lives of older women are
indeed central to the lives of all women.

The Women Today group met for eight weeks, a short
period in the lives of women who have lived sixty to seventy
years. It is difficult to project on lasting gains of a
group experience. Yet, the meaningful quality of the
encounter were acknowledged. The women decided to begin a
new group of a similar nature in the winter 1987 session at
Creative Retirement and that they were well equipped to do
so speaks well for its merit. The need for more groups
designed to meet the growing needs of the ever increasing
population of older women in Canada is pressing. Groups
like Women Today represent a positive step towards greater
recognition of the needs of older women.

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